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ISAAC FOOT



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THE FOOL

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE SEA CAPTAIN

THE GENTLEMAN ADVENTURER

THE HIGHWAYMAN

THE GAMESTERS

THE YOUNG LOVERS

THE PILLAR OF FIRE

BARRY LEROY

CALL MR. FORTUNE

HIS SERENE HIGHNESS

THE FOOL

enry christopher
BY
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THE FOOL

CHAPTER I

PLAYING KNUCKLE-BONES

THERE were dead in the courtyard and a noise. Across the morning twilight men shouted from tower to tower and blade clashed on mail where the last of the garrison sold blood for blood, and from the bowels of the castle came already the yells and crash of plundering. And the bells of the Abbey beyond the wall were ringing to matins.

Only one man was alive among the dead in the courtyard, and he sat on his heels in a corner and played knuckle-bones. He flared in the greyness, one lean thigh scarlet and one grass-green, his doublet a patchwork in all colours, about his neck and his big head a hood like a monk's cowl, but yellow, and the crest of it was red and fashioned as a cock's comb, and out of the sides came the grey rough ears of an ass. While his big hands tossed and snatched the bones he was singing a Latin hymn. From the battlements a man was thrown and fell beside him and lay with blood oozing through the rings of the hauberk. But he did not move or look; he tossed the bones still and still sang.

The storming party mustered again, a sturdy, swaggering company, begrimed and with many a gap hewn in their mail coats. For their armour was rings or little scraps of steel, like a fish's scales sewn upon cloth—that a man could wear steel plates no

man had yet found out. It was the year of the Lord 1140. You remember that Stephen was fighting to be King of England then, and his cousin, Matilda, who had been an Empress in Germany when she was a child, fought to be Queen, and all the country was ravaged by their wars and the barons who throve upon their wars. From sea to sea in England there was no law : what a man could not hide the sword took from him ; what could be hidden torture dragged from him ; and over many a shire there was no meat nor milk nor corn for common folk, and they lived in holes upon acorns and beech-mast like swine, more wretched than the first men who crawled upon our world. For they had known a better life.

Odo le Veneur was made to prosper in such a time. You see him, a hulking big-bodied man in bright mail, the long nose-piece of his helmet shadowing all his face but the fat jowl. He came down to the courtyard and roared at his men : " Splendour of God ! " (He gave out that he was a base-born son of the Red King, he liked to swear the Conqueror's oath.) " You grow slow, dogs ! " He strode past looking them over and laughed. " The boars have gored you. Go to, do your will," and they scattered to plunder. Odo took off his helmet and showed a bloated red face and lank black hair and shouted for wine. The man in the corner still played knuckle-bones.

Odo put out a foot to kick him over, but the man fell on his hands and threw a somersault. " Why, cousin Odo," says he with a wide grin, " Cousin Odo, we have stormed Heaven this morning and I bring you the keys of the gate," and he held out his knuckle-bones.

" Bones, fool ? "

" Why yes, cousin, man's bones, woman's bones. Nought else will open Heaven to any man."

" Out on you, do you play with man's bones ? "

" Even as you, cousin. What else are they good

for in this world ? ” He threw a somersault backwards and sat down on his heels and went on playing.

Hours after he was there still, when from the hall Odo shouted : “ Bran ! Bran ! ” He picked himself up, he picked up a shapeless thing beside him which, being blown out, revealed itself as a small bagpipe and playing upon it a jerky tune he danced into the hall, an odd sight, for his fool’s habit clothed a frame very lean and very short yet with broad shoulders, a huge head, big hands and big feet, and he showed them off in a jig. This vastly amused Odo and his men, who stopped their eating and bade him do it again and again, till he fell upon hands and knees and ran about like a dog, and like a dog whined for food and scraped at Odo’s knees, and, putting his head on one side, looked up at him plaintively and licked his chops and dribbled and made more queer dog’s noises.

Then Odo, swearing that he was the king of fools, flung him a bone, and he ran after it and growled and thereafter picked himself up and sat down by the little table on Odo’s left-hand. He cut himself a trencher of bread like the rest, and snatched slices of meat which another had cut, and began to eat, using all his fingers. Then, “ Welcome to our castle of Malmesbury, cousin Odo,” he said, and giggled. “ Welcome to my shell, quoth the oyster, as I ate him. But he had no wits, the fool. How does your entertainment like you, cousin ? ”

“ It likes me well enough, fool.”

“ Pledge me in a cup of wine, cousin. What, knaves, wine for my lord ! ” And when the steward came with a pitcher he snatched it. “ The cup for the lord, but the jug for the fool,” he cried, and drank. Odo cuffed at him and he fell over and waggled his great feet in the air. Then he sat down and ate again, and after a while, humming a glee, began to make his bread-platter into little dolls.

“ What are you at, fool ? ” says Odo after a while.

“Why, cousin, I am like the good God. I make men and women for man to eat.” He swept up the dolls and gulped them all down. “God rest their souls, quoth the fool.”

Then they made him dance again and juggle with knives till at last he seemed to stab himself and fell backwards out of the door and made the death rattle and was gone.

Out of the eastle and down the hill he went. The fool was fool enough to like to be alone. See him, if you please, throwing back his hood and dipping his shaven head in the river; see him wandering in the green desert of the country-side, laughing to himself, preaching to the willow herb and the ragged robin and barking like a fox till a fox answered him and he found a litter of cubs at play. But the next thing that matters is that serambling down a hill he came upon a cave in the oolite and a boy looking out of it, a sturdy bold boy, young in his teens, who laid hold of him and said, “Whose man are you, fellow?”

He giggled. “Bran does not know that. Bran is a poor fool. But we are all God’s people, lord.”

A girl came up behind the boy, little his elder by the look of her body, but with a wiser sterner face. “He lies, Jocelin. All fools lie.”

“Na, na, na,” said Bran. “None but fools tell truth. None but fools keep troth. An alms for the fool, great lady,” and he fell on his knees and put out his hands.

She dashed them aside. “Rogue, you are some rich lord’s man. See his silver chain, Jocelin.”

“Chains are chains. God save all. Pity the poor fool. Sir Odo le Veneur is my lord, lady.”

“Jocelin!” she plucked out the knife from her girdle. The boy held her hand. “He will tell of us. He must not go back.”

“It were shame to kill a fool,” the boy said.

The fool laughed. “Mercy was ever a man,” said he, “and wisdom is a woman. Strike, and

"I give you my blessing." He flung back his head and opened his arms—then sprang up. "No! God forgive me, who tempted a child." And he crossed himself and muttered a prayer. "Do I believe that? Why, care killed the cat." And he laughed so queerly that the girl shrank away and made the sign against the evil eye. "Na, na, never fear, Bran is not a wicked one. The more fool Bran."

"Swear that you will not tell on us," says the boy, catching his wrist.

"By oak and ash and thorn I swear, yea, and by the blood on the Holy Crown."

"That is a great oath."

"A great and terrible oath, lord. And thereafter a man must eat and be strong again." Into the cave he came, past the bewildered boy, and squatted down and took from his scrip a gammon of bacon and bread and cut. "Bran's pouch never goes empty till Bran's paunch is back by the larder. Eat, lady."

"I am not hungry, fool."

His long finger shot out. "Swear it! Na, na. Bran knows when a body is hungry. Bran has seen."

Eat they did then, and eating loosed tongues. They wanted to know if the Castle of Malmesbury was taken; what had befallen the garrison. "It is well with them. They are dead," said Bran, and saw the children look at each other with fierce eyes. "Whose kin are ye?" And they told him. They were the children of Sir Jocelin Longuemain who had held the castle for the Bishop of Salisbury, but he died in his bed in the spring. When Odo summoned the castle at nightfall, their father's steward had thrust them out by the postern and bade them take sanctuary in the Abbey. But the Abbey would not open to their knocking, and they ran away to hide. "The drowsy knave monks," said Bran; "eh, eh, cousin Odo will wake them. Not a saint sleeps sound with Odo to neighbour. Patience, patience, my lord

and my lady, the monkery will pay." So they asked him what his lord Odo was like. "Saw ye ever a pig loose in a garth? What does he do? He eats the herbs, yea, and what he does not eat that he roots up and defiles. Even such is my cousin Odo."

"And you serve such a one!" says the girl.

"Pity the poor fool, Lady Judith," Bran whined.

"A man may be a fool yet have a man's spirit," and she rated him fiercely for serving a robber lord, a knight unknighthly, a hunter of the weak, a foreigner—till the fool broke out in that queer laugh of his.

"Foreign? Nenny, nenny, foreign are you all. The Saxon was before the Norman, and the Briton was before the Saxon, and before the Briton was my folk, yea, before Sir Brut the Trojan came. For we are the living earth, the clay and the chalk, and the old, old stone, and it was a Saxon churl slew my mother with his spear in the thicket above Monken Risborough, and I only am left that I know, Bran the fool. Only the land, the old land and I." He thrust at them with his big feet and laughed again. "Away, new folk!"

The children drew together: "You—that knife is iron?" the boy said.

"Aha! Yea, lord, iron; and, yea, there is salt in the meat. Both the salt and the iron are my friends. No goblin I am, no fairy man. Born of woman I was and body of man I am. Naught but a fool, lord."

Perhaps they did not thoroughly believe him; they became curious about him yet with a certain reverence, and talk came fast. They asked him a thousand things and his advice. Odo was King Stephen's man, but it was no order of Stephen's to seize on Malmesbury. That was lord Odo's private venture. He was sent forth to watch the roads for the Empress. What should they do, the children? Lie close, close. The castle was a bishop's castle, and no arm so long as the arm of Holy Church. Wait awhile. And while they talked and the light waned came from the valley

the call of a woman, a long, despairing cry. The boy started up and ran out. "Oh, the mass! Lic close, say I, and off goes he. Who hath trouble enough ever goes to seek it."

"It was a woman," said Judith.

"What is the worth of a woman when men are born to be killed?"

Up the steep in the twilight came Jocelin, tottering, panting, so heavily the woman leaned upon him, and as they drew near the cave she swayed and stumbled and fell upon her face and lay still. The fool rolled her over and the children stood aghast. "She had ridden her horse to death," Jocelin gasped. "She asked food for the love of God."

"Now God have mercy," the fool muttered, peering at her.

"Why, is she dead?" Judith cried.

"Nenny, nenny," says he, and tweaked the woman's nose and laughed wildly and tweaked it again and fell to beating her hands. She sneezed, she grasped at the air and sat up, and he slipped his knee behind her.

"Wine, a cup of wine," she said faintly.

"Water is our wine, goody," he laughed.

"Who speaks?"

"A poor fool, goody."

"I am well served," she said. She was tall and largely made. Years and passion or care had furrowed her brow. Her cloak was deep in dust, but of rich blue cloth with broideries, and in it the gleam of a golden chain.

The boy brought her water in his cap and she made a wry face and drank, and they fed her on bread and bacon, and though she looked at it queerly she said grace for it.

"As dark as it is, a fool can tell you have an eye, goody," Bran said.

She was pleased and laughed. "Whose folk are ye?"

“Na, na, goody. You are upside down.”

“How, fool?”

“Thus, by mine honour: ’tis the guest gives a name not the host.”

“Here is deep policy! Why then, sirrah, men call me Grandam Mold, and I am a landless woman this day.”

Bran lay back against the rock and looked at the children and laid his finger on his lip. Then, making a chant of it, he droned out, “And well met then, and very well met, are Grandam Mold and we, for these be orphans and outcast and I am a fool, you see.”

“Aye, now am I come to my kingdom,” she said. “You are right to be merry, fool.”

“Why yea, goody, even as thorns do right to crackle in the fire. What now? What now?” There were horsemen riding in the valley and not keeping the track, but ranging wide and calling to each other. “Keep close now, you, or you are sped.”

“Close, quotha? I could not move a yard to shun the fiend,” the woman said, but Bran was gone.

It was not yet quite dark and a full moon rising red above the hills. So in the valley all things looked vague and treacherous, and the horsemen came on slowly, beating hither and thither. Then rose a long-drawn howl, a howl as of a creature in pain, yet with some wicked mirth in it, and it echoed from hill to hill, and while still the echoes rang came another that seemed to answer it and another.

The shouts of the horsemen were hushed, and they drew together and halted, and through the stillness came the murmur of an anxious parley. Then keeping close they pushed on. Again the howling echoed, there was cawing and screaming and a rustle of wings as a pair of ravens, roused from their nest, hurtled through the air in angry fear. If they were ravens and not more evil things, for there on the lump of rock above the river was some creature neither human nor beast, a strange, shapeless sight,

grey as the twilight, grey-white all over, without head, without tail, now dancing on all fours, now on its hind legs, now on its fore legs, and either way waving great hoofs in the air. Whence came the howling that mocked and gibbered no man could tell, whether from the dancing beast, whether from the hills.

The horsemen saw fiends on earth and air, and turned and fled the haunted valley.

When he heard the panie, Bran scrambled down from his rock and brushed the dust out of his face and his clothes. "It is a good Bran," he said, and for his own satisfaction performed another little dance. "A good Bran, yea. The trick was featly done. But oh, my wits, my wits, what a poor soul hath a man! As often as I play me that trick, under the roof, under the sky, never it fails me. Conjure up a fiend for them, and their souls cower and their joints are loosened. Yet what fiend could be more a fiend than man? I will believe in Mahound, ere I believe that any world hath worse than this. But Bran is a fool."

So he went lustily for the castle, and making a straight line passed those anxious horsemen, who kept to the track, and coming into the huddled little town of Malmesbury he hit upon some of Odo's men who had been drinking there, and mingling with them he entered the castle by the postern. Then he sought the hall and curled himself up on the rushes among the dogs and slept careless as they, yet like them not without dreams that made him start and moan.

CHAPTER II

THE EMPRESS GOES RIDING

IN the morning, prowling, as his wont was for news, he heard that in the night a party of horsemen had come to the main gate and asked lodging, swearing that they were the King's men. But the guard made them out a large party, and according to the custom of that troubled time bade them draw off till morning. And when Sir Odo was told: "Splendour of God," says he, "you did well, Walter. And if you had done other you should hang. No man, not the King's self, comes into hold of mine by night." Whereat a dog barked and Odo kicked him and the fool laughed. "How now, rogue?"

"Why thus, cousin. The fool treads on the hound's tail, the hound yelps and Lord Odo kicks the hound. And so the world goes on—and on—and on," and he flung himself on his hands and turned round and round like a wheel.

Odo kicked a stool into him and brought him down with a crash and laughed at him, and laughed the louder as he huddled himself together and hugged his elbows and whined. "Up with you rogue, up," he lashed out with his riding whip, and the fool yelled and scrambled up and ran limping out. Whereupon Sir Odo mounted and hunted him round the courtyard, flogging him till he fell.

So the fool did not go hawking with Sir Odo that day. He was in the kitchen rubbing his bruises with fat and thinking after his fashion;

thinking that if only pain did not hurt him he would be a very great man, thinking that whatever happens there are always a thousand other things to happen, thinking that the finest song in the world is the *Magnificat*.

But when Sir Odo and his troop came back he saw and shaded his eyes to see tied to the stirrup of Hugues le Roux the girl Judith. So he bustled up to help old Robert the falconer. "What sport, brother?"

"Spavined sport, fool."

"You have struck one gay heron, at least."

"That piece?" he scowled at the girl. "Your right sister, fool. Do you know how we took her? The churl which Odo pinned to the oak at the cross-roads yesterday, he is there yet, and the spear in him and the tree. None of his folk were fools enough to dare loose him. But by my faith, when we came there this morning, this witless wench is pulling at him and calling for help. And Odo must needs put her in the bag. St. Joseph, it was empty enough! But an unfledged woman! Sport! And young Hugues, the soft lad, must needs stick the churl's throat, he screamed so to die. Odo knocked a tooth out of him for that."

"You have been merry, brother," said the fool, and turned away to the hall.

Odo sat there sprawling his bulk, and the girl, her hands tied behind her back, stood in front of him, straight and still. She was unkempt, her fair hair and her clothes covered with dust, but something in her puzzled him. "Who in the fiend's name?" he roared out. "You are no villein's brat. Who are you, wench?"

"Untie my hands, churl," she said, and her eyes met his, fierce and proud.

"Churl?" That was startled out of him.

"Churl and coward and naught. No knight uses a woman so."

“Woman? Say wild cat. All one. I know how to deal with women, be sure. Splendour of God, I can tame you, girl. Come, save your hide. Who are you?” She did not answer. “What knave set you on to meddle with my man?”

“Your man? You lie. You are a robber and a villain. A landless man.”

Sir Odo started up and swore at length. “There is only one way with women all. Go think on it. Keep her hungry and thirsty, Walter. Put her in the chest. You will speak me fair before I have done with you, wench.”

So she was dragged out, and into the chest she was thrust. Now the nature of the chest was this: a box which would hardly hold the body of a man doubled up was lined with iron wrought into points and rough edges, and the prisoner being put in the lid was shut down upon him and bolted so that he was tortured by the pressure and bruised and pierced. The girl Judith, being smaller than a man, suffered less, yet enough. But when Odo and his band were at dinner into the cell where the chest stood the fool came limping and he pulled back the bolt and threw up the lid.

She lifted her head and through the tangle of hair he saw her face flushed dark and damp with sweat. She stared at him and her eyes were wild and empty of thought. Then she groaned. He put a pewter cup to her lips and she drained the broth. Then passionately, “Holy Christ, I hoped it was water,” she cried. “Oh fool, fool.”

“Oh woman, woman. Woman every way.”

She began painfully to get out of the chest.

“Nenny, nenny,” said the fool, and put his great hands on her and thrust her down again. “Thus bad were worse. If they find you loose, you were better dead.” Then the child bade him go, and cowered down and fell a-weeping. “Help the poor fool, lady,” says he in a most piteous voice. She

looked up then : " Tell poor fool what brought lady into Malmesbury. Oh, Holy Cross, to come back into the jaws of the fiend ! "

" The Empress sent me to buy her a flask of wine."

The fool gaped. " Empress ? God ha' merey, lady. Bran knows no Empress. Bran knows Goody Mold."

" She is the Empress."

" The foul fiend fly away with her and burn her in hell," says Bran, and the girl stared at him he spoke so like a natural man. " She will send a child to death lest her proud stomach should drink water."

" She is ill," the child said.

" Nenny, nenny, lady. Empresses and queens they cannot be ill, they are great ones. It is poor you and poor I who are ill and very ill. Yea, faith, and so Goody Mold is Goody Empress ! Now who had thought on that ? " he giggled. " Why, but that is the end of the cord that is tangled. Here is Sir Odo hunting Madame Empress, and would give his soul to have her. And Sir Odo hath caught you and will torture your life away. Why then, tell him where he may find Madame Empress and you go free."

" Oh, base ! " the child cried. " It is a treachery. You—you are a mean thing and naught."

" Yea, yea. Yet think, child. He means the worst that a man can. But you have a way of deliverance, and it is no virtue to give yourself to suffer sin. Save yourself, then, for blessed Mother Mary's sake."

" It is you who are like the fiend," the child cried.

" Not Bran, no. God help poor Bran, who means you well. Bran is but a fool. What is that gold about your neck, lady ? "

She stared at him and put her hand to her bosom.

" The Empress gave it me. It is her own chain."

The fool's big hands shot out. He tore it from her, pressed her down again into the chest and shot the bolt and ran away.

But he found the castle in a commotion. A great company of horsemen were before the walls, and among them a banner which bore gold upon red, a sagittarius, the banner of King Stephen. Sir Odo heavy with wine would not believe, though one and another bore him news, and when he heard the trumpets must needs climb the gate tower to see for himself, and the while a herald summoned the castle in the King's name, yet no man dared open without Odo's word. So the King was left to wait.

Down from the tower, his bloated face bowed and wrought in perplexities, came Sir Odo, and cursing bade undo the gate. The first of the horsemen rode in and formed up on either side the courtyard while Odo's men scurried out of the way. The King's banner advanced, and Odo came heavily forward to meet the King.

"Sir, I give you loyal welcome to this hold of mine."

"You, aye, I swore it was you," the King said. "What brought you here?"

"Please you enter my hall, sir."

"Your hall!" the King muttered, but swung down and strode on before.

The hall was littered and foul with the mess of dinner. Dogs were growling over the broken meat. "*Pardieu*, you keep high state for me," said the King, curling the nostril, and serving men scurried out. But the fool, huddled on a stool by the cold hearth, stayed.

"I promise you good cheer, sir," Odo leered. "There is old wine in Malmesbury."

"Good cheer for swine in a sty. God's body, sirrah, why do I find you wallowing here?"

Odo stared at him and the fool looked sideways. King Stephen had the body for a king, tall and strong and stately; he had the face of a king in a picture-book, handsome, benign, but weak.

"Sir, you do me a wrong. Do me reason," says

Odo, glowering at him. "Splendour of God, I am worth what I take."

"Who bade you take Malmesbury?"

Odo shrugged. "The place was fair game, sir. The Bishop of Salisbury had it in hold. Your friends must live upon your enemies."

"God have merey, what are you to set Holy Church against me?"

"The Church?" Odo laughed. "By my faith, a king may laugh at the Church while such men as I am ride with his banner."

The King swore and checked himself and shifted his feet, and the fool looked at him and rocked to and fro. "You have done a great wrong," says the King. "Let it go. God's body, man, who sent you to Malmesbury? You were sent to watch the roads."

"I am not a boy to be schooled. I must ride my hunt my own way. I have won Malmesbury for you. That is my answer to all."

"Is it so?" the King flamed out again. "Are you fool, or are you rogue, sirrah?" And Odo flinched as the big man strode upon him. "While you waste time plundering here the Empress slips by. And you, you keep no guard of the roads. You turn my men away when they come here for word of her."

"They came by night. I open no gate o' nights. For the rest, it is false, sir. Madame Empress has not come by this way."

"Oh, the lady, the great lady, the tall lady with the gold lilies on her cloak," the fool giggled.

They both turned on him. "Out, you dog!" Odo roared.

"What said he?" said the King.

The fool grinned at Odo, and nodded and began to shuffle out muttering to himself, "The lady, the tall lady with the gold lilies on her cloak and the black Barbary mare."

“By the rood, it is she!” the King cried. “Come hither, lad,” and he turned upon Odo. “So, my lord! She has not come by this way!”

And Odo had not words in his surprise, and then they tumbled over each other. “The fellow is a fool, my lord, the veriest fool. He knows not what he says. There is no drain of wit in him. He means nothing. He knows not how to mean. He——”

“Be silent, you. Come, lad; when did you see the lady?”

The fool, watching Odo’s furious brow, shrank away, putting up a hand to guard his head: “Na, na, Bran is a poor fool. Bran said naught. Bran has seen naught. Bran sees naught but what lord Odo wants. Bran is a good fool.”

“No man shall hurt thee, lad,” the King said.

“Yea, yea. No one hurts Bran when Bran says naught,” and he fell to talking gibberish.

Odo wiped his face. “Will you listen to a fool, my lord?” he said, and tried to laugh heartily.

“I have listened to a knave,” said the King.

Odo bit his lip, and then seeing the fool staring from one to the other with a vacant grin struck at him and bade him out. The fool shunned the blow, stumbled over the high chair where Odo sat and picking himself up put upon the table a great gold chain, as if he had knocked it down. He went out in a shambling run.

“Splendour of God!” quoth Odo, reaching for the chain. But the King was first. For the chain was wrought with the letters MATILDA IMPERATRIX. He held it aloft.

“You foul traitor!” he said, and shouted, “Grimbald! Hugolin!”

But Odo did not understand, for he could not read. “I swear I never saw the thing before, my lord,” he stammered.

And then the King laughed. “Ay, lie it out to the end. You never saw her chain, no more than

you have seen her. Her chain wrought with her own name that she bought you with! God's body, man, do you think you can cheat me still? Take your lies to the fiend. Grimbald!" He flung round upon the men-at-arms who were running in. "Take the fellow and hang him."

"Sir Odo, my lord?"

"Sir Odo! Strike off his spurs and hang him like a churl."

Now by this time the fool was slunk into the kitchen, and to the scullions who spoke to him he answered whining and howling that there was great work afoot, great and very terrible, and poor Bran was afraid. So they ran out to see and he broke up a fowl and lay down and gnawed it and thought. Then he filled his pouch with food and stole out. In the courtyard Odo's men were huddled together apart and the King's men kept their ranks and all were gazing up at the gate tower where could be seen a little company gathered close. The fool crept along from door to door and went to ground in the little chapel. The chief desire in his mind was to hide. So, cowering by the altar: "While the fool is the fool all men know him," says he, "King's men and Odo's men all. If the fool is some other man no man knows who he is. King's men think he is Odo's man. Odo's men think he is King's man. Ergo, dear fool, ergo"—and he fell to rummaging. In a curtained archway he found a chest, but it had been pillaged already, and priestly vestments strewed the ground. He grimaced at them, yet turning them over found among them an amplehooded cloak such as a priest might wear in walking. He put it on and preened himself. "Now is Bran a learned clerk. Yea, yea. *Cucullus facit monachum*. The gown, it makes a priest of me as motley made a fool of me, and many sorrier fools there be and many a naughtier priest I see, so God send I and myself go free." He stole to the door. In the

red light of sunset Odo swung a black bulk from the tower.

Bran shrunk back and crossed himself, and went to the altar and said a prayer for Sir Odo his soul.

And while he prayed, he heard busy movements in the courtyard. The King's men were taking over the castle, sending out parties, unsaddling, seeking lodging and food. Bran stayed on his knees till all was quiet. Then in the twilight he stole out and sought the cell where the girl was prisoned. He opened the chest and she raised herself, staring through the dark. "Silent, silent for the love of God, lady," he whispered, and lifted her out and laid her on the ground. She groaned and turned her face, stretching her cramped, bruised body. He pulled a flask of wine from his pouch and made her drink. "Have good heart. Odo is dead and all goes merrily. But the King is here, and we must do stealthily." He left her and peered out. "Can you walk, child?" She struggled to her feet. "Wait awhile, wait awhile." He stole out and scouted on the way to the postern. There was no guard on the stair. He drew her after him.

They were out on the open hill-side under the stars. She turned and looked in his face. "It is you! The fool!" And she began to laugh weakly and caught at him and hung heavy on his arm.

He laid her down fainting. "Yea, yea. Bran is a fool," said he, and giggled and looked helplessly about him in the dark. And therewith an ass brayed. "Holy Cross! The monks are at vespers," quoth he, and suddenly ran on. Beyond a bank on the abbey's ground the monks' asses were at pasture. Bran came back holding two of them by the ears. He rubbed the girl's temples with wine and set her on one and himself mounting the other they rode away.

So through the moonlight they came again to that cave in the valley and found the boy quarrelling

with Madame Empress because she would not have him go look for his sister but commanded him by his gentle blood stay and guard his liege lady. And indeed Jocelin had come near forswearing both gentlehood and allegiance when Judith and the fool, having left their asses by the river, toiled up to the cave.

“Is it you, child? God’s word, you have taken long enough of your errand,” says the Empress. “Have you brought us Christian food and drink at last?”

“Goody Mold, you have a proud stomach,” the fool said. “Yea, and how be your poor bones, Goody Mold?”

The girl flung herself down. “I have naught, madame, and I have almost died for it,” she said, and cried in her weariness. “He has it. He has everything, the fool.”

“She has said. Yea, and verily and out of the mouths of babes and sucklings,” said Bran in a voice like thunder. “He has all things, the fool.” And then it was the girl he fed first, and while she ate she stammered out her tale.

“God’s word,” said the Empress. “Stephen is in Malmesbury?”

“I do not know, madame. I was in that foul chest.”

“Speak out, fool. You have your story to tell.”

“King Stephen is a goodly knight, he came to the castle in armour bright, he hanged Sir Odo against the light, he will march on Goody Mold with his might, pray God you do not come in his sight, that is the tale I tell.”

She was silent awhile, then suddenly: “Where is my chain, sirrah? The chain you took from the child?”

“*Pardie*, Goody, that chain hanged cousin Odo. How, saith Goody? Marry thus. Because it lay by

Odo's platter for the King to see," and he cackled laughter.

"Rogue, you have betrayed me!"

"God have mercy, Goody. Which is the fool here? Goody or I? Are you me or I you? Well, God mend all!" He flung himself down and snuggled into his cloak and began to snore.

In the morning the Empress was feverish to be gone, and there was but one mind to it; whether King Stephen hunted them out or not they could be no worse off by seeking a roof and food. She promised them safety if she could but come within the country that Bristol held or Gloucester. But when she tried to walk she made a bad business of it and the girl was little the lighter. Yet she gave trouble at being set upon an ass. "Nay, faith, Goody, ride or stay, all is one upon Judgment Day," said the fool. "Yet an ass was good enough for Christ our Lord to ride."

So mount she did, and they trudged off up the valley and all the long morning met no man but some charcoal burners who sold them poached venison with a leer and a blessing. But awhile after noon drawing into a broader track they sighted a banner.

"Or and two bends gules and what is it, child? A scallop sable. God's word, it is de Tracy's banner. They are Stephen's men. Now are we sped," the Empress laughed a little grimly and stopped the ass and stood.

The fool swung himself up into a tree. "Yea, yea, they are horsemen, a company. They watch the road," he said, and slipped down to earth and grinned at the Empress. "Will you trust poor Bran, mother?"

"You can do me no hurt, fool, nor any good. Go your ways. I can meet what comes to me."

"Yea, yea. And these little ones?" She did not answer. She turned away. "I know and you know," Bran said.

"We stand by our lady, fool," the boy said.

"Why so do I, lord. Thus. Let you lie across the ass, mother, like to one dead, and I will be the priest that takes you to burial. Yea, yea, I can talk it and more Latin than mitred abbot. So go we through their lines to Gloucester."

"Madame, it is not fit," the girl cried.

The woman's eyes dwelt on her.

"And these be your children, mother," the fool said.

"I will do it," the Empress said. Then she lay upon the ass, and they bound her with the cord of the fool's cloak so that she hung safe, and the fool covered her own cloak with dust and they went on.

Then when the horsemen challenged them, "Peace be with you," Bran drawled Latin through his nose. "Pray for the soul of this your sister."

"Who are ye?"

"My son, I am the priest of St. Samson's cell by Avon and this a poor woman which burnt charecoal in the woods. But she is dead of a putrid fever"—the horsemen reined back in a hurry—"being stricken down in foul torments and in one hour living and dead and full of corruption. So that, rest her soul, she died unshriven. These be her children and we take her to bury her in holy ground." And he began a Latin prayer.

"Go your ways in God's name,"—the horsemen drew off to windward.

"*Benedicite*," said Bran and strode on; and for a good mile still in gait and manner acted the priest.

Then the girl plucked his arm. "Let her up now, for God's sake."

"What, what, what! is Goody not dead after all? By my faith, I thought she was dead in sooth and I true priest. Nenny, nenny. Bran is a fool now and for ever." So he unlashd the Empress and set her on her feet, and she holding her flushed head

swore like a man. "Nay, Goody, was it not featly done?"

"Do me no more such feats," said she.

"Now I know you are royal," said he.

So they went on again, working through the high hills to the safety beyond, seeing no man but lonely shepherds afar, till in the late afternoon a shout rang through the stillness and out of the bosom of the hills horsemen swept down on them. "Here is not even time to die, Goody," said Bran.

But she cried out: "No time nor need. See, it is the lions and the bar sinister. It is my brother's banner. These are mine own people. They are Robert's men," and she fell to dusting her cloak and patting at her coif, and slipping from the ass strode on before and she called out, "Who is your captain?"

There was parley, and a knight galloped forward who as soon as he made her out saluted her and coming up dismounted and fell on his knee with a "God be praised, lady."

"You are well met." She gave him her hand.

"You will be my escort to Bristol, sir."

He kissed her hand again. "You are alone, lady?"

"Have these two children in care," she said. He lifted her to his saddle, and calling to his men-at-arms gave the boy and the girl. The company clattered off down the hill.

The fool sat himself down on the turf and kissed his hand to their backs. And he laughed and talked to himself in Latin thus: "'Now there was found in it a poor wise man and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no man remembered that same poor man.'" He started and turned. The two asses were nuzzling against his shoulders.

CHAPTER III

TELLING FORTUNES

“IT is ugly here,” said the girl. “I hope it ends soon.”

“Verily and amen,” said the man. “An ugly world, though you are in it, Edith. Pray God it ends soon.”

“You always take me wrong,” said the girl. “You will always be solemn.”

“For I am a fool,” said the man.

The year of the Lord 1153 was drawing towards Michaelmas. They were riding through what was even eight centuries ago corn-land, but the fields were neither ripe to harvest nor bare stubble. The corn had been burnt, and all that country-side lay black and stinking.

“Then came the devil by night and sowed tares,” the man said. “Oh, Mother Mary, Mother Mary, there will be hungry children in this shire before the corn is ripe again.”

They made a bright patch of colour in the black land, he and the girl, for he wore a cloak of saffron-yellow with a red hood fashioned like a cock’s comb and her mantle was green. He was on a pony and she astride a mule, and as they rode they jangled, for besides the bells on his hood their steeds were hung with much merry baggage, a little drum, a tambourine and two brass horns. Bran, jester, juggler and minstrel, was on his way to the harvest fair of St. Edmundsbury, where the girl would make music while he juggled and danced to his music. A

pair well-matched to make folk gay : he was a little man and grotesque, bowed down by his big head, all arms and legs and hands and feet, and she was shapely, buxom for her youth, and of a soft smiling prettiness.

They came after a while to a town, a place of a hundred houses built of wattle and plaster and some two or three of stone, a town of dignity, and there they made a halt. Seeking out the hovel which by a pole thrust out above the door to bear a bunch of branches announced itself a tavern, they tied up pony and mule under a pent-house and went in to dine upon eels stewed with saffron and mustard and bread and wine, which cost them the great price of four silver pennies, so that Bran questioned the reckoning, and was told there was a cruel dearth of all food of man and beast. "Yea, yea," Bran nodded. "When the poor grudge the poor, hell is upon earth. Take up the moneys, good fellow." So the man of the tavern, knowing himself an extortioner, blessed him and warmed to him and asked where he was going. But when Bran spoke of the fair at St. Edmundsbury the taverner threw up his hands. "St. Edmund's fair! God have mercy, minstrel! Whence have you come that you know no better?"

"Out of the land where fools are born, brother. Tell me then, what ails St. Edmund?"

Then the man told him that Count Eustace, the King's son, claiming money and men of the abbot of Edmundsbury, had ravaged all the lands of the abbey near and far and the land of every man who was reckoned loyal to the monks, so that the country was a desert without corn or beast, and there would be no fair at Edmundsbury but mourning and ruined folk asking alms of the empty abbey.

"Yea, yea," Bran nodded. "When wise men go crying, a fool must turn wise. When children go crying our life is but lies."

"I was to have a new coif at Edmundsbury," the

girl said, "a new coif of silk. A thing always goes wrong with us."

"Na, na, na. All is well for us always, for God lets us laugh at ourselves," and he coaxed her and was droll till she put off pouting and he promised they would go back to London again and she was merry.

But when they went out into the market-place there were so many people there and they so wretched that Bran swore it was but God's charity to give them a dance and a jest. "They have not a penny among them," said Edith.

"Then God ha' mercy, child, let them forget it awhile. Play, play," and he beat a roll on the drum and struck up a merry ballad while she played on a lute, and then he plucked out his bagpipe and making it drone and squeak danced grotesquely. Soon they had a ring about them, and the girl slipped off her green cloak and stood out in a golden dress that clung about her and danced while he played upon the horn. Then Bran juggled with knives, and the poor folk forgot themselves and began to shout and stamp, and then he began to act a little play by himself, being by turns an old woman and a monk, and the old woman's pig and her lazy husband, and picking out folks in the crowd for each to talk to. They were merry at that, and when the girl stood out to sing them a love song they loved her and said so and she was the prettier. So Bran made fun for them like the men of his trade yesterday and to-day and for ever, coming out into the ring with an absurd gait and telling an absurd tale of nothing and breaking it off to turn to one and another, telling their fortunes and promising them the wildest nonsense. But in the midst of it, snatching a moment in the midst of laughter, "Who is the great lord, brother?" says he in a whisper to a grave fellow.

From the best house, the only stone house in the market-place, had come out some men richly dressed.

They watched and one was drawing nearer. He walked unsteadily, a big man and young and of some beauty of face, but it was sunken already and flushed, and he frowned and made mouths. "Count Eustace it is, the King's son," the man muttered to Bran, and as he came the crowd fell apart from him and was hushed. "Aye, stand off, swine, you stink," he said. But Bran rattled on in a swift patter of nonsense. "What is this folly, fool? Do you tell fortunes? Tell mine, you rogue."

Bran came up to him in zigzags, like a dog conscious of sin, and grinning and squirming and bowing. Then on a sudden he stopped and shot out his long arm with his long finger pointing straight and shrieked and trembled all over: "Jesu, mercy!" he gasped and cried shrill, "What stands behind you, lord? Look, look! Oh, the black monk behind you and his eyes in his hood," and he put up his hands, making the sign of the evil eye and staggered back and back into the crowd.

Count Eustace started, looked round on this side and on that, turned about and turned again wildly and clutched at the air. He tried to speak and said no word. His face was wrought with terror. He swayed and he fell.

The people shrank from him, murmuring holy words, crossing themselves, and he was left lying alone. None too quickly his knights came to him and stood a little while fearing to touch him. Then the gaping lips closed and quivered and gave out a hoarse oath, and he raised himself and again looked over his shoulder and shuddered. Talking to each other with their eyes his knights drew near and bore him away.

Before that Bran and the girl were gone, making the best speed their beasts could give them. And when they were well away Bran laughed. "Yea, yea. Ever he stands my friend, good brother Fear. He is the great lord, big brother Fear."

But the girl looked at him askance. "Bran," she said timidly, "Bran, what did you see?"

"See, child?" he laughed again. "Naught but a lewd, drunken boy. He saw the rest. But he is a great lord. He can see things. Not Bran, no. Bran is but a poor fool."

"Sometimes I think you have the evil eye yourself," she said.

It was late in that day they met the man from the north. He wore a good cloak, but it was plain. He rode a good horse, but it was a beast for use not show. He might have been a merchant or some lord's steward. He was halted on a hill in the burnt country, gazing at it, and when they came up: "How call you this, good fellow?" he said. "Whose work is it?" So Bran told him. "A king's son!" said he and swore. "A man would say it was the King's work to make the corn grow, not to blast it."

"A man would say so, cousin—if no king could hear him," Bran grinned.

"I have ridden three hundred miles in England, and, by the rood, each mile is worse. Pray you, good fellow, what manner of king is this you have in your country?"

"By my faith, cousin, a very kingly king."

"Say you so? God's mercy, you are easy to please in England."

"Sing soft, cousin."

"I come from France where the corn is reaped and the kinc grow fat, and here"—he waved his hand to the black fields. "But they have a king in France."

"But one, cousin. But here there is Stephen who is King, and Eustace his son who hopes to be King, and one Henry of Anjou his cousin who would be King, and the land hath no peace."

"I have heard of it," says the Frenchman. "But which of them do you choose in England?"

"I am but a poor fool, cousin."

“God’s mercy, it is time one of them made order. This is very hell.” It was said vehemently, and thereafter he fell silent, glowering at the black land. And Bran looked at him. He was a very solid fellow, as tall as a man need be, but so thick everywhere that he seemed short, bull-necked, deep of chest and of belly, and massive in the leg. His face was handsome in a bold fierce kind but red all over, and his eyes were bloodshot and the redder it looked for the other red in his hair. No doubt of his vigour, none of his passions. And yet—suddenly he turned upon Bran: “What are you thinking of me, sirrah?”

“Why, cousin, I am wondering whether you are a boy or a man.”

“Well said, fool,” he laughed as loud as he talked. “That is the very heart of it. I like you for that.” Then it was as if a veil were drawn over his staring grey eyes. “Well, know me, then. I am a Frenchman born and come to England to look at certain lands and traffic for them if I think well. And you? Who is your lord?”

“Nenny, nenny. Bran is a masterless man, cousin. Bran goes to and fro in the earth and walks up and down in it, all men’s servant, no man’s slave. Like a king, cousin.”

The Frenchman laughed again and thrust out a big clumsy hand and gripped his arm. “I love you, I say.”

“That is what no man has ever said.” Bran looked at him wistfully.

“But a pretty wench on a time, rogue?” The Frenchman jerked his head at Edith.

“Fie then,” says she, and laughed and looked away.

“Na, na. Edith is Bran’s sister and Bran’s daughter. Edith is my good maid who dances when I play.”

“God’s body it is what women are for,” says the

Frenchman. "And you, what is your part?"

"He talks his follies, sir," said Edith with a beekoning glance, and then smiling malice at Bran: "Yes, and he tells fortunes."

"Oh, a sage fool! By the stars, brother fool? By art magic? By——"

"Nay, brother, by the eyes," says Bran and looked into his.

"God's body, tell my fortune, then. I do not fear." He stopped his horse.

"Have your will," Bran said. "Come down to earth and eat bread with me. We are all one life then," and he slid off his pony and opening his scrip set bread and meat and salt upon the grass. The Frenchman laughed at him but sat down and held out his hand. "Eat, brother," says Bran, grave as a priest.

"Nay, faith, he is quite mad, sir," says the girl. "He will see death in your face as like as not."

"I defy him." The Frenchman began to munch, and Bran ate too and brought out a flask of wine and drank with him and looked. And after a long time: "Now have I eaten your salt, fool. And I am your man. What now?"

"Yea, yea," Bran said. "You do not fear. That is strange. The first man ever I saw you do not fear. You are sure, so sure, brother."

"Why man, I had a devil to my grandad's grandad. So the tale goes in my country."

"Yea, yea. The old tales are true tales. I see the devil, brother. He is your lord whiles. But you are greater. Only you have ever two souls in you. You love and you are cold. You are cruel and are gentle, rash and very wise, a wild rogue and good. I see a great fortune, brother, and sorrowful, sorrowful." He put out his hand and touched the man timidly and still gazed at him.

"God's blood, it is a fortune I like," the man cried. "What, brother, is that the devil speaks?"

“Nay, that is no devil. That is more like a fairy man,” Bran smiled.

“Do you say so? My grandam’s mother was a fairy and all in a night she was gone into the air. So they tell of us in—by the rood, man, you are a seer.”

“Na, na. Bran is but a poor fool, brother.”

Whatever persuaded him, whether he was taken by Bran or the girl’s buxom prettiness or by the shrewd calculation that if he travelled with a minstrel and his wench he was not likely to be taken for a person of importance, and I suppose all these three reasons worked in him, he joined himself to their company. He too was going to London; he would be some days in London if all went well. They lodged in a tavern at Westminster? Why, he would like to see something of the court and this king of theirs.

