The Messenger of the Black Prince

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Illustration:
The Lance Was Almost Torn From His Grasp

Chapter I

The King's Fool.

I remember the beginning of it as though it were yesterday. My brother André had sent me to the armorer's to have some broken links mended in his gear. I was standing near the forge watching Le Brun send the sparks flying from his anvil and marveling with what strength and ease he was able to turn the stubborn bits of steel, when a man appeared at the door and with a smile bid

us the time of day. There is nothing strange in that, to be sure. But yet the manner of his saying it struck us both, for his tone held a kind of sharpness as of mockery. I looked around quickly. Le Brun eased off the stroke as it came down. With a scowl upon his brow he leaned his weight upon the hammer. His big chest heaved as he glared towards the door.

"I agree, stranger," he said. "It is a fair day." He waved with his hand. "You will find the inn about half a league further down the road."

It was a strong hint for the man to be on his way, but he took no more notice of it than if Le Brun were a child. Three quick steps and he was beside the bellows with the smile broader than before.

"Do I look like a man who could eat in an inn?" he demanded. At the same time he pointed to his clothes which were indeed only rags. He took the soiled cap from his head and threw it on the floor. Then, without a word he placed the palm of his hand upon it and turned the swiftest somersault that you could imagine. When he was standing upright again, he gazed into our faces with an expression as though he had performed the cleverest trick in the world.

"Look here!" growled the armorer with a frown. "You were here yesterday. I gave you a piece of silver to get rid of you. You are back again. Do you think——"

The fellow threw his hand in the air.

"Of course I am back again," he cried. "Is it a crime for me to want to pay my debt?" With that he fumbled in the lining of his coat and brought forth a shining piece of gold. "There!" he called, flinging it on the anvil till it rang. "You have three times and more the sum you gave me!"

The slow-witted Le Brun looked at me and I at him. Both of us were sorely puzzled. The armorer shook his head.

"A beggar one day—a rich man the next," he began. "There is but one conclusion——"

"Ah!" interrupted the other. "Do not say the word. It is ugly and I'd rather say it for you. The long and short of it is that you take me for a thief."

"Gold doesn't grow on trees," remarked Le Brun darkly. "Listen, sir stranger," he said advancing a step, "have you no honest calling?"

I thought the fellow would flare into a rage, but to my surprise he threw back his head and laughed a long trilling laugh almost like the song of a bird. When he ceased, he laid his palms on his hips and bowed mockingly at us.

"I told you yesterday that I was a fool," he said. "I am the same today—a king's fool. Look!" He put his hand into his coat again and drew out a silly-looking cap, which he placed over one ear, and a bauble with tiny bells. He shook it with the glee of a child. The more it tinkled, the broader grew his grin. As though he was actually captivated by the sound, he began to caper about and finally struck into a quickly moving dance.

He stopped as suddenly as he began. Then he bowed once more.

"Now," he exclaimed, "can you tell me, sirs, where I can find a position?"

"—as a fool?" I asked with a smile.

"Yes," he answered.

"Why," I replied, "by what I have seen you are clever enough to amuse the King of France himself."

He jerked his head around and shot a look at me. For one second I saw a flash of hate and anger. In the next a wise smile curled about his mouth.

“Strange words,” he muttered and repeated it. “Strange words to fall from the lips of a Norman lad. Have you all grown so weak? There was a time when the gentry of Normandy thought the only way to amuse the King of France was with spears and swords and battle-axes, not with such toys as these.”

He spoke slowly and with a half smile, but under it lay a sting that cut me to the bone. I cast a sidelong glance at Le Brun who stood scowling as black as night, but withal puzzled. He was no good hand at solving of riddles nor in the sifting of double meaning statements. His way was with a cuff or blow, and there an end to it.

“Is this a jest, sir Fool?” I asked. “Would you have the Norman barons arm themselves and fight when there is no need for it?”

For a reply all that he did was to break into a long low whistle and toss the bauble into the air. When it came down, he caught it with great deftness and twirled it about in his fingers. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

“There was a meeting at Rouen——” he said and curled his brows, as though I ought to understand the rest.

“I know that,” I replied quickly. “There was a meeting of the Norman barons at Rouen——” Here I stopped and eyed him closely. “Such things were better left to themselves. For all I know, sir Fool, to give you a short answer, I may even be talking to a King’s spy.”

The man tossed his head to one side and uttered a little painful laugh.

“The Black Prince of England,” he went on as though he would brush my objection aside, “has left Bordeaux. He is ranging along the western coast of France. There is no one to oppose him. Not a soldier of the King is within a hundred leagues. He is toppling over one castle after the other——Suppose,” he said closing one eye and looking at me cunningly, “the King of France were to rush towards the west to destroy him? Would any of you Normans come to his aid?”