“It is a boy that you are, brother,” said Bran.

“He is a very comely man, King Stephen,” said Edith.

“As comely as I, fair lady?”

She laughed. “I dare not look at you, you are so quick.”

They found each other mighty pleasant, these two, and made a merry journey of it. And indeed the Frenchman was good company, a spirited fellow, taking his world with gusto, of ready mirth, full of talk, and the girl liked him none the worse for his restlessness and his sudden vehemence. But Bran was silent and distraught. In this fashion they came to their tavern and swearing that never was life so poor and drear it welcomed the old guests and the new with zeal.

CHAPTER IV
KING BY RIGHT

WHEN the Frenchman came down in the morning, and that was betimes, he heard that Bran was gone out already, and afterwards as he sat at breakfast came Edith and pouted and said that this was ever the fool's way to go off and mope and maunder by himself and it was hard to bear and she was the loneliest maid. Whereat the Frenchman made merry and mended the breakfast of bacon and small beer with a capon and mulberry wine, though he gave himself little. But she clapped her hands and was so naïvely delighted that he kissed her. She was indeed as fresh as a flower. And the end of it was that Bran came back to find her sitting on his knee with her arm about his neck and his lips at hers.

Bran stood at the door and beckoned. "Brother, I have news for you," he said, and beckoned again and went out. The girl had sprung up and away. She stood an ignoble spectacle, preening herself and defiant. The Frenchman laughed and kissed his hand to her and followed the fool.

He clapped him on the shoulder. "Speak out, man." But the fool shook him off and walked on swiftly beyond the houses and out to the river bank. There he flung himself on the shingle and began to throw stones into the falling tide. The Frenchman stood over him smiling good-humoured contempt. "And now your news," said he.

"The poor fool," Bran said, "he had nothing save one poor little ewe-lamb which he had bought and nourished up. It did eat of his own meat and drank

of his own cup and was unto him as a daughter."

"So." The Frenchman shrugged. "You need not talk scripture."

"Will you say holy writ is not well writ, brother?"

"God's body, man, do not whine like a priest. I did the wench no harm. And what is it to you? She is not your wife nor love. You told me so."

"Yea, yea. What should Bran do with love of women?" He made himself like a hunchback, he grimaced. "Bran is a fool born. But the poor fool holds that maid dear. He would not have her broken, brother. She is all that he has."

"Why, man, do you think you can keep her a nun?"

Bran looked up at him. "And you, brother, do you think you could take her to wife?"

"God have mercy, fool, you are too righteous. Man and maid must have their fun."

"There is other work for you, brother. You were not born to spoil poor men's maids."

The Frenchman glowered at him. "The devil burn you and your homilies!"

"Yea, yea." Bran threw another stone into the water. "And kings are but men and men are but kings. So God save all."

The Frenchman laughed. "Now God have mercy, fool, what is this?"

"Why this is thus, brother. You are but King Stephen without a crown."

"God's body, man, give me no more riddles."

"Na, na. Bran is a simple man. No riddles in him. See, brother, because I will not let you do your will, you send me to the devil. Because the bishops will not let him do his will, King Stephen holds them all prisoners. Ergo, brother, ergo, you are as like as brothers, you and my lord King."

"Is it true, good fellow?"

"That you are his brother? Nay, ask your mother. The tale is true as the sky is blue, but oh, my brother, what is it to you?"

The Frenchman laughed, but his staring grey eyes were grave. "By my faith, a king is a strange king that throws down the glove to Holy Church? Bishops prisoned! I will not believe it."

"Nay, then, come and hear. It is in every man's mouth."

"What ails him with his bishops?"

"Why, brother, he would have had his son, Lord Eustace, crowned to be King after him."

"Would he so?" the Frenchman muttered and bit his lip.

"But the bishops answered him nay, and they lie in duress till they do his will."

"He breaks them or they break him," said the Frenchman. "So. A man is a bold man who drives Holy Church to that."

They went towards the palace then to hear if it were true and hear more of it. The twisted by-ways were full of people chattering the story, and the thing was what Bran had told and by all men's judgment a great grim deed. The Frenchman moved among them eager and adroit in his talk and each moment more jovial. And in the end, coming near the palace which a crowd watched as a place where something awful was in doing, unseen they saw King Stephen ride in, a big man and stately, but already old. He rode alone, he looked right on, he seemed to see nothing, he was pathetically earnest.

"Oh, he is handsome as a saint," a woman said.

The Frenchman laughed. "And he would be King!" he said in Bran's ear.

"Yea, yea. But I do not laugh, brother, I. God give you the right when you be grey."

Now when they came back to the tavern it was still early, and they went into the garden to drink piment and drinking heard a murmur of voices and laughter. The Frenchman looked at Bran and shrugged and taking him by the arm walked him

along by the yew hedge. In the field beyond the girl Edith sat as she had sat on the Frenchman's knee with another man. He was a short plump creature, low-browed and of a base, sensual face.

Bran drew back and with a loud laugh the Frenchman followed him. "God's body, we are not honoured, friend, neither you nor I."

But Bran sat himself down on the grass and began to throw daisies in the air.

There was rustling and a scurry behind the hedge, and in a moment they saw the gleam of the girl's yellow dress as she ran to the house. The man came swaggering through the orchard; he wore the King's colours, he was plainly one of the Flemish mercenaries whom the King kept for a guard. "Give you good day, fool," he said and laughed. But his little eyes were on the Frenchman. "Why, who is your fine friend?"

"Friend, brother? Na, na, Bran has no friends." He tossed daisies into the man's face and ran away.

The Frenchman and the Fleming were left staring at each other. Then the Frenchman laughed in his face and went in. And the Fleming stood watching him.

They made a grim dinner of it. The Frenchman chose to make game of Edith and she was sullen, and Bran muttered to himself and cut queer figures out of apples and set them in array, and sometimes he looked at the girl with a queer smile and sometimes wistfully at the man. But he had no word for either.

There came the tramp of men marching in order. The girl started and looked at the Frenchman with the gleam of a smile, mocking, malicious. Bran turned to the window. "Get you gone, brother," he said over his shoulder. "Out by the kitchen, out and away."

"Why, what now?" the Frenchman started up.

"My lord, you know," Bran turned on him.

"So." The Frenchman laid a hand on his shoul-

der. "Go you, good fellow. No man bears my burdens for me. God's body, go!"

"Na, na," Bran said. "You——"

The girl laughed. Already the Flemish men-at-arms were in the room and first of them the plump fellow of the orchard.

"Away, my lord, away," Bran muttered, and thrust in front of him, and with grotesque antics, contorting himself, affecting spasms of surprise, pretending to see difficulty and from afar approached the Fleming. "But yea, but yea, it is Paul of Tournai, my little brother Paul," he cried, and fell upon the man and hugged him and kissed him and clung to him.

His brother Paul, cursing, threw him off at last. "You are too much a fool or too little. Lie down, dog, or you will taste rope." But the Frenchman had not used the chance to escape; the Frenchman stood his ground and the Fleming turned to him and looked him over and grinned. "Who are you, friend?" he said.

"Away to kennel," the Frenchman said.

"Now look you, there is pride for a fellow that lurks in a low tavern. I think you must be better lodged, friend. Come to the palace."

"God's body, rogue, do you give orders to me?" the Frenchman thundered.

The Fleming hesitated and licked his lips. "*De par le roi*—in the name of the King," he said.

"God save your King," the Frenchman shrugged.

"Let him come and seek me."

The Fleming grinned again. "You betray yourself, my lord. Come, we are many and you are one."

"Do you match yourselves with me, rogue?"

"By the mass, if I did not know you, you have told me your name now," the Fleming laughed.

"Come, my lord, it is an order." He drew near yet faltered, and then making bold, "Henry of Anjou," he cried, and laid his hand on the Frenchman's shoulder, "in the King's name I——"

“Dog!” the Frenchman shouted at the touch and flung him off so violently that he fell full length and lay.

“It is done, it is done,” Bran darted forward plucking out his knife. “Go, my lord, go,” and he put himself before the men-at-arms.

“Nay, good lad, peace,” the Frenchman set him aside. “Do you call yourselves the King’s men? March on before and tell King Stephen that Henry of Anjou comes to his palace.”

Paul of Tournai staggered to his feet. “Hold him, guard him! Take the fool there, too. He has drawn steel on the King’s guard.”

Henry turned. “So. How are you called, dog? Paul of Tournai? I do not forget.” Marching in the midst of them he came to the palace, and with hands bound behind him, beaten and kicked, there followed Bran—a sight which hardly a moment drew the eyes of the crowd. The like was often seen, and these were plainly men of no account.

As soon as he was in the palace courtyard Henry stopped short, and out of the confusion which he made, for the guard having no order marched on, he called out in a loud voice: “Let King Stephen be told that Henry of Anjou is come to have speech with him.”

Then every man who was about the courtyard, servants and men-at-arms and clerks and knights, turned to stare. Paul of Tournai ran up to him: “I have my orders, my lord, and you are my prisoner. March on, march on.” And the guard closed pressing on him and he was borne away.

A bare room built in the wall and half below the ground lit by a loophole above his head received him, and the door bolts clanged and he was left alone. He leaned in the corner—there was nothing in the place but the stone which made it—and folded his arms and broke out in that sudden loud laugh of his. “Now has the hart caught a hound,” said he.

“Here is sport,” and he fell silent and very still and calm for awhile and let his mind work. But then on a sudden he roared out: “The foul fiend tear that wench,” and a flow of vile words and blasphemy, forgetting her in a moment, but raving against his plight and his fortune and all the world, and he struck with his bare hands at the wall like a madman and flung himself down and writhed and rolled and gnawed his clothes.

So he lay when he was aware of more light and a voice saying, “By the holy rood, this is the blood of Anjou.”

The door shut, the light was dim again. He started to his feet and stood before a man with a drawn sword. “Who are you, fellow?” His voice was cold enough.

“Yves d’Eu, boy.”

“Stephen has no better man than you are?”

“As you say, my lord,” the knight laughed.

“And a timid fellow, too.” Henry pointed at the drawn sword.

“Faith, who deals with a madman guards against a bite.”

“Do you think you can kill me in the dark?” He sprang upon Sir Yves and bore him down, wrenching his sword arm and from the struggle rose grasping the sword.

“God save you, boy, who thought of killing you?” Sir Yves gasped, scrambling to his feet. “You are mad as a hare.”

“Go back to your King Stephen and tell him that Henry of Anjou waits him sword in hand.”

“What? What? By the mass, it is a challenge!”

“And you a knight, Sir Yves d’Eu. Carry it or be shamed.”

“None so mad neither,” Sir Yves muttered. “Pray you, my lord, stand in that light there. . . . Ay, it is so. You are Henry of Anjou.” Henry raised the sword in salute and Sir Yves lifted his

hand. "My lord, you well know that King Stephen is the most gallant knight alive. A challenge hath he never denied nor will ever from any man who hath the right to give him challenge."

"Henry of Anjou may touch the shield of any man that lives."

"I do not gainsay it, my lord. But King Stephen is old and you are young."

"If you be a knight, Sir Yves d'Eu, say to your King what I have said."

In a while came back Sir Yves and another knight, and said, "We bring you to the King, my lord."

"It is well. Carry my sword till I ask it of you again."

Sir Yves bowed and took it and they went before him across the courtyard. "This is he we called a boy," said Sir Yves to his fellow, "but he hath a devil in him."

"Aye, brother. It is the patron saint of his house."

King Stephen sat in his hall in a great chair on the dais, and about him stood a little company, but he sat as if he were alone, he looked right on at nothing. Henry marched in, the stone ringing to his stride, and stood square, young and full of life and very ruddy before the sallow white-bearded King. The dull eyes became aware of him, but without a gleam in their heaviness. "Aye, aye. You are Henry of Anjou."

"And you Stephen of Blois."

"I am King of England, young man."

"Anointed and crowned," Henry lifted his hand in salute and smiled.

"Give him a stool," the King said. "You are a bold boy, sirrah."

"I sent you a challenge, Stephen. God have mercy, do you call that bold?" he laughed. "But what now? Shall we talk in a crowd, cousin? Do you want guards?"

"Give us room," the King cried, and his knights drew down the hall.

“ I sent you a challenge, aye, and I will make it good where you will and as you will.”

“ I am King in England and you are a landless boy.”

“ Yesterday is yours, to-morrow is mine. But I sent you a challenge because I sought speech with you—God’s body, I come to your city alone, you send a base-born fellow to lay hands on me ; I have no word of lord or knight till one comes to me in my dungeon with his sword out. Grammercy ! At least it was a knight who was to murder me. A better knight than you, Stephen. For he was ashamed.”

“ By the cross, there was no thought to murder you. You were not known. You came by stealth, you lurked in hiding. The Fleming brought word of you and was bidden bring what he found. But naught was sure. And the sword—it was said you were mad, boy. You raved.”

“ Who raves here, cousin ? I was not known ? Why was I made prisoner ? Speak truth, man ; you knew and you feared. It is writ in your face.”

“ I fear no man,” the King said. “ There is none can do me hurt. What do you want of me ? ”

“ God’s body, what do you want of me ? I come to England alone, a naked man, and you set your men-at-arms on me and drag me to your castle.”

“ Why did you come to England ? ”

“ You hold what is mine.”

“ I am the King by right and by might. You come to harry the realm like your mother before you. You have no claim to mercy.”

“ Ask mercy for yourself, Stephen. You took the realm which was my mother’s by a trick. By arms you have held it. I could forgive you that.”

“ Holy saints, are you to be my judge ? ”

“ Yes, by God’s blood, I am your judge, I and every man who hath a right in England. You are the King. And all the land is waste, and no man is sure of life and living. Aye, your own son burns the fields black——”

“Be silent!” the King started up.

“I fight my challenge, Stephen.” Henry came nearer and spoke into his face. “King by right and might! You are no King. A King is he who rules men that they thrive. You are the bane of the land. And now you throw God’s bishops into prison till they will anoint your son to be its bane after you and curse the land when you are gone to your doom.” He stopped, for the King turned away with his hand to his brow. “What, do you yield yourself, Stephen?”

“My son is dead, boy,” the King said.

Henry stood silent. “That I did not know,” he said after a while, and bent his head and crossed himself. “God receive his soul. I have fought a stricken man, cousin.”

“You say well,” the King muttered.

“How did he die?”

“It is the hand of God. He died in fear. He was at feud with the Abbey in Edmundsbury (you who know so much, you know that). And on a day he met a fool telling fortunes and this fool bade him look at a black monk that was behind him. Then Eustace fell in a swoon and thereafter by night and by day he talked of the monk and his eyes, and presently he died.”

And again Henry crossed himself and said a prayer.

“This is the end of all. I am the last of my house. I am old and a lone man. What do you ask of me, Henry of Anjou?”

“I claim my right.”

“Right? The only right a man has is to death which is deliverance.”

“My life is yet to live. I claim my right.”

“You would be King? You who have seen me this day.”

“Each man has his own fate. I do not fear, Stephen.”

“I have feared nothing, boy; and stand here desolate. Remember me when your own hour

comes. What I have done, I have done for my honour and the son which was mine. I have my reward." He spread out his arms, grasped at nothing and let them fall. "What is to do?"

"You have said it, Stephen. I would be King. Why, cousin, it must be so. There is none other man left. It is God's will."

The King flushed. "You—you boast that over my son's grave! God's wounds, boy. I hold you in my power. If I will it, you lie dead with Eustace. That—is that God's will?"

"You know. For you do not dare," Henry said coolly.

"Shame, shame," the King said and beat his breast. "There is baseness in your soul."

"I fight a stricken man. I have said it. I fight but as I must, cousin. I would not beat you down. King you shall be while you live if you will write me your heir."

"Call you to his place!" the King muttered.

"What is, it is, cousin."

"My heir?" the King looked at him keenly. "Oh, if I had the strength of the old years to meet you with a horse between my thighs and a sword in my hand." He raised his right arm, fist clenched, and it trembled. "That is what I wish my heir, Henry of Anjou. Think of it when you leave all."

"We waste words, cousin," Henry shrugged.

The summer twilight was falling when he came out of the King's council chamber. Yves d'Eu, very carefully respectful, led him to a big stately room which looked out upon the river. He went all about it in a hurry, prying, like a dog in a strange place, then flung himself into a chair and sat twisting his hands and shuffling in the rushes on the floor.

"Pray you, my lord, does it content you?"

"No—aye—it will serve, it will serve."

"Will you sup, my lord?"

Henry stared at him. "God's body, I will not eat

nor drink till that dog Fleming is laid by the heels. You know him, sir, the knave, Paul of Tournai."

"My lord, the poor rogue had his duty to do——"

"And so had you, ha? Why man, you did yours like a knight, and he like a false foul knave. No man suffers of me because he is King Stephen's man. But the rope for all rogues. Go, tie him up. You heard the King give him to me. And hark ye, the poor fool who was taken with me, bring him here. He is my man."

Sir Yves looked away. "It—it was not known, my lord."

"Say you so?" the red brows bent. "It shall be known."

And after a while when the wine and meat were on the board came Bran, shambling, wriggling, muttering. He blinked at the candle light. "Now God have mercy, brother," he said, and dropped on his knees and fell to fondling Henry's hand and kissing it.

"What, man, am I so precious to you?"

Bran looked up at him. "You remembered, brother. None other ever remembered Bran."

"Yes, I remember. I pay all debts. Up and eat, man."

The fool heaved himself up painfully and stared round the room. "Is it real, brother? What should I eat? King Stephen in a pasty? What have you done, brother? The world is upside down."

"I have fought with Stephen and he is a conquered King this night. Well, God is over all. His soul was weak in him. I came to him when he had heard his son was dead."

Bran drank off his wine. "And how died he?"

"A strange tale. He met a fool who said there was a monk at his shoulder. And Eustace fell in a swoon and is dead raving of a monk and his eyes."

"Yea, yea," Bran said. "That fool was I, brother."

"You—aye, I had my guess of that." He reached across the table and grasped the fool's hand. "You

tell fortunes, do you not ? ” he laughed. “ Do you see what you tell ? ”

“ Bran sees men, brother. There was no monk to see, but Bran saw fear in him.”

“ And the devil in me ? ”

“ Yea, yea. And God.”

Henry laughed and let him go. “ So. I am content.”

“ What is the end of it all, brother ? ”

“ Why, man, you come with me where I go. But first we will pay that dog Fleming his due. He is mine.”

“ Na, na,” Bran cried. “ He goes free.”

“ What ? I swear he has not been gentle with you all this while. Speak out, fool. He had you flogged ? ”

“ Bran has no evil for him.”

“ God’s body, man, pluck up heart. I hold him now. What of your maid ? ”

Bran looked at him miserably and looked away. “ She saw. It is finished. She laughed.”

“ So. I had my own desire to that Fleming. Now——”

“ Na, na, na. He goes free, Henry. It is the first thing I ask or the last. He goes free. It makes me feel greater.”

Henry looked at his wine and made it run round in the cup. “ Well,” he said, “ well. He shall have no more of hanging than the fear. Men will call it kingly,” and he laughed. “ But you I call fool. By the cross, the queerest boon ever a king was asked since Christ.”

“ A king ? ”

“ Stephen writes me his heir, and I let the old man reign in peace for the little days that are his. Then comes my time ! ”

“ Yea, yea, and you covet it ! Fools are we, the world’s poor fools, Henry, my brother. Good heart on your cross.”

CHAPTER V

QUEST OF A QUEEN

THE Queen of France stood looking out by a lancet window, and in the green flat land spread like a carpet two hundred feet below saw neither house nor man. Behind her, her woman was huddled and stitched with blundering fingers. The Queen swept out and began to climb the winding stone stair of the tower. As she rose into the light and clean air, a spear was thrust before her, a man-at-arms barred her way to the walls. She bade him stand aside, but he neither answered nor moved. For a little while she stood there, then turned and went back to the room below. Her woman was crying. "Out, fool, out," the Queen said, and struck her and chose the window again. One hand wrestled with the other.

When she turned at last she found a fool sitting cross-legged on the floor at her side. She was a tall woman and strongly made. She looked down fierce and contemptuous at the little ill-shapen man, but he sat playing with the arms and legs of a naked doll and he bent over it so that his face was hidden under his red hood with its cock's comb and its ass's ears. She stirred him with her foot. "Peace be with you," said he in Latin, and tossed his head with a jingle of bells and smiled up at her.

"Death of God!" says she. "Who are you, knave?"

"If that I knew, no fool were I, but a fool I am so to know were to die."

“To the devil with your jingle. You are not my fool. Who sent you in his livery?”

“Sing soft, cousin Eleanor.” He took from his scrip a sprig of broom yellow with blossom. “Are you learned, cousin? Do you speak Latin? *Planta genesta* here you see, and who wears that is lord of me. Do you know the land which smiles gold in spring?”

“Anjou!”

“You have said. Henry Plantagenet, Henry of Anjou, he is my lord and my brother, and I am Bran, his fool.”

“The boy of Anjou,” she said, and Bran laughed and her eyes blazed at him. “Aye, you mock me? I think I can teach you fear.”

“Nenny, nenny, cousin. I know Fear. He wakes with me and sleeps with me, big brother Fear,” and he plucked at her dress and fondled it. She was a beautiful woman.

“God guard me! Stand up, man, stand, never fawn on me. How are you come here?”

“Na, na, cousin. I am not here. Bran is not here. Here is only old Gillies, the Queen of France’s fool. I am he, and he is on a journey or peradventure he sleepeth and must be awakened,” he giggled. “As how, saith Cousin Queen. Why thus, sweet lady. Here is you, the Queen of France, which her saintly lord King Louis shuts into prison. For what? Nay, no man knows that.”

“Have a care,” says she through her teeth.

And again Bran laughed. “What should I care for, cousin? See then, here is you, a fair lady in her prime, held in a lonely castle and my lord your husband looks down his nose and goes to prayers and all the world whispers. What shall come of it, cousin Eleanor?”

“No good to the man that does me ill.”

“Yea, yea. I can believe you,” says he watching her, and indeed the beauty of her proud face had a

strange look of force. "Now, there is in Anjou a hearty knight which swears it were shame a lady fair should languish alone at the will of a saintly king——"

"So he sends me a fool. Aye, a good, gallant knight is he."

"You say well who would say ill, and it needs a fool to do your will, so God save him who is Jack to your Jill. Prithee, cousin, no more of your words, for they are but wind out of emptiness. Thus it is. When holy King Louis sent after you your tirewoman and your cook and your fool there came a night when they lay in a tavern. And good man Gilles he fell a-drinking, and he was and he was not, and in his place was goodman Bran, as like him as a fool to a fool. And if your folks knew him they bit their tongues for fear he was a spy of godly King Louis. And the guards knew nothing, for no wise man knows a fool. And here am I with my head in my hand. Will you take it, cousin?"

"Why, God have merey, fool, what should you do?"

"What the mouse did for the netted lion. Give me your hand, Eleanor."

"Why, then?" she said, but gave it.

"There is a man in me would kiss it," said he, and he held it to his cheek a moment and laughed and shuffled out.

The Queen sat smiling. She was comforted. She found her world had not passed away. Still she commanded the allegiance of men. Henry of Anjou would serve. The creature could be but a boy indeed, and she—she looked down at herself and laughed. Reason the more he should be her knight-errant. He would serve. The boy was heir to Normandy and England. With him to her champion there was trouble coming on good King Louis. Caution, caution. A boy with a name must still be a boy, and all turned on a boy's wit and a fool's. Who

should trust them? Nay, let the worst fall, let them fail, they would make her a noise in the world and a tumult. She would not pine hidden away like a naughty nun bricked up in her cell. So she made out her choice, and night came and she ate and was put to bed and lay wakeful a long while. She woke with a hand on her head. "Cousin Eleanor," the fool said, "cousin Eleanor."

"Rogue," she grasped his hand.

"Woman," says he and laughed. "Well, woman, can you dress in the dark?"

"Why, then?"

"Because you must, cousin."

He heard a rustling, and in the midst of it, "You are the first that has said must to me and I did his will."

"And I am a fool," said Bran.

"I am dressed. What now?"

"Now I make light." He struck flint and steel and lit a candle and going to the window opened it and set the candle on the sill. "Stand behind me, cousin." He stood himself against the wall. After a moment there came a whizzing sound, the candle went out and fell with an odd faint rattle. Bran went on hands and knees groping across the room. He rose with an arrow in his hands to which was tied a light cord, and he hauled that in swiftly and after it came a rope. A moment he stood at the window listening to hear nothing. Then he knotted the rope about her waist. "Have no fear, cousin," he said, and he laughed. She climbed out of the window and slowly he let her down.

"God have mercy, God have mercy," he muttered. "The mother of what dooms hangs there!" and he made the rope fast and slid down after her.

She lit into the arms of a man who kissed her hand and cut the rope from her and throwing her across his shoulder made off swiftly, big woman as she was, down the hill-side. He said not a word and she

asked him nothing. But when he stopped by a muster of horses and set her down, "It is a broad back that bears my fortunes," she said.

"It is Henry of Anjou, Lady Eleanor."

She came close to him in the darkness. "You have chosen?"

"I can hold you."

"Oh, my brother," Bran chuckled. "Oh Henry, my brother, the dark will not last and the light is the end of this play."

"*Pardieu*, the fool is the wisest here. Lady Eleanor, I have no men about me to make head against King Louis. It is mount and ride."

"All night and all day," she said. "But whither?" and Bran laughed.

"We make to safety first." Henry swung her to the saddle.

And all the rest of that night they rode on through the plain and halted in the dawn thirty miles away and slept then in a village of Touraine.

You see them meeting in the noon sunlight, the woman stately and schooled, the man jerking all his broad inches in his haste. She was the taller; there was the assurance of power in her dignity, and the regular composed beauty of her face spoke subtlety and passion. And he, with his bulk and his awkward restlessness, his red face and his big ungainly hands working, he looked a boor and a boy. But what she said was, "Heaven guard me! You are strong."

"You will need that, lady." His full grey eyes strove with hers.

"Na, na, brother,"—Bran stole round him and took his arm—"what Lady Eleanor needs, it is a fool. How, saith Henry. Why thus, brother? That she may feel wise."

Henry smiled at him, then swiftly the bold, wary eyes went back to hers. "Is the fool in the right, lady?"

"How should a man be right who risked his life

for me ? ” She held out her hand : “ Cousin fool, I owe you the ransom of my life.”

Bran put her hand to his brow. “ A thing that I had I never could keep, but all that I lack is mine in my sleep.”

Her eyes lingered on him a moment. “ Dream well,” she said. “ And now, my lord, what will you do with me ? ”

“ I will hold you against the world. If——”

“ My lord, I have a husband.”

“ A husband ? Well ! ” he shrugged.

“ Holy saints, what do I know ? I am hurried off to that accursed castle and guarded like a traitor and have speech of none. I am told nothing, not what King Louis intends with me, no word of what he has against me. Death of God, my lord, a felon is better entreated.”

“ They say King Louis is a holy man.”

“ And holy have I found him. Let him be what saint he will I am still his Queen.”

“ That is what irks His Holiness. He has called a Council of France to Beaugency to write him a divorce.”

“ The fox ! Divorce me while I lie buried ! What is the charge ? ”

“ Faith, lady, you should guess that better than I.”

“ He has none, I tell you, none. It is why he hid me away.”

“ I believe it casily. God’s blood, Lady Eleanor, the King is a coward.”

“ Yes, he is a coward. Me he always feared.”

“ A coward and a fool. Let him go. You are well rid of him.”

“ No. Louis is not a fool. Oh, this is a foul trick in him ! ”

“ None so cunning as a saint. None so cleverly a fool. Why, let him shame himself and break himself. I will maintain your honour.”

“ You ! ” she looked him over. “ Oh, boy ! And yet not all a boy.”

“ Do you know me ? ” he laughed. “ I promise you I will not fear you.”

“ Alas, poor me ! A life indeed,” she said very placidly. “ You are a quick man, my lord Henry. You have never seen me till this morning’s light. And now——”

“ That have I, Eleanor. I saw you ride into Orleans with King Louis in the spring. And I swore then you were not for him.”

“ Oh, a knight-errant ! He will deliver me from the tyrant. Well, it is an honour. But after all, my lord, I am not only a king’s wife. In mine own person I am something.”

“ The grandest beauty in the world, Eleanor.”

“ The Duchess of Aquitaine, my lord.”

“ I shall be Count of Anjou and Duke of Normandy and King of England.”

“ Add Aquitaine to that,” she clasped her hands, “ and what a realm ! ” Then she laughed. “ Oh, you calculate well.”

For a moment he was abashed, but only a moment. “ I am cold in counsel, lady, and hot in action. If it is well planned, it is not ill to do.” He grasped her arm. “ God’s body, do you doubt I will fill your life for you ? ”

“ I am cold in counsel, too,” she said. “ Look, my lord. If I go away with you to my lands or yours, there is King Louis arraigns me to his lords and I am held a guilty woman and shamed.”

“ Words ! Words ! God’s blood, are you afraid to do what you will ? ”

“ Not I. And therefore to Beaugency I go and face King Louis.”

“ What, you cleave to that monk still ? ”

“ I am a woman, Henry. And I think it is what you cannot understand.”

“ Women were made for men, Eleanor.”

She laughed and he stood glowering at her. And Bran began to sing: "The ass for the thistle and the thistle for the ass, and you and I we shall grow in the grass, and feed the beasts whercon we fed, for all that is living lives on the dead, and so this world it comes to pass, you are born of a lass, with alas and alas, and you die with alas and alack the day!" So Bran chanted as he sat cross-legged on the ground looking from one to the other with a twisted smile, and he shook his head at Henry. "Nenny, nenny, brother, we mean naught, neither you nor I."

"Well, I will ride with you to Beaugency, lady," Henry said.

"No, my lord. That writes me guilty with you. I go alone."

His face darkened. "God's blood go, and the devil go with you."

"Na, na, cousin Eleanor. Take the fool instead. Take poor Bran. He is the better man."

"What now?" Henry turned on him.

"When a fool is a fool there is no now but to-morrow."

"Ride with me, good fellow," the Queen said.

"*Pardieu*, you will be well matched." Henry broke into the loud short laugh which she hated already. Bran looked at him wistfully but he strode away.

CHAPTER VI

THE QUEEN'S DELIVERANCE

AND so the Queen and the fool fared to the council at BeaGENCY alone. It was early in spring and the level corn-land freshly green and all the bright air merry with birds' voices, and Bran must needs sing back to them, and the Queen looked grim at him. So, "God have mercy, God have mercy, who would play at being Kings and Queens?" says he. "Na, na, cousin, when the blackbird sings out of the pink apple bloom is it not enough to live?"

"What is in your heart, fool?"

"Out on you for a woman! Who bade man eat of the knowledge of good and evil? Woman Eve. Who bade man look in at his dark heart when he would look out at the bright world? Woman Eleanor."

"So the fool's heart is sad?"

"Who but a fool has a sad heart ever? Is cousin Queen sad? Nenny, her heart is fierce, whiles her heart is wild, but she does not know how to be sad. But the fool, he has left the only man that ever he loved and his heart is black."

"Aye, now we come to it. Why did you choose me, fool?"

"You have said, Queen. Bran is a fool."

And thereafter they rode on some way. Then, "A fool to serve me?" She looked at him. "I love my own folk well."

"What can you give me for what I have given up?"

"Your lord Henry? Tell me, what manner of man is he?"

"He is as cold as you and hot as you. A reckless man and the wisest ever I knew. And withal he hath no foe so dread as himself. Body of me, who is it I tell of, cousin, him or you?"

She laughed. "You are bitter-sweet, Bran. And you love him."

"He was ever a good man to Bran."

And again they rode on some way before she spoke. "And your good man, what was in his mind when he took me out of prison? To make me his, me and my lands?"

"God have mercy, God have mercy, will you be judged by what lies in the dark of your mind? I think you will go down to hell, cousin. No, faith, what we do is ill enough to answer. And brother Henry he set you free and free you ride."

"And he might have borne me away at his will." She laughed. "The more fool he."

"Yea, yea," Bran looked at her. "Fools are we all, whatever we do."

"Why then, what is in your mind that you give up your lord to ride with the strange woman?"

He nodded his head till the bells on his cock's comb jingled. "A fool's folly, cousin."

"Whoever believes that you do not. You think us all children, children to Bran the wise."

"Yea, yea. Children to a childless man. And what does he know of a child?"

"Come, man, why are you here at my side?"

"I looked at you. You had need of me. I answered. Oh, body of me, laugh at me now!"

She looked at him, the big head rolling and nodding, the short misshapen body, the huge hands and feet on a little man. But she did not laugh. She put out her hand and touched him.

And in a while they began to talk of what they had to do. It was plain that the Queen was riding

upon danger. The last place indeed that King Louis would look for her was upon the road to Beaugency; that she would escape to seek him out and defy him he was not, she swore, capable of thinking. "How should a fish guess that I want air?" said she. But the nearer they came to Beaugency the more folk would be upon the road. They might ride into the King's own train, they might meet some loyal lord who would snap her up for his master.

"And back goes cousin Eleanor to the cupboard," said Bran. "Yea, yea. It is like enough. But you should have thought of that before you cast off my little brother Henry."

"I asked the man to give me a guard."

"And very prettily do you ask, cousin. Like a child which slaps mother to get a pasty."

"Should I kneel to him, fool?" She flied at Bran with her whip.

"Yea, yea, stiff in the knee are you both. And both be wrong and neither is right, and that is the end of you and your might."

"Never preach to me, sirrah. Name of God, what is to do?" Bran looked at her with his twisted smile. "Aye, ride you back to him and tell him Queen Eleanor is trapped. He will love you for that, your dear lord."

Still Bran looked at her steadily and he said, "Why, cousin, my Queen of you and me, it is Bran the fool I would rather be."

"Oh, I am a curst woman!" she cried. "I must ever strike what I love. You are a true man."

"Nenny, nenny. Bran is the world's poor fool. Bran is a tool in your hand. Bran is the shoe on your foot. But Bran will bear you safe, cousin. See, there is Holy Church."

"God's body, would you have me take sanctuary? Man, I must to Beaugency, I must fight Louis for my honour."

“ Verily and amen. And there will be churchmen to keep the lists. Lord bishops and lord abbots on the road, a holy company. Join we with them, and they dare not deny you, and under the mantle of the Church safe we come to Beaugency. Jog on, cousin, jog on and warily withal, and mark the mules and the priests.”

And so they did, and in a village on the Cosson came upon the cavalcade of the Bishop of Nevers who, good man, was much embarrassed to meet his Queen in such a plight, and yet more to be her escort. But the fool knew his world. The Queen who quarrelled with her King was a sore trial to his lordship, but a woman and a wife who claimed to be heard for the right of her marriage could not be cast off by Holy Church. The bishop promised to bring her before the council, and kept his word, and lest it might be hard to keep he let no man know of her coming.

The little town of Beaugency nestles between two hills above the Loire, and so many folk were in it that March morning that the devil and all his angels, Bran said, would have been nothing regarded. In the hall of the old castle the council gathered, a throng of grey heads and rich robes. And when King Louis had taken his seat the Archbishop of Bordeaux rose from his side and said that their King summoned them that they should give him divorce from Eleanor of Aquitaine, his Queen, “ For that he has not confidence in his wife and can never be assured respecting the line that shall spring from her.” He stopped, he stood without words. Thrusting through the solemn ranks came a woman, tall and vehement, a woman sombrely cloaked amid the council's splendour, but beyond doubt Eleanor, the Queen. “ I claim to speak,” she cried, and she swept on and stood before the King.

He would not look at her. He shrank upon himself and his eyes went to this side and that, and he plucked at his knees.

“What have you against me, Louis?” her voice rang out.

He turned as he sat. “It is not seemly, my lord,” he laid his hand on the Archbishop’s.

“I will be heard,” she cried. “What have you against me, Louis?”

He pulled at the Archbishop, but found no help nor prompting, and the Queen took hold of him.

“You know,” he mumbled, and shrank away.

“I know well. I am a living woman. That is all my sin. Therefore I was shut up in secret that I should not be heard.”

“Ah, how came you here now?” the King panted. “Who brought you?”

“I am here to fight for my honour. Who denies me that? I am the Queen of France, I am a wife whose husband would break her marriage. He has sought to give me to shame unheard. He shall charge me to my face and to his face I will answer. God’s body, this thing is not to be done in a corner. Look,”—she flung out her arm, pointing to the King—“judge you between us, my lords.” He sat there pale and shrunken, a grey wisp of a man in his robes, and she towered over him passionate, and all the council was murmuring.

“It is your right, lady,” the Archbishop said, and the King plucked at him and whispered. “Yet I beg of you, do you claim your right? Be assured no man here will do you wrong.”

“I will be assured.”

“It were scandal,”—the Archbishop went delicately—“and of very evil example that we debate of ill-living.”

“Let him that charges prove or own his lie.”

“You deny all?”

“What is charged upon me?”

“You have heard, lady.”

“The King says he has not confidence in his wife. The Queen says she has not confidence in her hus-

band. Judge, my lords. He would have hid me that I should not answer him. I come to hear him answer me."

"Oh, oh, a brazen woman!" the King cried out. "What of——" but the Archbishop bent over him enveloping him like a cloak. And the Queen laughed. When the Archbishop rose again he was smiling.

"Lady, do you uphold your marriage?"

She stared at him as though she wondered at his insolence, his folly. She gave herself time to think. Then, "God's body, my lord, who would cling to such marriage as mine?" she cried, and again she pointed to the King. "What woman would cleave to a husband who has put such wrong upon her? But in marriage or out of marriage I will have my honour clean."

And the Archbishop still smiled. "It has been said to me that your marriage is no marriage, lady."

"Who said that he said well."

"Since the King and you,"—the Archbishop had more confidence now—"being of cousinhood within the degrees forbidden—may not be man and wife."

"If so it be, let it be so, my lord."

"We will be advised on it." His Grace nodded generally and in particular.

"A chair for the Queen," said she. And advised on it they were, and they sat all day and read the canon law and heard its doctors, and in the twilight declared King and Queen too near akin to marry and the marriage null. So to the great content of peaceful men the wise council of Beaugency satisfied both Queen and King. "By my faith," said the Queen as she went her way, "I have not seen Louis smile these five years. Thank God, I shall not see it again."

CHAPTER VII

THE QUEEN'S CHOICE

WHEN she came back to her lodging there lay Bran on his stomach before the hearth with his big head cradled between his elbows.

“What do I call you now, cousin?” he said.

“Neither wife nor widow nor maid,” she laughed.

“And she that is nothing is naught.”

“I am free.”

“Who is, is dead. Here lies Eleanor, Queen of France. Pray for her soul.”

“It is a bitter, fool.” She bent and touched him.

“Nenny, nenny. Rest in peace. But poor Bran is lost in the dark. What wilful would, wilful will not withal. Gossip Eleanor was desperate to fight all the world for her marriage. And Gossip Eleanor rides into the lists and bids the holy men unmarry her. And it is lightly done, and none so merry as she. Are you here, cousin, are you there, are you anywhere?”

“I am a woman, Bran.”

“God have mercy, that is no answer.”

“I have my life again.”

“So down you sit to dice with God. I had a doll when I was a boy. I had a friend when I was a man. I staked my love to win me joy and naked I end as I began.”

But she was happy. For things began to fall as she had guessed. There was instant transformation of her fortunes. While she was Queen of France, and her King intent upon destroying her, none dared openly be her friend. Now that she was only the

Duchess of Aquitaine, holding in her own right lands as rich as the King's France, she had many courtiers. For a while she took their homage but warily, and soon eager to go back to her own country she chose for escort a churchman, the Bishop of Tours, and set out.

It was always a rich and laughing land, a land of clear sky and mellow air. Between the hills and the round hills, down a valley of corn and vineyards, the broad river winds, placid as though seeing it you looked through the earth into another sky so the sky is reflected, and in this firmament hang a hundred green islets, joyous fairylands.

On the river bank under the willows the Queen lay, and Bran sat beside her, sometimes weaving a crown of yellow iris, sometimes looking at the flowing lines of her body's beauty.

"It must be time to ride on," she said, but she did not move.

"Whither? We shall find no better than what is here?"

"Well said, fool." She turned on her elbow and looked at him smiling.

"Yea, yea, it is well for the fool. What is it for the Queen?"

"Well and very well; let us dream the world away."

"Dream, dream," Bran said, "dream that life is good. There is none in the world but you and me, and you lie among the flowers and there is no need we know, nor time, but I see you, I am beside you, and you—you are happy. Dream on, cousin."

"It is a quiet Heaven, yours, Bran."

"There is no Heaven but peace."

"Faith, there is no peace but in Heaven," she laughed. "Well! I am content to have it so."

"What would you have, cousin? I know you well, and that I do not know."

"And you? For you I know and know not that."

"Bran is a fool, lady."

“What fools call fool.”

“Verily, verily, that is he, one who is what should not be, one who sees what never will be, one who lives for what cannot be, he is the man who is born in me.”

“Why did you leave your Henry of Anjou for me?”

“You are a woman, cousin, you were going alone upon danger.”

“Why?” she said and she smiled.

“You are a woman and cruel,” he cried. “Ask me my shame. You know and well you know.” He caught her hand and kissed it and fondled it.

“Poor Bran,” she said.

“Aye, aye, pity poor Bran,” he laughed.

“You shall never leave me.”

“God have mercy, should I thank you for that?” He started up, he pulled a grotesque face. “The lady Eleanor’s fool am I. For ever and for ever and for ever. Nay, laugh, cousin, laugh, am I not the drollest fool?” and he acted horribly a blind cripple.

“Faith, you are a mad fellow,” said she laughing. “Come, cousin fool, we must ride.”

“Yea, yea, ride out of dreams. And yet whither, cousin?”

“Why, to my own realm.”

“And there sit by the fire and spin.”

“Well. It is a good land, mine. I have been up and down in the world, Bran, from the Holy Land to the western sea, and none have I found so good as mine.”

“Lavender’s blue, lavender’s green, when I am King you shall be Queen,” he sang. “Here is your crown, cousin,” and he gave her the chaplet of yellow iris.

“No Queen but yours, Bran,” she laughed. “No Queen now, nor wife. By the rood I have known many a man, but none that was worth my land and me. I will keep my land and my land shall keep me, and Monseigneur Bran shall be——”

"Your fool," said he, and walked on his hands.

Then they sought the Bishop while he sat blandly dozing among his chaplains, and the cavalcade set itself in order and moved onward, and in the evening they came to the ridge up which the crowded houses of Blois climb to the cathedral and the castle.

Now, Count Thibaut of Blois was a great lord in all men's eyes and his own, brother to King Stephen, rich in his own inheritance, and potent and still lusty and jovial. The Queen was hardly in her lodging before a smiling Bishop brought Count Thibaut to wait on her. He was grown weighty, but a goodly figure of a man and bright of eye. With jovial zeal he bade the Queen come lodge in his castle.

Eleanor cast down her eyes. "Alack, sir, here is no queen."

"The Duchess of Aquitaine is welcome as any queen."

"And the good lord speaks from the heart," said Bran, and the Count smiled on him and he cut a caper.

She said that the Count was kind, but she was no merry guest.

He vowed that Blois should make her forget her care, and she smiled at him. Bran at her knee was mumbling in Latin something about to retrace your steps and reach the upper air again, that is a task indeed. "It is not fit, my lord. I am a woman alone now," she said.

Then he paid her rich compliments and swore Blois should give her good cheer and left her.

"Oh, cautious one," says she, pulling at Bran's ear.

"This lord hath a venturous eye, cousin."

"Nay, let a man be a man."

Count Thibaut did his best. He gave her hunting and hawking and jousting and mumming, and in between and after and whenever an hour was empty a dance and a feast. And at each and all Count

Thibaut showed a knightly prowess, and always he was her devoted servant.

So on a night, "What does this lord mean, cousin?" said Bran.

"Faith, friend, he means to please me," she laughed.

"And what does this lady mean?"

"To please myself, fool. Oh, Bran, Bran, I have lived long years with a monk. Let me live a week merrily."

"A week? Well. And if Lord Pharaoh will not let the people go?"

"We will provide him plagues, Bran," she laughed, and fell to writing.

But Count Thibaut was from day to day more ardent, the generous lord was lost in the devoted knight, the devoted knight became the passionate lover. And at last he made his occasion. In her own lodging she was beset by a man who seized her as he spoke.

"Hold, hold, my lord,"—she too was strong—"you treat me like a castle taken by assault. God's body, I am not so to be won."

"I have wooed till I can wait no more. And you have let me woo and made me woo at your will, and now must yield to mine. No, faith, your hour has come, Eleanor. And I have come to my kingdom."

"Yield?" she cried. "Who, I? You do not know me, my lord. It is not in my spirit. I yield to none."

"It is the law of love, Eleanor."

"A man's law, my lord. And no man do I serve."

"You are mine."

"Death of God, not I."

"What!" He struggled with her, and she still held him off. "Do you mock me now?" He crushed her against him. "That is your place, Eleanor. Aye, you know it well enough." He kissed her fiercely.

"You are a rough wooer, my lord," she said.

"Aye, you have found your master."

"And very bold."

He laughed. "You shall not find me timid, Eleanor."

"Nor you me, my lord. But you go too fast. I must have time." She smiled and looked down.

"Good faith, it is but seemly."

"Aye, that is woman, indeed. Faith, I mean you no dishonour. You shall have priest and pomp. But I am on fire for you."

So cunningly she won a respite of a day and a day, and when he was gone at last Bran stole in. "And Lord Pharaoh would not let the people go," said he softly.

"Oh, wise man," says she, looking at him with bent brows.

"I heard a priest that talked with a priest in the bishop's company, and this said he: *nubere per vim vult*—he means to marry her by force."

"Death of God, would he so!" And then she laughed. "Yes, the man is a man."

Bran looked at her long. "Yea, yea, and the woman is a woman," he said. "And God have mercy, the fool is but a fool. Fare you well, cousin."

"Oh—wise man," she said again.

But Bran slunk out of the room. Her hand fell on his shoulder on the stair. "Whither now?"

"Out into the dark, cousin."

"The dark and the fool for me," she said.

It was night and all the gates of Blois were shut. Down the steep lanes to the river-side he led her, and watching the houses above the water stealthily cast off a wherry. "Get you in and lie you down," he muttered. Then thrusting off hard he crouched down beside her, and the wherry shot out and met the stream and turned and drifted down. "Lie close, lie close," Bran said. "If they see us from

the river tower we are sped." But low and silent, dark on the dark water, the wherry drifted by the tower unseen and away beyond the walls. Then he put an oar out over the stern and so worked and steered the boat with the stream. "Sleep now, cousin, sleep now," he said. "All is well in the night."

"With the fool at the helm."

So all night long the wherry floated on down the winding river, in and out among the misty aits with no more sound than the rustle in the reeds or the plunge of a rat, and she slept hidden, and only Bran's big head and shoulders loomed like a gnome above the gunwale. But when in the dawn he could make out houses, he ran the boat ashore and waking the Queen, "Say your prayers and abide," he said. "I come again soon."

It was an hour or more before he came, riding one mule and leading another. "Here is food to eat and beasts to ride. But God mend all, at what a price! Mules are precious in this country."

She came to look at them. "Nay, they are mules of my country. They are good Poitevins. We breed the best in the world, fool. They are our pride."

"Verily and amen. Like likes like. And what else do you breed in your country, cousin? Have you no other pride?"

"Aye, rogue," says she, laughing; "we say there are no such vipers as the vipers of Poitou."

"Oh, cousin, you come of a goodly stock."

Then they made a breakfast of bread and beef ham and Loire water, poor souls, and thereafter mounted and took the road.

But even a mule of Poitou has not the speed of a horse. In the afternoon they were aware of a cloud of dust in the valley and ever and again it gleamed. "By my faith," said Bran, "the darkest cloud hath a lining of steel. Yea, it is the Lord Pharaoh and

all his horsemen. And I think I am not Dan Moses to make the river into dry land. Hie off the road, cousin, up the hill into the copse there, ere they see us." So they did, and dismounted and hidden among the hazel boughs waited and watched. But in a little while and before Count Thibaut was come, "Why, God be good!" said Bran. "Here is another band coming out of the west. Whose men be these?" Each riding hard, the two companies drew near. "By the rood, I see the yellow! *Planta genesta, planta genesta,*" Bran cried. "They wear the broom, cousin. It is Henry, my brother."

"Aye, it is Henry of Anjou," she said. "Be still, fool, be still. Who knows what will come of it?"

The two bands halted under the hill and challenged and the leaders rode out alone. "What do you here, Henry of Anjou?"

"And you, Thibaut of Blois?"

"I seek what is mine."

"You have lost it, Thibaut."

"Angevinthief! God's blood, you boast too soon."

"Foul words are of foul mouths. I boast nothing I will not do. I say you have lost, Thibaut. I will make it good on your body."

"God rest your soul, boy." Thibaut laughed and turned his horse.

And Bran, watching the woman's face said, "Yea, yea, now are you happy."

"Look where herides, the little, thick-made man!" she laughed, and indeed Henry's short bulk on a horse was ill-matched with the knightly Thibaut.

"All good saints guard him," Bran said. "Oh, Mary Mother, what brought the boy here?"

"Oh fool," says she, "I wrote him a letter out of Blois."

He made wide eyes at her. "Oh, pride of Poitou!" he said.

But now they were riding their course, each mail-clad man with lance in rest thundering at the other,

and Thibaut was seen making that hardest, deadliest aim at the head, but a moment before the crash Henry bent to his horse's neck and while Thibaut's lance slid scraping along the mail of his back he struck Thibaut's shield and bore him from the saddle in a fall so heavy that the big man lay dazed.

Henry cast away his lance and leapt down and stood over him with naked sword. "The course is run, Thibaut," he said.

And Thibaut groaned. "It was a fair course, and it is run."

"I do not ask you yield." Henry put up his sword. "I am the younger man."

"God give you joy of it," Thibaut said. "Yea, and of her."

Henry turned and lifted his hand in salute, and went back to his own people. And down the hillside came Eleanor with Bran lagging behind.

Henry turned to meet her. "You called me and I am here, Eleanor."

"So it is." She held out her hand. "And be it so. My lord Henry, will it please you be my guest in my house at Poitiers?"

"I will be your guest all my life," he said.

And down came Bran to them dragging two mules which jostled each other.

"Ah, brother fool, brother fool, so you have brought her back to me in the end." Henry put his arm round the hunched shoulders. "I might have trusted you for it, wise man."

With something strange in her eyes Eleanor looked from one to the other. "Aye, he is the wisest of us," she said.

"Nenny, nenny, let me be fool," Bran cried.

"Oh, God have mercy, let me be fool."

"Give us your blessing, brother," Henry laughed.

"Unto him that hath shall be given," Bran said. "What do you lack? What do you lack? God help all poor souls lost in the dark."

CHAPTER VIII

THE OLD WORLD

THERE was a new King in England and a new Queen, and since no man could think of one to set against him, no man denied him. This also was strange and new, a change of kings without a fight. Through the weary country Henry II and his Eleanor made a progress, and the barons gave them homage and feasts. So they came to the castle of Sir Gilbert du Marais in Risborough under the hills.

Sir Gilbert was lavish. He had sweet herbs on his floor and Flemish tapestries on his walls, and good yew-coloured cloth upon his chairs and footstools covered in fur, and his beds were made with sheets of silk and sendal, and there was even a tablecloth at his dinner. His dinners were furnished with cranes and peacocks and swans, with spiced and seasoned meats in great plenty, with white powder and large sweetmeats, and mulberry wine and piment and clary and clove wine. Musicians and mummers he had in abundance. He provided a merry, pretty niece to divert the King. He was himself assiduously gallant to the Queen. He had an air, he had still a presence, he had never lacked wit. Sir Gilbert succeeded with his King and his Queen.

But Bran, the King's fool, was not merry in Risborough, and on a day when the dinner in its length surpassed all the other dinners, King Henry (of whom his enemies said that he would sin every other sin but gluttony, and his friends that he would do

anything for them but eat)—King Henry, I say, remarked this fool spurning a dish of field fares as he sat apart sewing. “Why, brother, what woman’s work is that?” quoth the King.

“It is my shroud, Henry.”

“God save you, fool, why a shroud?”

“Because I am old, brother, old, and the spirit is gone out of me. Here is a new King and a new Queen, yea, and a new castle and a new lord in it. But the new is what the old was and the spring as the winter, and there is no more hope. Hush you, brother, I stitch me my shroud.”

The King bit his finger and fidgeted, but in a moment pretty Matilda at his elbow engaged him, and when the mummers came Bran slunk out and no one saw him go.

It was in his nature to seek the hills, and along the ridge he rode looking out through the beechwoods over the wide blue green of the vale and singing to himself, sometimes in English, a babbling child’s song, more often the Latin of the *Magnificat*. A ludicrous creature indeed, in his piebald clothes, his jingling cock’s comb, his ass’s ears, chanting “For he that is mighty hath magnified me, and holy is his name.” He was aware of it; he ended in giggling, laughter. “An old song, brother. Yea, yea, and an old fool. And the world is old and hearts are cold, and only the wicked dare be bold. God have mercy, brother, so it has been all your days. And the new is but the old, and new Sir Gilbert is but old Sir Thief. Yea, yea, and new King Henry is but the barons’ king of old. And the weak must go hide in the old, old hills.” So he rode on droning, and in a while when the sun was waning level with the ridge and the shadows in the wood darkened he came suddenly upon smoke and a little township of huts.

Children scurried away from his horse like rabbits. Women rose from the ground to stare at him and

cried out. Through the smoke which rose from great mounds men came to meet him sooty and glistening with sweat. "God save all in this place," said Bran.

They looked at him under gathered brows, women and men. "Who are you that come here?" a man asked.

"A child of this earth, brother."

They thought it over, then solemnly, "That is a lie you have said."

"Nenny, nenny. A man of these hills, I. Child of the chalk."

The man strode forward, "I say, you are a vain liar. 'Nenny, Nenny,'" he mimicked Bran. "That is a Frenchman's bleat."

"Yea, wise man. And I will talk to you in French of the North and French of the South, in vile Flemish and godly Latin. Yet English is my tongue, and my blood and my bones are English."

"Who then? And what do you make on our hills?"

"I am one Bran, a fool by nature and grace, brother. And I am here on the chalk hills to dwell awhile with what is mine."

"Go your ways. Here is naught that is yours."

Bran came down from his horse. "Yea, brother, yea,"—he grinned and shuffled in the beech-mast—"all this is mine and the white chalk under that made my bones. Why are you unkind to me, brother?"

"You are a Frenchman and some French lord's hound."

"A hound, I! Hear him!" he barked grotesquely. "God mend your wits, brother. Do I look a hound?" and he showed off his ungainliness and grimaced, and some of them began to grin. "Holy thorn, who are you that you call me French?"

"We be good Saxon folk, and we want no Norman dogs to spy on us."

And Bran laughed. "I tell you a tale that was told to me, an old tale, brother, a new tale. The sheep, he hated the wolf, which came a stranger to eat him. Then said the grass to the sheep: 'Nay, brother, I was here before you, but you eat me.' But the good chalk said, 'I was here when the world was made, when the Lord God set the land apart from the sea, but goody grass eats of me.' Who is the sheep, brother? Good Saxon folk. And your Norman lords be the wolves. But I, I am the very chalk of the hills. The Norman came from over the sea, from over the sea the Saxon came, King Brute brought Britons from over the sea, my folk were here when the Britons came. Little folk, old folk, folk of the white chalk hill. We were here at the birth of things, we shall watch their death."

They drew nearer him, and one of the women said, "He is a fairyman."

"He is a liar," the man laughed.

"I love you, brother," Bran said. "You are English stuff. Nay, but I tell you true. My mother was of the little folk. Have you any left, brother? Or have you harried them all, you Saxon and Norman men?"

"He is a fairyman," the woman said. "Good friend, the hills are empty. There are no more little people. When the sad years came they fled away."

"Yea, yea. So it was said of old. So it shall be said anew. But always the little people come again. Even as I. I am of them by my mother, and my father no man knows but God. My mother, she was speared by a woodman of old Hugo d'Oilly's, a Saxon, Penda his name, and Hugo's men took me, a child, to make them sport."

They looked at each other. "It rings true, friend," the man said. "Such a man Penda there was, and an evil man. And he is dead unshriven."

"That well I know," Bran said. "Now know

you me, brother. But God have mercy, I know not you."

"We be folk out of Watlington."

Bran looked from one to the other. Even for country folk they were rudely clad: barefoot, bare-headed, in tunics and kirtles of coarsest cloth and that old and ragged; the signs of hard living were branded on body and face.

"Men say there be fish which fly," said Bran, "but who heard ever of townsmen living wild in the hills?"

"You are a stranger who have not heard it, fellow," the man said. "No man holds his home in our England."

"No horse has a tail, said mine when I docked him. Tell the tale of your tail, brother."

"We be villeins of Watlington, and so were our folk before us, holding our housen our own for dues and service to our lord. But King Stephen gave the manor to Sir Gilbert de Marais. Then Sir Gilbert built him a castle in Watlington, where castle had never been, and to build it he pulled down our housen and we have no home nor living."

"The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests. Yet I have none, brother."

"Like outlaws we live and like outlaws we die."

"Godrie!" the woman said, and touched his hand.

"So it is. Are you one of us, brother?" The man's eyes were grave and hard.

"I am the world's fool, brother," Bran said.

"By St. Dunstan, if you abide with us you are fool indeed. You are welcome to the nothing we have." He turned on his heel and called sharply to the other men and took them back to their charcoal burning. And Bran unsaddled and tethered his horse where in an open glade there was grazing and came back to the huts, and everything he did the women watched as it were a miracle. He sat himself down cross-legged and began to cut a whistle

that he could play upon out of an elder twig. And as he cut he thought. But the woman who had called him a fairy came so close that he must needs look up at her : " Yea, yea. I have no fear to handle iron. And I will eat your salt and your baked bread," he laughed. " I am no fairy, I. Good faith, I have dwelt too long with men."

" I—I thought no ill," the woman said. She was a comely creature, something worn by hard living, but tall and finely made and of a gentle face.

Bran looked up into her blue eyes : " How are you called, maid ? "

She blushed and he knew that a maid she was and not without thought of whom she should wed : " I am Godiva," she said.

Then he surprised her again : " These men of yours, are they all craftsmen ? "

" Surely, yes, one and all."

" And who is their leader ? "

Again she blushed : " It is Godric. He is a joiner, the best joiner in all our hundred."

" The Lord loves a good craftsman. But God have mercy, the world is wide. Why not go seek fortune ? Why lurk here ? "

" We love our own land," she said proudly ; " we wait for our rights again."

Bran blew a horrid discord upon his whistle. " English ! " he said. " Oh, English every way ! " and he sprang up and marched off playing weird music.

Now of all things in the world Bran loved a good craftsman, and what roused his passions (I conceive) in this matter was not the bare wrong and cruelty, but that craftsmen should be cast out of their shops and their skill lie waste while they toiled at rude work burning charcoal for meagre livelihood. He was not loving Sir Gilbert de Marais before. But this it was which determined him to hate. An odd thing to choose, yet every man has his own abomina-

tions and this was Bran's. And he applied his mind to Sir Gilbert. A castle in Risborough, a new castle in Watlington. "Yea, yea, the wicked flourish like a green bay-tree. And the man is a new man too. And now he will be lord of all the hills. It is well planned of Gilbert. And that hold at Watlington is shrewdly set against the King's castle at Wallingford. A great man is Gilbert. And my King lies in his halls and eats his meat and sports with him and plays with his buxom niece. Yea, yea, Gilbert is wise in his generation," and stranger and stranger the music grew.

When Bran came back to the huts, he found pots steaming over the fire. He flung down a brace of hares. "The fool pays his shot, brother."

"God help you, fool." Godric tossed them swiftly out of sight. "If Eudo saw you, you are sped."

"And who is friend Eudo?"

"Gilbert's forester: and such a one as Penda was that killed your mother."

"Yea, yea," says Bran mildly, "and in their death they shall not be divided. Be easy, brother, no man sees Bran when Bran would not be seen. And here is what friend Eudo may see and say naught." He had made his cloak into a bag; he put it down and showed a heap of truffles. They caused more consternation. From the truffles to Bran, from Bran to the truffles, the good folk stared unbelieving. "How, in God's name?" quoth Godric.

"Where the beeches grow, there grow truffles," Bran shrugged.

"But you have no dog, man. Or—" he crossed himself and looked all about. "What aids you?"

Bran laughed. "Nenny, nenny. No dog, nor pig neither. Nay, nor ghost thereof. Bran hath only Bran. But Bran is the good earth's brother."

"You are more than a man."

"Yea, yea, or less, being a fool."

So they made a savoury meal, and when they

began to be genial, "What is this Eudo, brother, that you love him so?" Bran said. "Has he harried you?" He produced a silence. Godric consigned Eudo to the devil and Godiva drew near and touched him. The others looked at each other and from one another to Godric and were glum. "Fie, fie, never fear the man," Bran said.

Then Godric swore. "I fear him not, fellow," he roared. And again there was silence.

Across the firelight Bran darted his glances hither and thither. Each man was communing with himself. Only Godiva looked into Godric's face as she pressed against him. He held his head high, staring into the darkness of the woods; it was a heavy face and sullen, not a clever man's face, but of a frank courage that redeemed it.

"Godric! You will not go!" the woman said.

"I do not fear him."

"Nay, but fear for us."

"It is that. It is hard. I do fear for you," said Godric, and turned away from her.

Then one of the bent brooding men lifted up his head and said: "What strikes one that strikes all," and there was rumbling and muttering.

"Sooth, sooth," Bran nodded. "But who strikes here?"

Godric turned on him and said fiercely: "Eudo, fool."

"Friend Eudo, who is the forester of friend Gilbert." Bran thrust out his leg and stirred Godric's bulk. "Tell on, brother."

The tale was this. A while before, Eudo had bidden Godric to his cottage to talk with him of their leaving the woods, desiring as he said to make their peace with his master, of which talk nothing came, Godric swearing that in the woods they would stay till they had their rights again and Eudo shaking a dark head over him. Then came word that Eudo charged Godric with stealing a silver horn of his,

the rich gift of his lord Gilbert, and in due and lawful order Godrie was summoned to answer the charge before the moot court.

"If I go I am sped," said Godrie, "for he will make the court of Gilbert's people. If I go not we are all sped, for he will make me outlaw and hunt me and all that harbour me."

"Yea, yea, it is a wise Gilbert," Bran nodded.

"If you go and you are sped, then are we all sped, for you are our best, Godrie," said one, and again there was a rumble among them.

"He strikes at me," Godrie said heavily.

"When is your moot court to be, brother?"

"In the dawn."

"And by to-morrow's night you may be outlaw and nailed to a tree. It is well planned of Gilbert. I see one way, brother. Gird and go. The land is wide and craftsmen need never laek meat."

"By the cross, I will not go," Godrie thundered. "I will stand for my right."

"Aye, aye, stand," the others answered him.

"Your rights be more than your life?" Bran laughed. "Oh, English, English. Then I see another way, brother: meet your court. As bad as men are they will not do that in council which one man will plot alone. When they gather, shame comes with them. Go to court with all your folk and have all told and sworn. I think he does not love the light, our Gilbert. He is too wise."

Godrie stared at him. "I thought you false," he growled, "you have said what a true man should say. To the court I will go." He thrust out his big hard hand and took Bran's.

"Godrie, Godrie,"—the woman clutched at him—"this is a fool's word. It is to go to your death. There is another way, Godrie. Here we rest safe. Hide here in the hills."

"You are no friend to me," Godrie said, and she cried.

CHAPTER IX

THE OLD JUSTICE

ON the low green hill which stands out from the great hills into the vale the folk of the manor were met. Over against it the new castle of Watlington glimmered white in the dawn. Robert, the steward of the manor, a big sleek man, came in the pomp of his gold chain and furred gown between two men-at-arms, and with him was William the town reeve, and after him marched the richer folk and the priest Clement.

“What like is this priest, brother?” said Bran in Godric’s ear.

“The man is gentle and to all kindly, but no firm friend.”

Then Bran stole away from him, and as the great ones ordered their seats on the turf he whispered in the priest’s ear in Latin the words of Pilate: “‘Why, what evil hath He done? I have found no cause of death in Him,’” and he slid away so swiftly in the throng that the priest could not be sure who spoke. He was much troubled and showed so plain signs of it that the steward asked what ailed him, but he only shook his head and crossed himself.

The steward’s eyes following his saw him watching anxiously Godric where he stood among his friends, and could find nothing strange there. But then he saw Bran sitting by them, red and green motley, conspicuous against their gloom.

Bran stared at him, twiddling thumbs. “Now he wonders. Now he is unsure,” Bran advised himself. “It is a shrewd one.”

But the steward now seemed not to see him and rose in measured dignity and declared that the moot court of the manor of Watlington was met and asked if all were men of the manor.

“Nenny, nenny, brother.” Bran shook his head with a jingle of bells.

“Then get you gone, good fool,” the steward laughed.

“Why, good steward, is this not England? English am I and a freeman, and Bran is my name. What has your court to do that a freeman may not hear?”

A moment of silence owned that a bewildering blow. “Now God have mercy, this is a fool indeed,” says the steward in a hurry. “Whose man are you, sirrah?”

“My mother’s, sir steward.”

“What brought you here?”

“My mother, in faith.”

“Hold your peace in God’s name,” the steward cried, and turned to the reeve and conferred, and the reeve bade Eudo the forester and Godric the joiner come into court. They stood together, Eudo in Lincoln green, a swart, squat, wide man, and Godric in dingy doublet, tall and fair. The reeve declared the charge, that Godric came to Eudo’s cottage and talked with him and the while stole his silver horn which Eudo presently missed and guessing the thief went to Godric’s hut and searching there found the horn. To all which Eudo made oath. Then Godric swore that he had never stolen nor handled the horn, and that if Eudo found it in his hut Eudo himself put it there. Whereat the two men turned to call each other liar and the steward had much ado to stay them. “You, Godric,” says he at last, “this is a wild tale you tell. Why should this honest man do a villainy and forswear himself to work you wrong? Who shall believe it?”

“Why was I driven out into the woods, steward?”

Because one sought my house and my land. Why seek my life now? Because——”

“This is no answer, fellow,” says the steward loudly. “Answer to the charge. By my faith, you have enough to answer.”

“Here are men of the manor who will answer for me,” Godrie said, and one after another his company came forward to be his compurgators, to swear: “By God, the oath of Godrie is clean and true.”

“Well. But you be all villeins,” the steward said, “and Eudo that has sworn against you is a freeman. His oath is good against your oaths.”

But among the elders who sat about him there was some murmuring, and the priest plucked at his gown. “Godrie and you all stand off,” he cried, and bent to answer.

Bran sprang up. “Yea, yea, it is in some sort a court, fellows,” he said loud enough for all to hear. “But there is a tale in my head, a tale of goodman Naboth and the lord Ahab which craved Naboth’s garden-ground. So this lord Ahab, he sent men to swear goodman Naboth a rogue, and——”

“What knave speaks there?” The steward started up. “I mark you, fool.”

“Do so, good steward.”

“Who put this naughty wantonness on your tongue?”

Bran crossed himself. “Holy writ!” he cried. “God save him, he knows not holy writ,” and with uplifted hands of horror he drew away, but always he watched the steward keenly. “Now would he give his shrunken soul to know what is behind me,” he smiled, “now he has met fear. Always you stand my friend, big brother Fear.”

The steward had much to hear from his court and they no little from him. “Yea, yea, now you sweat,” Bran said. “Many voices there be, brother, and in you more than one.”

But at last they made out to agree, and the steward

wiped his brow and sat in silence awhile staring at the ground, and then he rose and said : " We commit you to God, Eudo and Godric, we commit you to God. The oaths stand equal and we know not. Godric, you are charged and you are not cleared. Now must you go to the judgment of God. How say you ? "

" Be God my judge," Godric said, and he turned upon Eudo. " Aye, God shall judge between you and me."

" It is you to stond the ordeal," Eudo growled.

" Godric the joiner goes to the ordeal by iron," the steward announced, and sat down heavily and the priest and the reeve with others to help went to make ready.

Now what men believed of the ordeal was that by it God showed the truth in a dark case, that water would not drown nor fire burn a man of a clean heart. The manner of the ordeal by iron was that a pound's weight of iron was heated red and placed on the hand of him who must carry it three paces. Then his hand was bound up and the bandage sealed, and in the morning the priest broke the seal and looked at the flesh. If there was no burn the man was proved innocent ; if there was a blister as large as a walnut, God had declared him guilty. This all simple men faithfully believed, and subtle men like Robert the steward found it a useful faith.

So the reeve and his men brought a brazier and swung it till the charcoal was glowing white, and the priest brought from his church the sacred iron and said a prayer over it and laid it in the heat. And the while Godric washed his hands in a bucket of spring water and his friends wished him a good deliverance Bran was scrabbling with his knife in the chalk of the hill.

The priest came and took Godric's right hand upon his and felt it and looked at it. " This hand

is the man's bare flesh," he said aloud. "God deliver you, my son."

Bran nodded his head. "Amen, amen, my father," he said, and in Latin: "I am innocent of the blood of this just person. See you to it."

The priest flinched and looked all about him and at Bran, but Bran was playing with the chalk, making strange signs on the turf, and the priest went back to his place hanging his head.

Then they made a space in the midst, and Godric's friends drew apart, giving him words of cheer, and last of all went Bran and as he went he grasped Godric's hand. "Neither wonder nor look, brother," he whispered. "God's earth for man's need," and he left upon the hand a paste of chalk mud.

But Godric stood there alone looking at his hand.

"Come, sirrah, come," the steward cried. "You have offered yourself to the ordeal. You shall not deny it now."

Godric strode forward where the priest stood by the brazier and thrust his hand into the priest's face, but the priest would not look at him, the priest was trembling so that his robes shook and the tongs clattered on the brazier. He lifted the red pound of iron. "Swift, oh, my son, swift," he said, and it shook as he held it poised. "The open hand, and swift, oh, swift for your soul." He slid it on to the palm. "Once, twice, thrice," he cried as the steam rose from the hand and Godric strode out three steps and let the iron fall.

"The dog never gave tongue," said the reeve to the steward.

"Peace, peace. They are a stanch breed," the steward muttered, but he plucked at his chin.

Already the priest was binding up the hand. He set his seal on the bandage. "I pray for you, my son," he said. "And you too pray."

The steward stood up. "Fail not on the morrow, Godric," he cried. "Or at your peril fail."

“Who fails, I fail not,” Godric said, and scowled at Eudo.

Then they went their several ways, and as he went Robert the steward, always a provident man, bade two fellows watch the fool and see with whom he went and whither. But the fool was gone already and none had seen him go. So the steward, seeking safety still, wrote a letter to Sir Gilbert in Risborough saying that the matter was tangled, for Godric had come boldly into court and the court had been hard to drive and strange folk watched it, so that he could do no more than put Godric to the ordeal, whereof he hoped a good issue.

The while Bran sat in Watlington Church, and when the priest came into vespers, out of the half light Bran plucked at his gown. The priest cried out.

“Fie, fie, what should a priest fear but God?” said Bran.

“In the name of God, what is it that you are?” The priest shrank from him.

“The man that I am, he goes for naught, but that I work with strength is wrought and that I seek by the wise is sought. Twice I have spoken and you have heard, now I bring you another word,” and he fell to chanting Latin out of the *Magnificat*: “‘He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek.’ Sir priest! Here be six silver pennies. These for your prayers for Godric, a true man. And when his hour comes see to it that you find him clean.”

“All saints grant it!” said the priest.

“Be sure they will, father. Be very sure.” Bran’s hand gripped his shoulder a moment; Bran peered close into his face and flitted out and away.

He was in the woods of the high hills as the moon rose, wandering down a glade and sometimes capering in a querc dance, and as he went he sang, music that had no words to it or words of no language that men still spoke, soft eerie music. After

a while there rose up among the silvered boles of the beechwood, as though he came out of the ground, a man still shorter than Bran and slighter, a very dwarf but shapely, like a boy with a man's bearded head. He was clothed in a deer-skin and about his head was a wreath of yew. He breathed deep through his nostrils. "You are not of our folk," he said, speaking English like a foreigner, "you who sing the song."

Bran sat down cross-legged where fungus grew, and plucked one and squeezed the juice into his mouth and sucked it.

"You are free of the woods."

"Yea, yea, I was free born. And still there are little people, brother?"

"The little people are always and always."

"Good life, brother."

"And to you, brother. Come, we have ewe's milk and mare's milk a-plenty."

"Na, na. I ask help. Away under the hill of the white cross there abides one, a King of the house-folk, a red man and round, with eyes that swell, and he hunts all the day."

"He is seen."

"There be those could lead that King's horse a long hunt far away from his company."

The little man laughed. "It could be, brother."

"And when he was far and alone, this might be given." He held out a scrap of parchment folded and sealed. But the little man stepped aside. "Na, na, it is no magic but good magic. It is a kindly charm, a merciful charm, for the life of a good man."

The little man came very close and touched Bran and nuzzled against him. "Yea," he said, smelling, "yea," and took the parchment and tied it in his deer-skin.

When Godric woke in the morning, in the dark,

he saw the fire still burning bright, and coming out of his hut in wonder he stumbled over the body of Bran who lay sleeping in the warmth. Bran waked with a grunt alert: "God save my ribs, brother. Is your hand as sound as your foot?"

"I thought you had left me," Godric said. "I was well pleased. I do not like your tricks."

"Mislike me and need me, that is for you. Brother, God speed you, mine is to do. Have you slept, brother?"

Godric glowered at him. "It is true I have slept. And it is true the hand has no hurt in it. But it was a trick that you played."

"Oh, Englishman," Bran laughed.

With the dawn they came again to the hill of the moot court and when all were met Godric was called out into the midst and the priest came to break the bandage. The dried chalk came away with it. He looked at the hand, he felt it. He turned to Robert the steward: "This hand is whole," he said. "This man has borne the ordeal and there is no spot on him."

"Name of God! Fellow, hold up your hand," the reeve cried, and in the morning light Godric held it high.

Heads drew together and there was a murmur of talk, but the steward plucked at his chin. Then he whispered to the reeve and the reeve stole away to Eudo.

"I stand here for judgment," Godric cried.

The steward bade him be silent, and solemnly conferred with his court. And then Eudo strode forward. "I challenge Godric the villein to combat," he shouted.

He brought silence then. He was a man proven false by the ordeal. He should have been silent and shamed. He had no right left.

"Who speaks?" said the steward gravely. "It is Eudo that speaks. What is your claim, Eudo?"

“This Godric stands to it that I am false and a thief. I will make good upon his body. That is my claim,” and he flung down his forester’s leather glove.

“Stand, man, stand,” Bran hissed, as Godric started forward. But Godric picked up the glove.

“He takes your challenge, Eudo. You are answered,” the steward smiled. “By the saints, a bold fellow and sure. Nay, then, we may not deny him. You go to the ordeal of combat.”

Then Bran laughed. “God have mercy, is this a court? Is this England? By the thorn, you have strange customs in this manor.”

“We suffer no fools, fellow. Who sent you to brawl here?”

“If that you knew, what were to do?” quoth Bran.

But the steward had other trouble. For the priest was loth to bring the weapons of combat, saying it was not law nor right that a man should stand two ordeals in one cause.

“He has taken up the glove, father. We may not deny him. It were unjust to both.” So the steward strove with him and overbore him.

Now, the ordeal of combat was this. It was fought with consecrated weapons—wooden weapons like a battle-axe tipped with horn, such weapons as men used in the old time before the working of metals was known. A man could scarce be killed, not easily wounded, but he might be beaten to the ground or wearied out with bruises, and the man who fell, the man who gave up the fight, was adjudged craven and infamous.

So with their wooden weapons the two fell on and fought fiercely and fast, and Godric had something the advantage, for though the forester was strong and stubborn, Godric had a longer reach than he. And the forester still sought to fight close, and Godric kept him off, and the blows fell about his dark head,

and bruised and dripping sweat he flagged, but still held on till desperate he plucked out his knife in his left hand and hurling himself in, though the wood rang upon his head, he stabbed Godric in the neck and fell upon him. He struggled to his feet and reeled but stood.

The steward started up in a hurry. "Hold, hold. We judge him vanquished. Eudo is proven true man and Godric is craven."

But Bran flung himself upon the forester and wrenched up the hand which was fumbling to put away the knife and held it with the bloody knife in it aloft in the sun. "The steel! He has used the steel. He is false and dastard."

That shattered the court. Men cried out: "The steel! The steel!" and broke from their places all talking together.

Bran fell down on his knees by Godric and began to bind about his neck the bandage which had held his hand, and to him came the priest.

The steward was calling hither and thither, commanding, cajoling, trying to make order, but Godric's folk gathered threatening about Eudo, and the reeve and his men ran to back him, and all the court was in turmoil.

The priest rose and came into the midst holding up his hands. "It is a true word," he said, and they hushed to hear him. "He has been stricken with steel. Eudo the forester has used steel," and he turned on Eudo and in a quavering voice cursed him with the curse of the Church.

"Name of God, priest, you are mad," the steward cried. "We have judged."

"Here is no judgment nor right, but a great wickedness," the priest said, and there were loud voices for him.

"We will examine the thing, we will examine it," the steward said. "We will hold them both in ward till we have the truth of it."

“Yea, yea, till Godric is done to death,” Bran said.

The steward shot a glance at him and from him to the reeve.

The priest threw his robe over Godric. “Hold Eudo, you hold a man accursed. Godric you do not hold. He is in sanctuary.”

“Sanctuary!” the steward cried. “You are no sanctuary, priest. This is against all law and good custom. What, do you brave my lord’s justice?”

“This man committed himself to God, and a false, foul blow was stricken. God’s man he is, and I claim him in the name of God. All Christian men stand for the right.”

The steward looked at the surge of the crowd. “You claim him. You shall answer for him,” he said, and drew off with dignity, and men took Godric up to bear him to the priest’s house. But as he was following some fellows laid hands on Bran and hustled him off in the midst of them.

He made no struggle nor cried out. He praised their haste and laughed. They bore him to the reeve, and the reeve cursed him for a brawler and urged them on, and still he laughed. They carried him to the new castle at Watlington, and he was presently brought before the steward.

“I have you by the heels now, rogue,” the steward said. “Now save your skin if you can.”

“Of your skin and my skin, mine I would be in,” Bran laughed.

“Folly will not serve you now, fool. Who sent you to brave me in my court?”

“If it was not my mother, I know of none other.”

“What, fellow, do you boast yourself a masterless man?”

“Nay, good man, my fellow, every man has his master, on the earth, or above the earth, or under the earth. Choose you while time is.”

“Who is your lord, then?”

“When he does his will, you shall have your fill.” Bran crossed himself. “God have mercy upon your soul.”

So for some while the steward wrought with him and could make no more of him, and rage compound- ing with fear flung him into a cell of little ease, and wrote an anxious letter to Sir Gilbert, telling of the perverse way the thing had gone and protesting it was all the fault of this cunning fool whom he held prisoner and who would speak nothing but dark words, and confessing fears of the people, fears the priest was suborned, fears that the fool worked for some enemy of his lord. Which letter came to Sir Gilbert in Risborough in the midst of dancing, and for all that his buxom niece was dancing for the King, the King’s eye fell on him and marked his face, and the King leaned forward to watch him.

He thrust the letter into his bosom and his face was at work. The King plucked at Queen Eleanor’s gown. “There is one who reads riddles,” he whispered.

She looked. “He is a stricken man,” she said.

“That is the riddle,” the King said, and he called out: “What, Gilbert, ill news?”

Gilbert started. “Pardon, sir. Aye, ill news it is. My foster brother who is dear to me lies sick to death.”

“That touches the heart. Where lies he?”

“Sir, in Watlington.”

“No further?” The King smiled. “Nay, man, take horse and go.”

“Oh sir, if you give me leave, I will be with you again in a day.” Gilbert knelt and kissed his hand.

He was hardly gone before the King led the Queen away. “His brother lies in Watlington. Aye and in Risborough Gilbert lies,” he chuckled to himself. “I will see these brethren betimes.”

For that morning, when they roused a stag in the woods towards Hampden, the King’s mare ran a line

of her own, and at first the King was well content, for he heard the hounds clear before him though he never saw them, and thought the rest of the hunt were left or away on a false scent. But when he had ridden far and never had a sight of hounds though always and still he heard them, he tried to turn the mare. She put her head up and bolted and he could not hold her, a queer uncanny thing, for it was not in her temper, and she had been going hard and long and was failing. And then on a sudden she checked and stood a beaten horse, heaving and trembling. "God's body, my wench, are you bewitched?" the King said, and gentled her and again tried to turn her. But turn she would not. She trembled the more and whinnied, and the King was aware that there was no sound in the woods but her whinnying and panting.

A tiny man in a deer-skin rose out of a hollow. The mare whinnied again and thrust her wet head into his bosom and he put his hand on her nostrils and she stood still. "King?" he said and laughed. And the King crossed himself. "King?" he said again.

"I am the King."

"Have." He held out Bran's parchment. The King crossed himself again and took it. And the little man laughed and was lost in the beechmast.

"In the name of God and the Mother of God!" the King muttered, and gingerly unfolded the parchment. And then he laughed that short sudden laugh of his, for he knew the hand. Bran had written in Latin: "Henry, my brother, if you love your fool come seek a sad sorry fool in Watlington where Sir Gilbert hath built him a great new castle to chain King and King's men."

It was a meek and weary mare that carried King Henry back to Risborough, and the ride was long for the man who bit at his hands and muttered as he rode. But when he came to Risborough he had a

merry brow for Sir Gilbert's courtier anxieties and the Queen's jests on the King who lost the hunt. He had not been in Risborough half an hour before one of his knights was gone to Wallingford with an order that the Angevin men-at-arms in the royal castle there should move instantly on Watlington. Then he gave himself, like a jolly dupe still, to the pleasures of Gilbert's providing.

When Gilbert came to Watlington in the night and heard all that the steward had to tell he was an angry man. It was plain to him that the steward had mishandled the affair vilely, and that he set the blame on Bran and made a mystery of him only to cover his own folly. So he cursed the steward roundly for disturbing him and went to bed. But in the morning early the steward stood by his bedside. "Sir, will you speak with the fellow?"

"The devil burn you; did you wake me for that? The fellow is but a wandering, brawling fool."

"Will you look from the window, my lord?"

Sir Gilbert looked out and saw a company of men-at-arms halted a bow shot from the castle. "Whose are these spears, in God's name?"

"My lord, I think this brawling fool could tell us if he would."

"Send out, man, and see. And for the fool, have him up and I will make short with him."

But Bran was hardly dragged from his hungry cell before those Angevin spears were moving up the castle mound, and their trumpets sounded at the gate and bade open it in the King's name, and Sir Gilbert looked down from his walls and saw the King.

File after file of the lances passed through the gate and halted in their troops in the courtyard. Last rode the King, and Gilbert came to him, bareheaded, smiling, delicately.

"What, Gilbert!" the King said. "And how lies your brother this morning?"

“Oh, my lord, you honour me to come to this poor hold.”

“Not for your honour but mine am I come. God’s body, man, this place is a great strong castle. It is not in my mind that a castle stands here.”

Gilbert began to talk. It was built for the safety of his lands and his people which had been much harried and——

“Where is my fool, Gilbert? Who harries him?” The King swung down from his horse. “Enough of lies. I will have the truth of your work here, if I hew it out of your heart. Go in, sirrah, go in. Louis and Thibaut, follow me.”

So into the hall they went, and there, very much at his ease, sitting in the great chair plaiting rushes, while Gilbert’s men huddled aloof, was Bran. “Welcome, brother,” he said. “Are you too prisoner? Oh, he is a wise fellow, this Gilbert; but greedy, God warn us, greedy.”

“Who holds you prisoner?” the King cried, and turned on Gilbert.

“Nay, my lord, nay. It is a folly of my steward’s. I——”

“Nay, my lord, nay. It is a wise steward and a wise Gilbert. Listen, lord. One builds him a castle on poor men’s housen and land. And the other harries these same poor men,” and he told the tale of the two moot courts and the two ordeals and Godric’s wound.

“God’s body, here is no law nor justice nor right,” the King cried.

“Nenny, nenny, naught but wise men’s wisdom, brother.”

“My lord, my lord,” Gilbert cried, “this is but a matter of some villeins’ quarrels and——”

“Villeins! By the rood, I will have no man lack justice, villein or lord, in my England.”

“Ah, my lord, that is a true King’s word. But in this matter the fool knows not what he says. He mistakes, he is a dreamer——”

The King stamped his foot. "These stones, are they in his dreams? This castle stands here with no right nor law. You lie to me, Gilbert, and like a fool you lie. I will take order with yo . Lay hands on him, Thibaut. God's body, no lord shall build him a castle against me and my people but I will pluck it down to bury him."

"My lord, my lord, I have held my lands these ten years, and——"

"What you hold of right of king or villein you shall hold. For the rest you pay a dear reckoning, Gilbert. Have him away."