It was a question far too deep for my boyish brain. Besides I knew that silence was the beginning of caution, so I flung my hand in the air as though the affair were of no importance to me.

“From what I have heard,” I said, “the Black Prince is well able to care for himself.”

I saw an expression of contempt gather on his face.

“The meeting at Rouen was a blow to your country,” the man went on with more perseverance than ever. “A good dozen of your finest blood lost their lives. It’s a good thing,” he added with biting scorn, “that you were not there yourself!”

I was growing angry.

“Why?” I demanded.

“Because,” he replied with cutting deliberation, “you would not have had the courage to raise an arm in your own defence!”

The hot blood stole slowly to my neck and face. I saw out of the corner of my eye that the armorer was rolling his sleeves up over his elbows, while one hand reached out for the hammer that lay alongside the anvil.

“Have you come here to pick a quarrel?” I demanded.

“As you wish,” he said and spat derisively upon the ground.

It was a challenge flung into my teeth. I was but a lad, of course, but for all that of big bone and strong from the life which I had lived in the open. My opponent was a man full grown and, from what I had just seen, as quick and

slippery in his actions as an eel. For the moment in my wrath I took little heed of these things but knotted my fists together and advanced towards him.

I thought that if I could strike the first blow I could settle him once for all and so end his insolence. With a lunge that ought to have carried him off his feet I made at him. To my surprise I beat only into the empty air. The fellow had slipped to the one side with a light gliding motion that for quickness fairly took my breath away. Then, to add fire to my discomfiture, he calmly placed his hands flat upon his hips and stood smiling at me.

"A Norman calf!" he cried. "If the rest of your race can fight no better than that, it is no wonder that the King of France will soon devour you!"

I made no answer. The taunt struck me with the sharpness of a knife. If I was full of wrath before, I was boiling with anger now. I steadied myself on the balls of my feet and looked the fellow in the eye. Then, with greater quickness than at first, I rushed again upon him. But he was ready, even more than I had expected. Instead of leaping to the side, he jumped back and, as I came towards him, struck me a sharp blow on the face with his open hand.

By this time I was fighting mad, but rather at my own bungling than at his adroitness. I would have given my right arm to have caught him a single stunning crash. I plunged forward, reckless and determined to the last degree. Now he slipped past me so close that I was able to touch the sleeve of his coat. Again his hot breath touched my face. He came in so near that he gave my arm a twist. But with all my effort I could not lay a finger on him. It was like a game—a contest with speed on one side and strength on the other—

"Henri!"

It was Le Brun's voice coming like a warning. I knew I had to be on the alert. But before I realized what my opponent was about, he had caught me by sliding his arm entirely under mine. I felt a twang run across my shoulder as though it was being wrenched from the socket. My feet loosed themselves from the ground and in the next second I was rolling over towards the anvil of the armorer.

But I was not entirely gone. With a kind of instinct I extended my hand to grasp whatever might save me from utter humiliation. It was mere luck, I know, but even at that I had to grit my teeth and hang on with what strength was still in me. My fist was closing around the Fool's wrist and the surer I was of myself, the harder I held on. A sudden jerk brought him slightly towards me. A hard steady pull bent him still further. With a twist I threw myself with my back upon the ground. I had two hands free now and I wrapped both around his wrist with the sureness of a vise. He struggled like an animal taken in a trap. With the fingers of his free hand he tried to pry my grip loose. He twisted and squirmed. He dug his nails into my flesh. He jumped from one position to another. He pretended to fall towards me and then with his arms relaxed sprang suddenly back again. But I clung to him as though it were my only hope for life until his tugs and pulls spent themselves and I grew the more confident of victory.

His breath was getting shorter and a paleness overspread his face. It was now or never for me, so with one firm effort I drew him steadily down until his face was near mine and his feet kept tapping at my ribs. Then, he fell. His whole body covered mine. His knees dug into my stomach and the crook of his elbow fastened itself in my throat.

For a moment I feared I would choke. I had to let go his wrist with one hand to clear myself of his weight. As soon as I had shoved him away, I reached out to grasp him by the throat if I could, but in the same moment I felt him clutching at mine.

We were struggling with every sinew, each for the mastery. With a quickness that I might have been expecting, my opponent gave one final lurch. It was an effort that wrenched free the hand which I held in my grip. I tried again and again to clutch it, but I succeeded only in closing my fist in the air. I caught his body between my knees in the hope that I could squeeze the breath out of him. I squirmed this way and that. Now I had his arm or his wrist between my fingers, but before I was sure of myself he had twisted out of danger. We rolled over locked together like tangled pieces of twine, but with every rolling it was he, because of his adroitness, who came uppermost and it was I who was prone upon my back upon the ground.