"So the little man found him a King, brother," Bran laughed. "Yea, yea, the little people have found a king at last," and he touched the King's hand and turned away.

"Whither now, man?"

"To church, brother."

"God have merey, when did my fool turn pious?"

"In the new world, brother."

And to Godric, where he lay in the priest's house by the church, he came singing the *Magnificat*. "He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with the good things; and the rich He hath sent empty away."

CHAPTER X

FLINT AND STEEL

THE King was handling his new arrows and talking law to his new Chancellor. The King's fool chuckled as he drew the portraits of Chancellor and King. For King Henry was squat and bulky, with bristling red hair above a coarse red face, and shabby withal, but his Chancellor stood stately in a brocaded robe, darkly handsome, of a look to win hearts and minds. The King stabbed his finger with an arrow, swore and sucked it, and sucking continued to argue about what Gratian said in his "Decretum." The Chancellor set him right and the King flung back the book at his head; the Chancellor caught it, found the disputed place, and set it down in front of him, saying:

"God be with you."

"What, priest, when I am wrong?"

"Even so, my lord," and the Chancellor went out laughing.

"By my faith, I love that fellow." The King turned and slapped his fool on the shoulder. "And what is your work, brother?"

Bran held out his picture at arm's length. "Riddle me, riddle me ree, can you tell which the King may be?"

"Rogue," said the King with that short loud laugh of his, for the picture was so drawn that in it Thomas Becket was a King making mock of some bailiff or groom. "Am I so?" He tweaked Bran's ear. "Well, God made us all."

"Nenny, nenny, brother. You made Dan Becket.

And, faith, he can deek it, until he shall wreck it."

"Now now?" The big brow gathered. "What has the fool against my friend?"

"Speak good words, brother. The fool is the older friend."

"And the old friend is jealous of the new?" Henry flung an arm about him. "Bran, Bran, you are a child."

"Nenny, brother. Bran fears naught nor needs aught." He touched the King's hand.

"What then? The man is a true man."

"Yea, yea. The man is true and the man is wise. But the violent man shall not live out half his days."

"Violent? God's body, he is the courtliest of us all. What, man, has he been harsh with my fool?"

"Na, na. He is blithe to Bran, he is good. But he is a hard man, Henry."

The King laughed loud. "Fear not, brother. I am hard enough."

"Said the flint to the steel. And thereof came fire."

"Oh, Bran, old Bran, you are a dreamer."

"Yea, yea. Old I am in my soul and I dream dreams. And I fear what I see in my dreams. Do you dream never, Henry?"

"I have only one life to live, brother," the King said, and started up and went off with his arrows and his book of law.

Bran went on working at another picture, a picture of a king in his crown washing the feet of beggars, and in a while the Chancellor came back with a sheaf of parchments. "The King is gone, friend?"

"And Thomas is come. God save us all."

"Now, what has Bran against poor Thomas?" He came and stood by Bran's side, and Bran looked up at him.

"You have a long nose, brother."

"I confess the nose. But it harms none but me."

"I like it not when a man has a long nose."

“You mislike me and know not why. It is not Christian, brother fool.”

“Na, na, but human it is. Are you Christian, brother?”

“I trust in God.”

“Then forgive your enemies.”

“How now? Who is mine enemy?”

“A hit, a hit. That struck home, Thomas.”

The Chancellor made merry no more. “You strike shrewdly, brother.”

“Then forgive poor Bran.”

“By my faith, I dare not. Nay, brother, I forgive no man who is a better man than I am.”

And Bran watched him keenly. “Yes, you speak from the heart,” he said. “There is greatness in you, brother. I am sorry for it.”

“This is a strange fellow.” Becket laid his hand on the big head. “What do you see that I see not?”

Bran thrust forward his picture of the crowned King serving beggars. “That is for me, brother?” Becket said in a moment. “Well, I need the lesson, God knows. And what is this other?” Bran drew it away, but he laid hands on the mocking picture of King and Chancellor. “Oh rogue,” he laughed. “This must to the King.”

“He has had it, brother, and is gone away merry.”

“Aye, and where is he gone? For here is a day’s work to do.”

“Three things, yea, and four, Solomon, he had found that his wisdom might not know, and a fifth there is which is darker yet: the way of an eagle in the air, the way of a ship in the sea, the way of a serpent on the ground, and the way of a man with a maid. But who knows the way of Henry our King, cousin Solomon?”

The Chancellor looked at him gravely. “I would seek it out, brother.”

“Yea, yea, if you were a fool,” Bran said.

The King was among his people, away across the river in the fields beyond the abbey. There the guilds of Shrewsbury made holiday in honour of new rights of market, and there was archery and cock-fighting and bull-baiting and quarterstaff, play and joys less bloody, jongleurs and jugglers, and dancing and Shrewsbury cakes. In and out of the frolic went the King in his shabby short cloak, as hearty and jolly as any of them. He limped in his English, a man of many tongues, but he understood it, and he had a laugh for every jest and a knowing eye for every girl, and if any dared to know him and do him reverence there was a cuff and a coarse joke and he rolled on his way.

He was arm in arm with some merry wife in the circle about two dancing bears, shouting and rocking with laughter like her, when riding by came his Queen with Hugh Mortimer, lord of the Marches, and a splendid company. The King, who saw everything, saw her, but seemed not to see and roared to his bears. Queen Eleanor, checked to a foot's pace by the press of the crowd, would not see what she saw and rode like a statue of majesty.

"By the bones of the Conqueror this rabble needs a master," Mortimer said, but she answered nothing, and he pushed on and bade his men ride down who stood in their way. So they broke through and the crowd surged and scoffed and howled and turned to its sport again.

In a while after the King drew off, and trudging across-country came to a copse where a girl stood waiting. While he was still far off she had seen him and watched, her hand shading her eyes, but when he was come she stood as though there were no life in her, very still and pale and her eyes looked beyond him.

"Good child," said he, and he laughed and took her and kissed her.

She was at his will, she did not move in his

arms. When he let her go she turned from him, her hand at her throat. He grasped it, and with it made her look at him. "Ah, my lord!" she cried.

"What now, Izan?" he said gently.

"That is my soul cries out in me."

"And is it not mine?"

"I do not know what I am, no, nor who I am now. I am here with you."

"Why, child, does that make you sad?"

"I cannot tell. You bid me come and I must come. You know and I know no more."

"Dear woman," he said and caressed her. She was small, this Izan de Bocland, and frail, her body lost in her flowing blue gown, her hands and feet like a child's, but from her delicate keen face looked forth a life eager and brave.

"What do you need of me, my lord?"

"To feel you with me, child." He drew her little arm through his, and since he could never be still, walked to and fro with her while he made her talk of what she had done all day, of all her tasks and her ways and her thoughts. A tale of the smallest things, of the simple life of a poor knight's daughter, but her talk was as though she showed him herself and gave it. And he listened while the darkness gathered about them till she fell silent and looked at him, her eyes dark as the night sky but her face was white.

"Dear life," he said, and kissed her. "Come to me again, come."

"My lord," she said like a prayer, and watched him hurrying into the dark.

To the castle at Shrewsbury the Queen had come long before him, and Roger Mortimer led her to her bower, and there in due form was grateful for the honour she had done him in visiting his poor lands and house.

She gave him her hand to kiss. "We have had

good entertainment, my lord," and turned to her women and bade them bring the Prince.

"You are gracious, madame. I cannot pardon myself that you were troubled by the herds of these brute common folk."

"It is no blame of yours, Roger."

"By my honour, if I were lord in Shrewsbury it would be a sad town on the morrow." He looked at her keenly. "But the way is now to let the base rogues have their will. God's blood, it cannot last nor shall not."

"Is that a threat, my lord?"

"You are my Queen. None knows it as I know it, Lady Eleanor." He came nearer, looking down into her eyes; he was a man very sure of his magnificence, not without cause, for he was made in the grand style, large and handsome, with the fair bright colours of the old Norse race before it was made Norman in France. He took her hand. "My Queen," he said again.

And the women brought in her little Prince Henry, who came in a rage scolding and beating them. "Here is one who is made to rule, Roger," she smiled.

"Aye, there is royalty in him," the man said, and seeing there was no more to be done with her then made a graceful departure.

The King was late; the King was in a hurry, and his Court, hungry with long waiting, found him sitting down to supper before they were in their places, a distressing thing, but not new. On his own high table a third cup was set, and he looked at it and from it to the Queen.

"I have bidden Roger Mortimer," she said.

"A bold girl," he said with his loud short laugh.

"But she says come and his mightiness comes not. Cry aloud, for he is a god."

"You are merry, my lord. God knows why. The man has been my host to-day. Now I am his."

"What shall be done to the man whom the Queen

delights to honour? Nay, what shall not be done?"

"Aye, mock me," she said fiercely. "Be sure that I honour no man baseborn, no, nor of base likings, my lord."

"See where he comes! Do I bid the trumpets sound, Eleanor?"

And Roger came in dignity. He made the speech that was due, something about asking pardon, something about the honour done him.

"God's body, man, you should be a herald," the King cried. "Sit down to your meat or you will have us gone while you are empty."

Roger made the best of it. He risked a glance at the Queen and sat down and began to talk easily of horse and hawk and hound. The King would not have it. Eating, as his wont was, like a man who has but one minute to spare for the hunger of a day, he engaged Roger with great affairs. The right order of the realm, how it stood with the barons, how the commons fared, what was the need of the time, on all this the King urgently sought Roger's thoughts. No doubt that he was jeering at the man, he used no pains to hide it. But Roger came off well enough, making grave earnest of the business, like one conscious of ill-bred folly, but ruling it out of his thought.

"This is the sum of my mind," he said at last. "The common folk must have a master."

"Solomon Mortimer!" The King pushed back his chair. "My father chastised them with whips, but I will chastise them with scorpions, said Solomon." He turned and kicked at Bran. "Eh, fool, was it Solomon?"

Bran was huddled on his stool in a quest for marrow. "Peace, brother, peace," he mumbled. "Let me suck me my bone."

"God's body, it is well said. There is the King's part, Solomon: give the folk peace to suck their bones." He started up. "Yet there is some sooth in you. The land must have a master. Go, find him,

Solomon." He flung out his hand to the Queen. "Come with us, my fool," he called over his shoulder.

"Oh Henry, my brother," Bran groaned at them, "is this your peace?"

When they came to his room of audience the King thrust a kiss on her and cried: "Good dreams, Eleanor," and fell into a chair and drew parchments to him.

She stood over him. "Let the fool be gone, Henry."

"God's my judge, I thought we were rid of him," the King laughed, and feigned to look round the room. "Aye, aye, all is well. Sleep sound, my woman. We have done with Roger Mortimer."

She stamped her foot. "You need no fool who fool it so well. Out, Bran. I have talk for your master."

"Heigho, come and go, hit me high, hit me low. Quoth I, Dan Shuttlecock." Bran lounged away.

But the King tripped him up. "Lie down, brother. Nay, good wife, if you must talk, none so fit to hear as brother Bran."

Bran had made an elaborate stagger and a ludicrous fall but the Queen was in no temper to laugh. And from the ground he groaned. "Eleanor, Eleanor, hear poor Bran, queen is queen but man is man, woman may win what no queen can."

The King threw a strange look at him. The Queen cried out: "Why, then let all the world hear. I say you use me vilely, Henry—Henry the Angevin."

"My gentle girl of Poitou," the King laughed.

"It was a King that I came to wed. A King you are called, but no King indeed. A King of the greasy commons, a King of villeins and serfs. Not a baron in your land, no knight nor man nobly born but spits upon you."

"Hear the words of Solomon Mortimer."

"You, you have no friends but churls. You live among the hovels. You choose out men baseborn,

no man's sons, to honour, like this son of earth that is your new Chancellor, like the fool who lies there. These are our King's men. Death of God, what a King! I am weary of it, Master Angevin. The King that is but a scullion is no King for me."

And here came in the Chancellor laden with his parchment sheaves. He stopped and bowed, and with something of a sigh was going out again.

"Nay, nay, it is naught, Thomas. Have you done, sweet wife?" the King laughed.

"Look to yourself," she cried. "Aye, there you are well set betwixt your clerk and your fool," and she stormed out.

The Chancellor sat himself down and smoothly began to talk of scutage.

"Oh Henry, brother Henry, here is no right but double wrong," Bran groaned.

The King started round. "You have your word, too? What is your word, wise man?"

"Both be wrong and neither is right, oh Henry, my brother, God give you light."

The red brow bent. "What wrong have I wrought, fool?"

Bran dragged himself along the floor to the King's feet. "Who is your child's mother, she is like none other."

"Bran, Bran," the King said, and his hand lay on the big head. "What a man gives that is he given."

"Yea, brother, yea."

"Aye, but he can give only what will be taken." And Bran bowed his head on the King's knees.

CHAPTER XI

THE FIRE

IT was the next day and the Queen was walking on the walls when Roger Mortimer came up behind her. How should their tale be told now? Nor he nor she could think that in what they did there was wrong: both were well assured that to them intolerable wrong was done. Yet so the world goes that you will despise them heart and head. And they well believed that they struck for the right and at God's command. How could such people and such deeds now be?

That Queen Eleanor was a woman shrewd and of a great will none denies. I hold it a vulgar error to write Roger Mortimer off as a ballad-monger's villain. He had something more in him than passion. Or if you please less. But the tale must hurry or it is not true.

The Queen stood there looking out over the vale of Severn, and Roger Mortimer came beside her.

"You watch like a princess in prison, my Queen."

She did not turn nor speak, she stood like a woman of stone.

"Where is the King, madam?"

Then she flung round upon him. "Death of God, do you tempt me?" she cried.

"Not I, by the rood. I bid you think of your honour."

She laughed. "A word, man, a word. What honour have I left? Naught I am and less than naught."

“ You have said and it is your shame that you say.”

“ You are a bold man, Roger Mortimer.”

“ And when will you be bold, madame ? ”

Her hand clutched at the battlements till the knuckles stood out. She commanded herself.

“ Speak man, speak,” she said in a low voice.

“ What is in your heart ? ”

“ I said, where is the King, madame ? ”

“ Blood of God, man, I know not nor care. Chaffering with this scullion or that.”

“ It is like enough. But in a little while he will be with a scullion’s wench. He has marked one down as your stoat marks down a coney. Each creature does after his kind, Eleanor, and such is he. He spends himself for a broken man’s daughter and day by day seeks her out. A blowsy milkmaid has him. And you—nay what are you ? ”

“ Are you true, Roger ? ”

“ I lie to no man nor for no woman’s sake. Are you true, Eleanor ? ”

“ You dare——” she turned on him.

“ Aye, madame, I dare all for your honour. And what dare you ? By the bones of the Conqueror we have borne enough from this scullion’s King. There is no lord in all the land that is not wronged by him. And you that made him great most foully wronged. I say it is the hour to strike.”

“ Show me this girl.”

He laughed. “ Girl and man too. Coney and stoat. I swear to you I will snatch them up and bear them off to my hold in Bridgenorth if you will give me your banner to bear. Come ! All the marches will rise for me and if we strike under the Queen’s banner the lords of the north will join hands with us and we will make an end of this King of scullions and Eleanor shall be the lady of England. Do you dare ? ”

She grasped at his hand. “ Fail not you.”

“Faith of God not I. I will have him eaged this night.”

She laughed. “And I—I will speak with him in his cage.”

“Ride out before the sun sets. He will be hungry for you.”

On that morning, Izan, having set in order her dairy and her little household, left her father in a chair in the sun with arrows to plume and his old hound at his knee and wandered away to the copse that was her shrine. She had no thought of her lord's coming then, for she had schooled herself to count upon nothing from him, twice he would come and seem to live for it, then fail her thrice. But she loved to be in the place and remember, poor child, and dream.

But on this morning the King broke loose from his Chancellor's burden of tasks betimes and left that shrewd man wondering. “God guide you, brother, you walk like a man in his sleep,” said Bran, making way for him on the stair.

“Say like one who walks in the dark, good friend,” Beeket said. “Can you give me light?”

But Bran made a miserable face and shook his head and went on groping.

So on this morning the King came to Izan where she sat in the shadow of the hazels. She started as she saw him and the cowslips fell from her lap. She stood and clasped her hands, her eyes large and dark in a white face. He rushed upon her, the short burly man, red and laughing, and she was lost in his arms. But then he kissed her gently enough and held her away to look at her. “Why child, what is it?”

“I do not know, I do not know,” she trembled. “It is strange and terrible.”

“There is fear in you. God's body, Izan, you must not fear.”

“There is no fear,” she said quietly. “But I—I cannot see.”

"Make me welcome, my heart."

"Ah welcome, welcome," she put her little hands on his breast, "if it is well for you."

"Child—" he kissed her hands—"you are sweet life in my veins."

"You are all power, you charge upon me and carry me off and I know nothing but you. I am to serve you, my lord."

"I come to you, I need you, I seek you like clean air, like freedom to a man who has broke prison. You are sun and wind and running water and flowers."

"My lord, my lord and my King," she breathed.

And then out of the copse men-at-arms broke upon them. The King was borne down before he could strike and they fell on him and bound him. He shouted and the woods rang to it and they filled his mouth with a cloth. They tied him on his horse and rode away with him, and Izan was flung across their captain's saddle-bow.

You may guess how the blood pumped in that bull neck, how he gnawed at the gag and foamed and set his muscles against the creaking cords till his doublet was wet from bleeding flesh. The men who had mocked him began to look at him with something like fear. "There is a devil in that one. God save us, they are of the devil's own seed, those Angevins. Nay, but no man can live in such a madness as that. What if he die upon our hands?" So they talked and Henry heard nothing, knew nothing but his own passion.

When he rode out from Shrewsbury in the morning there was one who marked him far off beyond the river, one who saw the Queen with Roger Mortimer on the walls, Bran his fool, and of all that he saw Bran liked nothing. So in a while groaning he saddled his mule. "Into the dark, Virgil," quoth he, "into the dark. Naught in the dark but ghosts I see, oh Lady St. Mary they frighten me, from

ghosts of the past I might win free, but I quail at the ghosts of what is to be. Nenny, nenny, poor Bran is a fool. There is no past nor time to come. Now is all. What hath been is naught and hath no power over what shall come, if what now is is wisely done and well. That is the faith for man. Now is all, oh Bran my brother. But you are no man. You have no life. You are a dreamer and a dream. You are a word in the air, you are a thought in the mind, you are a hope in the heart. You come and go and naught is done. Na, na, God have merey, brother, but what should I do, I? If I could make the man to my pleasure, naught should fall him but grief beyond measure. What can I give him with all my care but a burden all too heavy to bear? Tell him his wife hates him for what is best in him, hath a mind to wrong him for what he does right, bid him cherish her who will have no cherishing—oh, Bran my brother, work for a fool.”

But he rode on. He had marked well the way the King went, and not that day first. He guessed, I suppose, to what it led. He rode easily, his reins on the mule's neck, having no purpose to come on the King unawares or spy. And so while he was still far off the copse he saw that company of men-at-arms sweep across a hill-side, riding south, and the King among them bound. They wore blue upon yellow, the colours of Mortimer's band of Flemish spears.

He turned and the mule Virgil felt whip and heel.

Thomas Becket the Chancellor, working on the roll of the new sheriffs with clerks busy all about him, was startled by a red and breathless fool. “Why good-man Bran, what hounds have hunted you?” he laughed.

“Hark in your ear, brother,” Bran gasped.

“Get you gone, children. I hear confession,” and as the clerks fled Becket came to him. “Now man, what is the marrow of it?”

“The King is taken, brother,” Bran said and

steadied himself on Becket's arm. "I saw him among Roger Mortimer's Flemings. Bound he was and they rode southward. He is an hour away."

Becket put him off and he swayed to the window and leaned upon the sill breathing deep. Becket clapped his hands and the clerks scurried in again. "Walter, go you to Sir Richard de Lucy: I greet him and it is the King's need that he sound to horse. Swift, man. Antony, to Sir Roger and bid him muster every spear and his trustiest squire must ride hard to Ludlow to my Lord of Leicester: the King's good greeting to him and the word is that his power come swift to Bridgenorth. My horse at the gate, Francis. Bid Peter bring me my harness." He clapped his hand on Bran's shoulder. "Courage, brother. This wolf hath long been marked and all is ready for his hunting. We have a pack to lay on Master Mortimer that shall pull him down in the first gallop."

Bran turned: "God have merey, brother: a man might say you were glad of your lord's peril."

"Say not you so. He is dearer to me than brother. I know our Roger a weak man in grain. He will dare but not do. The King shall live out his days for Roger. God is my trust, I know he shall be safe. But Roger hath troubled the land too long. Now may we strike and strike home."

"Yea, yea. It is a wise Thomas. Swift it thinks and clear. Yet to the heart of things it sees not."

"What is the heart then?"

"See where she goes, madame Queen." He pointed out to the courtyard where Eleanor stood with a squire of her household cloaked for the saddle.

"God's body, she would ride to Bridgenorth," Becket cried.

"You have said, brother. There is the sad heart of all."

Becket leaned from the window and shouted: "Warders, ho warders! Down porteullis!" From the gate tower an arm was raised in answer. Slowly

the iron bars slid down into the open archway and clashed upon the stones.

Becket turned and cast off his gown and went into the inner room where his squires waited with helmet and coat of mail. So clad like a knight he went down to the courtyard. The Queen was in the saddle. "Death of God, sirrah, what folly is this?" she cried. "When was your clerkship dubbed knight? Who made you lord of our castle?"

"Lady Eleanor, none born of woman rides out of Shrewsbury this day but by the King's own order."

"I go riding, rogue."

"It cannot be. You go no whither, lady."

"You—you are to hold me at your will?"

"I dare not risk you, lady. Here are you safe. Without these walls you go upon you know not what. There be evil men abroad."

"Fie, you prate like the coward clerk you are. Where is your King then?"

"Nay, if the Queen knows not who am I to know? This only I know, that I do his will. When the King comes again let him judge if I have done you wrong."

She cried out an oath at him. "Rogue, rogue, you threaten me?"

"With what then?" And she was silent glaring at him. He bowed to her. "I go upon the King's business, lady," and he strode away.

CHAPTER XII

THE ASHES

THE castle of Bridgenorth stood on a cliff above Severn. When they came there, the King and Izan, bound still, and he still gagged, were flung into a cell beneath the gate tower and in the dark he heard her whisper to him and ask that he would forgive her, and he dragged himself to her feet and lay touching her. But not long were they left so. When Roger Mortimer heard of their coming he made much of the captain of the Flemings, Baldwin of Ghent, promising him great things still to be won, and set a fresh watch on his towers and sent out a party on the Shrewsbury road to bring in the Queen. Then to his great chamber in the northern tower he went and called for wine and his prisoners.

They could but stumble and shuffle, so closely were they bound, and Roger laughed as he heard them coming. When they stood before him, dirty and torn and helpless, he fed his eyes on them and drank a cup of wine and "By the bones of the Conqueror, now you look what you are, Henry, a slave king of slaves," he said, and he laughed again. "And you, wench, fit mire for him to wallow in, how like you your lover now?" But Izan would not answer and the King could not and this disappointed him. "Prick the cat with your dagger, Osbert and let us hear her sweet voice. Tell us your love story, sweet." So one of the men-at-arms put his dagger point into her bosom, but she neither flinched nor cried, and he plucked it away in a hurry.

"My lord, she would fall on it!"

“Nay, nay, not so easy a death, dear heart. Nor so soon. Pluck the cloth out of his foul mouth there. I would hear his royal speech.”

Free of the gag the King looked round the room. There were four men-at-arms guarding him, and he laughed. “Give you good night,” said he. Izan stole one glance at him and shrank away behind him and leaned by the window, her bound hands at the wound in her breast.

“God’s blood, the Angevin shows sport,” Roger cried and drank again.

“To a merry meeting in hell! Drink it down, Roger. We shall all be there soon enough.”

“You are something nearer than I, Henry.”

“Yes, faith. By an hour. To-day for me, to-morrow for you, Roger. How many be here will see the sun o’ Sunday?”

“Care not you for that. You have——”

“God’s body, not I. It will be a merry onfall in Bridgenorth. But that is your share. I shall lie warm with the devil.”

“By my father’s soul, the fool threatens!” Roger laughed loud.

“Who, I? Good Roger, where are your wits? I am sped. So are we all. Never a King was done to death but a thousand died for his killing. The wolf hath the sheep and the hounds are upon the wolf.”

“Angevin!” Roger cried, for at last he saw his men’s faces. “Your craft serves you not now. Out, fellows, out. Leave me alone with them.”

“The brave Roger!” the King laughed. “Alone with a bound man and a woman bound. Oh gallant knight.”

“Aye fool it to the last, Henry. There is nothing left you but your tongue. Now hear you me. Not at my will only you lie bound, but for the lady your Queen. She shall have her way with you ere you go to your grave. She comes to me this night and she

shall judge you and your leman there and the fame of it shall go through all Christenty how you played her false with a wench from the byre and were taken with her. We will give you to shame and you shall be all men's jest in your death. And——"

Izan was by the window and as he spoke she reeled as though she would faint and lay there upon the sill. Once she turned and looked at the King. Then she flung herself forward and was gone.

Roger ran to the window. She lay a little huddled heap on the rock a hundred feet below and lay still.

But the King did not look. The King bent his head and spoke softly in Latin: "Into thy hands, oh Lord. Christ Jesus receive her soul and St. Mary the Mother comfort her."

There was no blood in Roger's face. "The wench is dead," he said, and he stared at the King.

"Nay, good Roger, she lives," the King smiled and went on talking Latin: "Oh God Almighty, forgive not this man's sin, but give him according to his deeds and let thine angels persecute him for ever."

"What say you?" Roger stammered.

"Now nay, good Roger, it is you to say. You are the speaker, are not you? Say on. Now a new tale is to make, for the old tale has gone awry."

"I hold you still."

"Yea, oh wise man. You hold your King bound. And none but your King. What tale is now to tell?"

"By the bones of the Conqueror it were well told if you lay there with her. That would glad your Queen's heart, Henry."

The King laughed. "She tarries, good Roger, she tarries. Women are wayward. What if she comes not? Look and see. What if she hath mocked our Roger?"

"God's blood, you shall not mock me," Roger cried and drew his sword and rushed at him. The King flung up his bound arms to meet the blow.

He turned it, not without blood, but as it fell it seared through the cords and the straining arms sprang apart. Then the King fell upon him within the long sword's sweep and cast his arms about him and bore him back into the window embrasure and flung his weight upon him and bent him backward across the sill, and fear took hold of him and he shouted shrill in his fear. But now the King's body held his body and the King's broad hands were at his throat, and his head went backward and out and his strength passed and he moaned and the King thrust him down and leaned out, watching him roll in the air.

Into the room breathless broke Baldwin of Ghent crying, "My lord, my lord."

The King turned smiling and sat himself down and began to tear the sleeves of his shirt to bind his arms.

"In the fiend's name, where is my lord Roger?"

"Well spoken, friend," the King laughed. "Look and see." So Baldwin ran to the window. "See where he is gone. And see who comes." And Baldwin rumbled to himself in Flemish.

"Is this your work, my master?" he turned, threatening, his hand on his sword.

The King sprang up. "God's body, fellow, that well you know. It is his work who lies there. The fool who must needs be villain too. But these be my men who come upon you."

And while he spoke there ran in a man spattered with mud and horse's foam. "My lord—Baldwin—Baldwin, it is the King's banner they bear. I have seen it and de Lucy's and there is another company afar."

"There is your answer, rogues."

"You we hold still," Baldwin growled.

"At cost of your lives."

"You must be our ransom, my lord. This is the end of it," the Fleming shrugged.

“No ransom I. Out dog, and open your gates. Or soon or late you hang.”

The Fleming looked again at the power that was closing upon the castle, looked long and fled.

So when the trumpets sounded the gates were already open and Baldwin of Ghent was gone. To the room in the tower Becket came and found the King on his knees.

When he made an end of his prayer he started up and “Thomas my friend,” he took the man and kissed him. “Swift and sure are you.”

“My most dear lord. I thank God this night. But it is not I that saved you, it is Bran the fool. He saw you taken. He brought me news.”

“Aye, aye, true brother Bran,” the King laughed.

“But how has it chanced, my lord?”

“Look from the window.”

“That thing was Roger,” the Chancellor said coldly. “But another lies there, my lord.”

“By my folly and to my shame she lies dead. This was a saint, Thomas, and like a saint I will honour her, who knew not how to honour her in life. I am a desolate man. Hear the tale, friend,” and he told it.

Becket crossed himself. “St. Mary crown her,” he said. “She was holy.” And then he turned away, and plucked at his chin.

“What is in your mind, man?”

Becket’s face set like stone, but his eyes glittered. “My lord, I have no will to speak. But just it is and right you know all. This is true that the knave Roger said. The Queen was to ride here to meet him this night. We stayed her already in the saddle and hardly stayed her.”

“God’s body, that viper made the plot!”

“I say not that, my lord. Judge you.”

“False she is and was ever false. Her lean hands are wet with Izan’s blood. And I—I,” he gnawed at his fingers.

"The King is just," Becket said. "Let justice be done."

"Doubt me not," the King started up. "To horse, to horse!"

So in Bridgenorth to hold the castle de Lucy was left and the King stormed back to Shrewsbury.

You see him again in that room among his books, Becket standing before him, grave and austere. Bran at his feet fondling him. "My brother, my brother, there are wounds on you."

"The fox snaps when you break him. It is nothing. Where is my true Queen, Bran?"

"Nay, brother, I know not. The best of all is you are safe. Oh give God thanks and be kind."

"Fool, fool," the King put a hand on the big head. "You would cry heaven in hell. Bid her come, my lord."

"Oh Henry, my brother, speak peace, peace. There is no right in vengeance. You have made children, the woman and you. The past is dead. You are still to live and peace wins all."

"My fool," the King said gently. "Aye, the past is dead. Speak no more."

"Oh my brother, my brother," Bran groaned. The Queen swept in and stood silent.

"You give me no welcome, madame?"

"I give you no welcome," she said. "Your fool was there to welcome you."

"You ask no pardon?"

And she laughed.

"You have chosen. Be it so. I have no more honour for you and I will not live with you. But free I may not trust you. You are held in ward, madame."

"I am your Queen," she cried.

"You are——" he stopped a moment. "My prisoner. Go."

"I claim my children, Henry."

He looked at her heavily. "Yes. My children are yours."

She laughed again and swept out.

The King lay back with his head fallen on his breast. "Let me alone, good friends, let me alone." Bran kissed his hand and Bran's tears were wet on it. As they went out he fell on his knees and they heard him pray.

On the dark stair Bran reeled and Becket stayed him: "Why, man, courage. He hath dealt with her wisely and well."

"Yea, a hard man are you," Bran said.

"This is not I. But this is just, this is merciful. For the King is more than all."

"Na, na, na, God's peace is more than all," Bran cried. "Oh wise man Thomas, what peace shall he see in all his days?"

CHAPTER XIII

OF A CHILD

“ I KNEW thee that thou art an hard man,” said the fool to the King, “ reaping where thou hast not sown and gathering where thou hast not strawed.” Whereat the King’s Chancellor looked down his impressive nose, but the King laughed easily.

“ I seek only justice, Father Bran.”

“ Then take care lest you find it, my son. Na, na, who will ask justice o’ Judgment Day ? ”

The matter was this. King Henry had taken to wife the Duchess of Aquitaine, and though he held her in prison since nowhere else was he sure of her, he was still married to her lands and rights. Among her rights was some suzerainty over the Count of Toulouse which God forbid that any man should now explain. But to enforce it, to make himself master of the county of Toulouse, the King of England marched with his barons and a great host. For Thomas Becket the Chancellor had devised him taxes on yeoman and town, on church and on Jew, for the hiring of spears, and Thomas himself brought 700 knights of his own and 1,200 whom he rented and sergeants 4,000. A Chancellor of pride.

Yet the very first town that they met called a halt to King and Chancellor and all their panoply. The town of Cahors on its limestone cliff in the loop of the grey river stood across their path impregnable and from its walls the minstrel of its lord Bertrand mocked at them. Terrible as an army with banners they made parade and menace and gave challenge,

and sat down to listen to those jeering songs, to watch the sunlight on the twin cupolas of the cathedral and starve out the Seigneur Bertrand. And the while the strength of France gathered to Toulouse.

Among the walnut trees by the river the King had his pavilion, and as the nightfall darkened that lucent southern sky he would talk with his Chancellor of all that he was doing and had in mind to do, strange talk, petty and grand in the same moment, so that Bran said to him : " Peace be with you, Henry my brother. A just man are you. But I knew a taverner in England that swore the miller gave him short measure of malt by a groat's worth and he would have him in the reeve's court for it. And thereafter sell all that he had to buy him a horse and mail and ride with the King's spears and win knighthood and lands by doughty deeds. Only he spent life and substance a-seeking his peck of malt. Peace be on his soul. A just man was he."

And the King pulled his ears and laughed, but Thomas Becket said, " Who stands not for his own right, he will not stand for God's right," and went on to plan a great campaign in France.

Much of France indeed lay already in the King of England's hand. Normandy was his and Brittany and the broad lands of Aquitaine. Toulouse and more he was to win by arms and make one great realm from the Mediterranean to the Scottish hills. Then join hands with the Holy Roman Empire. Then lead all the strength of Europe upon Asia in a great Crusade. Behold Henry of Anjou the champion of Christendom, the deliverer of the Holy Sepulchre, God's viceroy of the world. So betwixt King and Chancellor the scheme grew.

The while Bran at the supper-table was building him a tower. On a pasty it was founded and on the pasty he piled a beef ham and on the ham chickens and on the chickens a swan and on the swan silver cups. And then the tower fell down. " Alack my

pasty," Bran mourned. "A fair land was she. Now her poor vitals gush forth."

"What have you done, you wastrel?" said the King.

"Na, na, Bran is no wastrel. 'Tis brother Henry put on his land a load she would not bear and laid her waste. See your England, my King," and he thrust the squashed pasty under Henry's nose. "You load her with all Christendom and heathenry and glory and it crushes her life blood out."

"Hear the words of the preacher, Bran the fool," said Becket angrily.

"Once there was a wise man and a wise man was he," Bran made owl's eyes, "farther he saw than any man could see, but when he went a-walking he walked into a tree."

They were then disturbed. "My lord," said Sir Hugh of Assynton, "my lord, there has come a herald out of the town and this only he says that he has no word but from his lord Bertrand this to Henry Plantagenet:" and there was laid on the table a bough of broom with its flowers dead and shrivelled.

"Foul insolence!" Becket started up, for the broom was his King's crest. "Hold me that knave herald. His sides shall bleed for it."

But the King laughed. "Peace, Thomas, peace. Give the herald meat and drink, man, and bid him say that broom flowers all the year."

"My lord," Sir Hugh bowed. "Here too is a clerk come with letters from England, but the poor priest hath ridden till he can neither stand nor sit, yet must he give them into your own hand."

"I will seek them, my lord," Becket went out and after a while came back hot. "The knave is ass and mule. He will not hear me nor heed me."

"By my faith, a brave man, Thomas," the King chuckled. "I would not dare so, not I."

"The rascal whines he is sworn to give his budget to none but you. God's death, what ails the Arch-

bishop he chooses such a fool for his errands ? ”

The King went out laughing.

“ Give a priest orders and he lets his brain go sleep. They are all so,” Becket grumbled.

“ Quoth Thomas the deacon,” Bran murmured, and Becket glared at him. “ Thomas, were you born of woman ? ”

“ Do you think me no man, fool ? ”

“ God he knows, Thomas. But Bran he doubts. For mortal man is sometimes wrong, but Thomas the deacon is only strong.”

“ Be it so,” quoth Becket.

Then the King came rolling in. “ Heart of God, here is matter, Thomas. The Archbishop is dead, rest his soul.”

Becket crossed himself. “ He was a good man but old.”

“ And here he writes with his dying hand. The good Theobald ! He prays me choose the best man I have to come after him. Aye, aye, a wise man and true. The best man I have ? ” he looked sharply at Becket. “ Who is it but you, Thomas ? ” he smiled.

“ Who I, my lord ? Now God forbid,” Becket was vehement.

“ Why should He, man ? ”

“ I am not fit. No, my lord, not I. And there is work enough to hand and better work for me.”

“ Well, we will think more of it. Archbishop Thomas ! By the mass, it has an honest ring.”

“ Do not moek me, my lord.” And so they left it. For it was the King’s way to ponder his policies long and secretly but to be sudden in act.

In the morning Bran went out beyond the camp. Often the need came upon him to be alone under the sky, and then he would talk long to dumb things, bird and beast and flower. Beyond the camp a quiet country smiled, for King Henry made war not on the land but its lord alone and the people stayed by their fields. It was early summer and great flocks of the

black sheep of Languedoc were on their way from the plains to the upland pastures in the mountains of Lorèze and Margaride, far off and blue in the glittering southern air. So he lay in his red and green motley in the shade of a bank of wild roses and talked with the grasshoppers and he was aware of a child. She sat alone in the tall clover, through the murmur of the bees working in its fragrance she too was talking, talking to the sheep driven on the green road away beyond the corn, telling them stories, promising them good days, bidding them bring their lambs safe home again. And Bran fell silent and listened and the grasshoppers played on his body. She was little and frail. She wore nothing but a short tunic of leather. The black hair that curled about her neck shone in the sunlight. The small brown arms made strange graceful rhythms in the air as she talked, there was rhythm in her words and her voice was clear and sweet.

“What fairy are you?” Bran said.

She started up like a fawn and was a score yards off before she stopped. Bran lay still and held out open hands. She came closer, little brown legs swift. He saw her eyes like violets in a dim light or black water in sunshine. Her face too was frail but finely wrought and of a dark warmth of colour. She peered at him, shy and afraid. He had thrust back the cock's comb of his hood and his big shaven head was revealed. She considered him gravely, from big head to big feet. The little mouth laughed.

“Who are you, seigneur dwarf?” she said.

“Bran is my name, and a man am I, and what is more a fool.”

“How are you more than a man?”

“I weep when I laugh and laugh when I weep. I see what is not. What I know that I do not believe.”

“Are you a witch?” The child was very grave. “They say I am a witch.”

“Nenny, nenny. I have been here and I have

been there and never a witch was anywhere. It is a kind earth and has no magic save in men's fear."

"They say I have the evil eye," said the child solemnly.

Bran put out his hand and drew her down beside him. "Your eyes are like flowers, little one." And to himself he said: "God send they do not die as soon." And he caressed her. "There is a place in my heart for you. Na, na, but believe no evil they say of you. You are God's child."

"They say it hurts them when I look at them, and brings a murrain on their cows and their sheep. But I do not believe it. When the boys are not there the lambs love to come to me and the little calves. And they like the stories I tell them and they play with me. And the birds will come into my hands. So I know I am not evil."

"Yea, yea. That is sure," Bran said. "Who is your father, little maid?"

"I have not a father. I never had, they say. I have no mother. She died in bearing me. Like the black calf's mother. But they said it was my grandmother looked on her that she died. For she is a great witch."

"God have mercy, God have mercy," Bran said. "There is none but the grandam for you, little maid?"

"But grandmother is my own grandmother," said the child proudly. "And she is very great. None dares come to our eave. And all run from her. She knows all things and she is sister of the King of the Dead. Some day he will send for her and she will be a Queen."

"Sister of the King of the Dead?" Bran said after her. "God save all poor souls. And what is your grandam's name, little maid?"

"Why, she is my grandmother. And they call her the witch. Sometimes they call her the Wisdom and the Old One."

“So, so. Then what is your name?”

“I do not know. I have so many. The boys call me too witch. Sometimes my grandmother calls me Ion. It means violet, she told me, and also it means one who is going, always going. Sometimes she calls me her flower.”

“And you love her, this grandam? And she is good to you?”

“But yes, yes. She is my own one. She is dear and kind. Only—only she—sometimes it is strange. Oh! How do you make me talk? I talk everything to you. And look, look, she is there.” The child started up.

Bran held her gently. Across the clover he saw a woman. Old she might be, but she walked easily, unbent. She was short and sturdily made. She wore a tunic that reached only to the knee and her legs and her arms were bare. “Bran is safe to trust,” he said. “How do you live, little one?”

“Why, we live in our cave. I told you. I told you everything. Please, Bran, let me go. My grandmother is hunting. I do not like to be with her when she is hunting.”

But the woman had seen them and she cried out: “Wait, you,” and came to them in long strides and stood before them.

“Good cheer, good woman,” Bran said. She was old, indeed. The hair beneath her flat leather cap was white. Her face was wrinkled everywhere like a walnut and darker than a walnut and her eyes sunken deep.

“What man are you?” she said.

“I am the King’s fool.”

“And I am the Wisdom of Cahors.”

“Can I serve you, good mother, you or the child?”

She clutched at the child. “What have you that I would have?” she said fiercely. “Keep your own. I keep mine,” and she dragged the child away and over her shoulder jeered at him: “Fool, poor fool.”

CHAPTER XIV

OF A WITCH

BRAN, left alone, talked no more to the grasshoppers. The thing was not strange to him. All over his world there were scattered, lonely or by little tribes, outcast folk, sprung of old vanished nations or jetsam of conquest and war or wanderers who had lost their way, without part or lot in the common life, hated, feared, hunted by the mass of the people. Never a doubt but the Wisdom of Cahors and her grandchild were such, as his own mother was on the chalk hills of England. What blood might be in them he could not guess. Moor and Roman and Gaul and Greek had mingled in that south land and nameless races in the dark time before. To him woman and girl were of the old folk, born of the very earth even as he, and his heart went out to them and he yearned for the child. He knew his world and he saw her born to suffer, little and gentle and a girl.

The King and Becket, coming like brothers into the great tent, found him wrapped in thoughts and dreams. "Why, Bran, Bran, in what world are you?" Becket called.

"I know not," Bran roused himself. "Master Thomas, if you met the devil a-walking on this earth, how would you do?"

"Take heart and slay him," Becket laughed.

"Yea, yea, and when God came upon earth men did even so."

"Out on you, fool, you talk like an infidel."

"No, by my faith, he says well," the King cried.

“He thinks deep, my Bran. What men fear that they kill.”

“Good or ill, that they kill,” Bran echoed. “But what of that, care killed a cat, eat my Thomas, eat and grow fat, long is your nose but longer your face, oh Thomas, my lord, take heart of grace.”

So they went to dinner, and after Bran rode with them round the walls of Cahors, whence men still mocked them with songs and cross-bow bolts. In the evening when the guards were set that no succour or food should steal into the town, they three went walking by the river.

It was in Bran’s mind to seek the child’s cave and he lingered behind the others searching here and there. He had a hope to play the King. If the old woman would be guided, the child and she might be made safe against any man. That chance never came.