At last the end came. By a piece of mere chance I had slid my arm forward with its entire length under his. Then with a twist of my wrist I laid my hand around his throat. His shoulder was like the resting place of a lever. I began to press steadily. His chin went back and his eyes turned upwards. A little more and his mouth opened showing a row of even white teeth. I was on the verge of tossing him from me when he squirmed once more, this time to the one side. He slid from out the vise that was closing in on him and almost with the same effort sprang quickly to his feet.

I jumped up of course, for I thought the conflict but begun when he raised his hand as though to tell me that he had enough and between the heavings of his breath called in a shaking voice, “I did not come here to fight!”

I almost laughed in his face.

“Why, then, did you come?” demanded Le Brun with a growl.

“I came to make friends!” was the answer.

“—to make friends?” I echoed. “Do you think a man makes friends through jibes and insults?”

By this time both of us had somewhat recovered our breath. In the most serious manner imaginable he threw his hands apart and looked from the armorer to me.

“It’s an unfortunate habit I have,” he exclaimed. “It lies in my disposition to dig to the bottom of things—to prod people till they squirm.”

“Some day,” said I by way of admonishment, “you’ll prod the wrong person. In such dangerous times as these, when everyone is the other’s enemy, it’ll likely cost you your life.”

He paid no more heed to me than if I had not spoken. As though he was aroused by a sudden curiosity, he half closed his eyes and made a mental measurement of me as I have often seen a buyer measure a horse. He took a step or two to the rear. He circled around me. I saw his lips move as though he was noting this or that to himself. Then, with the same ease and confidence as though we had been life-long friends, he came up to me and laid his fingers on the upper part of my arm.

“All brawn,” he said. “Tough. Great endurance, but a trifle slow in action.” And with a smile of satisfaction he clapped me heartily on the shoulder. “Can you fight?” he demanded.

I wrinkled my brows.

“I held my own with you, didn’t I?” I asked.

“Na. Na. Lad. Not that,” he said. “That was no fight. It was only a little rolling in the dirt. What I mean is this: Are you good with a sword, an ax or a dagger?”

“Well,” I answered slyly, “a bit ago you made an accusation. You upbraided me for being a Norman.”

His head came up with a jerk and the fire flashed from his black eyes.

“That was only a bit of my prodding,” he replied quickly. “I wanted to stir you up. Oh,” he cried when I looked questioningly at him, “you’ll all need stirring up. What skill you have in the handling of weapons will soon be sorely useful. Can’t you realize that the King of France is watching you like a cat watches a mouse?”

“I know,” I answered rather downcast, “he would like to add our territories to his own.”

By this time the armorer had returned to his forge. His great hairy arm lay along the shaft of the bellows. The sparks from the coals of peat flew like tiny shooting-stars towards the rafters. He was like a great ox, patient and plodding, that did not realize its strength.

“You are too much like him,” came the answer as the Fool pointed to Le Brun, “—powerful, but not far-sighted. What you ought to have is a bit of cunning to match your wits against your foes.”

I said not a word for I did not know exactly what he was driving at. With a toss of my head I ambled slowly towards the door. The Fool went with me talking and jabbering at my elbow. When we came to the threshold, he slid his body carefully along the wall and like a thief peered up and down the road with more than usual circumspection. Then as though he was thoroughly alarmed he spun about and took me anxiously by the arm.

“You won’t say that I have been here, will you?” he begged.

“Why,” I laughed, “as far as that goes I shall forget all about you within an hour.”

The expression on his face fell. He looked at me as though I had dealt him a terrible blow.

“No you won’t,” he exclaimed. “The fact is that you’ll remember me till your dying day. You’ll tell your children about me long after I’m dead.” Here he seized my arm again even more firmly than before. “I must be off,” he cried. “And you won’t forget, will you? Never breathe to a soul that I’ve been here!”

I was puzzled but yet more amused. I was sure that it was some whim or other that had taken hold of his fancy. So to flatter him I promised that his presence here would never be mentioned. With that he seemed pleased and with a skip and a hop he made his way around to the back of the forge where he was quickly lost among the trees.

To satisfy my own curiosity I gazed a long time up and down the road. There was nothing as far as I could see that could have given him cause for alarm. The whole highway was as void as a desert save that on the brow of the hill, like a speck in the sky, there came riding towards us a solitary horseman, booted and spurred, in all likelihood a guest for the village inn for the night. At most he was only a passing stranger like hundreds of others. I smiled at myself that I had taken the Fool so seriously. I went back to have my laugh out with Le Brun and to wait for my brother’s gear.

Chapter II

I Am Attacked in the Woods.

It was late in the afternoon when I left the armorer's. The sky was covered with low dark clouds. A fine rain fell which cut through the skin with the keenness of a sharp knife.

Our house (where I lived alone with my brother André) lay above a mile from the village around a long bend in the road—a track I rarely traveled, for I knew a shorter path through the woods. So with my brother's armor slung lightly over my shoulder I started briskly on my way.

I was without a serious thought. The birds, in the face of the oncoming night, were settled in their nests. The branches of the trees began to drip moisture over my face and neck. The grass and the underbrush were a bit soggy under my feet, but even with that the lightness of my heart prompted me to whistle a little tune.

I had gone about half way. The thoughts of a bright fire and warmth were uppermost in my brain. Save for the dripping of the rain the woods were as silent as an empty tomb.

A sound startled me—a swish like the hurry of a deer or a wild-boar scurrying through the weeds. I stopped and peered carefully through the gathering gloom. The sound was repeated, directly in front of me. Quite instinctively I backed away to seek the protection of the nearest tree, and waited. But for a second all I could hear was the thumping of my heart against my ribs.

After a little I began to feel that my fear was founded on imagination, so with cautious steps I slowly ventured once more ahead. I had not gone five strides when the swish came again to my ears, this time more distinct and very near. I was about to swerve to my left to avoid the danger that might be threatening me, when a rough-looking fellow stepped out of the semi-darkness and made towards me.

As well as I could distinguish, he was of the commoner type, clad in the wooden shoes of the peasantry and with a coat and breeches of some black material almost threadbare, crumpled and soiled from being lived and slept in. His hair hung out in clumps from under the edges of an old cap and around his neck was knotted a ragged scarf.

I caught all this in a flash, you may be sure. But what attracted me most was neither his clothes nor even his threatening aspect, for I started with terror when I caught a glimpse of a dagger that he held grasped in his right hand.

I stopped and drew a long breath. But he came on with the weapon raised on a level with his shoulder, and with his heavy eyes glaring at me as though I were a wild animal that was to be stricken to death. I shifted to the one side and he shifted likewise with me. I saw him moisten his lips and half-shut his eyes. With what quickness I could, I sprang further on and dodged safe for the moment behind a tree.

"My name is La Mar!" I called. "I am Henri La Mar. I live in that house over there at the edge of the woods." I stopped long enough for him to understand. Then, "Surely you have made a mistake," I cried still louder. "You must be waiting here for someone else!"

He lunged stupidly after me. The breath was coming from between his lips in a kind of a wheeze. At the same time he uttered in a deep growl, “La Mar. The old Count of Gramont—the rest of them”—and something which sounded like an oath, but which I was not able to understand.

We were within five feet of each other. All the time he held the dagger on high always ready to strike. It flashed through my senses that I was dallying long enough, so with a jump I flew away from my tree and made deeper into the woods.

But it seemed that I had run into a trap. I had not gone twice the length of my body when a second fellow, dressed the same as the first, confronted me. If you had stood the two together you could not have told the one from the other. And this one, too, had a dagger like the first and stood with his legs spread out to block my way.

I was as good as dead. I came to a stop as though I had struck a stone wall and then veered over to the one side as I did before. At the same instant I bent low and ran as fast as I could in the hope that, if my assailant made a lunge at me, there might be some chance that it would only be a glancing blow and do me little harm.

I had calculated too rashly on the sloth of my enemy. Indeed he was as sure of me as a hunter is of game that is already brought to earth. As I passed, he took one leap after me. His hand came down with the speed of an arrow and the next thing I knew I felt a jar in the middle of my back that sent the stars before my eyes and flattened me on my stomach on the ground. Then a shriek echoed among the trees that sent the blood curdling through my veins and after that the woods were still again.

I was partly dazed by my fall. To tell you the truth, by every right I ought to have been killed. But the armor which I had slung so lightly over my shoulder had saved me. When the blow struck, the point of the dagger caught in the meshes of the twisted links. The weapon was a straight knife with no cross piece to form a protection for the hand. The impact was so sudden and so unexpected that my enemy lost his grip on the haft. His hand slipped down the blade and, as I learned afterwards, was cut along the fingers and the palm. It was the pain of it that made him cry out and to that the frenzy of it caused him to take to his heels and run away.

There was danger on every side of me. I had no time to breathe a word of thanks for my deliverance but got up as quickly as I could and made forward in the direction I was bent on. Then came my third surprise. I had started at a fairly good gait when an arrow whistled past my face and buried itself in the trunk of a great tree. My flesh crept from the very terror of my situation. There was one thing to do, I thought, and that was to take the bridle in my teeth and make the best of it.