In the cool of the evening, the black flocks were again on the march. He heard the shepherd boys singing and sometimes a dog busy. Then came a clamour of furious shouts and he climbed the bank and saw a flock turned and scattered and the shepherds running together in a rage. “The witch! the witch! Mark the black witch!”

The first of the sheep had plunged down from the green road into a little ravine that brought a brook to the river, and the mass behind rushing upon them filled it with frenzied creatures crushing each other. He saw the cause. The grandmother had come from a thicket into the green road and scared the flock. She stood there alone. She lifted her arm over her head and mocking made the sign against the evil eye and laughed and went on her way.

The King and Becket stood at gaze. “Goody is a brave old wench,” said the King.

From the swearing shepherds came now one shout.

“Aye, she has dared too much,” Becket said and turned away.

"God's my life," the King cried, "they will course her like a hare. This is foul wrong," and he strode on.

"They know her for a witch," said Becket. "Look what you do, my lord."

The sheep dogs rushed at her yelping. She made no step the faster and when they came close she turned to meet them and they checked and crawled on their bellies and lay watching her. The shepherds ran up and bade them seize and tear her. But they cowered and when they were beaten slunk aside. She stood and laughed.

"By the rood, the dogs will not touch her," the King said.

But as he spoke, the cry rose: "Proven! Proven! A witch she is," and the shepherds, gathering close, came upon her. "Now, old Wisdom, now are you sped. Now we have you bare."

She cried out "Fools! You hold me, you?" and she laughed and spat at them.

They laid hands on her. "Drown if you can, burn if you will. This night you go to your master."

"Fire will not burn nor water drown what I am," she screamed. "Before your fathers were was I, when you are rotten I shall be."

"Foul witch! Steel will stab," said one and drove his knife into her side.

"Splendour of God! Here is merry work," the King came up. "Stand off, knaves, stand off. Who gave you leave to hunt my folk?" They turned upon him, saw him and shrank away and fled. "Look to the woman, Thomas."

But Bran was come. Bran was kneeling beside her already and Becket stood off and drew his cloak about him. Bran raised her head and she looked up at him: "What thing are you? Aye, aye, the fool. It needs but that," and she laughed.

"Here is the King, mother, come to save you," Bran said, making a pillow for her head, and he

made busy with the wound where the knife still was.

She peered up through the twilight at Henry :
“Hail, King!” she said with a twisted smile.
“You have been long a-coming and late you come
at last. Hail, King! You have done what you
could. Hail and farewell, King of the Earth. To
the King of the Dead go I.”

“Blaspheme not, woman,” Becket cried.

“Ha, is that a priest there?” She raised her head.
“You are faint, priest. You go from my eyes. You
are naught. Nay, fool, let be, let be,” she plucked
at his hands. “I am gone this night and all nights
ever. I am gone.”

“It is a true word, mother,” Bran said. “What
word is your last word?”

“Who called me mother? None calls me mother
on earth. That is good. None but a fool. Bear
me down by the river, fool. With the running
water I go.”

“Help me, brother Thomas,” Bran said.

Becket crossed himself and turned away.

“Now God assoil me Thomas, I am not so holy,
I,” the King cried and lifted her head.

So the fool and the King bore her to the river-side
and laid her there in the heavy scent of the meadow
sweet and the murmur of the stream was all about
them. She breathed deep and sighed. Then,
“Where is that priest? Let no priest spy on me in
my hour,” she said and raised herself to look. But
Becket stood afar off. “Aye, aye, he fears,” she
laughed, “and he shall fear. I shall abide with
him.”

“Mother, mother,” Bran said gently.

“Yea, I was a mother once, fool. And my child
she died on my breast.”

“You are a mother still.”

“My little one? Na, na, she is not mine.”

“You love her well, mother.”

“My flower,” the woman murmured. “Little

one, little one. She is not mine, I say. If I love, I hate. She is not of my soul. There is her father in her." She turned. "Ila, King, are you in Cahors yet?"

"God have merey, mother, what is this?" Bran cried.

"Peace, woman," the King said. "I hold fast."

"Quoth dog who barked at wall," she laughed. "Na, you do what you can. I know it, I. I thank you while I go. You fear not the old witch, little King of Earth. Shall have a gift for it. Cahors is yours, little King. Seek out my cave, there it lies, there by the water." She pointed with trembling hand. "Go in and on and on and you shall come to the very heart of Cahors, yea, the altar whereon she is built. Dead lives, dead, dead."

"Oh, mother, mother, what of the child?" Bran said.

"Oh fool, fool, no child of mine. She was born to my daughter of Bertrand of Cahors. He forced her. Not mine, not mine. I am the last of my own."

"The little one," Bran said.

"Tell her—tell her—the King of the Dead has taken me."

Some while still Bran knelt beside her. . . . He closed her eyes. "God receive her. The unknown God," he said.

The King crossed himself. "She had a brave heart," said he. "Come, brother," and he put his arm in the fool's.

"She has left me an inheritanee, Henry."

"Nay, brother, I am her heir," the King laughed. "Her cave is mine, free of geld and serviee and homage and the heart of Cahors and an altar and dead lives withal. A strange lordship, by the rood."

"Yea, yea, to have and to hold. But I think of the child. Bran has a maid in wardship. Bran has a child of his own."

“What like should she be? Some wild wolf’s cub. Nay, God’s my life, shame it were to leave her for these curs to worry.”

“Yea, yea. But she is like a flower, a fairy maid. Bran has a child to his heart.”

“Why then, God give you joy, brother,” Henry laughed. “I will stand godfather. Nay, but what tale is this? You have seen the child? What, were you hand in glove with the old dame?”

“I have seen the child, yea. But the grandam—she was for no man, she. I know what you know, and know nothing. Only I wonder.”

“By my soul, you do well. Go, then, let us seek out your child. In this strange cave does she lie? I have a mind to my new realm.”

“Think what you do, my lord,” Becket spoke behind him. “That woman was evil, and willing evil she died.”

“What ill has she done you, Thomas?”

“She was a proven witch and black magic in her.”

“God’s my life, man, a priest are you,” the King cried. “If you fear, fear then and go your way;” and he strode on, and Becket came heavily after.

The cave was above the river where it flows beneath a limestone cliff as the ground rises to make the hill whereon the town is built. At the mouth of it the child sat, playing with a string of shells and singing to herself, but when she saw men coming through the gloom she fled in.

“Flower, little dark flower,” Bran called gently, “it is Bran, the fool, calls.”

“Go away, Bran,” she cried out of the dark. “My grandmother comes and she will look upon you.”

“Nenny, nenny. From your grandam come I, little maid, and she bade me come.”

After a moment. “True?” said the little voice out of the dark.

“Bran speaks true.”

The child stole forward, a dim little shape. “Your voice is true,” she said. “Oh but fear! Here she lets no one come and no one dares.”

Bran took her hand and drew her against him. “Time was,” he said, “that time is no more. She has no need now of her cave. She is gone, and when she was to go she bade me seek you and tell you the King of the Dead had sent for her at last.”

“She is gone!”

“There is none will see her again in this land. Swift it fell. She heard the call on a sudden and ready was she. And us who stood by she bade carry the word to you and we heard her no more, neither saw her.”

“And she is a Queen now.”

“What said she? She is a Queen with the King of the dead.”

“She always knew,” the child said.

“And this also she said, that I should take you and be your father, and here is my King come to give you welcome.”

“Aye, good cheer, little maid,” Henry laughed and laid his great hand on her head.

She trembled and Bran bent over her holding her close. “No man did that ever,” she said, and began to cry. “You are kind, you are kind. Are you a King, too?”

“I have a crown o’ holidays,” Henry laughed. “We will guard you, little maid, Bran and his King.”

“Bran, oh Bran is good,” she said, and clung to him.

“Little one, little one,” Bran took her in his arms. “There is no more fear.”

So he bore her away to the camp and laid her in his own tent and for the first night in her life she slept safe.

CHAPTER XV

DEAD LIVES

BUT the King and Bran and with them one knight Sir Hugh of Assynton went back to the cave above the river. For when he came from tending her Bran found the King pacing to and fro, with his red brow furrowed and the big hands wringing each other behind him while Becket sat and glowered.

“Ha, Bran!” the King shot a glance at him and turned. “Are you man for it?”

“I am your man, brother.”

“That was a strange word of hers. In her cave is the heart of Cahors. Go in and on and on, said she. Whither then?”

“To hell,” said Becket fiercely. “She would beguile you, my lord. There is some wicked magic in it. She would betray you to the fiend.”

“So says the priest. What says the fool?”

“Nenny, nenny, there is no magic but in men’s fears.”

“And by the rood, so say I! Come then, brother Bran, and leave the priest to his prayers.”

You see Bran bearing a brazier of red charcoal and Sir Hugh with a sheaf of torches beneath his arm marching through the night on either side the King. Torches were lit and into the cave they went. It opened out from the narrow entry, it had some pitiful furnishings, sheep-skins upon heather to make beds, wooden platters, a black cooking pot and a rude pitcher. On the grey limestone were strange paintings in red, a bull, little horses, and

many hands with the fingers doubled as if in some sign or charm. Farther on the walls narrowed again till the cave was but a cleft in the rock, barely wide enough for one man's shoulders.

"Give me your torch, man," said the King and strode on.

The cleft ran straight for some way, turned sharply and ran straight again and so on winding like a mountain stream. There was no trace of man's work in it, nor of any use by men. For the most part it was tall enough for their height, sometimes water dripped through the rock on their heads, and the air was heavy with the smell of earth but clean. It was hard going, for through much up and down work the cleft climbed steeply, and wet and panting Bran cried a halt.

"Thanks, brother," the King sat heavily down. "I was wondering which of us would first flinch."

"That would I if I dared," Sir Hugh said. "God shield us, I know not whether more I dread to go on or to go back."

"Look you now what a brave beast is a mole," Bran laughed.

"All saints guard us!" Sir Hugh cried out and was silent.

From the darkness ahead came a faint thud and as they listened another.

"There be many ways to die here," Sir Hugh said. "Yet no good death that I see. Will you go, my lord?"

"By my soul, I will go on," the King cried. "I will know what the grandam knew, live or die," and he plucked another torch from Sir Hugh and lit it and strode on. And as they went they heard again that thud murmuring through the heavy air.

On a sudden the cleft widened, they stood in a cave, a great chamber in the rock, and stood upon the bones of men. Sir Hugh started back and crossed himself and said a prayer. The King held

his torch high. Grey and gold the shape of a man stood out of the gloom.

"God have mercy, brother," Bran said, "which of you twain does homage?"

The King leaned upon his shoulder. "What said she?" he muttered. "The King of the Dead?" and he cried out. "All hail, King. King and brother, I greet you."

"Oh King, live for ever," Bran said.

The white bones crackled beneath their feet. For the most part the cave was dry, but on one side water fell from the rock above in heavy drops and there stalactites hung. Beneath them, beneath the drip of the water a man sat. He was tall and gaunt, grey as the rock. On his head was a golden diadem and the torch light gleamed in it as though it were the very light that crowned him. In one hand across his grey knees was a sceptre of gold. The other hand was doubled like the red hands painted on the rock of the first cave.

"Look, brother," Bran said, "he makes the sign to his dead knights."

"St. Mary stand for us!" Sir Hugh cried out. "Mock him not, fool. He hears. He looks on us."

For the man gazed at them full with his hollow eyes.

The King strode forward and touched his hand. "He is stone," he said. "He is turned into stone. God's my life, like a saint above his shrine."

The drip of the lime water had made the dead body its own statue.

"Here is dread magic," Sir Hugh said.

"Earth he was and earth he is. Peace be with his soul," said Bran. "Whither now, brother?"

But the King still stood by the dead king. "What said she? Dead lives, dead lives. See how he is throned upon his dead. He was a mighty one in his hour. What was your kingdom, brother? What men were yours that died to do you honour?"

“Yea, yea, upon his dead he is throned. So the world goes, brother.”

The King struck his hand upon the dead king. “Is it well with you? Is it well?” he cried. “Oh God, have mercy upon us.”

“Amen, brother, amen. Will you on, still?”

The King turned and gazed about him. “Was it this that she bade me see? God’s my life, if this were all, this were enough. What lies beyond?”

Bran pointed to a cleft behind the dead king.

“On then, in God’s name.”

So on they went still and climbed a steep way and in a while thrusting through a narrow crevice came into another chamber. But this was bigger far, this was vaulted and pillared, and a stairway came down into it. “By my faith it is a crypt,” the King said. “Warily, now, warily. Keep back your torches. What stands above?” Sir Hugh was left with the torches saying his prayers and Bran and the King stole up. They came into vast dim spaces, where windows glimmered in the moonlight. “It is a church, it is the cathedral, it is St. Stephen’s of Cahors. God’s my life, she spoke true, the very heart of Cahors, the altar built upon dead lives,” and to the altar he strode and fell upon his knees. Bran knelt beside him. . . .

“For what did you pray, brother?” the King said.

“For the woman who is dead and the child who lives.”

The King strode on. “I prayed I know not what,” he said. “Let us be gone. There is too much for a man to do in the world.”

They made good speed through the rock and when they were out again in the clean air by the river-side “St. Mary be thanked,” cried Sir Hugh, casting his torch into the water and watching it splutter out as he wiped his brow. “I would like ill to go that road again.”

“Ill or well, could you find me a hundred stout fellows who would follow you up that road?”

“My lord? Yes, by my faith. I could find five hundred would follow me to hell if you bade.”

“Be sure of all your men. Seek them out presently and march them down to the river by stealth in the dawn. Go you in then and muster there in the crypt and when St. Stephen’s clock rings noon break out into the town and strike for the walls. We will make assault and it shall go hard but we have Cahors.”

“Nay, then was it for this we went? My lord, you are a great captain and by the rood I will not fail.” He ran on to the camp.

“Tell him of fighting and he takes heart,” the King laughed.

“Oh, Henry, my brother, was this your prayer?” Bran said sadly.

“Nay, Bran, I looked afar. Farther than I can see. But a man must clear his way.” So, silent, they came to their tents, but after Bran took mattock and spade and buried the woman by the river, without priest, not without prayer.

In the morning early, a solemn Chancellor came to the King and told him that Sir Hugh had led off many good swords.

“Na, na, that no man knows, Thomas,” the King smiled.

“I have been proud to think I had the ordering of your host, my lord.”

“And so you have, my friend. Set it in array, and when noon strikes, make assault upon the main gate and break in.”

Becket stared at him. “Be sure it shall be done, my lord. I have urged you to it this many a day. But perhaps you thought it was fear in me.”

“Why, are you bitter yet for last night’s work? So am not I. All men fear, some this thing, some that. Be sure I trust you well.”

“ Yet you speak with a different voice,” Becket said sullenly. “ But I am your true servant.”

“ And my friend, man.”

“ If you will, my lord.”

While the army was yet unready, trumpets sounded from the walls and the great gate opened and there rode out a knight. On he came alone and the gate clashed behind him, and as he came he sang, that same song mocking at Henry, the mongrel King, Angevin and Englishman, half leopard, half fox. He rode on to the gathering ranks as though alone he would charge the army.

“ Who is this paladin ? ” the King laughed. “ By my soul, it is the golden eagle on his shield. It is Bertrand’s own arms. Sure, Bertrand’s self it cannot be. He has lain quiet behind his walls all this while. He is no knight-errant or he is much belied. Why should he come forth now ? ”

Along the front of the unready array the knight rode, turned and rode back and in the midst flung down his gauntlet. “ God’s my life, he is their champion, be he who he may.”

“ He is their Goliath,” Becket said. “ Let me be your David, my lord.”

“ You ? ” the King considered him. “ I have other work for you.”

“ I ask it of your love of me,” Becket cried.

“ Go then in God’s name,” and Becket ran shouting for his horse and his helm.

“ Last night rankles in him yet, brother Bran. He must needs show his mettle.”

“ Yea, yea. Yet the man is a true man according to his wit.”

“ I have a place for him,” the King smiled. “ I love him well.”

Becket rode out with lance and shield and he saluted the knight of Cahors, who gave no sign nor waited but rushed upon him. Becket had not more than time to put his horse to the gallop before they

met. The knight of Cahors struck his shield fair and he reeled in the saddle and lost his lance. But that lance's point was aimed at the head of the knight of Cahors and as he stooped it drove into his throat between the plates of his mail and he crashed down. Becket turned his horse and sprang from the saddle, sword out, and bestrode his body.

"Yield you, sir knight of the eagle," he cried.

But the man lay still and blood welled out of his neck. "A priest," he gasped, "a priest to shrive me."

"Name your name, for you are vanquished," Becket said.

"Bertrand. Bertrand of Cahors," the man gasped. "A priest for the love of God! Ah, Christ, the witch!" and he writhed and blood flowed out of his mouth.

The King came up. "A brave, knightly course, Thomas," he cried and kissed him. "What, is he sped?"

"Sped he is," Becket said sombrely, "and unshriven and unabsolved. It is Bertrand himself."

"God's my life, a miracle!" the King cried. "The man was a minstrel, a hunter of women, a craven. None saw him fight ever."

"It is in my mind that witch sent him to his death."

"Why, man, she is twelve hours dead."

"He died crying on her name."

The King crossed himself. "God is over all," he said. "The man wronged her daughter. Take him up in honour. He died like a man. Go cry aloud to Cahors that its lord is dead. And at noon we set on." And Becket gave lance and shield to a squire and rode to and fro setting the army in array.

But there was no fight in Cahors. When the clock chimed noon and guarding heads under shields like a tortoise in its shell, men marched to the great gate and plied axe and crowbar, few stones fell

upon them, few bolts were shot. Sir Hugh's band breaking out of the cathedral and storming through the streets found none gather against them and to the gate they came and drove away the guard and flung it wide or ever it was broken and with banners and trumpets the army marched in. Never was town more lightly won.

That night the King supped in Bertrand's hall.

"How say you now, Thomas?" he lay back and looked through his eyelashes. "Was my witch of the devil? She has given us Cahors this day."

"Who knows that?" Becket shrugged. "Let the dead bury their dead, my lord. And give God the glory."

"If you fall by the way, you have had your day and we shall forget your story," Bran droned. "But to win us our prize on dead friends we must rise and so we give God the glory."

The King played with his wine cup. But Becket laughed. "The fool hath found no man righteous, no not one. Vanity of vanities, saith the fool, all is vanity."

"Nenny, nenny, that was a wise man's thought, brother. The fool, he likes his world and the fools that are in it."

Becket turned from him. "What now, my lord? We have well begun. But in war to use good fortune is all. My mind is that we strike swift at Toulouse."

Still the King played with the cup and after a while he said: "I shall not see Toulouse, friend. What is in my mind is not war."

And Becket too was silent awhile before he spoke, but he did not hide anger: "Say you so, my lord? This is not the mind I know."

The King looked up. "I am my own man, friend," he said gently enough.

"You are the King, my lord. But I thought I had your mind to keep as I keep your seal."

“And so you do. I tell you I make an end of this war of ours and back to England go I.”

“Here is an end of it all!” Becket said bitterly. “You were to conquer France, you were to win a great empire, you were to lead Christenty against the heathen. And back to England you go! By the rood, my lord, men will say you are something unstable.”

The King laughed. “Now he will tell me that I fear! So it is, friend. I fear to be throned upon men that I slew. Dead lives, dead lives! I will waste none on my glory or I dare not die and go among the dead.”

“By my faith, my lord, you are a changed man this day.”

“Speak out, man, Say I am bewitched, like Bertrand who came seeking death. It is in your mind.”

“God forbid, my lord,” Becket crossed himself.

“And so He does, friend. I see clear. I see my work.”

“What it is now I know not,” Becket’s head fell.

“In mine own realm, man. God’s my life, there is enough to do.”

“Not for me, my lord. Not for me now. I am not——”

“You are a true man and a strong man and you I need. There is the Church for you. Go you to Canterbury, Thomas.”

Becket started. “I answered that before, my lord.”

“Aye, when there was other work to hand. Now my work lies at home, and there is no place greater than Canterbury.”

Becket sat frowning. “I dare not, my lord. No man can serve two masters. If I should be Archbishop I must serve the Church, not you, and I am your man and you made me. How should I stand against you?”

“What, man, a friend is a friend and you are

true and tried. I fear you not. What should you fear?"

Becket looked at him from under a troubled brow. "Fear? Always we talk of fear now."

Just then the child stole into the hall and made for Bran where he sat on a stool by the King and running stumbled and fell against Becket. He started up with a cry and struck at her, but his arm stayed in the air and the child huddled into Bran's bosom.

"Little one, little one, I was weary for you," he said, "take Bran away," and he went out with her in his arms.

"The witch's child!" Becket said, staring at the King. "I tried to strike her and I could not. The strength went out of my arm. Oh my lord, that woman was the fiend's own minister."

"God have mercy, friend," the King laughed, "it is a good Christian fiend that stays a man striking a child."

Becket leaned his head on his hand and closed his eyes. "I know not," he muttered. "I am not what I was nor you neither, my lord. God watch between us."

The King grasped at the hand on the dark head and Becket took his and kissed it.

Bran was carrying the child up the winding stair. "There be flowers that must close when the sun goes down, little flower," he said.

"Do not you be angry," she touched his cheek. "The dark man was angry. But your King laughed at me with his eyes. Laugh, Bran. I want, I want people to laugh. This castle does not laugh."

He set her down in a little room high in the tower, where a silver bar of moonlight cut across the gloom.

She looked about her and held to him. "Do not go. It is lonely here, and grim. There have been evil things here."

“Has been is not. There is no evil where you are, little flower.”

“The dark man thinks me evil. Is he a priest, Bran?”

“A priest he is and a priest will be, but what is that to you or me?”

“All priests are fierce,” she said, and shrank. “Will he be with you always?”

“Nenny, nenny, you have the world to know, little maid, a goodly kind world with gentle priests that save poor folks lost in the dark. And Thomas the priest is a right good man and serves his master as well as he can.”

“Who is his master?” the child said. “He is fierce. How shall he serve?”

“Little one, little one, the good God is over all.”

CHAPTER XVI

“WHAT SHALL HE HAVE THAT KILLED THE DEER?”

THE milkmaids were in bloom by the stream, swaying daintily as the wind set the light dancing on the water, and the meadow was dark with bluebells and under the beeches on the bank which bounded the great forest clusters of primroses gleamed out of the moss.

There a child was busy. On his face by the stream lay Bran the fool, so that his big head was thrust out above the stream and he looked down into the water and saw himself, and he shook his cock's comb hood and made its bells jingle and the ass's ears on it bow to him from the water.

“Oh, Bran,” the child called, “it is good for us to be here.”

“Now nay, quoth I, as here I lie, for I see myself when none is by, and then I know that a fool am I,” so he droned to himself and rolled over on his back.

“It is always best when there is none but you.”

“Oh Ia, God keep you long of that mind. But heigho and heigho, little maids must learn to grow, and Bran the fool must go to school——”

The child looked up. “Bran is Bran,” she said fiercely.

“Well a day, now it is May. It is good picking flowers, my flower.”

“But I do not pick flowers,” said the child with indignation. “Never I pick flowers. And you know it well.”

“Yea, yea. A stern maid are you who fast even from flowers. What is the work then?”

“I am building,” says she proudly, “a house for the fairies. Oh, Bran, there are little fairies here in this England too?”

“For certain everywhere there are fairies and some as like you as your eye to your eye and some as small as a violet’s eye and there you see them dance,” and he nodded to the points of light in the rippling water.

“It is the little ones I love.”

“Oh great one!” Bran laughed. “Yea, now the fairies thrive in England, now England has peace. For without peace they will not be born.”

“I love fairies,” the child said. “Look, Bran: look at the fairy house I have made.” Of dry twigs the walls were woven, two inches high, and there was a roof of last year’s leaves and a patch of moss for the garden and in a little hole a beech-nut held water to make a well.

“A house for King Oberon. A goodly house. Yea, yea, there are many houses a-building in England now. The land bears fruit.”

“Every one works in your England,” the child said.

Bran looked up. The beech-mast was crackling under footsteps. Through the forest a woman came in a man’s arm. She was something the taller, a big creature deep-bosomed and strong, but still in the first of her womanhood. She was very fair and blue-eyed and the plaits of hair that hung over her bosom silvery yellow. She did not look at her lover, but smiled on the world a candid simple happiness. She wore a kirtle of blue, good honest stuff, but of the plainest. He was in all things unlike her, dark of skin and eye and hair, slight and lithe, by much the elder, gravely earnest and with many words to her few. He was richly furnished, his green doublet embroidered and furred, a gold chain about his neck.

"Yea, yea, England is at work," Bran said.

The two lovers heard and saw him and turned back into the forest.

"She is pretty," said the child. "I think she is a princess. She has hair like cowslips."

"Well a day, now it is May," Bran droned again. "Comes October to make you sober, naught for December but to remember, well a day, what was your May."

"That is a sad song." The child went on building. "I will not sing a sad song, I. They are not true."

"But fairyland is true," Bran laughed.

"That is sure," the child said.

The man came striding upon them and jumped down from the bank.

"Seigneur Bran, all hail," says he. "Walk aside with me, my lord."

Bran groaned and slowly heaved himself up. "A young man's youth it knows no ruth," he said, and looked at his man long and hard.

The man linked arms with him and drew him away. "Do me no wrong, Bran. You have seen us. It is ill luck."

"That is ill said, Cousin Walter."

"Ill may be mended, if you mean me well."

"Nenny, nenny, I am for nought. If you mean ill, you will sup on ill."

"My lady is Ursula, the daughter of Siward of the Hatch."

"And Monseigneur Walter is son of Sir Walter of Betchworth. And King Cophetua he did wed a beggar maid. But that was in the old time before and——"

"No beggar she is, but a most fair wise lady. And her I will wed or I will wed none. But we must be secret yet. If my father hears suddenly that I go wooing her, he will break out upon us."

"Do you mean good faith, cousin?" Bran said.

“By the holy rood,” the young man grasped his hand.

“What is her father, the Sieur Siward, cottar or villein?”

“He has a furnace here in the woods. He holds of us and of Gilbert of Ockley. He is a shrewd fellow and prospers.”

“But you are born of a Norman lord and she of a Saxon churl. God be with you, cousin. England is a-making. But ’twixt hammer and anvil, it goes hard with the iron.”

“I fear not nor she. But let me fight my fight fair. Tell no tales at home, Bran. Stand off and be my friend.”

“Fie, fie, Bran sours no man’s milk.”

“Good fellow,” the young man held to him, “good friend,” he waved his hat to the child, “Princess Ia, your own true knight,” and he was gone.

In the castle of Betchworth the King took his ease. From hunting in the royal chase by Guildford he was come to hunt the wide forest of the hills and the weald and great sport he had. For the woodland was dense and wild and in many miles no hamlet made a clearing and no man disturbed the coverts and there was great plenty of beasts of forest, beasts of chase and beasts of warren, hart and boar, fox and roe and hare. Also there was good entertainment indoors. For the lady Alice of Betchworth was a merry woman and wise and Sir Walter had seen cities and men, had worn the Cross in his youth and fought for the King of Castile in his middle age and, what the King valued most, he was a very learned clerk.

“Of all the lands that you have ridden which likes you best, Walter?” the King said.

And Sir Walter, having talked of all Europe, praised the high woods of Surrey. “This land that I hold is best to me,” and he quoted Latin verse.

“Happy man, you,” quoth the King. “And

blither land I know none in my realm who know it well. What says wise Bran, who knows more than I know ? ”

“ All land is good to a landless man,” said Bran with his mouth in a pasty. “ But for me, bury me in the chalk, brother.”

“ Nay, man, God grant I never see your grave. But landless ! The more shame to me. You shall have a good manor to your name ere the earth is a week older.”

“ Many a manor is in a feebler hand,” said Sir Walter.

“ Na, na, Bran is a snail that bears his house on his back. Bran is a dog that runs on his master’s land. You are trouble enough for my life, Henry. Give me no more.”

“ Why, Seigneur Bran,” said the lady, “ but you must have hall and bower. You have a daughter to rear. She cannot long wander the world with you. She will not be ever a child.”

“ Sooth, sooth,” Bran rolled his eyes at her. “ A wanderer and a vagabond are you, Henry, and it is no life for maids. But what home should the fool make ? How should the fool give a maiden grace, Dame Alice ? ”

“ She is a child to love,” the lady said, “ it is women’s work, Seigneur Bran, and there are true women would do it.”

“ Yea, yea, everywhere good women are, but where is home ? Many a home has pleased me well, but none was a home where I would dwell.” Bran counted the plum stones from his pasty. “ Pig-stye, tavern, palace, hall, convent, workshop, castle wall, where it is the best for me, there I pray my life may be, of myself I cannot see. God save the good company.” He made a grotesque bow and shambled out.

“ There is one who wants nothing of any man, my lord,” said Sir Walter.

"A wise man, he," the King laughed.

"I dare not say that, sir," said the lady.

"Then say he wants nothing but love, fair lady. God is my life, he should not go hungry," and the King went to the work that never was long out of his mind.

Then in the afternoon came to the castle in haste Sir Gilbert of Oekley, whose lands marched with the lands of Betchworth, with but one squire and one forester he came, who followed him far off, and an angry man was he. Into the court he rode and he cursed the grooms who would have taken his horse, and when the steward came out to him he roared for Sir Walter and sat muttering on his smoking horse.

So Sir Walter, a leisurely man, greeted him with, "Why, Gilbert, you are in a heat."

Sir Gilbert thrust out in his face a crossbow bolt so violently that the older man drew back. "Nay, fear it not," Gilbert laughed. "It is your own."

Sir Walter took it and made out in the iron his stamp W.B. "What then, has it done you a wrong?"

"I found it in a hart—a hart of ten—in my covert under the Hatch. The foul fiend burn him that shot it! Do you own the kill, Sir Walter of Betchworth?"

"By my faith, not I. No man of mine has ridden your borders. We have been busy elsewhere."

Sir Gilbert laughed. "Aye, you have oil enough on your tongue. I say he was a false knave that did it and he is a false coward that denies it. Will you answer that with oil?"

"I shall know how to answer."

"Answer me now or I strike you down before your own grooms," he plucked at his sword.

"And hang for it," said Sir Walter with a shrug. "Look up, man, look up!" He pointed to the

Royal Standard flying over his keep. "The King is here."

Sir Gilbert stared and Sir Gilbert swore. "The King has saved you this day," he growled. "When the King has gone look to yourself."

"I have saved your head now. I have kept my own against better men than you. Go your way," and he turned and went in and Sir Gilbert rode off more furiously than he came.

"As old as I am I grow no wiser," Sir Walter took counsel with himself. "I should not have told the fellow I had spared him. Such an oaf is he he would not have known else. And now he will never forgive me." And the good man was disturbed. The chance of fighting Gilbert pleased him, but to quarrel was weariness and by the cause of the quarrel he was puzzled. Churl or outlaw might risk his head to kill deer, but that churl or outlaw should shoot with Betchworth bolts was out of reason. One of his own men in Gilbert's coverts? They had enough to do with the King's hunting. He would not believe it, but conferring with his chief forester and his son found them less solemn on the matter, the forester sagely propounding that when covert marches with covert a chance is a chance and St. Hubert to speed while young Walter laughed and bade him ask Gilbert for the haunch. But Sir Walter was precise in his notions of right and he delivered a short homily and was troubled.

Now on the next day when the King went hunting they roused a hart beyond the river and it ran boldly, but on a sudden they came upon the hounds nosing at a beast that lay in a pool of blood.

"God bear witness!" Sir Walter cried. "Who kills the King's quarry?"

Young Walter was down by the dead hart. "This is not yours, my lord. This beast is hours dead. And a hart of ten."

“Who kills in your coverts, Walter?” the King said. “God’s my life, I would I had the whipping of him,” and he gnawed his fingers and glowered, for he loved his hunting.

“I crave that honour, my lord,” says Sir Walter.

“A shrewd shot,” young Walter said and cut out the bolt. He wiped it on the turf and looked at it. “It is our make—no, by my faith. Gilbert of Oekley! Gibby the bold!” and loud he laughed.

“God is my witness!” Sir Walter exploded.

“What is the jest, friend?” says the King sourly.

“Why, my lord, Sir Gilbert of Oekley came raging to my father, for he had found a hart killed upon his ground by a bolt of ours and here is a bolt of his in a hart of our covert. And each, by your leave, a hart of ten.”

“He is a merry fellow, your Gilbert,” the King glowered. “He needs chastening.”

“I vow I never knew him merry, my lord,” young Walter must still be chuekling. “Nay, this quip is too neat for him.”

“An oaf, an oaf,” Sir Walter cried.

“What is it then? Your men and his harry each other’s coverts? God is my life, you keep good order in your forests.”

Bran plucked at his sleeve and he turned to see Bran scratching a bare head. “Of the hart that fell and the hart that fled—what ails you, brother? Tell poor Bran. He is quiek which should be dead, he is dead which should be quiek. God have merey, why do you rage, brother? It was ever so. Thus is the world made. No man yet slew what he fought. No man yet won what he thought. No man yet lost what he ought. And when you have made the world anew, you will not make what you think you do.”

The King laughed and “I will wear the motley then, I,” he said.

But Sir Walter was still solemn. "I can make nothing of it but that some rogues of mine and Gilbert's are set on breaking bounds. A vile thing. All will go to havoc if this be not stayed. There is ever trouble brewing when covert marches with covert."

"And cursed be he that removeth his neighbour's landmark," the King laughed. "Nay, man, call quits now and let each man take order with his own rogues."

"I will deal roundly with mine, my lord. But I would I knew the truth of this."

"The beast is not long killed," his son said. "A bold thing, sir. It is a chance but we had marked the rogue. And by my faith if he came from Gilbert's ground there be more than we might have seen him—Siward's folk from the Hatch."

Bran blinked at him. "It is well thought on," his father cried. "By your leave, my lord, let the boy ride to this Siward. It is a shrewd fellow and true and loves us well. God is my witness, I would not for all I hold have shown you so ill a chase, and now I must have the right of it."

"Nay, man, nay, it is no such matter," the King said. "Order it as you will, but make no ill blood of it. And now ride on in God's name. The day is young yet."

Bran lingered by young Walter's horse. "A shrewd fellow, Siward of the Hatch, cousin?" he grinned.

"Why so he is," Walter stared. "What is in your head, Scigneur Bran?"

"And so say I, cousin," Bran laughed and rode on.

CHAPTER XVII

THE HAMMER

THEY killed a boar under the down, and hard by found another hart which ran so stoutly that the forest grew dark and never a shot they had, and though the hounds still held on the horses began to fail and Sir Walter was lost and his foresters were lost and at last it was clear to Bran and the King, where nothing else was clear to them, that they had lost themselves.

The discovery was made in a vast splash. Bran stopped with a yell, flung himself out of the saddle, and found that he was on the bank of deep water, wherein was the King and his horse. The King, swearing and laughing, was already scrambling out. Bran haled him up and together they towed the scared, weary horse some way till he found his feet and came to dry land.

“What should this ocean be, brother?” Bran said. “We are many a long mile from the river and the river is no such matter neither, and all else in this country is but brooks. But here is deep sea.”

“We have rid over the edge of the world,” the King laughed. “Or this is art magic and dreams and I am not wet nor the water. God is my life! Look, we are in hell.” Out of the darkness a red glow shot from mid-air to the sky, not in one place, but several, as from vast hidden fires, and as they watched faint smokeless flames rose and fell.

“Nenny, nenny, it cannot be hell, for they have there no water. Or are we mad, brother? Sure

that were a gruesome thing, to be mad in hell, yet it hath in a manner comfort."

"Lead on, brother," the King said, "fire of earth, or fire of hell I will dry me my shirt."

Then marching on the glare they found a man with a lantern who lifting it to look at them revealed a face black as coal. "Amen, so be it," Bran said. "Here is the devil."

This man answered him nothing, but pointed on through the dark and turned away.

"Yea, yea, by his pride you may know him," said Bran. "The arch fiend is he."

But the King took hold of him. "Softly, friend, what is this fire of yours?"

The man laughed. "God save you, where was you bred? 'Tis the furnace. And there is the chafery. And yon is the finery. Aye, and yon is the finery too." He pointed from glare to glare.

"Grammercy, brother," Bran laughed. "Now we know all. One chafery is two fineries and two fineries make one chafery. Good news, faith."

"What is your work, fellow?" the King cried.

Again the man laughed loud. "Iron. Strange folk, you. Iron. Iron. You know not where you be. 'Tis the Hammer of the Hatch."

"Now are we back on earth," Bran said. "One Siward dwells here, good fellow?"

"Siward is my master and this his hammer."

"If he has a house to his back, lead on," said the King. "I drip."

He had a house. By the lantern light they made out a long low building, mighty spacious for a common man and of stone. Their guide hammered at the door: "Siward, Siward, here be strange folk rid into the pond."

Bolts were drawn, the door flung wide and they stood in the light, blinking at a sturdy fellow who smiled through a yellow beard. "Here is warmer welcome, friends. What men are you?"

“One Bran a fool and one Henry a King,” said Bran.

If he thought to take Siward aback, he was wrong. A keen glance scanned them and down on one knee went Siward. “I am Siward of the Hatch, lord, and what I have is yours and loyal, humble service. Pray you honour me. It is a poor house, mine, but none other there is this many a mile.”

“By my faith,” said the King, giving his hand and looking hungrily within, “no house ever liked me better.”

And indeed Siward lived at his ease. His hall was large and carpeted with fragrant herbs. Pewter was bright on his board and he had white bread and wine, clary and piment, and a roasted crane beside the great joints of beef and pork and high pasties. There were even two good chairs. The King, put into a linen shirt and a robe of fine wool, swore that his yeomen of the wardrobe furnished him worse. He kissed Siward’s wife, Elfrida, a large calm woman, he kissed the daughter Ursula and led Elfrida back to her chair, took Siward’s, thrust Siward down on the bench at his side and vowed that neither man nor woman should lose a supper for him, and fell to.

It was a large household, large as Sir Walter’s own, for below the salt sat Siward’s workmen and their wives, a sturdy, jolly company, in no awe of master or King, but mannerly enough. “God’s my life,” said the King, “you are like a lord in his castle, friend Siward. You make good cheer for a goodly band.”

“Who work hard must live well. But no lord I,” Siward laughed, “nay, God forbid. I am but a craftsman, my lord.”

“And all these make iron for you?”

“With me, for you, my lord. With iron is your realm built.”

“Well said! But look you now, how little a man knows. I thought I had learnt this England of mine, but never I knew you iron makers were waxed so great. Never I saw such a homestead as yours.”

“We lie deep in the forests, my lord. We keep close to our work. And the work grows swift as England grows. My grandsire had but a smithy and he was the first of us who was a freeman, buying his freedom. My father built him one little furnace before he died. So it began. I am not yet old, but the rest is of my own time and since you brought us peace.”

“I have builded better than I knew,” the King said.

Siward looked at him a moment over his wine cup. “Aye, my lord. So it falls with wise men.”

“Yea, yea, ever in luck are the wise,” said Bran, “but the fool must live by his wits.”

“I see you also have builded well, master Siward,” the King said, “many a lord keeps no such cheer as you, no, nor such power about him.”

Siward looked grave. “You mock me, my lord. We are but hammermen all, they and I, living by our craft and knowing naught else.”

The folk below the salt, as they finished their supper, went off without word or bow, and Siward only and his wife and daughter were left.

“Mock you, man? Not I,” the King laughed. “I could envy you. You with your fair lady and fair maid.” He beckoned to Ursula and she came and stood beside him and he put his arm about her and she looked down at him as placid as her mother. “Is it a good life here in the woods, sweetheart?”

“I am always happy, my lord.”

“And would you dwell here all your days?”

“If it is to be,” she smiled a little, “it will be well.”

“And no man has told your fair bosom what is to be?”

“My heart would tell me first, I think.”

“And your head too,” the King laughed. “Go your ways. I fear you. Have you more, Siward, or is this fair wisdom all?”

“Two sons I have, my lord, but one watches the chafery and one is gone selling horse-shoes and nails to your steward in Guildford.”

“Two fineries and one chafery. Two sons and one daughter. The man has all things to his desire,” said Bran.

“I will not believe it of any man,” the King laughed. “What, Siward, speak true, is there naught that you ask yet?”

“Surely, my lord,” Siward smiled. “I would have another furnace. If I had fuel for it, then I might serve two more fineries and another chafery.”

“Now he talks Hebrew. God is my life, I must learn this craft of yours that breeds such content in men and maids. Will you make me a hammer-man, Siward?”

“Every man must be bred to his craft, my lord,” Siward smiled. “Why, who comes so late?”

For some one beat on the door and shouted his name, and when he opened there stood young Walter: “Siward, man, have any of your folk had sight—God be thanked, my lord. All our men are beating the woods for you.” In he came, red and splashed. “You have taken no hurt, my lord?”

“I lost myself and found a pond. No hurt, no. Only a noble welcome. And by my soul, master Siward hath had me breaking a commandment this hour past. I covet his house vilely and all that is his.”

“Faith, my lord, you could have found no better fortune than Siward and Siward’s good cheer. We

are again in his debt, my father and I. But will you ride now? There is a good track to Betchworth."

"Young man," the King lay back in his chair and drank and settled his arm again about Ursula, "if you had such fortune as I would you leave it to ride the forest by night?"

"Not alone, sir," said Walter, and Ursula smiled as the men laughed. "But I break your commandment too. Have I your leave to go, my lord? My father is in distress for you."

"Comfort him, my son. Tell him I have found consolation," the King laughed and when he was gone turned to Ursula. "That is a well-bred colt, sweetheart."

"The gentleman is a merry gentleman," said she. And then the King, though still he kept her by him, talked of iron and the making of iron till Bran curled himself up by the fire like a dog and among the dogs went to sleep.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE IRONMASTER

IN the morning he was afoot betimes and out with Siward to be schooled in the work of the hammer. He saw the great smoking mound where the raw ore was built up with layers of charcoal and burnt till it fell into small pieces which could be fed into the great furnace. He saw that sandstone furnace in which the fire burnt half a year and more which was fed with ore twice in a day and from which the molten metal flowed to make sows of crude iron. He saw the fineries in which the sows were put again through fire and hammered into the square masses which Siward called blooms and heated yet again to be beaten into the bars called anconies. He saw the chafery where the anconies went once more into fire to be made longer and rounded off. He saw the waterwheel on the great pond of his ducking which drove the untiring hammers. And neither the heat nor the abounding noise troubled him or stayed the flood of his questions.

“Good faith, my lord, you will know my craft by heart,” Siward smiled gravely.