I plunged on ahead recklessly. I am sure that I was as white as a ghost. It is one thing to have an enemy in front of you with whom you are matched on even terms. It is another to be beset by lurking foes who are able to strike unseen and who have every advantage in position and in weapons. But even at that the spirit of desperation was strong within me, for I was resolved to use my last speck of strength to worm myself through the woods and to make for home.

But my resolutions were nipped in the bud before I had fairly formed them. I was just getting into full career when another arrow passed my face, this time closer than the first and whistled on among the trees. But I did not stop. I bent

my head low to the ground. I grasped the piece of mail more firmly in my hand. I was breathing hard, but more from the strain I was under than from actual labor. Three strides further and a third arrow buried itself in the turf straight before me and snapped with a little click.

I could not help looking down for my face was directed towards the ground. To my amazement, even in the gloom of the woods, I spied a piece of parchment tied in a hard knot on the haft of the missile.

"A message," I thought. "Is it a warning from a friend? Or a threat from a hidden foe?"

As quick as a flash I stooped and snatched it open. There I read in letters scrawled as coarsely and as rudely as a child would write the words:

GO BACK BY THE ROAD

I trembled a little, I must confess. Whether from friend or foe, it was wisest to obey. If I insisted on going on ahead, I knew I would surely be killed. If I were to go back—well, there was a ray of hope.

I turned. I was as much in the hands of Fate as ever was any man alive. This time I did not run but kept on at a steady gait. At every step I was in expectation of some fresh attack, to be confronted by one of the two men who had assailed me, or by a knife darting through the air, or even by an arrow. But to my surprise the woods were as calm as when I first entered them. The rain dripped slowly from the overhanging branches and the light wind fanned and cooled my heated cheeks.

I was soon past the place where I had met my first foe. To my imagination it was like a tale I had heard of a superstitious person's passing a place haunted by a ghost. My eyes were on the alert. At any second I expected a fresh attack. I thought I heard a low groan. I let the thought pass as though it were the promptings of fear. Then I heard it again and with it some words that I could not understand. I looked about and there to my amazement I saw the fellow who had first threatened me with his back to a tree. A strong cord held his wrists tied together, while another wrapped around his body held him firmly fastened against the trunk.

At the sight of me he cleared his throat.

"Come here!" he commanded.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"Will you loose these bonds?" he said.

"I know when I'm safe," I replied. "I'll do nothing of the kind."

He growled something under his breath.

"If you do," he went on half coaxingly and half in a threat, "I'll tell you a story that's worth while."

"You've told me enough already," said I, and started on my way.

But he was insistent.

"Wait," he commanded once more. "Will you give me a mouthful of water, then?"

"There's enough dripping from the trees," I shot back at him. "Turn your face up and you'll easily slacken your thirst."

He growled deeper than before but he realized that I was not to be taken as lightly as he thought. I went on. There was no more interruption. The fellow with the wounded hand might have been lurking somewhere in the

neighborhood. He might even be standing behind a tree. But as far as I was concerned, he did not appear and in quicker time than I had come in, I was out of the woods and on the road that led in a roundabout way to my home.

I breathed a great sigh of relief when I tramped up the gravel walk that led to the house. With no ado I pushed open the front door and entered. In the great hall there were two men, the one my brother André and the old Count of Gramont who lived in the castle on the hill. They had just finished lighting the candles. There was no fire in the open hearth and the room was cold and chilled with the damp. The old Count was pacing nervously up and down the floor muttering to himself in his deep rolling tones. My brother's face was as white as chalk and lines of worry lay across his forehead. He was standing at the long oaken table that stood in the centre of the room winding a piece of linen about his lower arm. I did not speak for at the first glance I noticed that, as he wound, the blood kept oozing through the bandages from the place where he had been wounded.

Chapter III

A Visitor in the Night.

I stood stock still in the middle of the floor. My brother looked at me from head to foot.

"Le Brun has been here, Henri," he said calmly. And then in a low voice, "I was afraid that something had happened to you, you return so late."

"Something has happened," I burst forth and in shaking tones told him of my adventures in the woods.

"They are agents of the King," cried the old Count. "They are everywhere about us. They are not satisfied that they have taken my son. They will——"

My mouth fell open in amazement.

"They have taken Charles?" I asked. "Is it true then that he was at the meeting at Rouen? You can——"

"It was a meeting of the nobles of Normandy," he interrupted. "I thought I was too old to go myself so I sent my only son. They were to make plans to protect us against the aggressions of the King. But the secret leaked out. Some traitor in our ranks betrayed us. Every man in the gathering was taken. A full dozen were beheaded behind the walls of the town. A few were sent off as prisoners, to be scattered among the castles of the King."

"—and Charles?" I cried.

The old man sighed and ground his teeth.

"He is on his way down the valley of the Loire," he rumbled deep in his throat, "to be mewed up till the crack of doom."

The blood left my face. A chill of horror ran through every limb.

"We shall bring him back, Henri," said André with a ring in his voice. "If it takes the last drop of blood of the last Norman, we shall bring him back. But we shall have to wait."

The old Count flung his hand in the air. The fire flashed from his eyes and he began to stride again across the floor.

“Wait!” he demanded. “Wait! That is the only word you know. We have waited long enough already. I’ll not bide another day.” He turned wildly towards the rack that held my brother’s arms. “I’ll take this,” he cried laying his strong hand upon a battle-ax. “I’ll go to the King, where he sits upon his throne. I’ll demand of him why he dared to lay his finger upon my son. I’ll offer him his choice, whether he will give me my son back—or perish at my feet.”

Here André raised his hand for peace.

“If you do that,” he said quietly, “you will only be playing into their nets. It will mean the destruction of us all.”

The Count flung himself into a chair.

“There’s one last fight in me yet, André,” he growled in his heavy voice. “I’ll summon a thousand archers from the countryside. I’ll find the castle where they have him prisoner. We’ll storm it and burn it to the ground.”

But André, who ever was on the side of wisdom, saw the folly of his intentions.

“If you do,” he warned, “it will only be a signal for an attack. The armies of France will sweep us from our homes.”

He took two or three paces to and fro in the room and returned to me. There was a smile of sadness on his face as he spoke.

“The Black Prince of England is our only hope,” he said.

“He is ravaging the western coast of France,” I told him. “It is his presence there that holds the King in check.”

He opened his mouth to answer but the long whine of one of the dogs out of doors interrupted him. We kept silent until the sound died away. Then he took up a tinder and went to the hearth.

“I shall make a fire,” he said. “The chill of the air has pierced me to the bone.”

I looked at his wounded arm.

“How did you get that, André?” I asked.

He laughed.

“We were attacked by knaves as we came along the road.”

The whine of the dog began again. Then like a chorus there arose a barking and yelping as though the whole pack of them had gone suddenly mad.

“There is someone in the yard,” muttered the old Count without raising his head. “I thought I heard the crunching of the gravel on the walk.”

With a kind of instinct I turned towards the window. I could not see clearly what it was, but there flashed across the pane what seemed to be the image of a man’s face. By the suddenness with which he moved away, it struck me that he must have been loitering there, peering in. My heart rose in my throat for I thought of the enemies who were lurking about the house.

I was on the verge of raising my hand to point and call out, when amid the sharp howling of the dogs there came a rapping on the panels of the door. Like a flash André sprang forward. Without a single weapon in case he was attacked he jerked the door open. The light of the candles shone dimly into the haze. For all that, I was able to see the figure of a man standing on the stone step. He was booted and spurred and clad from neck to heels in the long black cloak of a traveler. He wore a broad brimmed hat with a feather in it. When he saw the anxious expression on my brother’s face he smiled and touched his forehead like a salute. Then he bowed with the gravity of a courtier.

“May I come in out of the rain?” he asked.

Chapter IV

A Trickster.

Of all the men I ever saw this stranger struck my fancy to the highest degree. He strode into the room with as much confidence and poise as though he were the actual master of the house and we the humblest of his servants. He looked neither to the right nor the left. Yet, as he passed us, without shifting his gaze, he seemed to sweep each of us out of the corner of his eye with a glance that measured us from head to heel.

He stopped at the great oaken table and raised his hat with a sort of mincing delicacy. With a swish through the air he knocked the water from it and laid it carefully down. When he took off his cloak we saw that he carried a silver mounted sword and wore a doublet and breeches of the finest velvet ornamented about the edges with a fine lace. He curled his moustache with his thumb and forefinger. Then, with his hand over his heart and a bland smile on his face he turned and bowed with as much reverence as you would pay to a king.

"I'll never forget this," he said, but there his voice dropped so that the rest of it sounded like hollow mockery,"—this unexpected hospitality."

André was the first to speak.

"It's a sour night," said he carefully eyeing the stranger's wet boots and dripping clothes, "for a man to be abroad."

The visitor gave a short laugh.

"A little warmth," he replied with a nod towards the hearth, "would add greatly to my comfort." He began to chafe his hands the one in the other as though he were frozen to the marrow. "Will you please bestir yourself!"