“To know every man’s craft, that is the craft of a King. Nay, but this is all new to me. It was in my mind that one man here and there, each with his little furnace, burnt out iron and it was enough. But here you have a township and many men’s work and great engines.”

“It is new, my lord. Till you gave the land peace, naught was done but in a little way. And till there was peace, the land had use for but little. Now we cannot make enough. And so it grows.”

“And there is no end to it.”

“I see none in my day nor in my children’s. That is your work, my lord.”

“And the work breeds good men,” he clapped his hand on Siward’s broad shoulder.

“Here be many men where naught was but beasts of chase and beasts of warren. So it goes, my lord. But for me, I make iron.”

“Nay, God’s my life, you make England,” the King said. “But where does your iron go, Siward?”

“Here we fashion it in bars and spades and horse-shoes and nails and——”

“And crossbow bolts, cousin?” said Bran.

“Aye, in many things,” Siward glanced at him. “I will show you, if you please. And many anconies we sell to the smiths and the armourers.”

“There is one seeking you, cousin,” Bran said.

Siward turned: “It is Sir Gilbert of Oekley,” he said carelessly. “Will you see the store, my lord?”

And while Sir Gilbert talked loud to Siward’s placid son, to the store they went. The King was still busily curious, but Bran lingered and dallied and having found some arrow heads sat him down and played with them, dropping them into the floor between his feet and juggling with them. At this Siward found him and surveyed him with some contempt. “My iron is keen, friend.”

“Yea, yea. But I have my craft too.” He had two bolts in the air at once and let them fall between the fingers of one hand behind his head and caught them in the other. “I can shoot two at once. Is it these pretty things Sir Gilbert seeks?”

“He buys of me,” Siward said carelessly. Through the dull beat of the hammers men’s voices were rising loud. He strode to the door.

The King swung Bran round: “What is in your head now?” he whispered.

“He is a deep man, he.”

“And honest, I will warrant him.”

“Who had the bolts that slew the deer? Honest Siward stores them here.”

“He rob the forest! Not he.”

“Sooth, sooth. Where the harts fell, there they lay, he came not to steal who came to slay.”

“Why then, in God’s name? What use to Siward? You are too wise, brother Bran. He is no wild rogue, no man less.”

“Nay, he is a deep man, he. Where is he, brother?”

“God’s my life, the man is gone!” the King cried and went to the door.

Away before the house Sir Gilbert and Sir Walter were horse to horse and loud in a quarrel. “Nay, faith, this asks for me, I think,” the King laughed and was going, but Bran stayed him.

“Look and listen and learn, brother. The Sieur Siward hath this in his hand.”

Neither gentleman indeed, to do them justice, had come with the thought of quarrelling or with any sinister intent. Sir Gilbert was there, even as Bran opined, with the single purpose of buying crossbow bolts, Sir Walter to recover his King, and neither expected to meet the other. The shock of meeting was the more violent. Sir Gilbert exploded in a jibe about Sir Walter’s wondrous courage in daring to leave his castle, Sir Walter, with the outrage on his own coverts and the King’s spoilt hunt still heating him, boiled over. Sir Gilbert found himself accused of that very wrong whereof he complained and having with difficulty understood the charge was beside himself. So they were rating each other, jostling each other horse to horse, hands were at sword hilts when Siward came.

“My good lords, you do me wrong,” he said and took their horses’ heads. “You have honoured me much. Do me no dishonour now, I pray you.”

“Stand off, man,” Sir Gilbert cried. “You have naught to do here.”

“ I am a poor man to you, my lord, and hold but little, yet what I hold is mine and who does violence here on my land puts me to shame. But I pray you, what wrong has fallen here to inflame you ? Tell me and I will answer for it.”

“ God save you, Siward,” Sir Walter gave an angry laugh, “ it is no fault in you or yours.”

“ Yet here you take swords. You who are great lords, and my very good masters. Do me reason, my lords, what is left of me, if you fight upon my land. I am the earthen pot that is crushed between two iron cauldrons,” and standing there between their two horses he looked mildly from one angry man to the other.

Sir Gilbert was compelled to laugh. “ The poor Siward ! He hears his ribs crack. A wise fellow.”

“ Please you, my lord, this is no jest to me. You have known me both and known me true, I hope. And I have done you both honest service. But if there is feud between you there is an end of me. If the castles are at war I must pack and go !”

The two knights looked at each other and each bethought him of the good iron which the Hammer furnished him, of the good marks in the year which the Hammer stood for on the manor roll.

“ Sooth it is,” Siward shook his head sadly, “ of both I hold and betwixt both I lie and if one is against other I am destroyed. You know it well, my lords.”

They did know it and pondered and then “ Betwixt both you be !” Sir Gilbert cried. “ A true word ! And an honest man are you. Tell me true then, and you, Walter, hear him, have you seen Sir Walter’s men come to kill on my land ?”

“ I ? My lord, not I.” Siward was duly aghast.

“ No, nor Gilbert’s men come killing here,” Sir Walter said. “ But so it is. A hart of ten, with one of Gilbert’s arrows in it across the King’s chase.”

“And a hart of ten, deep in my coverts, killed by a bolt of yours two days since. You struck first.”

“God’s death, do you own the shot then?”

“My lords, my lords,” Siward spread out his hands between them. “More wrong will not make wrong right. Nay, who will believe that either did other wrong? I have seen naught, not I. But I hold little land and far beyond my holding your coverts march. That is the evil. Men mark not where they ride nor where they shoot. Honestly unknowing, or knowing but in the heat of the chase, your foresters cross their own bounds or the stricken beast runs on and dies far from the bowman. So it must be while your coverts march.”

“Here is good comfort!” quoth Gilbert. “What, must I build me a wall about my land, because there are cursed bad woodmen beyond?”

“Look to your own, Gilbert,” Sir Walter said.

“Nay, my lords, there is naught in this for ill blood. By St. Mary, I could promise you peace if I dared.”

“Speak out, wise man,” Sir Walter said.

“I have ventured before and you liked it not. Aye, and with you too, my lord. Yet it is a little thing and will bear you good silver in the year. Set apart land, each cut a strip and there is a clear bound betwixt your coverts and give it me to my holding and I will fence it and burn it for charcoal. Nor beast nor man will cross then and you shall have profit of it beside.”

The two knights looked at each other: “How now?” said Sir Walter. “He talked of this before and I would not hear. But I never knew that he asked your land too.”

“I would not give it,” says Sir Gilbert. “No more than you. But faith, I knew not that he had asked yours,” and he began to laugh.

Siward smiled discreetly. “Proud lords you are and stubborn. It is well seen this day. Why

should I tell either that the other had denied me ? That helps not me. Good faith, my lord, it is true I want the land, for I need more fuel to the hammer. But true it is also that it serves you well to grant the land, which before you would in nowise believe. Call friends, my lords, and mark off your bounds."

Then away in the storehouse : " God's my life," said the King, " here was the mark for his bolts, brother Bran. A cunning craftsman he. And I—I toil and sweat to make my barons do the realm service and here is this smith and his smithy orders them at his will."

" Yea, yea, the craftsman's need is the land's good speed," said Bran.

The two knights were reckoning up the matter and each other between long looks, something shame-faced, and each waited for the other to speak. " How say you, Walter ? " cried Sir Gilbert at last.

And Sir Walter, the wiser man, put his pride away. " Let us give him his land, Gilbert," he said with a good grace enough. " He is right. We shall establish our peace so. It must be done together. What one grants let the other grant."

" You have said," Gilbert was satisfied if the other was first to yield. " Be it so. What ! Who comes here ? "

Ursula came and young Walter and between them holding a hand of each was the child Ia : " But where is Bran ? " she was pleading. " You have not found me Bran."

" Ursula and young Walter ! And very tenderly withal," Gilbert laughed loud. " Goodman and goodwife, faith. What, are they wed already and a child to their house ? Give you joy, Grandsire Walter."

" Here is a scullion's jest," Sir Walter flushed. " It is the child of the King's fool."

And young Walter forsook his lady and the child and strode forward. " Do you mock at me, my

lord? Then come apart with me and you shall be answered."

"Oh no, no, no. I praise you, young sir. A good eye you have for a woman and well-matched you are. And——"

"I would have no man jest with my daughter's fame, my lord," Siward struck in. "I cannot tell why you should mean me ill."

"Ill, good faith, not I," Gilbert laughed. "I say she is very worthy of him."

"Then you say well, my lord," said young Walter fiercely, and turned to his father. "My most dear lord, this you should have heard of me alone. But since this gallant knight would make evil of it I must speak now for her honour and mine. I am this lady's true servant for ever, and I seek her to wife."

"Siward's daughter?" his father cried.

"This is no more of my seeking than of yours, my lord," said Siward. "Be sure that I crave nothing of any man for my daughter."

Then the child said, "Why are they all angry, Ursula," and stroked her timidly.

And in the storehouse "Alack the wise Siward," the King laughed. "A woman has undone all his wit. The man is but a man after all. Shall I strike in, brother?"

"Peace, peace. They want none but a fool," said Bran, and slouched out.

The child saw him and cried out and ran to him. "Bran, Bran, they are all angry and she is sad," she said, and clung to his arm that was about her.

"Nenny, nenny, they play a game that big folks play," Bran said. "An old, old game."

But when the child had left her Ursula came forward and took young Walter's hand and she looked up calmly at his father.

"Good morrow, wise folks," Bran said. "Do you lack a fool?"

“God’s body,” Sir Walter cried. “Do you brave me, girl?”

“I stand here because I must, my lord,” she said.

“And by St. Paul, a gallant wench!” Gilbert laughed.

“And so I stand, my father,” young Walter said, “do us right.”

“Free man and free maid, naught to them is gainsaid,” Bran droned.

“Aye, the fool is your right friend. You are mad, boy.”

“To-day to you, whatever the sorrow, read you true, theirs is to-morrow.”

“God is my witness, must I hear a fool’s jangle? Speak out, Siward. There is naught in this but folly and shame. You know it well.”

“I know not that, my lord,” Siward said. “It is no more my work than yours, but I cannot bind what is free.”

“Then go your ways, you and your girl, I will have none of it.”

“You are my lord and I hold of you. But if you break with me I go. What I have done here I can do on other land.”

“Wherever I go this maid is mine, my lord,” young Walter said.

Bran counted on his fingers and muttered to himself and sang: “Four men be here and four wise men and a maid withal I see, but who of them all is most worth to all is dark to a fool like me.”

Then Sir Gilbert, whose mind, no bright one, was very sure of the use of the Hammer and its rents, cried out: “What, Siward, would you quit and go?”

“I hold of no lord who bears me ill.”

“Now God have mercy, Walter, we must not lose him.”

“Aye, my good friend are you!”

“What wrong is done, sir?” young Walter cried.

"Here is honest blood and true and the fairest lady in the shire and wise and my heart is for her and my soul."

"I am a lonely man this day," Sir Walter said heavily.

"That shall not be, my lord. Oh, trust me."

"You are my son," he held out his hand. "I would have nor you nor she forget that."

The young man took the hand and kissed it and held it for Ursula to kiss.

"Peace be with you." It was the King called to them. The King came with his brisk, rolling gait. "God save the good company." Hats came off embarrassed heads. "Nay, never heed me. You have no need of me. I am come but to kiss the bride." And heartily he did so. "Never grudge me, lad." He gave her back to Walter. "God's my life, wise men are you all, but the young one is wisest." He put his hands one on Walter's shoulder, one on Ursula's. "Aye faith, here is my England. Make her men such as your fathers." And he came back to old Sir Walter. "Give me your sword, old friend. Kneel, Siward. Bend your stiff knee. Aye, that is hard. Now rise, Sir Siward."

"I am your man, my lord. How shall I thank you? You have made me what I never thought to be."

"You have made yourself, man."

"Give you joy, sir knight," Gilbert laughed.

Sir Walter put out his hand. "Let us hold together, Siward. I promise you, I fear you."

So they went in to drink wine on it and the King plucked Siward apart. "Shall I blazon you a coat of arms, Sir Siward? I will give you two crossbow bolts gules upon vert. Oh rogue!"

Siward smiled in his beard. "And two knights enraged proper. Nay, good my lord, a beggar on horseback should be my crest. But you are too wise for me. I pray you keep my secret. What is a

man to do when men will not see their own good ?

“ Nay, faith, that is ever the King’s riddle. But I did not guess your secret, wise man, it was my fool.”

“ I owe him the more, my lord, who kept a still tongue. And he was the wise man when all went awry.”

“ Where is he, my Bran ? ” the King looked round.

Bran was away by Siward’s wife and she had the child on her knee. “ Aye, that is Elfrida,” Siward smiled. “ She never passed by one that is lonely or little or weak.”

“ Well the child knows that : see ! ” For Ia was nestling to the deep bosom.

Siward went to them. “ Welcome, little one.”

“ This is a kind house,” Ia said, watching him with big eyes. “ And you were not angry, you. Not very angry.”

Siward put his hand on Bran’s shoulder. “ Will you come to my house sometimes, little maid ? ”

The child looked up into his wife’s face. “ Please come,” Dame Elfrida said.

Bran turned. “ You see clear, you. I am a homeless man.”

“ I am in your debt, friend. Here is home at your need.”

“ I am Bran’s one,” the child cried out.

“ Yea, always Bran’s one,” Dame Elfrida kissed her. “ And here is home for Bran’s one and Bran.”

“ What is home ? ” the child said.

“ You shall know. Be very sure you shall know,” said Siward. “ You and he,” and he gave his hand.

But afterwards when the King and his fool rode alone, “ Brother Bran, brother Bran, what need have I to be King of this people of mine ? They do their own work. They are grown.”

CHAPTER XIX

WHEN FRIENDS FALL OUT

ON the King's right hand was an empty place and all the court was aware of it. Away down the table two of his knights, Reginald Fitzurse and Hugh de Morville, winked and whispered: "He means mischief. He is eating like a bird." The King would bend over his food, munching quickly for a moment, then sit up and stare all about.

From his left hand spoke the justiciar Richard de Luey: "We shall not see him this day, sir. My Lord Archbishop holds his own court."

The King scowled. His steward made to take away the unused platter and cup. "Let be," said the King with an oath. "Here is the man for the place." And from the stool behind him he haled up his fool Bran and inducted motley and bauble into the Archbishop's chair. "Now give us your blessing, my lord Bran," he laughed.

Some laughed with him, some looked awry. "Nenny, nenny," said Bran, and rolled his eyes. "Too bad for blessing are you, my brother, too good for a curse. When the fire smokes, you seek the smother, brave the bad in the worse."

"Go to school with the fool," the King laughed again. "Oh, read me my lesson, good my lord."

"You mock poor Bran," and he wept grotesquely and made a faree of sobbing and eating. It went not ill and the King was merry awhile. But he did not linger at table and when he was gone, men gathered in little voluble companies. The Archbishop would not be the King's guest, the King set

his fool in the Arehbishop's place, flagrant things, things to make a court babble of the world's end.

And Bran, the fool, stole away to the Arehbishop's palace. There was such a throng at the gate that he could not in a long while and with much labour draw near, a ragged, unsavoury crowd, jostling and quarrelsome, beggars all, the halt, the maimed and the blind and in great abundance the imitators thereof. So Bran was rebuked for his coming and though he had hidden his motley under a cloak of frieze his neighbours swore that he was no true beggar and cursed him and bade him begone.

"Na, na, brother, I rob no man of his alms. Not for my body but my soul am I come."

They jeered then and bade him keep his tricks for those who were not in the trade.

"A beggar begs not of beggars? Shy men are you. A priest prays among priests. And a dog barks at a dog. Fie, brother, never be ashamed of your trade. A great trade. Never I knew there were so many beggars in the land."

Then the gates were opened and small coin and broken meats were thrown far and wide and monks stood and called to whomsoever they desried most wretched till they had picked out thirteen in all and these thirteen were admitted and the gates shut. The crowd scrambled and fought for what had been thrown and melted away. So at last Bran came to the palae and he knocked and the porter looked at him through the grating and bade him begone for the day's alms were spent.

"No alms I seek, brother, but my soul's ease. A traveller of the world, I, and sick at heart and I come to my lord to be cured of my sickness." The porter closed the grating, but in a while a monk came.

"What is your errand, my son?" and shrewd eyes studied him.

"God be with you, father, mine own heart is my

errand. I must lay it before my lord or no peace have I."

"Come in peace," the monk said, and opened the gate.

Bran was brought into the hall where the tables were spread for supper with gold plate and silver and rich fare. But other splendour was none. The thirteen beggars in a row on their bench were not more sombre than the Archbishop and his household. In a monk's black gown, barefooted, the Archbishop came down the hall; most of those about him were monks and the others by their dress poor clerks. The Archbishop knelt and water was brought him in silver basin and ewer and he washed the feet of his thirteen beggars and dried them on lawn. Then, the more majestic for it, he swept to the high table and his chaplains chanted grace.

"Sit down and eat, my son," the monk laid his hand on Bran.

"Nenny, nenny, I think I have left my body behind," said Bran, "out in the wicked world. Here be too many saints for poor me," but down he sat and was fed sumptuously, while above him and about him the sombre company talked theology and canon law in Latin. When it was done, and the Archbishop sat long, "Stand in his way, my son," the monk said, "he marks all men."

"Yea, yea, me he will mark," Bran said, and as the Archbishop came down the hall he fell on his knees and "Speak with the poor fool," he droned and looked up with a sheepish pathetic grin on his big face.

Becket's eyes gleamed. Becket raised a hand and blessed him. "Follow you me," he said, and swept on, and Bran shambled after, all men giving him place.

Into a room small and bare as a monk's cell he came. Becket sat down on the stone bench. "What is the fool's errand?" he said coldly.

“Nenny, nenny, I am not sent. Here is but poor Bran. And whom hath he found, lord Thomas?”

“A man of God.”

“Then he hath found good company.”

“And the head of God’s Church in this land.”

“Pity poor Bran, brother. Once you called him friend.”

“I am the friend of all poor men. And of all good men the servant. May I serve you, Bran?”

“I am a sad man this day, lord.”

“Sorrow told is sorrow halved,” said Becket gently. “Speak your heart, brother.”

“You are a great man and wise and a fool am I. Be gentle, lord.”

Becket smiled. “I remember you would call me a hard man in the old days. While I lived in the world I was as the world. I am a priest of God. I will be hard to none but God’s enemies, brother Bran.”

“Oh Thomas my lord, it is a wide world and there be evil men enough. Pray you peace in it for men of good will.”

“My heart is eager.”

“Once I knew two men and they loved well and each served other and poor folk had comfort of them. But either was strong and proud and so it fell they forgot their love and service and each strives against other and by their strife the land is torn.”

Becket’s haggard face flushed. “You would not so school the King.”

“Oh, Thomas, when did I fear the face of man?”

“Well said. Forgive me that. I am humbled. But oh, Bran, Bran, it is to the King you must speak.”

Bran smiled. “Thomas my brother, of two in a quarrel, was there ever a man who would not bid you school the other? Nay, you know him well. You loved him once——”

“And still would love him. He is my King and my true friend he was and out of nothing he made me.”

“Sooth, sooth. But you know him. He is a hot man and quick to anger and when his rage is upon him he does wildly. And you—do you know yourself as well, Thomas, my lord?”

“Ay, a hard man am I,” Becket smiled. “You have said it. But I pray you what have I done that the King should be fierce against me?”

“There was a great lord of old which made a feast and bade his friends sit down with him, but they came not, and when they came not, he went out and gathered rogues and masterless men to be his company. So will it fall if you stand off from the King.”

“I am driven away, brother. He denies me my pleas. He makes my enemies great. I dare not go where there is no honour for me.”

“Yet you have loved him and he loved you,” Bran said. “Oh, brother, brother, that endures. Nay, but honour is service. A strong man are you and serve men well. A strong man is he and would serve his folk. But if you stand each against other, God have mercy on this England.”

“God will have mercy upon his own.” Becket stood up. “I have served the King in true faith and love and will serve. But I serve God also. I will render unto Cæsar the things that are Cæsar’s, but unto God the things that are God’s. I will yield all to the King, saving the rights of Holy Church. I have said, brother. Go in peace.”

“The Church was given to heal men’s pain, to give men justice the King doth reign, if Church and King shall break the peace, either and other must wane and cease. God have mercy, brother, good night.”

He went his way through the night and when he came to the King talked to him of old days. And

the King was ready for it in a mood of gentleness rare with him. He too had his memories and Becket loomed large in them, Becket who was good fellow and bold horseman, Becket who was loyal counsellor and true friend, a man's other self. "God's my life, what have I done to change him? I have not changed to him. Oh, brother Bran, give me back past years."

"Keep the heart of your youth, brother," Bran said, and went not unhappily to bed.

In the morning the King rode out to hunt in the Bishop of London's chase at Highgate and when he came to dine at the Bishop's house there a woman sat by the gate who cried out, "Justice, my lord, justice in the name of God!"

The Bishop turned and rated his men and bade drive her off. But the King held up his hand. "What ill hath she done, Gilbert?"

"Nay, my lord, I know her not, not I. But I would not have rogues weary you."

"I had a man once would not have harried them that ask me justice," the King said, and Gilbert Foliot looked down, for he hated Becket.

"Draw near, good wife." The King sat himself down on the door step. "Tell your tale."

She was young still and had been comely. She was worn and a fierce yearning in her eyes. "I ask justice, my lord, justice for my man."

"Where is your man that he asks not for himself?"

"He is dead."

"Peace be with him. And to you peace, good wife."

"There is no peace," she cried. "He is dead, murdered. And the man which slew him walks scatheless. His blood cries out to me."

"Let me hear it," the King said.

"We be of Elstow under Bedford. Gytha am I and Edgar was my man, a wright. There is a

man Philip de Broe hath land there and this Philip would look on me. For men say that I was fair onee. And Philip de Broc, who is an evil man and a man without shame, came into the house and would have forced me. Then I cried out and Edgar came to me and this Philip smote him down with a knife that he had and presently he died and Philip de Broe went his way and he lives and makes merry. And my man is slain in our youth. And I—I live yet. Justice, my lord, justice."

"A dark tale," the King bent his brows, "who else has heard it, Gytha?"

She stared at him. "Who has not heard it?" she cried. "All know it."

"All know it and naught is done? God's my life, where is my Sheriff's work? Hark you, Gytha, how long since your man was slain?"

"A month and a month and three weeks more."

"Month on month and naught is done. Have you seen no Sheriff in Elstow?"

She laughed. "He has come and again he has come. He has heard me and he bids me be of good cheer for ill cannot be mended," she flung out her hands. "Philip de Broc is too great for him. Justice, my lord, justice for my man."

The King started up. "Who is he, in the fiend's name, who is your Philip de Broe? And who is my Sheriff in Bedfordshire? Aye, it is old Hugh de Leya and a wise man he was wont to be." He bit his nails and after a moment turned on the Bishop. "Lend me a good horse and man, Gilbert. Hugh de Leya must hear of me. And I give you the woman to care for. Courage, Gytha, courage now. Justice you shall have and justice I will do."

"There speaks the King," the Bishop bowed and smiled.

Men rode hard on this King's errands. Before dark of the next day Hugh de Leya stood before him in his palace of Westminster, a grey man and

fat with his age and breathing heavily but sharp of eye. "So you live yet, Master Hugh?" the King said.

"Who wishes me dead, my lord?"

"By my soul, if a Sheriff does his work there should be many wish him dead. And dead I feared you by the tales which come to me from your shire."

"Who bears tales against me, my lord?"

"None. You are for naught in the tale. That is what you shall answer. Here is a woman of Elstow, Gytha to name, which says her man was slain by one who would have forced her and he who slew, Philip de Broc, goes free and master Sheriff bids her take heart for ill cannot be mended."

"Poor wretch," said the Sheriff calmly. "There is here more ill than you know, my lord."

"Aye, aye? A dark tale it is and hath covert enough for lying. Come then, we will have her in, and you shall front her. The truth must out."

"The truth is out, my lord, but not all the truth. I will not stand against the woman. I believe on my soul the thing was done as she tells it. She has a clean name and I see no evil in her, and this Philip de Broc is a wild fellow."

"God's my life, gentle words! He sought to ravish and did murder. And the wild fellow goes free. A stout Sheriff are you."

"I do as I can, my lord. I choose my words to match my deeds. And I cannot touch him. A blithe day it were to me that I had the hanging of Philip de Broc. But I have called him into my court and he answers me he has benefit of clergy and it is true."

"What, is the knave a priest?"

"Not he. No outlaw lives more wickedly. But he has minor orders, he is a clerk, and he is beyond my arm." The King glowered at him, muttering oaths. "You know it, my lord."

“I know it!” the King cried. “God’s body, God’s body, shall every rogue that was bred in a churchman’s house harry my folk and moek at my law?”

“No clerk stands his trial,” the Sheriff shrugged. “It is so and so it has been all my days.”

“God’s my life, so it shall be no more,” the King cried. “Hark you, master Hugh, go down into your shire and bring me this rogue. By holy rood and holy thorn he shall learn that the King reigns.”

So Hugh de Leya went back into Bedfordshire with a warrant under the King’s own hand. But on the fourth day he came again alone, an anxious man. For Philip de Broc, when he was told that the King summoned him to Westminster and shown the warrant—it was all he had of the clerk, that he could read—went into his house to make ready and went out again secretly and fled and the Sheriff in a while pursuing him had word of him upon the London road, and following hard ran him to ground in the Archbishop’s palace. There when the Sheriff demanded his body it was answered that Philip de Broc by right of clergy placed himself under ward of the Archbishop and this the Sheriff took in writing and brought it to the King.

Then the storm broke. “By the bones of God, are there two Kings in my realm?” the King roared, and rent his gown from throat to hem and beat upon the table till his hands bled and drove all men out from him, and shut himself up with his rage.

When Bran stole in upon him in the twilight he was on his knees. “Is it you, brother?” he said quietly enough. “Well met! I and my fool and God,” and he put his arm round Bran and drew him down beside him. “The trumpets sound, brother. We must run our course now. God defend the right.”

“If God be with us who shall be against us?” Bran said. “Who is against us, brother?”

“You know him who knew him well. Pride is his master. He would be above the King and above the law, he and his. God forgive me who raised him out of the dust.”

“Proud he is, but right he would do if he sees aright, brother.”

“By what he does he is judged. God shall judge me by what I do. I have my task, brother. No man shall work men wrong and go free because on a day a priest touched him. The law is over all or no King am I.” He smiled. “The trumpets sound, brother Bran.”

“Hear him, brother. You loved him well and——”

“Bran, Bran, I have torn my own heart for him. No more of that. You cry peace where there is no peace. Aye, but I will hear him. Even now— even now——” he bowed his head on his hands.

CHAPTER XX

THE BATTLE

ON the next day Becket was bidden to the King and he came. In black monk's gown with sandals on his feet and one priest for all his company he stood before the King. "You are swift, my lord, and we thank you for it." The King looked him over hungrily. "By my faith, Thomas, you keep no more state than I." He held up his own stained worn gown and laughed.

"I keep the state of my Master," Becket said.

"Why, we need no state now. Let us be alone. Sit you down, man. Aye, that is well. I think of old days, Thomas, good days to me. And you, do you remember?"

"What I was and what I am," Becket said.

The King halted a moment. "Nay, if I have set you high, you served me well. You know me, Thomas. Do me right. I think you know me just."

"To all men of yours," Becket said.

"Why then, trust me, man!"

"I do most humbly trust you, my lord, save in that which I may trust to no man. What would you have of me?"

"I would have your heart again."

"I have a treasure to guard. And where the treasure is there is the heart also."

"Be it so." The King looked at him long. "We may still deal justly together."

"I shall not fail, my lord."

"I count on you, Thomas. There be those who

would set you against me. Some folk of yours have given refuge to one Philip de Broc."

Becket threw back his head. "So it comes," he said scornfully. "Hear me, my lord. The man is a clerk. He was pursued by your officers against the custom of England and the law of Holy Church. He has taken sanctuary with me as his right is. I dare not deny him nor I will not."

"The man is a murderer."

"I do not know that, my lord."

"You shall know it," The King started up and bade bring in the woman Gytha, and when she came: "Tell your tale once again, Gytha. Tell it to the priest here. My lord Archbishop is he. Nay, never kneel. Speak out boldly." And gazing at Becket's haggard face she spoke. . . .

"Aye, you have tears, Thomas," the King said. "I had no tears, I. But I promised her justice."

"God pity you, my daughter," Becket said, and stood up towering above her and raised his hand and blessed her and she fell on her knees. "God give you peace and St. Mary comfort your heart."

"My father, my father," she muttered and kissed his feet. "I am alone!"

"None of us is alone, for Christ lives."

She looked up at him through tears. "Oh, help me, help me," she sobbed.

"Be sure that I will help you." He raised her and led her away. "Here is one will bring you to my house," and he gave her to his chaplain.

"Well said, Thomas. Stand for her and I am content," the King smiled. "Aye, there is a man's heart under the monk's gown."

"I dare not deny her. She is a woman and poor and stricken and I am a priest."

"Now you know him what he is, this Philip de Broc."

"I know what I knew, my lord. The man is accused, not judged."

"God's my life, was that woman lying?"

"I doubt her not. I say he is not judged."

"Why, God have merey, that is my plaint, not yours. Give him up and judged he shall be."

"I dare not, my lord. The man is a clerk, the man is of the church and must not answer to the courts of this world."

"What now? Look how you turn upon yourself. You wept over the woman, you swore her help and now you deny her."

"Not I, my lord."

"She asked for justice, she asked vengeance on this rogue who slew her man."

"I heard her and heard not that. Not vengeance she asked, but help."

"Her man's blood cries out from the ground."

"It cries to God, not man."

"What, shall a knave murder and man not do justice upon him?"

"The man is not in man's hand. He is of the Church and the Church is not under man's law."

"Aye, now you speak your heart. You will have no King nor law over you."

"None but God," Becket said, and crossed himself and bowed his head.

"Go!" the King shouted. "Go! By the holy rood, you have lit a fire that shall burn you up."

"Peace be with you, my son," Becket said.

He went out from the palace alone and men drew away from him as he passed and muttered and scowled. Only Bran knelt to ask his blessing and Bran he did not see, so high he held his head.

"A shrewd jest, my lord," said the justiciar, telling the King of it. "When he saw that none other of us knelt, then knelt the fool. And all the world will remember it against Master Thomas that he hath but a fool to his friend. A cunning fool is Bran."

"Say you so?" The King bit his nails and Bran

looked round the door. "Show yourself, brother. For whom are you?"

Bran stole in and sat down at the King's feet and caressed his knees. "When a man is strong, he needs no friend, when a war is long all lose in the end."

"Aye, you jangle your riddles."

"For the world is a riddle, and, hey diddle, the good men they fight for the wicked's delight and, read me aright, never may what they might, never will what they would, never can what they could, never shall what they should."

"Peace where there is no peace, fool," said the King angrily. "It is for peace I fight."

"A hard fight, my lord," the justiciar said, "for he is a proud man and bold."

"Aye, aye, set a beggar on horseback and he will ride to the devil."

"But short, I dare hope. He makes no friends and when he stands against the law and the King there is not one that will know him."

"Sooth, sooth," Bran said. "Do him no wrong and he will have no friend."

"This fool is a wise fool," the justiciar purred, and they fell to talking of ways and means.

And indeed when it was found that the King's will was set Becket was left alone. His very Bishops, some hated him, some feared strife, none thought it a cause to die for that churchmen should not be under the law, bade him yield. Forsaken, he promised to swear obedience to the old law of the realm and the King called Bishops and barons to hear him swear.

What he should swear and how he should swear he disputed for three days in that council at Clarendon and then would swear nothing. The King cried out, "Mock not, that you be not mocked," and strode from the council room growling threats, and the barons followed him and with Becket none

but the Bishops were left and they faint of heart. In the courtyard swords were out and men talked of death for the traitor. The Bishops heard the clash of steel and some wept and begged him yield and Gilbert of London cried out : " You have lit the fire ; now you feel the flames." Becket started up then. " This man had among the brethren the place of Judas," he said, pointing his lean hand, and they shrank from him and babbled while he paced to and fro.

But where the King sat alone gnawing his hands : " The man will yield," said the justiciar coolly. " I see it in his wavering. He is unsure of all men and of himself most unsure."

" Sooth, sooth, brother," Bran said. " But what if he yield in his death ? His death shall do more scathe than his life. Hear the swords."

The justiciar smiled. " Aye, fool, die he must not. But let him fear death and be shamed. I will find trusty fellows," and he went down into the courtyard and in a little while two barons broke into the council chamber and cried out that a hundred swords were out to hew down the Archbishop if he would not own the King and the law.

Then Becket's friends gathered about him and beset him on their knees. " God deliver me, God deliver me," he cried, " what is all this work ? I am ready to keep the old laws of this realm."

So they ran to the King and told him, and the King came down into the council room and in disarray, with blood upon his lips, he stood over against Becket, Becket swart and haggard, and his black gown all trembling about him. " Swear you," the King cried ; and the throng of the barons behind him surged forward a little way.

" I swear to keep the old laws of England," Becket said hoarsely.

The room was full of murmurs and one of the Bishops lifted up his voice and prayed.

The King stood and said no word and smiled, and Becket hid his face in his hands. And after a while: "What you have sworn it is written, Thomas," said the King quietly. "Here are the laws written by wise men," and the justiciar held out a parchment.

Becket's hands fell and they saw his eyes gleaming through tears. Becket started back. "A trap, a trap!" he cried, and flung the parchment down. "I have not sworn what I have not read."

"By the bones of God, you have sworn. You do not make the laws but obey the laws. Sign and seal."

"By the omnipotent God, while I live I will never set my seal to it."

The King laughed. "Tricks serve you no more. Before God and man you have sworn. Give him his token and let him go."

So the justiciar tore the parchment down the middle and put one half in his bosom and the other half he held out to Becket. "Be it so," Becket said in a moment. "This I take neither consenting nor approving." He turned upon the Bishops: "By this you may know the malice of the King," he cried, and he swept out.

He vanished from men's eyes. He shut himself in a monastery and put on sackcloth and lived on bread of affliction and water of affliction and did penance for his weakness. And when this was told the King he made merry. "He hath found his trade at last. Let him be a monk and have done."

But Bran shook his head till the bells jingled. "If that be done we are all undone. I fear no sinner under the sun. When my foe turns saint, it is time to run."

"The devil is sick, the devil a saint would be," the justiciar smiled. "But of this sickness there is no healing, master Bran."

And the King had his will. "Then was seen,"

the friends of Becket wrote in the bitterness of their hearts, "the mournful spectacle of priests and deacons who had committed manslaughter, theft, robbery and other crimes carried in carts before the King's officers and punished as if they had been ordinary men." But the ordinary men were well content. Out of his sackcloth Becket published protest and lamentation and no man in the realm stood for him. Then he fled. On a dark night he stole out of Canterbury, two priests for all his company, and at Sandwich they hired a little open boat and came safe in her to France. The French king had reasons good and old to hate Henry. France must baek King Henry's enemy and commend him to the Pope. France could menace all Henry's realm and if the Pope should be persuaded to use excommunication and interdict in Becket's cause, Henry must bend or break. If France would make war and the Pope make it a holy war, then there must be victory most glorious.

"Here is our saint," said Henry with a great oath, when he heard of Becket's flight, for he saw the plan far off and feared it, and girded up his loins for a long struggle in diplomacy and intrigue. He was the man for that, tenacious, patient behind his fits of passion, very cunning and through his craft of the moment seeing far and true.

He knew what he could count on. King Louis was no fighting man. The Pope would make peace for his Archbishop if he could. But any hour might bring Becket the chance to manœuvre them into a place where they must fight for honour. So the King went warily and was all things to all men and always mild. But the need fretted him and he had his enemies at home, barons whose power he had curbed and who longed for the old days of disorder and rapine, honest men who bore it hard that the head of the Church should wander in exile. He was eager for peace if peace could be

had. And he went out to meet Becket in France.

In the good land of Touraine they met on St. Mary Magdalen's day amid a great concourse of French barons and Bishops. Becket was weary of exile. He had found out that his champions would not fight, he had learnt that he must be in England to have power in England, he had no faith left in policy.

"There rides a man of sorrows," Bran said as he came.

"That is his art, fool," the justiciar laughed. "He is grown more cunning. A sad brow looks sadder against a bright robe over that monk's gown he used of old."

In his primate's splendour Becket rode and when he came to the King lit down and made to kiss his foot. But the King was too quick for him and sprang down and held his stirrup for him to mount again. "It is fit the less should serve the greater, Thomas," he said.

"Your servant am I, my lord, and your true servant," Becket looked down at him.

"If so you be, you shall be welcome to my realm," said the King.

"I ask no more than my just place and power, my lord."

"No man lacks justice of me and you last of all, Thomas."

"To England I may not come unless I have my see and all that is mine of right."

"If you do aright in the affairs of the realm, all that was yours of right you shall have again."

"Alas, my lord, you speak to me with closed teeth," Becket said. "You trust me not."

"As you shall do I trust you. By what you shall do you may earn my heart again."

"I am a lonely man in my days," Becket said.

"You may have of me what you will as you had of old."

“My lord, my heart tells me that I go from you as one whom you shall see no more in this life.”

“What now?” the King cried. “In peace we are come. Do you hold me a traitor?”

“That be far from you, my lord. I pray you give me the kiss of peace.”

The King leaned from the saddle and kissed his sunken cheek and he crossed himself and turned his horse and rode away and the concourse cheered and trumpets blared, but he rode with his head bowed.

To the monastery of the Cistercians where he lay that night came Bran and found him alone making his supper of a bowl of pulse. “Is this a fast day with you, my lord?” said he.

“Welcome, wise man. Nay, gluttonous and a wine-bibber am I. But I grow old, Bran.”

“You should have many years, lord.”

“I shall have what is appointed and gladly go.”

“Is it not good to live, lord?”

“Nothing is good in this world but to do. You have learnt that, wise man.”

“Nenny, nenny. For Bran it is good to be, yea, to be poor Bran the fool.”

“Then why are you here, brother? Something you would do. And in all the years I have known you, you would ever be doing.”

“Why, look you now, what ill have I done you ever?”

“You wish me well, brother fool. But you wish all men well. What would you have of me now?”

Bran looked up at him wistfully: “Is it peace, lord?”

“I am weary of strife, brother. I would be at peace with all men but those who war upon God.”

“How shall a man know them who they are?”

Becket drew back. “You make cunning questions, master Bran.”

“I am answered,” Bran said sadly. “Na, na,

Bran lays no traps. Bran would live at peace and be kind. Oh brother, my brother, what help for this torn realm in strife ? ”

Becket laid his hand on the fool's head. “ I would I were what you are, brother. But God hath taken me to do his work. He has appointed what awaits me.”

“ It is a sad world you live in, lord.”

“ It is a sad world where sin is.”

“ Na, na. A good world it were if men lived at peace and were kind.”

“ Quoth the fool,” Becket said fiercely. “ Who bade you tempt me, wise fool ? ”

“ God have mercy, here is none but poor Bran ; and naught but good will, lord.”

“ Here is the fiend,” Becket cried. “ Oh wise man, have you heard tell of one who was sent not to bring peace but a sword ? And the devil showed him all the kingdoms of the earth and the glory of them and said, ‘ All these things will I give thee if thou wilt make peace with me.’ ”

“ I have heard, lord. And I have heard of one who said that the meek are blessed and bade turn the other cheek to him that smote one.”

Becket leaned his head on his hand. “ You have said. Go your ways. You have said. What is for me I cannot tell. There is no help in man, no, nor in mine own thought. I shall do what it is appointed. Whether I go to peace or destruction I know not. You have done what you could. God be with you, wise man.”

And Bran kissed his gown and stole away silently.

CHAPTER XXI

THE TRIUMPH

THEREAFTER came tidings to the King where he lay in Bayeux that a hundred French knights and lords had marched with the Archbishop and borne him company to the sea and that he was embarked on a tall ship wherein his cross was planted above the figurehead, and so with holy cross to lead him he was gone to England.

The King turned in his bed, for he lay sick. "It is his own cross which he bears," said he.

And soon strange tales came back to Bayeux. A while before the ship of his state had sailed, the Archbishop had sent a little boat by stealth with a trusty messenger. When he came to the English shore he had not deigned to land in the King's harbour at Dover but sailed along to his own town of Sandwich. But to Dover his messenger had come and sown letters among the lords of the King's council and his officers and brought fear. And when my lord Archbishop came into Sandwich there were to greet him many great folks who had no love of the King and all along his road to Canterbury poor folk knelt for his blessing and a multitude with garlands and with banners brought him to his cathedral.

The justiciar smiled sourly, "And every one that was in distress, and every one that was in debt, and every one that was discontented, gathered themselves unto him and he became a captain over them," he said.

“Yea, yea,” quoth Bran, “and still he hath no power over you unless you do him wrong.”

From the King it could not be hidden, and he rose with his fever still upon him and fretted himself seeking sure tidings and all the court murmured rage.

Each day brought its new story, false or true. The Archbishop rode to and fro with a guard of knights and men-at-arms. The Archbishop sought to marshal the people under his command. The Archbishop would not be stayed by the King’s council and swore he was to suffer no man’s bidding, but the King should hear commands of him.

“Ere Lent there will be wild work in England,” the justiciar said, and all the court murmured war, though the King gave no sign.

And then came to Bayeux the Archbishop of York and the Bishop of London and the Bishop of Salisbury with what was worse than rumour. For it was to them that the messenger of Dover had given Becket’s secret letters. It was a boy, or a nun in a boy’s habit, who came to them in St. Peter’s oratory and gave to each a parchment and vanished before they could read.

“Well for the rogue,” quoth Gilbert of London, “for the Sheriff hunted him with naked swords a day and a day.”

The letters were letters of excommunication, banning Archbishop and Bishops from holy sacrament and Christian company because while their Primate was in exile they had done duties which were his of right. “It is we to-day, it is you to-morrow, my lord,” quoth Gilbert. “Nay, by my faith, you may be under his ban already, for you have speech with us, and if his curse holds we pollute whom we touch.”

“If his curse holds all England is stricken,” the justiciar said.

“See you to that,” Gilbert turned on him.

“There will be no peace while Master Thomas lives.”

“By God’s eyes,” the King cried, “if all are cursed who stand by the law, hell is here upon us.” And he gnawed his hands and muttered writhing in his chair. “This knave, this knave that I made with kindness, that came first to court me in rags, riding a lame mule, he is to rule me and destroy my realm with his folly.” He started up. “God’s body, God’s body, what cowards have I about me that none will deliver me from this turbulent priest!”

Then the Archbishop of York and the justiciar were earnest to quiet him and they took him apart and began to reason what was to do.