There was a ring of insolence in his tone. His words, though uttered smoothly, had a kind of sly meaning at the bottom that touched us to the quick. It was clear that he intended to nettle us. The old Lord of Gramont squared his shoulders. He let out a low quiet whistle and walked away. But André, who was quicker and more easily hurt, flushed the color of scarlet and knotted his fists.

For a moment there was empty silence. Our visitor looked at each of us in turn with the corners of his lips curved in a taunting smile. He strutted past the hearth with his spurs clanking and glanced with a sneer about the room.

"I have often heard that the cattle in Normandy were better housed than their masters," he began. "It's even colder here than it is out of doors."

"That is one reason why we are so healthy," replied my brother looking him full in the face. "And that is why we are so strong."

The stranger broke out into a loud laugh.

"Why, man," he exclaimed, "you have more wit than I imagined." He bowed low again. "It is to your credit, sir."

André yawned.

"It is indeed cold," he said. "But your tongue has a chill all of its own. Do you know, my friend, I should have had a fire going by this time if you——" But he stopped short, knowing that as a host he should not be the first to openly offend.

But the stranger tossed back his head. He clapped my brother soundly on the shoulder.

"I shall finish it for you," he cried. "You meant to say, '—if I had not come into the house.'" He flung his arm in the air in a wild gesture of mirth. "You too have a tongue in your head. To tell you truly I am amazed, for at first sight of you I thought you nothing but a country dullard!"

With that he stared brazenly into André's face. Then with the lightness of a feather, he spun around and threw himself into one of the chairs.

My brother went as white as chalk. For a second he seemed stupefied. Then a redness swept over him. He walked deliberately to the rack that held the arms. The old Lord of Gramont halted where he had been pacing half way across the room and looked sharply back. As for me my breath stuck in my throat.

André returned bearing a naked sword in his hand.

"There is no light outside of the house," he said. "We must finish, what we have begun, here."

The other arose. The same taunting smile played around his mouth.

"I had not thought you would have the courage," he remarked. And then, "Will you stain the floor of the house with your own blood?"

My brother took his position but, for a second, the old Count of Gramont interfered.

"Will you tell us your name?" he asked the stranger. "In case anything happens, it will be well to know."

"My name?" repeated our visitor laying his finger-tips on his chest, and with the shadow of a bow. "I am called the Sieur De Marsac. To all with whom I am acquainted, a faithful servant of his Majesty, the King."

There were no words more. The swords rang in the air. De Marsac began as though it were only a fancy play, my brother with all the seriousness of his nature. There was a difference between the two that was soon seen. Our visitor had the advantage in litheness and in trickery. André was the better in strength of wrist and in driving into his enemy with force and steadiness.

The fight began with a few light thrusts and parries that on each side were only trials of the other's skill. Then of a sudden De Marsac unleashed a savage attack. His sword came darting in like the fangs of a snake with the point directed towards André's heart. A part of a second and it would have been too late, but my brother, who, I saw, was making sure of his defense, swung his weapon to the side and caught his enemy's blade, steel against steel. The swords locked at the pommels like the horns of deer and for a second the two stood glaring into each other's eyes.

It was here that André's sturdiness showed itself, for it was a test of the one man's brawn against the other's. My brother's jaws came together with determination. The veins in his neck swelled. He raised himself slowly on the balls of his feet and pressed forward with all his might. A cold look came into De Marsac's eyes and a frown crossed his forehead. I saw him go back little by little on his heels. His arm was bending in towards his body. André took a step forward and our enemy to save himself from being thrown off his balance sprang quickly backwards.

De Marsac began anew. His smile of confidence faded into seriousness. He tried again with a few feints to find an opening in my brother's defense. Each time he was blocked with neatness and surety. Each time he drew back with a scowl. The color in his face gave way to a pallid white. His breath came short.

But there was a look of gathering hate on his countenance and a shifting expression in his eyes that roused me in alarm.

"Look out for a trick, André!"

It was foolish for me to cry out. It is no thing to do when men are in a conflict that means life or death, for in the second when he heard my voice, my brother shot a look towards me that told me as plainly as words that he knew what he was about. But I had given De Marsac his opportunity. In that brief moment when my brother's eyes were turned, our enemy sprang forward with the quickness of a tiger. The light of the candles ran like a flash along his blade. His arm, the sleeve of black velvet and fancy lace, straightened itself in the direction of my brother's chest.

But for the terror that I felt, I would have closed my eyes, for in the next breath I expected to see André fall. But instead he showed a nimbleness that I never dreamed was his. Like a spring he was down and up again. By the breath of a hair De Marsac's weapon passed over his shoulder. Our enemy's body was open for the fatal blow and my brother, heated with the conflict, wrapped his knuckles about his sword to strike his insulter to his feet.