But the King’s men were in a tumult, swearing themselves no cowards and raging against Becket and the King’s caution. When darkness fell and the gates of the castle were shut came the constable to the justiciar and told him that four knights of the King’s household had ridden forth that day and were not returned, Reginald Fitzurse and Hugh de Morville, William de Tracey and Richard the Breton.

“Whither? I know not, my lord. But I may guess. The King called his knights cowards this day.”

“God’s body, they would not dare!” the justiciar said. “Yet they must be stayed.” And he made haste to send after them one he could trust, William de Mandeville, to guard him safe.

But another was gone before.

It was the afternoon of a winter’s day and the light all but gone from a clear cold sky. In his own chamber in his palace at Canterbury Becket sat among his clergy. It was dark about him save for the red glow of a fire, and his chaplain sang a psalm: *Domine Deus Meus in te speravi; salvum me fac ex omnibus persequentibus me et libera me: O Lord my God; in thee do I put my trust; save me from all them that persecute me and deliver me. On*

that broke a man in motley, and mad as his motley, screaming as he ran and flinging body and limbs this way and that. He cast himself upon the Archbishop and dragged at him, arms about his neck, crying: "Come, Thomas, come. So the Lord wills. This is not the place, nor this the hour, nor thus you win to grace. Come, brother, come."

Then Fitzstephen the chaplain and Grim the clerk from Cambridge tore him off and he fell down and sobbed: "Save not yourself, na, na. Save men. Be gone and save us all."

Then Fitzstephen said, "He hath a devil."

But Becket said, "Nay, brother. He has loved much, alas poor Bran"; and the hard face smiled.

Now a noise sounded far off and grew and a woman came running and after her a monk, and she cried out: "My lord, my lord, the King's knights, the King's knights come in arms."

"Who cares for that?" Becket laughed. "Armed am I."

But his clergy gathered about him and prayed him for their lives: "To sanctuary, to the church, to the church," they cried, and among them bore him away.

Bran rose painfully and looked at the woman who wept. "Yea, yea," he laughed. "You would be for him, you. God have mercy on a mad world." She gazed at him not knowing him and ran where Becket had gone and he too followed.

The last of the winter twilight glimmered in the cloisters. The great bell was ringing vespers and the cathedral windows shone from the candles on the altars. Down the cloisters the four knights came, phantoms in arms, swords drawn, with axes in their left hands and after them clanging, glittering, yet dimly seen, a company of men-at-arms. "Where is the traitor? Where is Thomas Becket?" one cried; at the church door they halted a moment, then rushed in.

The altar lights shone as from afar and low

across the gloom. On the steps of the choir the Archbishop stood, a tall, great form, alone, and by that revealed. The four rushed upon him and down the steps he came to meet them. Then Grim cried out and broke from the clergy who huddled before the altar and ran to him. But Becket put him by and came among them. "I have no fear of your swords," he said. "What do you seek of me?"

"Do the King's will!" cried Hugh de Morville.

"I do the will of God," he said.

"Take off the ban on the King's men."

"I dare not nor I will not, till they sue pardon and atone."

Reginald Fitzurse stole up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder with the flat of his sword. "You are a dead man, Thomas," he said.

"Traitor, you shall die as you have deserved," cried William de Tracey.

"Ready I am to die. I charge you in the name of God that you hurt no one here but me. May the Church through my blood win freedom and peace."

Fitzurse grasped at him and strove to drag him away from sanctuary: "Touch me not, Reginald," he cried, "off, knave, off!" and flung the man down. And Tracey grappled him and was flung down in turn. Then the swords fell to work.

Fitzurse struck and the blade turned from his head. Tracey struck and Grim took the blow on his arm and fell, but Becket's brow was wounded and the blood ran down his face. "For Christ and His Church I am ready to die," he cried, and Tracey struck again and he fell down on hands and knees. Then Richard the Breton gave a blow at his head which seared the very skull and broke the sword upon the stones and he was dead. One of their company, the deed is certain but proved against none of them, set his foot upon the dead man's neck and thrust at the brain.

They stood over him, the four with his blood upon them, breathing hard: "We may go," one said, "the traitor is dead and no more will trouble the land"; and they looked at each other in the gloom. Then with an oath: "King's men!" Fitzurse cried, "King's men," and led them out into the night.

Bran lay upon his face, the hood torn back from his shaven head, and he beat his brow upon the stones and moaned out, "Have mercy, have mercy upon the world Thou hast made." In a little while he rose, moving painfully, and peered round him in the dark.

From before the altar, from the shadows of the great tombs, from the crypt monks were stealing out. But by the dead man were only two folk, Grim who lay in his blood and a woman who knelt and holding by a pillar prayed and sobbed. Over her Bran stood and peered down at her: "Who are you that weep for him?" he said, and he laughed and his laugh tore through the murmurous gloom. "You were Gytha of Elstow once. Yea, yea, you are his in his death."

"I am Gytha and he saved my soul," she cried. "He gave me peace. He taught me mercy."

"You have said," Bran's head bent. "God be with you, sister," and he stumbled away.

The townsfolk were flooding into the cathedral, and forcing his way through them came a knight with an ordered company of men-at-arms who challenged Bran and bade him stand. "Na, na, you come too late, brother," Bran laughed. "His blood is out already."

"God's wounds, it is Bran! Speak clear, man, you know me. I am William de Mandeville. I come to guard him for the King."

"Then are you late indeed, brother. See where he lies."

"They have struck! Out on them for madmen,

madmen!" He peered through the gloom and saw the light of the monks' tapers fall over the body and the blood. "God have mercy upon us all."

"Well said, brother," quoth Bran, and went his way.

In Bayeux the King lay with his fever still upon him. There to his bedside, a weary man came Bran and fell upon his knees and kissed the King's hand and hid his face. "His blood is upon the ground," he said. "They slew him in his church. Oh, Henry my brother, a good death he died."

"By my hand!" the King cried out. "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"

CHAPTER XXII

LONG LIVE THE KING

“**B**ROTHER Siward,” said Bran, “do you know who taught men to work? It was my lord the devil. “How, fool?” saith Sir Siward, crossing himself like a good Christian. “Why, thus, knight. The devil he tempted Adam and Adam he fell and was cursed therefore and his curse was that in the sweat of his brow he should eat his bread, him and his seed after him. And God have mercy, they do sweat, your men here. I am a-weary to see them. I will go watch the trees grow.”

Furnaces glowed and hammers clanged in finery and chafery, men toiled to and fro with baskets of charcoal, baskets of brown ore. “God is my life, you have thriven, Siward,” the King turned to the ironmaster, “you have grown, and still you are mighty busy.”

“So it is, my lord. I cannot tell why.”

“Because you are an honest fellow and shrewd,” the King clapped him on the shoulder.

Simon was still pensive. “My iron is good iron. But men want more and yet more this year and cannot have enough.”

Bran was away beside the stream that fed the hammer pond and he plucked yellow iris and twisted it into a wreath for the black hair of the girl who sat beside him. “Fie, you look at me as if you were a thousand years old and a thousand years wise,” he complained.

“And so I am,” her lips smiled but not her eyes, “but to you always a child, Bran.”

“Na, na,” he passed his hands about her shape, as though he were moulding her, yet never touched her, “that is not and I would not will it, I. Child of my heart you were, maid of my heart you are. But the woman is in your eyes now.”

“Time enough, oh, time enough,” she said, and laughed.

Bran took a silver brooch from his scep and fastened the two black braids of her hair together on her bosom. “See, it is a lion to guard you till you render yourself.”

She cried out in a pretty pleasure, she fingered the silver lion and started up, drawing her blue gown about her to look at herself, a little creature, finely made. “He shall guard me; till my lord Bran bids me yield.”

“Nenny, nenny, not poor Bran,” he cried. “What is not done of yourself is ill done.”

“Alas, my lord, one does not choose, one is chosen. It is the doom of maids.”

Then he kissed her and went after his King.

Over the hills they rode and through eorn to the dank meadows of the Wey valley and so to the rolling grey heath.

The King was silent, riding ahead of his knights alone with Bran and coming out of his thoughts once and again in many a mile. The day was waning, and a cloud bank across the western sky and the heath grew darker, and far away the rise and fall of it loomed dim. Bran sniffed at the air like a dog and rose in his saddle and looked all about. The King became aware of him: “What is in your head, man?”

“This place is full of life, brother.”

“This heath?” The King stared and laughed. “Why, man, we could see man or beast a mile off and I see none.”

“Sooth, sooth. What I feel I cannot see, here are a-many where none should be, and Henry, my brother, it likes not me.”

“The heath is bare as my hand and empty,” the King decided. “You are a dreamer, Bran”; and he went back to his thoughts.

In a while they came into the forest and to the castle at Windsor. When they had supped and in the King’s chamber Bran lay at his feet, the King opened his mind. “He thrives, Master Siward. He has made himself mighty.”

“A wise man he is and kindly. Yet he thrives. He hath lands and gold and children to his desire. And still is kindly.”

“He has children to come after him. I had a wife when I was young, Bran.”

“Yea, yea, and your children are her children, brother,” Bran looked up.

“I have need of them now. God is my life, what am I? I grow old. This realm has need of them, this realm that I have made.”

“You have held their mother in ward long years.”

“She has had the honour of a Queen. I have done her no wrong who wronged me, unless I wronged her to take her to wife. By holy rood and holy thorn, I have been a just man all my days.”

“And she—she has bred her sons there where she lay under guard.”

“God’s body, should I take the boys from their mother? You call me a hard man, brother Bran. I spared her that.”

“Has she thanked you, brother?”

“Yes, faith, time and again she has thanked me for it. Nay, man, she is a woman though she loves me not. She is a Queen in her heart and her lads are bred to be kings. And bold lads they are and noble and manhood comes on them now. It is time, God knows. I grow old and men think I grow weak. The barons lift their heads here and

beyond the sea, and everywhere I cannot be. Do you know what I have in mind, old Bran? I will leave Henry here to be King in England for me, while I take the young ones over sea and school Normandy and Aquitaine."

"God send you a good deliverance," said Bran.

"From what, fool?"

"Nay, brother, I know not, I. But you go to your trial."

"So it is, faith," the King laughed, "but so it must be. They will have to take it when it falls from my hands. Let them work the sheep while the old dog is here to save the flock if they run wild. A man must learn his trade at his trade."

Thereafter he took counsel in his fashion with the justiciar and the men he trusted, telling them what he had resolved and answering what they had against it, and he made ready to seek his Queen in the castle where she was guarded. None withstood him. He had ruled long and with a heavy hand upon whosoever was against his will. There was talk that his day was done. Some of his barons were weary of peace and wished the old days back that they might be without a master and thrive on civil war. It was plain that he would need what strength he could find, and each day he let go by without owning and establishing his heirs was a temptation to his enemies.

And yet: "What, old Bran," the justiciar said, "so we be to serve two masters, you and I."

Bran rolled heavy eyes at him: "Out of the smoke into the smother, poor Bran is old, poor Bran is a-cold, when his heart is broke will you buy him another?"

The King went his way and sought out his Queen after many a year. She waited him in her own chamber. She rose at his coming and stood. She was no younger than he, but a stately woman, tall and still, in a robe of mourning. "I would bid you

welcome, my lord, if this were my house," she said.

"If I had been welcome, I had not been so long away. The past is as it is, Eleanor. But your honour is mine. And for your honour and mine I am come."

"You speak your prisoner fair, my lord. I remember fair words of old. And again you would take what is mine."

"I would give to those who are mine and yours. And you have not answered. Come, will you speak me fair?"

"You can give to my children no more than is theirs of right. Shall I thank you for that, my lord?"

"God's body, what are thanks between man and wife?" the King cried.

"Am I your wife? I had forgotten."

"Have you forgotten the children you bore?" He stared at her, the bulky restless man, swaying, plucking his belt, fretting at her still calm. "God's my life, there is no fruit of bitterness. Call friends or have done. It is time the lads stood to their places. Do you give good will to it, aye or no?"

"You are in haste, my lord. That was your way ever. You have taught me to wait."

"A realm's need will not wait. Henry to hold England while I go oversea. Aquitaine for Richard and Brittany for Geoffrey, and I will find some fief for little John. Are you content?"

"Henry is to be called King."

"Henry shall be King with me while I live and King after me."

She smiled. "Long live the King," she said.

"I thank you. Be it so."

"And I—I am left alone."

"We are all alone in the end of the day."

"You have chosen it. I do not choose. I will go oversea and go with Richard, and go among my own people, or I will have none of it."

The King bit his hands and after a while, "Well, have it so," he said, "I will not deny you. I will appoint you a place."

"You are gracious, my lord," she said, and bent and offered him her check.

So he bore back his sons with him to Westminster, and the new order was declared and the King owned his son Henry King of England with him, equal in honour and power, and to the young King men did homage. He was a comely lad and gracious, and he made no enemies. There were those who gave thanks that he was the first born and not Richard, a young giant with no respect nor favour for any man.

"How say you, old friend?" the King talked to his justiciar. "Can you work for your new King?"

"A new master is apt to want new men, my lord. But I serve him with good will."

"You serve me, Richard de Luei," the King said gravely, and gave his hand.

"Always, my lord," the justiciar held it, looking in his eyes.

"Say your mind."

"It is in my mind that Henry Fitz Henry is something light to ride this wild horse which is our England."

"You say well. Therefore I leave you to ride with him. You are not light, my friend."

"Nenny, nenny," Bran said. "But if two men ride a horse one must ride behind, brother."

"And from behind a man may guide, brother Bran."

And then the young King came upon them, and the King talked policy and the young man took his schooling happily. . . . "So I leave you, my son. God watch between us. Here is one with you that knows my mind," he laid his hand on the justiciar's shoulder. "And you will find none wiser."

"I shall know how to honour him." The lad bowed and smiled.

"There stands my brother, like himself, 'twixt a wise man and a fool!" It was Richard's loud, jolly voice. He clapped his father on the shoulder. "Come, sir, will you ride? They wait for us. And brother Henry is hungry to be King!"

"Ride on with your train, boy. I follow," the King waved him away.

"The King is dead. Long live the King!" Richard cried and swaggered out.

"Care for my fool, Henry," the King said, and Bran started up with a cry. "There is none has loved me better in all my days than brother Bran."

"I would not have you say that, my lord. But my fool he shall be for your sake, nay and for his own. I love a gentle fool, and gentle he is, your Bran," and he held out his hand debonair for Bran to kiss.

But afterwards when the King was going, Bran ran after him and plucked at him and drew him aside. "What is this, brother?" he said, and the tears ran down his face. "I have never lost you since first I found you till now. And now you cast me off without word said."

"I could not bring my heart to it till the last. Oh, Bran, old Bran, we have been long together."

"Yea, yea, and for ever," Bran sobbed.

"But I must have with the boy one who knows my heart for him and one who knows his heart for me. You keep my heart in England. I have done well, be sure I have done well."

"Oh, Henry, my brother, it shall be well done," Bran said, and clung to him and let him go.

CHAPTER XXIII

BROTHERS

FOR some while nothing went ill. The young King had more appetite for pomp and show than his father, his manners were better, his temper easier and so his court was the gayer, but all else was as if his father still ruled at Westminster. Under the justiciar's hand the machine of government did its work with the old force and certainty, and Henry the younger showed no ambition to meddle. But as the months went by more of the great barons came to court, men who had stood aloof from the old King, men who bore him no good will, men who had quarrelled with him. To all of them Henry Fitz Henry was gracious and something more, as though he sought their favour. He gave the justiciar and the old King's friends no cause of offence, but he seemed to prefer these lords of famous blood and vast possessions to the able men whom his father had raised out of nothing to hold office. And a day came when he made known that he would leave Westminster and go to Windsor and after, if so he pleased, make a progress through the country, and he did not bid the justiciar nor any of the officers of state go with him. It was plainly within his right, it was conspicuously not his father's way.

"How do you read this, master Bran?" the justiciar said.

"A young man's youth will say its say, and every dog must have his day," Bran shrugged.

"I like it not when the sheep dog runs with the wolves."

“ Like no man till his head is gray, youth it buys what age must pay.”

“ Why, if this were a boy’s fling, no harm. But what company does he keep? My lord of Leicester, old Hugh Bigod, the Earl of Clare. You are a younger man yourself, old Bran. It is a green head seeking the grey—and them who have grown grey as his father’s enemies. God’s my life, I think his mother’s spirit works in him. She ever leaned to the barons.”

“ If it be so, so it were said. Yet I tell you the boy is but a boy.”

“ God send you right,” quoth the justiciar.

To Windsor the young King went and more than one great baron in his train and hunted and feasted merrily. And on a night Bran rode out alone across the forest to that bare land beyond the Surrey border which he had crossed with the King. The moon was rising behind driven clouds and a dim grey light bathed the heath. Bran tied up his horse to a tree on the verge of the forest and strode on. Here and there in the hollows points of light twinkled like tiny stars upon earth. On the wind came a murmur of sound as from soft voices far away. “ Yes, yea, there is life here,” Bran said, and in a while he began to sing, a strange song, gentle music but weird with no words. He sat himself down and still sang. Then he broke off suddenly to say, “ I am of the earth, brother,” though he saw no one. “ From the chalk of the hills I come.”

The heath rustled about him. “ From the black land of the river, I,” a voice said, but still he saw no one. “ Come, brother. My ring is near. We have honey and curds and spring water.”

“ Na, na, I have all and naught but news I seek. Is it well with the little people, brother?”

“ Here is no ill.”

“ You be many here, here on the heath where no food is. And you are of the river land.”

“We be very many. From the river land and the clay and the tilled sand and the forest. Ill comes, brother. Men hate again.”

“Fie, fie,” Bran said, “you are not fled far from men. I remember in my days when we fled many a mile where none could come.”

“You are old and wise, brother. We remember. But men are not hungry now. Men are not naked. They will not long kill. We live in the heath till their hate grows cool.”

“It is well said, brother. Peace to the little people.”

“Peace, brother, peace.”

On his way back Bran sang the Benedicite : “All ye works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord”; and he came to the castle again about the time that young Henry was lurching to bed. “God save you, brother fool,” he steadied himself by Bran’s shoulder, “a sad, sober fool are you. Where were you this merry while?”

“I have heard what the wind hears, I have learned what the old earth knows, I have seen what the running water sees. I am a wise man this night.”

The young King hiccoughed and rolled on.

In the morning Bran saw the court was breaking up. My lord of Leicester was off betimes and after some talk together Hugh of Norfolk and the Earl of Clare went each his way. To the young King, Bran came, a King who was making his breakfast of spiced wine and crayfish. “Blessed are you among Kings, Henry my son. What a thirst is there! But tell me, child, have you put on the cross? Do you go a pilgrimage?”

“What is in the fool’s head now?”

“Naught, child, naught. A drum is my head and things beat on it and you hear the din. All your lords have taken staff and scrip and gone to seek their saints. Who is your saint, son Henry?”

“The red deer. I go to hunt in Guildford chase, fool.”

Bran rolled his eyes. “Yea, yea. And the old men have other game. But tell poor Bran. What ails the deer of Windsor, child ?”

“They are too tame for me. They show no sport.”

“Yea, yea, the beast you know not is better than the beast you know. Do you know me, child ? Na, na, youth seeks ever a foe and a friend, age it runs from both in the end.” And he flung himself upon one of the hounds at the King’s feet and fought a desperate grotesque battle.

So to Guildford they rode that day, the young King with none but his own train. They had been at Guildford no more than a night when the Earl of Clare came to the castle, the Earl of Clare with his knights and their ladies, a splendid company. From where he lay in the rushes on the floor of the hall Bran scratched the young King’s knee. “My son,” said he, “call his name Gad : for a troop cometh.” He rolled over and, his head between his hands, blinked at them, while the lad was gracious and debonair in his welcome. When the men had all knelt and kissed and the women curtsied and been kissed, “Hail, cousin Clare,” he called from the floor. “Like the poor are you. For we have you with us always. Yet the fool bids you welcome.”

The old Earl scowled at him. “One fool and his folly are not soon parted, my lord,” Henry laughed.

“Sooth, sooth, child. But you should not tell him so. Respect a grey head.”

“Let your fool get o’ horseback, he rides to the devil,” said the Earl. “Wanton rogues are they all. I hate the tribe, my lord.”

“God ha’ mercy, cousin, keep your temper. For if you should lose it no man would find it for a thousand crowns.”

“If you were mine, my grooms’ whips should know your ribs.”

“Nay, nay, my lord, old Bran is a gentle merry fool and we love him well,” the young King said.

My lord made his bow, and then the King nodded Bran away and was forward to please him.

In the chimney corner Bran sat by himself and talked to himself. “Yea, yea, a kind heart are you, Henry my son, but in the head you are naught and for a King, God help you. Fie, how he fawns on the old robber! Your father never feared the face of man, child, nay, not when he was landless and friendless. And you who have the power that he made for you, you cringe. There is base blood in you though his son you be. God have mercy, boy. What is de Clare that you should seek his favour? Proud he is, yea, proud as Lucifer, and a good gaunt shape of a man and he looks down on you and you are humbled. Why, he is naught but a robber chief, and for all his lands and his knights your father would have broken him between bed and breakfast at need. Nay, but who is the wench? A large, luscious girl are you, and with a beckoning eye. I would sprinkle holy water on you ere I touched you. Our niece, Adela de Clare! So, so. And the boy looks on her like a dog on his dinner. Now God have mercy, every woman was a woman to your father when he was young, but never one saw him a fool. Aye, aye, sit down to your meat between her and the old man who has brought her to buy your little soul withal. Say grace for her, child. Eat, drink and be merry, for to-morrow you die. Fie, fie, see her work her black eyes! Smile and languish, then. *Amor vincit omnia*. Love conquers all. Love, quotha! And you, you are the son of a man.”

He lay among the dogs munching a crust and watched. The plan was plain as his hand. Old de Clare and his friends meant to win the young

King for their party and set him against his father, and the full-blown beauty of Dame Adela was the bait for the lad. She knew her part, she was merry and coy, she ogled and looked down, she made a show of every part of herself and withdrew. And from the shadow by the fire a sad, bitter face watched each turn and trick of the game.

In the morning he was by the lad's bedside, "How does it taste, child?" he said. "How does it taste in the morning?"

The lad stared and rubbed his eyes and took his morning draught of piment. "Old Bran, old solemn face!" he laughed. "God's my life, you are the saddest fool in Christendom."

"Yes, yea. For I love your father's son."

"What? Oh, a good fellow, a good fellow," the lad patted him as if he were a dog. "I like you well. Never fear. I will stand your friend. But for God's sake give us something blither."

"Do you stand your own friend, child?"

"Why, would you be preaching? Good father Bran, a priest is often a fool, but who would have a fool play priest?"

"Bran is no priest in head nor heart, not fast but feast gives Bran his part. I would have you blithe and gay, but look you, child, you miss the way. God have mercy, what would they make of you, this rabble of de Clare's? Your father's enemy."

The young King started up. "Good words, fool! I am my own man."

"Then wisdom comes in the morning."

"What do you mean, rogue?"

"Would he have you your own man, the old Earl who sat prompting her?"

Then the lad laughed loud. "You hate well, old Bran. Aye, he is a fierce fellow. Never fear. He shall do you no hurt."

"Hate? God have mercy, child, not I, not such

as he is. I have seen your father break sturdier rogues a many. But he and his are beneath my King."

He was not ill pleased with that, when he thought it over, best pleased that he had said nothing against the woman. He was not ill pleased with its effect. The young King was magnificent to Dame Adela and condescending, which she took ill enough. But her uncle had his plans. The most of his company took their leave. He stayed, but he had affairs, he was much absent. And so he contrived that Dame Adela and the young King were in the castle with none to be in the way but those who were careful to be out of the way. And Bran sent letters to the justiciar and to the King.

More than once he comforted himself in Siward's house with Ia. It was only an hour's ride from the castle, the one good thing of that stay at Guildford. On a day as he made out of the forest to the old road he came upon a huge fellow who let his horse go as it would and chanted jovially a French hunting song. "God save you, brother fool," he called out.

"And bring you peace, Richard my son."

"Death of my life, it is old Bran!" He ranged alongside and threw a heavy arm round Bran's body and came near to hugging him out of the saddle. "And how goes my pretty brother, wise man?"

"The sun shines all day for him, child. And whence comes brother Richard?"

"From going to and fro in the world and walking up and down in it. Like the devil. From the devil we come, we men of Anjou, and to the devil we go. So pretty brother has not gone yet? I will help him. Why do you look at me so, old Bran?"

"I am thinking you are the grandest body of a man ever I saw."

Richard laughed. "But for the soul—well, God mend all!"

In a little while they came to the castle and the young King where he sat with Dame Adela. The brothers kissed—say Henry kissed and Richard was kissed and laughed the while. The woman's dark eyes sought one and the other. They were unlike enough. Henry passed for a well-made man, but against Richard's huge frame he was puny. Henry had a pleasant comely face, as neat and smooth as his sober gown. Richard was in red and gold, all splashed and stained and frayed. Richard looked out of a mane of yellow hair, rough-hewn, jovial, reckless. "Well, my pretty boy," he flicked Henry's cheek, "you find the sun like a cat. Who is your lady?"

"Here is the rogue of our family, Adela. It is the Lady Adela de Clare, Richard. I will uphold her against all your sunburnt beauties of Aquitaine."

"Death of my life, you choose wisely, boy," he laughed, but there was a shrewd gleam in his blue eyes. "I kiss your feet and your hands, my dear," which he did, "and so win to your lips." She was lost in his arms.

"Oh! You are too big for a man, my lord." She was released, flushed and breathless, but her eyes still played with him and she preened herself and made poses.

"But you would pass for a woman anywhere."

"On my soul, Richard, you are a boor," his brother cried.

"Say you so, sweet chuck? Why then, I will be judged by Dame Adela. Choose between us, pretty one. Which is the lord for a lady?"

"Now the Virgin defend me!" she laughed. "What shall become of me if you both assail me?"

"I vow you know better than I, my dear," Richard laughed.

"I, my lord?" she looked at him full, looked down and smiled. "Nay, you frighten me."

"Death of my life, I wish I could." He put his arm round her. "And you—you have a mind to wish I did."

"Wish?" she looked up at him under her eyelashes. Her bosom heaved. "I cannot tell what I wish. You trouble me so."

"Not I, faith," he laughed and kissed her. "There's for you. Go your ways," and he thrust her off. She gave a cry, she turned and saw Henry glowering at her.

"You make a mock of me, my lords. It is base," and she swept out.

"There is for you, pretty boy," Richard chuckled. "Faith, I have brought you sport."

"What in the fiend's name has brought you?"

"Not so wrong neither, faith. For it was my mother. Death of my life, she has a spirit, the old woman. Here it is, boy. She has a mind to raise Aquitaine against goodman Henry if——" His brother seized him and pointed to the corner where Bran crouched whittling a stick. "What, are you there, old wisdom?"

"Yea, child, yea. Poor Bran is always here."

"By the bones of God, you must have seen some days in your life. What were they like when they were young, goodman Henry and goody Eleanor?"

"They made you, child. Peace."

"Well said, old wisdom! Wild work! Aye, my pretty boy, and wild work we will do now, if you raised England against the old man while goody Eleanor and I——"

"Are you mad?" Henry whispered. "The fool hears all and he is our father's, body and soul."

"Why, man, let him hear. The better sport. Hark ye, old Bran, take horse and ride and tell my father his sons are out against him and he must mount and fight."

“Tell no such tale,” Henry cried in a hurry.

But Bran sat still. “Make you a suit of motley, Richard,” he said, “take ass’s ears and a cap with bells. That is your need, child. Fool, fool, what you can plan, Henry my brother has known as your big head shaped the thought.”

“He is right, Richard,” Henry grasped his brother.

“Death of my life, I will not say he is wrong. Goodman Henry is a wise old fox. But what of it? The better the hunting of him.”

“If a fox be he, what beasts are ye who would hunt the father that set you high and gave you his all ere he came to die?”

“Nay, I like it not,” Henry said. “It looks ill.”

“Blow hot, blow cold, what were you doing before I came? Hand and glove with old de Clare and his niece to your leman.”

“She is not.”

“The more fool you. Let it go. You were——”

“Who are you to school me, sirrah? I am King in England.”

“Not while your father reigns, little King. Think of it.” He swaggered out laughing.

“The devil is in him,” Henry muttered.

“Yea, child, yea, the devil is here,” Bran said.

“Must you still be preaching?” the lad turned on him and drove him out; and that night other letters went their way to London. But what the young King would do, Bran could not guess. Richard settled himself in the castle, made mischief with Adela, who was plainly half-frightened of him, half-angry, and altogether in his hand, and mocked at his brother. And the young King fretted and glowered.

“What he would not, that he does, what he makes, that he mars, our Richard,” Bran said as he watched.

“In the right, old wisdom,” Richard laughed.

“A man’s life!”

CHAPTER XXIV

THE PILGRIM

BUT on the morrow Bran had other matter to think of. There came Siward's son Hugh to tell him that the girl Ia as she walked in the forest had been carried off by some two or three horsemen, the lad struck down who watched over her, and the men were young William de Clare's men, and were gone to his castle at Reigate.

Bran broke in upon the King: "My son, my son, the poor man had nothing save one little ewe lamb," he cried.

Richard swore. Adela tittered and "The old fellow does madness well," she said. "Oh Ia! See his queer eyes!"

"You are loud, my master," the young King said. "We are not to be troubled."

"Do her right," Bran cried. "Oh, my son, it is my child Ia that I love. She dwelt with Siward the ironmaster and William de Clare hath snatched her up as she walked in the forest and borne her away."

"Who tells this tale?" the young King shifted uneasily.

"They that saw it. I tell it, I, and she is dearer than all life to me."

"The fool's wench," Adela laughed. "Faith, William has an easy taste."

"It is in his family, my dear," said Richard.

Bran was plucking at the King's hand. "Up, child. up. Be swift to save her."

"We will know the right of it," the King said. "My lord de Clare may tell another tale."

"She is lost while you falter. Oh, Henry, my King, be a King this day. Up and strike!" Bran dragged at him.

"Let me be, sirrah. Am I to be forced by my fool?"

"There is no King! There is no King in England," Bran cried and ran out.

"By the death of God, he speaks true," Richard said, and he laughed. "You are a bold man, brother."

"Oh la, la, la, here is another quarrel," said Adela. "And all because my cousin has an eye to some wench of the forest. But you are very saintly, my lord Richard."

"See her maiden blush, brother," Richard laughed. "Aye, sweet lady, if any man wronged man of mine his blood would out for it though it were your own noble blood."

"If the fool is wronged, I will right him," the King cried. "I shall send to my lord and——"

The rest was lost in Richard's laughing. "Aye, send and send again. Hail, King of England!"

To the castle at Reigate there came that day a pilgrim, his cap and his breast bedecked with many tokens. He had the cockle shell of St. James of Compostella, he had a little image of Our Lady of Rocamadour, he had a medal of the head of St. John Baptist of Amiens, he had the Three Kings of Cologne on a brooch and about his neck hanging by a silver chain a box of silver inlaid with a wooden cross, and this again and again he cherished in his hand against his breast. When he came to the castle gate he lit down from his mule and knelt and kissed the image of Our Lady and prayed a blessing on all good men within those walls. Manifestly a very holy man. They begged him in. The seneschal himself came to do him honour. Since

King Henry had quarrelled with the Church or with Thomas of Canterbury it was the policy of the de Clares to win the Church's favour. And this was a man to honour for his own sake—and fear. He could tell of the holy sudary at Rome, he could tell of the road up the rock to the sanctuary at Rocamadour and the prisoners' chains and the cripples' crutches and the women's tresses within, he had seen, his own eyes had seen, at Sainte Marie the Maiour, the picture of Our Lady which St. Luke and the angels had painted.

The seneschal lamented that the earl was not there to bid so holy a pilgrim welcome. "A blessing upon all his good endeavours," said the pilgrim, and talked Latin. The earl's knights did him honour. Last William de Clare, the earl's son, came in and knelt to him, a big swaggering youth, but pale and wild of eye and craving eagerly to be blessed.

"God save your soul and bring you peace, my son," the pilgrim said. They sat him down on young de Clare's right hand and made him great good cheer, but he would taste only bread and water.

He told of strange perils by land and sea, he told of the church at Rome wherein every pilgrim on his coming had all his sins remitted, he told of the catacombs and a thousand thousand martyrs' bones. But most of all he talked of relies, of the arm of our lord St. George at Venice, of the virgins of Cologne, of the ear of St. Paul and the crumbs of the five small loaves. "By St. Mary, a holy man are you and most fortunate," said William de Clare, and crossed himself. "Tell me, I pray you, good father, do you bear with you never a relie that will heal a man?"

"From what would you be healed?" said the pilgrim sternly. "There is no healing save in penitence."

"I know it, I know it," the young man cried. "But there is great virtue in holy relies," and he

pressed upon the pilgrim and looked covetously at the box about his neck.

“Yea, yea, and great peril for those who seek them with a heart of sin. Here about my neck—” he crossed himself and said a Latin prayer—“here is a box that was blessed at Rocamadour and at Compostella and in it a scrap of the swaddling clothes which Our Saviour wore at Bethlehem. I had it from them that had it of the shrine of the Three Kings at Cologne. And the virtue of it is that whoso kisses it, he is safe from every curse of the devil.”

“My father, my father,” the young man clung to him.

“Have your will,” the pilgrim said, and cherishing the box in his two hands opened it. There lay within a scrap of cloth, aged and dusty. “Hold, hold. Be sure of yourself. There is blessing in it and sure salvation. Yet so holy is it that if you kiss it while the heart is unclean within, it will burn you like fire.”

“Grant it me, my father.”

“God shall do right,” the pilgrim said. He lifted the scrap of cloth, held it on high a moment and pressed it to the young man’s lips. Then he shut it away in the box again and said a prayer in Latin, but all the while he watched the lips that had kissed.

William de Clare was very pale and his breath came fast. Suddenly he clapped his hand to his mouth. “It burns, it burns!” he screamed. “And I, I burn in hell.”

The pilgrim started up. “God assoil your sinful soul! What wickedness have you done?”

“It is the woman! She cursed me! She is a witch! Oh, it burns, it burns!” He fell down and rolled in the rushes on the floor, plucking at his lips.

“A witch!” the pilgrim crossed himself. “I am

bidden where you dwell with a witch? You have done ill this day. Unelean! Unelean! Alas, poor soul, you burn in your own sin. Bring me to this witch and I will strive for you."

So at last they brought him to Ia where she lay in a little barred room in the east tower. She started up, her black hair all about her, her hands over her head, menacing, a wild thing. "Speak no word, yet what I speak hear," the pilgrim said quickly. He began to chant a psalm in Latin: "'O Lord God to Whom vengeance belongeth: O God to whom vengeance belongeth, shew thyself,'" and at the end of the first verse: "Are you safe, child?" he said under his breath.

"I have no hurt. He fears me. I played that I was mad. I sang to him a charm of my grandmother's and made signs such as she would make. O Bran, it was like the old, old time when men hunted her. Is it come again? But he, he thinks I am a witch and have put spells on him."

Loudly Bran chanted: "'Lord, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked triumph?' O, my heart, all shall be well. Play the witch still. He thinks he is accursed. I am here to strive with you for his soul. 'They slay the widow and the stranger and murder the fatherless. Yet they say the Lord God shall not see.' Do not laugh, child. Or if you must, laugh wildly. 'Understand, ye brutish among the people and ye fools, when will ye be wise?' See, child, I have won you from the fiend and you will go down with me where this knave lies grovelling and take off the enchantment, and I will bring you away. But we must not be hasty. Finish the psalm. 'He that chastiseth the heathen, shall he not correct? He that teacheth man knowledge, shall he not know——'"

Down to the hall they came, the pilgrim, grave and bowed, murmuring Latin prayers, leading the girl, whose gown was rent, whose hair hung tangled

before her face. All shrank from her as she passed, and made the sign against the evil eye. William de Clare lay upon the ground where he had fallen. He raised his white befouled face and there on the lips great blisters had risen. The pilgrim blessed him and said a prayer and drew the girl forward. She made strange signs in the air. She sang in words which they did not know. "It is finished, my son," the pilgrim said. "She takes back her curse. Go you presently to a priest and confess all your sin and repent, and the mark of the beast which is upon you shall be healed and your soul find peace. Give thanks and sin no more. And you"—he turned to the girl—"follow you me and you shall be saved."

He strode out telling his beads and the girl followed him close.

But when they were out of sight of the castle, he set her on his mule and kilted his gown high and drove the beast on at speed. "Oh, Bran, Bran," says she, braiding her hair as she rode. "What magic was your magic?" So he told her. "Nay, but Bran, this is miracle. The great blains upon his mouth! I, I played to be a witch. But you——"

"Fie, child. No witch, you. No saint, I. It is but a scrap of a shirt, with something of Spanish flies on it. God have mercy, it would blister a horse. There is no magic but in what men know not, child. I live by that. I have lived on it all my days."

"You know everything, Bran."

"Na, na, only that we are fools all. Peace, child. I need my breath and swift we must be."

He brought her to Siward's house and there the hammers were silent and men at work upon the stream that fed the great pond, Siward's elder son Azor ordering them. "God save you!" he cried out. "Is it well, Bran, is it well? God be

thanked. But you to win her already and alone! Well done! Well done! My father is out upon the London road to meet the Earl and doubted not to have reason of him. We are always needed, we of the iron. But this is far better."

"Send and bring him home again. But what is your work here?"

"We would have a moat to our wall. There are bad days coming, Bran."

"Sooth, sooth. Can you guard her?"

Azor held out his hand. "Trust us yet. We hold fast."

So Bran stayed and ate and drank and put off his pilgrim's clothes and changed his horse for a mule and that night rode back to Guildford alone. He found turmoil.

For he had gone but a little while from Reigate when to the castle rode up a huge knight in his mail. The warder challenged him and he drave such a blow at the gate with his sword hilt that all the castle heard the din. "Who am I, knave?" he roared. "Richard of England am I. Richard of Anjou, Richard of Aquitaine, Richard of Normandy, Richard Fitz Henry."

After a while the gate was opened and the senechal stood bowing and speaking smooth welcome. But Richard rode on, thrusting him aside, rode into the courtyard and shouted, "Where is that false rogue, William de Clare? Ho, William de Clare, I cry you challenge."

Then two of de Clare's knights ran out. "My lord, my lord, you do him wrong. Our Lord William lies stricken of God."

Richard laughed. "Let him come out and be stricken of man."

"Nay, nay, my good lord, it is truth we tell and no knight——"

"Who bade you prate? The rogue is not so stricken but that he steals a maid and forces her.

Ho, William de Clare, come out and meet Richard of England, or I will cry you dastard to all Christy." The courtyard rang to his shout and was silent. A moment he waited on the stillness. "Death of my life, you shall not hide your shame," he roared. "Craven son of a craven house." He turned his horse and rode out, but in the gateway halted and standing in his saddle nailed his glove with his dagger to the top of the great gate. "De Clare is dastard!" he cried, "de Clare is dastard!" and rode away.

To Guildford he came again in the cool of the evening. Dame Adela was walking in the courtyard when he rode in. She smiled at him and waved her hand. "Death of my life, here is one of the breed bold enough," he muttered, and he laughed and pushed his horse alongside her. "You smile on me, fair lady?"

"Why, would you have me weep for you, my lord?"

"All in good time," quoth he, and looking back shouted, "hold open the gate there," and turned his horse. He drew close upon her again. "Woman's smile is woman's challenge, Adela, and death of my life, it is all I can get of your breed. I take it up," and stooping he took her up and flung her across his saddle, and drove in his spurs and thundered out.

CHAPTER X

IRON

THAT night the old Earl of Clare was an angry man. He had gone northward seeking news of his friends and found it. Robert of Leicester in the north, old Hugh Bigod in Norfolk were risen in arms already. The great adventure was begun untimely. He was not sure of the young King, he was not sure of his own men, and by what he heard Leicester and Norfolk were not sure of each other. My lord invoked all the saints: "We are like young dogs baiting a bear," he said. "We run in on him one by one and one by one are stricken down. We are like silly rogue foresters that beat a covert before the horsemen are in place." So in a black mood he came back to Reigate and found a company of his knights at the castle gate. "What the fiend ails you that you gather here to gape?" he cried. Then they pointed him out the dagger and the glove, and faltering one and another told the tale.

The old man flung himself from his horse and stormed in shouting for his son. But William de Clare was fled with his sin and his blisters to the monks in the Austin priory. "Well for him," the knights whispered. "The earl would have slain him with his hands," and then the old man's rage fell upon them till he was weary and sat down alone to digest his ill fortune. A feud with Prince Richard, his castle, his name disgraced, his son called dastard for all the world to hear (he well knew Richard's wild temper would not spare

him)—a goodly burden for a man who was engaged to set the princes against the King and rouse the country to civil war. But the old man was stubborn. He held by his ambition and his hate. He had hopes yet. His own people must stand by him. Adela should have the young King body and soul. With that puppet in his hands the game might yet be played. In the morning he set out for Guildford.

He was kept at the castle gate. He was let wait in the courtyard. When at last he was brought to the young King's presence he was in an ill temper for craft. He found a worse temper waiting him. "You are a bold man to come to me, my lord!" the young King cried.

"I can be bold enough if you threaten me, young man."

"God's wounds, who is master here?"

"You are called King," the old man laughed, and then, something pleased with his sneer or fearing he had gone too far, gained command of himself. "You may be King indeed if you will."

"If I do your will. Say it so. It is in your heart. I know you, I am weary of you. By the blood of God, I will see you broken yet."

"Why, what now? I left you friendly, my lord. I have been busy but to serve you. I——"

"You send your son to steal the daughter of a man of mine."

"God is my witness, I knew nothing of that. And the girl was yours, my lord? The fool shall pay for it, I swear. But true it is the girl is gone scathless and the boy has fled from me to sanctuary. I give him to you with all my heart."

"I—I touch one of your blood?" the lad cried. "I would see you all burn in hell. Where is that strumpet, your niece? Fled with my brother. Fled with Richard."

"Richard! Devil he is and the devil's son!"

The old man sat down heavily and fought for breath. "My lord, my lord," he held out trembling hands, "join with me and we will hunt them down. I will not spare her, not I."

"I would have none of her, nay, not to help her to hell. No, nor of you neither. Go your ways."

"My lord, we would make you King indeed, yea, master of all your father's lands. Leicester is in arms, and Norfolk and I strike in now. We——"

"Get you gone, get you gone. There is no blood in de Clare that is not base. Get you gone, I say, or my grooms shall drive you out."

When he was gone the lad fell forward upon the table and buried his face in his hands. From the corner uncoiled itself an ungainly shape and stole forward. "Well done, child," Bran said and caressed him.

"Oh Bran, old Bran," the lad sobbed. "What shall I do?"

"Go to your father and say unto him 'Father' . . . —He loves you well, child."

"For little cause," the lad said, "for little cause. He is strong, my father."

"Yea, yea, he is strong and sure."

"Come with me, old Bran."

"Bran comes, child." The lad hurried out, calling to his servants.

"'Unstable as water thou shalt not excel.'" Bran shook his great head. "Yet a fool would love you, and his first-born are you."

Trouble the more for my lord de Clare. As he rode back under the Downs he was aware of a woman that limped before him, a woman alone. She turned when she heard the horses, she gave a cry and sat down by the wayside. My lord saw a dirty, wretched face, but a face he knew. "Adela!" he roared. "Adela, in the fiend's name!" And he spurred on. "You treacherous wanton fool, where is your paramour?"

Dame Adela began to ery. "It is too much!" she sobbed. "Oh, it is too much!"

The old man sprang down beside her and struck her across the eyes. "I will teach you to whine. Have done with your whining. The foul fiend seize you, why do you play me false with that bull calf Richard?"

"Play false?" she gasped. "God pity me it was no play. He seized on me. He bore me off."

"A woman's story. Would he touch you if you had not looked on him?"

"It is not true. I hate him. I always hated him. And he hates me. Oh, oh, I am a luckless woman. And you—you to blame me! It is all your work."

"My work? Are you mad?"

"It was you set me in his way," she whimpered. "It was for hate of you he took me. Hear, then. He caught me up when I walked in the courtyard and bore me off into the forest. He is as strong as a bear, the brute that he is. And while he rode he mocked me. He swore he had no use for me, and called me foul names, but he took me because my cousin had taken the fool's daughter. He took me for his sport. He took me to mock at the de Clares. There is for you, my lord. And then when we were gone some way he saw the fool riding, that wicked rogue Bran. And Richard shouted to him how it fared with his wench, and the fool bade him go in peace for she was safe. Then Richard, oh, the devil that he is, he thanked God he would be quit of me soon. But he rode away into the forest, and when it was dark he set me down and bade me find my way home to my uncle. I have been all night wandering. Oh, it was foul shame of him."

"You are well served. But I have no trust in your tale, not I."

"Have you not? Hear this, then. Carry this to your uncle, said he: "De Clare is dastard. De Clare is dastard."

The old man turned away with an oath and bade put her up behind a groom and rode on.

What was to do? Come what might, he must strike a blow at the King's house. He called out all his men, he sent messengers to Leicester and Norfolk that all the south was up, and bade them march and join him. About him gathered, not all his knights indeed, but whosoever was discontented and eager for the old days of strife and rapine—no small host.

The justiciar in London saw dangers all around him, saw the realm broken into fragments for the rebel earls to devour. He could hold the towns, the townsmen were sturdy for the King's peace, and the towns' wealth, the towns' store of all that armies need lay in his hands. Up and down England were great lords still loyal to the King. He strove hard to set them in array and did not fail. The chance of striking down a powerful rival in the King's name was not to be missed. But under his own hand he had little force or none, and he feared the issue and to the King in Normandy his fears came urgent.

My lord de Clare and his friends had their own anxieties. Norfolk and Leicester bade him come north as he bade them come south, and none of them all would move out of his own lands. Though they dared, they could not. Men they had and horses, but there was no assurance of food if they marched where they would not command the country-side; worst of all they had no store of arms, not even horseshoes to spare. And while they advised and scolded by letter, the Earls of Cornwall and Arundel and Gloucester rallied to the justiciar, and a great host marched.

The old earl at Reigate saw that the hour had struck. If he could not join his friends they were undone. But he lacked lances, he lacked arrows, he lacked horseshoes and nails for horseshoes, he lacked all iron. Hither and thither he sent to the furnaces in the hills and the weald, but his messen-

gers came back with naught but words. He rode out with pomp and a great array to Siward, and found that wary knight's forges encircled not only with a stout sandstone wall but with a goodly moat beyond the wall. No man was to be seen and the hammers were silent.

His trumpets sounded. Sir Siward's sturdy shape climbed up into sight. Then a gate was opened and two planks thrust out across the moat. Siward came down and stood in the gateway. "Please you enter, my lord," he said, and smiled in his beard. There was no help for it. The old earl swung down and came afoot.

"God's eyes, this is a castle you have made, Siward."

"You mock at me, my lord," Siward said gloomily. "We are poor folk and feeble. What would you with me?"

De Clare stood measuring moat and wall and the stands for bowmen in the wall. The place was planned to stand a siege if there were men to hold it. And he saw many men about the furnaces. The strong hand would not serve. He gnawed his lip and said: "You have served me well, Siward, and I remember it."

Siward made answer what was no answer: "I think you know John of Ewhurst, my lord?" A fat man in a leather jerkin rolled up grinning.

"He is well met," de Clare said, for the man was another ironmaster, potent as Siward. "I have work for you both. You may send me what you have of lance-heads and cross-bow bolts and horse-shoes."

"Have you any in store, John?" said Siward.

"Not a one I, brother." The fat man looked solemn.

"I sent all I had to my lord justiciar a week past, my lord."

"And so did I, faith."

“The worse fools you,” de Clare cried. “He is a broken man. You will never see your money.”

“Aye, aye, it is a bad world, for sure,” said John of Ewhurst. “Who will we trust now?”

“I cannot tell.” They shook their heads together.

“God’s blood, make good then. Fall to and work, and let me have my need swiftly, and there is gold for you enough.”

“There is no work a-doing till peace comes,” the fat man said.

“When there is peace in the land there will be iron in store,” said Siward.

“What, you rogues, you will give me nothing?”

“Where there is naught, there is naught,” said John.

“God’s eyes, you cheat me, you rogues. You sell to my enemies and will not sell to me. You are sworn together to deny me.”

“We sell to the King, my lord,” Siward said. “And there is no iron for any man but the King in this time.”

“God’s body, God’s body, am I to be broken by you churls of the furnace?” the old man roared.

“Aye, aye, the furnace breaks down all,” said John of Ewhurst.

“Break what break must. We keep the King’s peace,” Siward said.

Cursing and threatening my lord went his way.

There was nothing to be done. What Siward and John would not give no other would give. The iron-masters ever held together. The two rogues spoke for all. If he had time to spend, he might besiege Siward’s hold and take it, but the need was instant. Though he pillaged that and every hammer in the weald, he could not seize what was gone or make unwilling men work heartily. And time was all in all. While he struggled for his equipment, the justiciar’s host, furnished with all the stores of London and the rich south country, was marching on

Leicester and Norfolk, who had nothing but men. And the ironmasters held him fast.

Then came news of battle and disaster and Leicester and Norfolk hunted through the land and the justiciar marching southwards. My lord did not wait. By night and secretly he fled into the west, making for the marches of Wales.

So the great rebellion was burnt out or ever the King came to quench it. With his son he came, "two Kings eating at one board and sleeping in one bed," his people laughed and made him welcome. And on a day he rode again with Bran to Siward's hold where the hammers beat a dizzy tune and Siward came red and wringing sweat from his beard to greet him.

"You work well, friend," the King said.

"The land needs iron, my lord."

"Aye, aye, by my soul. Iron is the master of all. Good thanks, friend."

"I know not why, my lord."

"You know and I know. We be too wise for our day."

"We do the work of our day. But if I am aught it is you that have made me, my lord."

"The King's work is all men's work. I have builded better than I knew. It stands. By holy rood and holy thorn, it stands. But the days come that I know not."

"If you would borrow the cares of the morrow then you shall sorrow," Bran sang; "this is your day, live while you may. If you work thorough in joy and in sorrow, trust you the morrow to give you your day."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE QUEEN'S EMBROIDERY

IN her own town, in Poitiers, Queen Eleanor cherished her age. She had no sovereignty. To whomsoever that might pass it could not come to her hand again. She knew it and watched still. The wide land that was her birthright she had given to one man and another, to Louis of France, till she broke from marriage with him to marry Henry of England, now she willed it should go to her son Richard, though his elder brother claimed overlordship, and King Henry, their father, would still be master of all. No one of them owned debt to wife or mother. She had bred strife all her days and would still be breeding. But within the castle of Poitiers she was queen and free, free after long years of prison in England, the evil, dank country. Her life was spent unloving and unloved, she had won no man to trust her, but cold and resolute she nursed the last of her strength. She had still a realm to destroy.

She sat working embroidery, quick with her hands, but in all else still as death. Time had spared her the bold majesty of her body, she was closely swathed and draped, her grey hair hidden and her neck in stiff white linen, from which her face looked out like a mask wrought in ivory. She made an inch of her pattern and then pulled out the stitches and worked it again patiently. And in the corner by the window Bran the fool sat and sang to himself.

“Is the fool turned monk?” she said. “I am weary of these holy dronings.”

Bran gave her one more verse of his Latin hymn :

O Thou who on the Cross wast borne,
For all poor souls by Thy world torn,
For all whom life hath left forlorn,
I pray Thee peace.

“I pray for you, lady queen,” said he.

“Pray for yourself, fool.”

“Yea, yea, and that do I. But who shall pray for you, lady?”

“None but a fool. My soul is my own. Naught else I have. That I will keep.”

“And for what, lady queen?”

“To do my will.”

“God ha’ mercy, God ha’ mercy upon you. What is your will? You sew your cloth and undo your sewing.”

The still face smiled. “That is my life, Bran.”

“You have said. One man you married and unmarried him. Another man you married and bore him children. And you turned from him and turned him from you. And now his children know neither mother nor father. What is your will? You sew and pull out the thread. What you do that you undo.”

“Who do not my will do naught,” she said. “Speak no more, fool. You are turned priest in your age. You prate like a saint.”

“Na, na, Bran is for this world, Goody. Bran is of the earth and the hills, oh, the good chalk hills. Bran is bone of their bone. Here is Bran’s heaven.”

“You are mad, old man.”

“Old I am, and like shadows you pass me by. But when I was young I loved a Queen.”

She looked at him, her hands idle, and suddenly she laughed. “You remember? You came to me when Louis had cast me into prison and set me free. Free—to marry Henry. Good thanks, fool. And

he cast me in prison again. And here we sit, old folks by a dying fire."

"I do not die," Bran thundered, "by oak and ash and thorn I do not die."

King Henry came in a hurry and flung himself into a chair and thrust out his short legs and sat breathing hard. He was grown something fat, which his height could not bear, so that he looked gross beside her, yet little. His bulky face was weathered to purple and the red hair above it worn thin and grizzled.

"God's my life," he broke out, "what a brood is ours, Eleanor! Master Richard will not do homage to Master Henry, and Master Henry will remit him nothing, and they are hand upon sword for it."

"It is the way of your blood, my lord. Brother ever turns upon brother and son upon father in the house of Anjou."

He scowled at her. "Good comfort, wife."

"I made them in your image. I am for nothing in them."

"If it is so, it is well."

She laughed. "What matter now to you or me? Our day is dead."

"Good comfort, I say!" he cried, and turned this way and that, biting his nails. "What, the little one? And how is it with my John?"

The youngest of the brood, a lad almost a man, came in and kissed his mother's hand and stood beside his father. He was well made and handsome, and if he knew it, so did the father who flung an arm about him and drew him close. Prince John smiled and consented to be caressed. "The great Kings, my brothers, are coming, sir?"

"Aye, and they will eat us all, child."

"And then each other, sir. That would please every one."

"Oh, wise John. But what shall an old man do with young men who will not be at peace?"

“Laugh at them, sir. Nay, but they will not eat you. You are too tough—and too strong, my father.”

“John, my John,” the old King held him close, “you have the best head of them all. And the best heart. Love me well, child.”

“How should I not?” John said softly.

“God bless you. Heigho, a weary world. Come, let us go down and meet these great lords. We must keep the peace this day. Richard brings Philip of France, Eleanor.”

She started. “Why, then?”

“To hear the sermon. Or to spy out the land. He is his father’s son.”

So they went down to the hall, and there was already Henry the young King chafing because the old King had not been there to do him honour, because Richard was waited for who should have waited for him, because Richard had——

John laughed. “Because brother Richard is the devil, brother Henry. And what is brother Henry?”

“Who bade you speak, baby?” Henry turned from him and paced to and fro under the glow of old colour from the round arches. He was aged already, his face worn and lined, and set in a look of disappointment.

John fell behind, and spoke to Bran loud enough for the old King to hear. “See the hungry man, lord fool. Do you know what ails him? He hath not stomach for what he would eat.”

“Oh, wise child.” Bran looked at him without love. “And for what do you hunger, my son?”

“I am my father’s man.” And the old King made him sit at his feet.

Then trumpets sounded, and with a great and splendid company came Richard and King Philip Augustus of France, Richard huge and jovial, the French King so much the smaller man that he seemed like Richard’s child, but his pretty youth veiled by a calm restraint.

"God save you, father," Richard laughed, "and give my lady mother joy of you. What, little King, are you there? You make no growth, boy. You will still look hungry. I vow you do not pay for your corn."

"Our royal Richard! The world cannot show such another. Let us thank God. But prithee, brother, do not joke or we shall all be shamed."

"Well crowed, cockerel!" Richard slapped him on the shoulder so that he reeled. "But what brought you here? We are to talk of fighting this day."

John came between them. "Peace, my masters, peace. None has profit of this but they who love neither."

"Oh, wise youth!" Richard laughed. "And who are they, little John?"

John linked arms with him and looked round the hall, and his glance dwelt upon his father, and the old King, who had seen his peacemaking, nodded to him and smiled. John smiled back, and smiling still looked up at Richard.

"You are a knave," Richard laughed.

John broke from him. "I cannot tell what he means, Henry," he protested.

"Nor no man can. For he means naught."

The old King was busy with the King of France, showing him grave and ceremonious respect, the more impressive from an old man to a young, and Philip Augustus met him gracefully. And Queen Eleanor listened and watched. King Philip was led to her chair, said something neat, and kissed her hand as though she were a stranger, had never been his father's wife, accused, divorced, his enemy. But she would not have him forget.

"How should I make you welcome? I should have been your mother," she said.

A moment went in amazement and silence, the old King swaying and chewing his lip, even Philip

startled out of his self-command. Then he recovered himself: "A sorrow for me. But you have worthier sons," he said smoothly. "Let me give them a brother's kindness," and he slid away into easy civilities and passed on to the three brothers behind her.

"God's my life, are you mad?" the old King growled in her ear. "Would you have him at war with us all?"

"Let me be. I think of old days. He is so like his father that I hate him. Death of my life, when I see him I am with Louis again. Let me be."

And then there came into the hall borne on many voices the chant of a Latin hymn:

*Urbs Sion aurea, patria lactea, cive decora,
Omne cor obruis, omnibus obstruis et cor et ora.
Nescio, nescio, quæ jubilatio . . .*

You know it in English, though it does not sound so well:

*Jerusalem the golden
With milk and honey blest,
Beneath thy contemplation
Sink heart and voice opprest . . .*

But it was written for that time when to all Christian men the Holy City was dear for the age of the Crusaders.

*Stant Sion atria conjubilantia, matryre plena,
Cive micantia, Principe stantia, luce serena. . .*

The chant came louder and nearer.

"Here is pomp," the old King said. "God have mercy, will he bring his choir in upon us?"

But into the hall the singing monks came not. He who came, came alone, an old man in the simple robes of a priest, but the lords gave way and knelt as he passed by, and the Kings stood up and went to meet him.

"Do me no honour," he cried, "do me no service. Serve my Master and honour Him."

"So humbly we seek in our poor wise, my father," Philip said. "Yet must we honour the Patriarch of Jerusalem."

"Mock not, that you be not mocked! Heraclius the Patriarch I am, but I walk the world a beggar for the dear home of Christ. What are ye in your pride?"

"We are met to hear you who asked it of us. Say on, say on." The old King drummed upon his knees.

"Once there came kings out of the east to worship our Lord when He was a babe. What will you do for Him, you kings of the west, now that He is risen in glory?" Again he waited.

"God's my life, we do as we can," the old King cried. "Say on, man. Speak your need."

"Not my need but my Lord's. Not my soul but yours I seek. You do as you can, and naught is done. In the days that are gone your kin put on the Cross and redeemed the Holy City from the infidel. But you are not sons of your fathers. You are a little folk. Now the hosts of Mahound are gathered again, and there is none to stand against them, and soon the Holy Places will be defiled. Who shall deliver the City of God, who?"

"It is a great task, my father," Philip said.

"It were a great task to save your little soul. Golden Sion, by the blood of Christ she was consecrated, she was redeemed by the blood of your kin. She is the mother of all Christian men. The abominations of the heathen came upon her. Her honour is your honour."

"Aye, aye, we have heard," the old King fidgeted. "And not now first. It is a good plea, but an old plea. What we can that we do. You may have men and money from my realm, all there is to spare."

"Not thus shall you save your soul nor the heritage of Christ! Men and money, I may call for them here and there, and they shall start from the

ground. The need is princes and kings, captains of men. How say you, kings of the west? I challenge you to the Cross! Forward, forward, and deliver your Lord's dear home and win you Paradise."

The old King shuffled with his feet in the rushes and looked covertly at Philip. "Nobly and well you have spoken, my father," Philip said. "It is a high emprise and my heart stirs within me. Oh, that I were a free man! I will consider of it and with right good will, and you shall hear of me presently."

"'When I have a convenient season I will call for thee.' Even so said the heathen King to St. Paul. But the season came not, King Philip, and he died in his sin and to hell went he."

"Good speed, cousin Philip," Richard laughed. "Tell me a thing, my lord Heraclius. Who is king among the heathen?"

"Saladin his name is called."

"And is he a bold knight?"

"Bold he is, ruthless and terrible, and no man yet makes head against him."

"And how many in his company?"

"A thousand thousand fierce as the fiend who die to do his wicked will."

Richard laughed loud. "A thousand thousand! This were a noble venture, my father."

The old King muttered to himself and Henry jeered, "Aye, Richard, you would eat them all."

"How say you, King of England?" Heraclius cried. "Will you be God's knight ere you die? Will you march for the Holy City?"

"You are a priest of Jerusalem. I am King of England. I have served God and man all my days, and God has found me work enough. The city of God is here; as God lives, it is here. I will not peril my realm on any venture afar."

The Patriarch started back. "Blasphemy! Blasphemy!" he cried. "What, is your power holy?"

Is your realm the city of God? Great are you among kings, great have you been. I prophesy unto you, Henry of England, as you have forsaken God this day, so shall He forsake you, and, destitute of His grace, shall you go till your glory be turned into disaster and your honour into shame. Anathema! Anathema!" and he swept from the hall.

"For a round curse there is none like a priest," Richard laughed. "Nay, but he is a stanch old hound and bold."

"This is unhappy, my brother Henry," said King Philip meekly, and the lords about them looked all ways and murmured.

The old King beat his foot on the ground. "They have barked at my heels all my life," he said. "And still I live, Philip."

"His cause is good and he will set men's hearts aflame."

"Burn who will, I do my work."

"You have seen many days and are wise. Yet I would not so answer him."

The old King lifted weary eyes at him. "Aye, aye, the wild blood of youth rules in you, Philip," and he smiled on the sedate young man.

"It were a gallant course to run." Philip turned to the old King's sons. "How say you, Richard?"

"Death of my life, I seek no better. What, cousin, shall you and I call out our knights and take horse for Jerusalem? But I mark this fierce Soldan for mine. Sir Saladin to my lance, Philip."

"And his thousand thousand for dinner. How you brag, boy," his brother Henry said.

"What, little King, are you still there? Never fear, you shall stay at home and play with the women."

"Nay, cousin, deal gently," Philip put a hand on his arm.

"Let the rogue be, my lord. He knows well that no one marks him. Else he were not so bold."

“God have mercy, little brother,” Richard laughed loud, “do I fear you?”

“Peace, peace,” the old King growled. “You are wild rogues both.”

“Who, I, my lord?” Henry cried. “I take you to witness, I have borne with his folly for your sake more than becomes his King.”

“God’s death, you are no King of mine!” Richard shouted, his hand on his sword.

“Ha, that irks you! Your King and your overlord am I, and of me you hold.”

Richard thrust him aside so that he reeled and strode upon his father. “Speak out now! Who is the master of us?”

“Peace, child, peace. Nor he, nor you. Both hold of me.”

“By the blood of God, you forswear yourself,” Henry cried. “You gave——”

The old King started up: “If all the men of my realm were gathered in one body and spoke with one mouth, they would not dare say this to me. Hold your peace, boy, I am the King.”

“And King am I,” Henry thrust forward, “I am the first-born and my birthright it is, and you gave it me in your life. God’s body, God’s body, you shall not take it back. King I am and will be against all your power.” And he stormed out of the hall.

“Henry!” the old King called, but he was gone.

“The little man throws down his little glove, by my faith,” Richard laughed.

“This day goes ill, my brother,” Philip said gently. “Ill may be mended yet. Let me go now and I will follow after him and reason with him. He is of a noble heart, like all your house.”

“Go your way,” the old King muttered.

And when he had taken his ceremonious leave, “Philip the smooth,” Richard laughed.

“Yea, yea, smooth as the snake, child,” said Bran in his ear.

"What, master fool," Richard took him in his great arm, "How the fiend could you keep a still tongue in this?"

"God ha' mercy, child, there were fools so many a-talking, no chance for old Bran, there were ghosts so many a-walking, no place for live man."

"Ghosts? God's eyes, we were all live enough and loud."

"Yea, child, yea, and the ghosts were gay, ghosts of hate and ghosts of sorrow, came to your strife to win them life, drank your blood and are strong for the morrow."

"Good fighting!" Richard laughed. "I never rode at a ghost."

"They will ride at you, child, all your days," Bran said, and followed the old King.

He shut himself up and would have speech of none. On the next day he sent letters after his son, but the men brought back the letters unopened. "Aye, he means me ill," the old King laughed bitterly. "God's my life, he could never do what he means or child or man." Then came news that he was in arms and declared himself King alone and his father of no right nor power in all the realm.

"Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin," the old King cried out. "We are weighed in the balance and found wanting, Dame Eleanor. Our kingdom is taken from us and given to little Harry. By my soul, this is a dread day. And has your lapdog a mind to be Queen?"

But Eleanor sat silent, and went on unpicking her embroidery,

"Nay, God's my life, I must be merry or I shall weep for him. What a son have we made, Eleanor! He knows not himself nor any man else. He to win crowns by the sword, God help him!"

"It is well for you to laugh, sir," John cried. "For my part, I would strike at him and strike hard."

This is treason and black sin and there is ruin in it. Out on him, I say."

"Aye, you would be fierce for me, John, my John," the old King smiled. "I shall endure, boy. I think of the blows when he struck me long ago, a little child in his rage."

"Oh, sir, you are too gentle. He will plunder us all. Let us march and overthrow him."

"Peace, peace, I know him. He cannot stand alone."

Afterwards when they rode hawking and John was merry with one of Eleanor's women galloping for a stricken heron, Bran came beside the King.

"Your heart doubts, brother," he said.

"It is naught, what is. I think of time to come."

"Yea, yea, wild he flies and light he strikes."

"A true word. How shall it go with him when I am gone?"

"He is young yet, brother. He is weak, not base."

"Which is worse? I think of my realm, old Bran, my realm which I built. Must he be young all his days? Here is about him Philip who was sired and bred by cold craft, and Richard who is an axe for any man's hand. How shall it go with him when I am gone?"

"Na, na. Work the day's work though your cares irk. Stone makes the iron, and iron makes the sword. What we leave unwrought is wrought by the Lord. Let me go to the boy, brother. He heard me of old time. He loves me yet."

"God's my life, all love you. You are the happy one, old Bran. Go in God's name."

But before Bran could reach him, the young King was harrying near and far. He raged through Aquitaine, he beset Limoges, he made a raid on Angoulême. For Aquitaine was Richard's land. But Richard, who was planning to make a crusade with Philip, or thought he was, called him a gnat

and would not stir for him. He won few to his banner, he did no great harm, for he would never drive home a blow, but he pillaged far and wide to feed his men and buy more, and town and country cursed him.

Bran rode southward up over the rockstrewn heaths where the oxen wandered, had word of him here and there, and came at last to the cliff rising out of a green gulf that is crowned with the holy towers of the town of Rocamadour. Thither from all Christendom, pilgrims came to see the wooden sculpture of the Virgin Mary that was wrought by the very hand of the Blessed Amadour, who before he made his hermitage there on the cliff in Perigord was called Zaccheus the publican, he that climbed up into a tree to see Christ. And pilgrims many Bran found there, but they knelt along the steep path up to the shrine and prayed and rent their gowns. When they were asked of Henry Fitz Henry, Henry Court-Mantel, if he had passed that way, they cried out and cursed him. To Rocamadour he had come, the devil at his elbow, and pillaged the shrine of all the gold piety had brought in a thousand years, yea and taken the sword of Roland the Paladin for his own and was gone.

“Blessed are they that have not a child. It is in the scripture,” Bran groaned as he turned his weary horse. “What is there in fatherhood that such a father should make such a son? Rob Rocamadour? Better he had stripped the Pope. All the world will turn from him all his days. Ah, child, child, you have nor heart nor head to bear the burden of it. You will lie down with fear and rise up with shame. And you would play the Paladin! Oh, child, child!”

He rode on his quest and guided by men who had deserted the banner of sacrilege he came at last, riding down through vines and walnut trees, to the little town of Martel. Only a few men-at-arms

loitered about the streets, and when he asked news of the army they jeered at him. "There was an army. There was snow last winter."

"Where is the King, brother?"

"There was a King, fool," and they laughed.

"Speak me true! Has God taken him?"

"The devil waits at his door. There he lies in the smith's house, siek to death."

To a little, low-browed house Bran came and there found a knight watching. "Aye, the fool should be with us," he said. "Welcome, fool."

"I would I had been with him this many a day."

"Then you are a fool indeed."

"You were with him, Sir William le Marshal."

"The more fool I."

"God ha' mercy, you were true man of old. Could you not guide him?"

"O fool. If I could should I be here? He has broken himself and broken me. Yet I serve him. I have lived bitter days, master Bran."

"Is he gone yet?"

"Fever has his body. He is stricken in soul. A priest watches by him, but he will hear no priest. That black day at Rocamadour laid him low."

Bran went up to the dark room where the young King lay tossing on a straw pallet. The priest sat by him on the ground droning over his beads. Bran knelt and touched the knotted brow: "Oh my son, Henry my son," he whispered.

"Who calls me son?"

"Poor Bran the fool, child."

Henry tried to raise himself, and Bran caught him and held him. "You come from my father?"

"Yea, yea. He loves you well, child."

"He loves me, he? He would forgive?"

"The father forgives, child. That is his trade."

"God!" the lad cried hoarsely. "God!" The priest began to speak. . . . "You prate! You prate! Give me your girdle. The rope!" He

plucked with his shaking hands at the cord upon the priest's loins, and when it was given to him put it about his neck. They tried to stay him, but he had no strength to do himself hurt. "Let be, let be. I know what I must do. I know better than you all. Cast ashes on the floor." And when that was done, "Now, now," he held up the cord, "hale me forth. I must go. Hale me forth, I say."

"Do his will, brother," Bran said through his tears.

So by the rope about his neck William le Marshal dragged him from his bed to the ground, and he lay upon the ashes and flung out his arms so that he lay like a cross. And in a little while he died.

When they had laid him in the church, "Whither now, brother?" says the fool to the knight.

"I know not. I have laid my heart there. Little good had any man of him in his days, but he made me love him so that whatsoever befalls me henceforth of my life is neither good nor ill."

"Such a man does deeds. Such my King needs. Serve him."

"By my faith, so the boy said when the fever came on him and he bade me go. And what should the father have but a hanging for them that rode with the son? I care not. Let him do what he will. Lead on, master fool."

So to the old King at Poitiers they came and told him his son's end. He listened, fretting at his gown, and said no word, but sometimes he raised his eyes and looked at John, who stood very close to him. Then in the silence, "God have mercy on his soul," said John.

"One is gone," the old King said. "He was my first-born." And Queen Eleanor sat silent, unpicking her embroidery.

"Unworthy, oh my father, unworthy," John cried. "God forgive him. God shall do right."

"He dies who should have seen me die. I am

weary of my days. I look into the dark. Na, na, he is at rest and for him it is well. There was naught for him here, such as he was. But I made him, I. And I have no comfort. Na, na, I have no hope of my realm."

"My father!" John cried.

The old King heaved himself up and strode away. "Lean on me, my lord, lean on me," John cried, and took his arm.

"That man is a King, be his sons what they may," William le Marshal said as they followed him out. "He may have what he will of me."

And Queen Eleanor drew out a thread from her embroidery.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE HOLY CITY

ON the next day they were singing mass in the castle chapel for the dead lad's soul, the King was on his knees, when Sir William de Mandeville sought the King's side and whispered an anxious tale. When the mass was over the King went near the altar and thrice he bowed low, and thrice he crossed himself and hurried away. And afterwards alone in his council chamber he called Bran to him and said, "Have you ever seen Thomas Becket, brother Bran?"

"God have mercy, lord, not since he lay dead."

"Yet you loved him well."

"No man but you loved him better, brother."

"You may say it. But William de Mandeville hath seen him this night in a vision."

"Na, na. I see no visions nor dream no dreams. Let him that has them make them come to me."

"William de Mandeville was sent to save him and saved him not. To William de Mandeville he might come. And the man believes it. St. Thomas he saw in robes of glory, but Thomas Becket it was, swart and stern, and in his hand he bore a shining sword, and he said this sword was newly forged to pierce through Henry the King."

"If Thomas Becket be saint in heaven, he sends no malice by vision nor sweven: no hate in heart, in hand no sword, for him who dwells with Christ our Lord. Na, na, brother: what men fear that they dream."

"Well said, old Bran. But God's my life, there is fear enough among us in these days."

And on the morrow there came messengers with letters out of Normandy, and when he had read

them the King sat awhile like a man in a swoon and presently after he cried out: "The sword! The sword hath stricken me."

"No sword of man, my lord," John said, hanging over him and caressing him.

"Na, na, the sword of heaven, the sword of hell. All is one. Richard and Philip have joined together, and march against me."

John drew back watching him. "God's eyes, we are stricken, indeed."

"You are left, you only are left"—the old King stretched out his hand to him—"stand by me, John."

"Oh, my father!"

"They cannot hold together. They cannot! Fox and bull coupled! And I, God's eyes, there is life in me yet."

He mustered every man he had, he sent into England to summon all knights howsoever exhausted and poor to come to his aid, and he marched northward. But Philip and Richard had a great power and they were engaged to ruin him. Philip proclaimed himself sovereign of all French land, Normandy, Aquitaine, Anjou and the rest, and Richard was to hold his inheritance as fiefs of the King of France. When the old King heard it, he mocked: "What am I, then, that I should be sire to an ass? Many a man have I known that was traitor for his profit. But Richard is the first that would work treason to make himself a beggar." And then he called down curses on the madman who would destroy his own house. "Nay, but if I live, I will baulk knave and fool. I will establish my realm. I will heal the land again. Oh John, little John, stand we together. All comes to you at the last."

"Whom have I but you, my lord?" John said.

What Richard had in his wild head was soon plain. He loved war indeed for its own sake, and war with his father had spice that he relished. But what he coveted was resources to have at his will for a great

Crusade. When he held the rich fiefs, of whomsoever he held them, he was to make a levy and lead a host to the Holy Land. And Philip had sworn that when he was King of all France he would take the Cross too, and be his brother in arms. "Trusty brethren, by the bones of God!" the old King laughed. "The fox and the bull to win the Holy City! God's my life, and my fair realm must be harried that they shall find men for the heathen to slay."

For there was no doubt of the power of the strange allies. Richard raised Brittany in revolt, Philip marched into Normandy, and as the old King came northward they joined their forces and fell on his own birthland, Anjou. The more swiftly he pressed on, though he had no army that could stand against them. But when the clash was near, John fell ill. He was full of courage for his father, full of noble words, but he could not sit his horse. He would have no guard left with him, he trusted his father's arms.

And the old King led on a scanty company in a passion of bitterness. He found William de Mandeville praying at a wayside shrine, and cursed him for it. "Why should I honour Christ?" he cried. "Why should I think Him worthy of honour, who takes from me all honour and leaves me naked in my age to my enemies?" He flung himself into Le Mans, the prize of Anjou, his own town, to hold that if he could, and Philip and Richard came and encamped round about. The next day they broke through his men who held the bridge, they set fire to the town. With a handful of horsemen the old King fled.

"His hour has struck, brother," said William de Mandeville to William le Marshal. "It is the first time ever he turned his back on foemen."

"Say you so? Then I will guard his back," quoth William le Marshal, and gathered a few of the stoutest and rode in the rearward.

On a hill-top two miles out of the town the old King halted and looked back on the smoke of its

burning. "The city which I have loved best on the earth," he cried, "the city wherein I was born and bred, where my father lies buried! Thou hast taken it from me, oh God, my God! My Holy City! May the heathen deal with Thine as Thou hast dealt with mine. But I will requite Thee! I will rob Thee, too, of that thing in me which Thou lovest best." He turned his horse and rode on furiously under the burning June sun. There was bitter need. Richard and his knights followed after, shouting and sounding horns as it were a hunt, and riding light, riding fresh horses, pressed him hard.

Richard had his quarry full in sight when they came to the stream that runs by La Frenaye, a stream too deep to ford. The road went over by a wooden bridge. When the old King and his company were over, William le Marshal took an axe from a Flemish knight and hewed at the timbers and hewed still when the chase was upon him. Horsemen and bridge crashed down together, and were swept away and their comrades checked and quested down stream and up. But Richard jumped his horse into the water and flinging himself from the saddle swam with the beast and so made the farther bank.

Then William le Marshal tossed his axe to the Fleming who still stood by him. "Ride on, brother," he cried. "This gallant is mine or I am his," and he mounted and laid lance in rest. "Come up, Count Richard, come up."

Richard struggled out of the water laughing. "God's feet, Marshal, slay me not. I have no lance nor hauberk," and he mounted and held out open hands.

"Pray to your father," cried William le Marshal, and rode upon him and hurled horse and man headlong into the stream again. "I kill you not, Richard," he shouted, "let the devil kill you." And he turned and galloped after the King.

Through the marches of Normandy and Anjou

they fled, riding hard all day and every day in the summer heat, turning and doubling through the forests, and horse and man fell and died of weariness, and all the while the towns and the castles were falling to Philip's hand. And no succour came, so all the roads were guarded. The old King's body began to play him false. He was beset by feverish pains that racked every nerve. He could neither eat nor drink but in tiny portions. His strength went out of him. But his will endured, and his shrewd foresight. "They are too strong for me," he said. "I must bend. But it shall go hard if I cannot turn each against other at last. Cost what it may, time I must buy. I will grant whatsoever they ask to give me peace. But God's my life, I shall yet see these cursed bedfellows kick each other out into the cold."

And so he sent to Philip to offer any terms, and was bidden render himself at Tours. There in the pleasant land by the Loire, in a blaze of summer sunshine, a great array of lords and knights was gathered in pomp to see him humbled. He came leading his miserable company of hunted men, so much enfeebled that he could hardly keep the saddle.

"God's eyes, the old lion is tamed," Richard said.

King Philip was smoothly courteous, and bade spread cloaks on the ground, and begged him sit at his ease. But he would not, and there was no other gentleness. He must do homage to Philip, he must hold himself at Philip's mercy to do whatsoever Philip should decree, he must own Richard the heir of all his lands, he must grant pardon and safeguard to all men of his who had joined with Richard and Philip to subdue him.

The bitter words were read and his knights who stood by him supporting him in the saddle looked up at the old King's face and dared not look again. While he wrought with his passion, came from the clear sky a roll of thunder. He reeled and was hardly held. Philip reined his horse back and crossed himself. And again the thunder rumbled.

"The voice of God!" Philip muttered.

"What says God?" Richard laughed.

"Make short, short," the old King cried, and gave his submission and took from Philip the kiss of peace. When it was given, Philip drew back, looking at him strangely.

"Fever is upon you, my lord," he said.

"I burn this day, in this life," the old King laughed.

"Kiss me also, my father," Richard pushed his horse alongside. "God's eyes, I have earned it."

So to him, too, the old King gave the kiss of peace, and clinging to him whispered: "May God not let me die till I have worthily avenged myself on you."

Then they lifted him from his horse and laid him in a litter and carried him away to Chinon, and there found the first safe rest for him in many weary days.

"Old Bran, old Bran," he groaned, fighting with pain, "the sword of Becket has pierced me through my loins, yea, through and through."

"Na, na, brother, if he hated, he loved also. It is only in hell a man would hate when life is done."

"Then to hell go I."

"Oh Henry, my brother, you brought peace to my land, and for you there shall be peace."

"God's my life, I want not peace but a sword. Where is that knave that hath the tale of the traitors I am sworn to love?"

"Na, na, rest you now, rest. How shall this poor body serve you if you ride it so hard? Time enough——"

"By the eyes of God, all time were too little time for my vengeance. Cozen me not, fool. Do my will. If I die now, I would die knowing mine enemies." He struggled up shouting for his clerk.

The man came with empty hands, and was slow to understand what the King wanted of him, but at long last he brought it, the roll of the lords who had joined with Philip and Richard, a writing sent

betimes by Philip the careful man, that the King should know his humiliation well.

"Read it out," said the King eagerly, "read it out."

"Please you, my lord, I cannot see," the man faltered.

The King raised himself groaning. "You lie, you mock me with your lies. God's blood, are you all sworn to cozen me?"

"Oh, my lord, my lord, may Christ Jesus help me, the first name that stands written here is the name of Count John your son."

The King cried out and tore the parchment from his hands, and pored over it, and crushed it, and cast it down and fought for breath. "John, my very heart," he gasped, "John, whom I loved beyond all my sons, he has forsaken me. While I wore out my life to keep the realm for him, he betrayed me." Then he laid himself down again and turned his face to the wall. "Now let the rest go as it will," he muttered. "I care no more for myself nor for the world."

Queen Eleanor had drawn out the last thread of her embroidery.

So he lay speaking only in dreams or in delirium while day passed into night and night into day, and Bran watched over him. In the dawn he woke and saw Bran there kneeling beside him covering him again. "What, fool, do you pray?" he said.

"Na, na, brother. I love. That is all."

"You are a fool in your soul," the King turned from him and Bran touched him gently and he writhed and flung off the hand.

"Oh Henry, my brother," Bran murmured and kissed at the air, but the King spoke to him no more, and he crouched down and watched through tears.

With the light came one and another of those who were still faithful, but he did not know them or would not know them. He lay restless, he groaned

out wild, broken words, living over again all the worst of his life, he cursed his wife and his sons and fell to wilder laughter. "The Holy City," quoth he, "God's Holy City! It is gone to the heathen unless I save it, I. And let it go and the fiend dwell in it! I had a city that I loved. I had a realm that I made. All is gone to the fire. And I am gone, I. Shame, shame on a conquered King," and he gasped, and was shaken, and blood gushed out of him. . . .

That night into the room where he lay came his son Richard in helm and mail, and the candles burning by the bed gleamed on the steel of his huge strength. He stood over by that low mound which lay like a grave on the bed, he drew back the red robe from the face that lay shrunken, dark and terrible.

"He is dead in truth," he said slowly. "God's eyes, I could not believe till I saw." He drew his sword and kissed the cross hilt, and held it up in salute. "You were a King and a knight," he said.

From the dead man's feet rose up Bran. "Yea, child, yea, love him in his death," he said. "He does not die, he does not die!"

"What, old Bran, is there none but his fool to weep for him?"

"Na, na, child. I weep not for him. He is gone to the peace. I weep for Bran, who is alone all his days."

"True man are you. I have a place for you, old Bran. Follow you me. God's death, serve me as you served him and I am well served."

"Na, na. It is a life too late. I have given what I had." He turned and looked at the bed. "Cover his face, child, cover his face," he cried.

Richard stood a moment looking down at the dead: "I will win your realm glory, my father," he cried, and carelessly tossed back the red robe and strode out and away to fight for the Holy City.

* * * * *

Away in England, by the old road along the

Surrey hills, that strip of bare chalk and close chalk turf between forest and forest, came a man in motley riding a mule. When he saw the gleam of water flash up through the trees he turned and made down hill. He came to the great pond where the wheel beat out its heavy rhythm through the laughter of the falling water. From the furnaces beyond a haze rose into the clear air, and the hammers that worked the iron made merry. He rode on to the gate in the wall and, none hindering him, came to the long low house of red sandstone.

"All journeys end, King Philip," says he to his mule, and swung out of the saddle with a jingle of bells. "Is there ever a man who knows poor Bran?" he called.

"Bran!" a deep voice shouted, and hurrying came a mass of a man, white-bearded, but sturdy for all his bulk and age. "Yea and yea, brother. Here is man and woman and child to make you right welcome." He grasped both hands. "So Bran is come home at the last."

"I am weary, Siward my brother, and it is dark about me. I make for home."

Siward the ironmaster brought him in and sat him down and gave him mead and drank with him. "We heard that the King was dead," said he. "God give you comfort, brother."

"He is gone to the peace," Bran said. "He does not die. He does not die."

Siward considered of that and then: "Well said," he answered. "He built what stands. He gave England to Englishmen. He made us one. He taught us law. We shall not fall." He drank and made lines on the table with his finger awhile, then looked up: "And now Count Richard is King?"

"Na, na, there is no King but Henry my King. Richard he is a minstrel's knight, he will travel the world for the joy of a fight and that is the song of him and his might. He goes a Crusade, brother.

He will deliver the Holy City. He that delivered his father to death and shame. Let him go, let him go down the wind. My King is gone."

"Peace be with him in his rest," Siward said.

"Yea, yea, and to the peace go I. I have given all, and have naught to warm me but the old earth. Out of the hills I came, and to the hills go I, the good chalk hills."

And again Siward considered of it and in a while he said: "You have given well, brother. I know one who gives. Come with me, old Bran."

He took the fool's arm and led him out and away from the forges to the green glade in the forest where the stream ran clear over red sand. There, among the purple loose strife and willow herb and the creamy fragrance of the meadowsweet two children were playing, little brown arms and legs in a dance about a woman who lay in the flowers and sang. She was little and slight, a girl's bosom and a girl's face the sunshine kissed, but in her likeness and her happiness their mother confessed.

She saw the sharp colours of the motley, the grotesque shape, she started up, lithe and eager, and ran upon the fool and flung herself into his arms. "Bran, dear Bran. Oh, you are come to us at last," and she kissed him, and laid her face against his. "Dear, my father," she said, "how I have wanted you, I, who have all! Father of me."

"He is come home," Siward said, and turned away.

The little children came to him.

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