His sword came forward. He had put one foot before the other to drive home the blow with all the might that lay in him. The point caught De Marsac in the middle of the chest as straight as ever a thrust was aimed and, I am sure with as much power behind it as any average man can put.

I expected to see our enemy crumble to the floor—dead. To our extreme amazement, as André struck, we heard a sharp click. The sword which De Marsac held, fell, to be sure, rattling to the floor. But no blood flowed, and his body, as though it had been violently pushed, or struck by a man's fist, tumbled back. He tried to keep on his feet but was too far gone. He measured his length on the floor and in falling knocked his head against one of the legs of the long oaken table.

It was the old Count of Gramont who spoke first.

"A coat of linked mail!" he cried running over to him. "He wears a coat of mail under his velvet jerkin."

De Marsac was stunned. The old Count caught him roughly by the shoulder and jerked him to his feet.

"A trickster!" he shouted in his face. "You are a low-born coward."

De Marsac never uttered a word. He blinked and ran his hand over his eyes till they cleared. The old smile of cunning curled around his lips, but this time it was mingled with contempt and hate.

"You Norman dogs!" he hissed. "Do you think I would match my life with yours?"

The old man went white with anger. He held his big hand out at arm's length. He curled it slowly into a knot of a fist and took a deep breath. With what force he could summon he whirled about and struck De Marsac a hard blow in the face. We had not expected it and I think De Marsac was taken by surprise too. His knees sagged under him and his arms fell limp at his side. He would have fallen, had not the old Count caught him again by the shoulder and pushed him into a chair.

"You are not the first of your breed that this fist has struck down," he cried. "In the days gone by it has wielded a battle-ax that laid dozens of your countrymen low. If the time comes," he added darkly, "it is still strong enough to match itself with another foe."

He took to pacing once more up and down the hall. André walked quietly to the rack and put his sword away. When he came back he picked up De Marsac's weapon where it had fallen and handed it to him.

"You will have no further need of this," he said in an even tone, "—at least while you are here."

Of the four of us in that room it was De Marsac who first regained his poise. The sting of the rebukes which had been flung into his face soon faded away. He arose without a look at any of us and took his coat over his arm. Then he put his hat upon his head and snapped his sword back into its scabbard. Without a word he walked towards the door and as he went I thought I saw his former jauntiness returning.

"Gentlemen," he said with his fingers on the latch and in a voice of sneering mockery. "You have won tonight, for it is difficult for a man to fight two against one. There will come another meeting when there will be fairer odds. At that time I promise you a different ending to the story."

None of us answered. He closed the door behind him quietly and with no show of anger passed out of the house.

I breathed a long sigh.

"I'm glad he's gone," I said.

My brother and the old Count exchanged glances.

"There's something back of that fellow," said André. "We must be on our guard for I think we shall hear from him again."

We sat for almost an hour. None of us stirred except André who busied himself in making a fire. When the blaze had spread warmth about the room he came and sat down with us again. A tiny spot of blood was oozing through the bandages.

"It's from the exertion," he explained with a smile. "I wonder if the fellow who attacked us on the road was a hireling of De Marsac?"

At that the dogs began barking and yelping as they did before. The old Count of Gramont started to the door, but before he reached it, it flew wide open. It was De Marsac who burst into the room. He must have fallen into the mud for his velvet breeches were splattered with clay. A wild look shone from his eyes and he was of the color of death.

"An attack has been made upon my life!" he cried.

We rose from our seats.

"I was making down the road towards the armorer's where I left my horse. I was set upon by a band of men. Look here!" he exclaimed and drew an arrow from under his cloak. "But for the coat of mail I was wearing this would have gone through my heart!"

"Have you enemies in the neighborhood?" demanded the old Count.

"There are enemies following me," declared De Marsac. "There is one who would snap out my life as you would snap a piece of straw. But this is not his work. This is the work of another." Terrified, he looked around the room. "Have you ever heard of the 'Will-o'-the-Wisp'?" he asked.

"No. Who is he?" we cried together.

"A highwayman," he answered. "—a bold desperate highwayman. For a month at a time he terrifies the countryside. Then he disappears. Miles and miles away he is heard from again. He is seldom seen. He works alone. It is his disguises that trick people. He can masquerade as a nobleman, a beggar, a soldier—anything."

He flung himself into a chair but was up in a flash again.

"Gentlemen, we have had our little dispute," he said hurriedly. "It is all over now and done with. You see I cannot venture out into the night without fear for my life. In the name of your hospitality I am going to ask you to let me rest here until the morning."

The old Count looked warningly at my brother and silently shook his head 'no.' But André, who was easily touched on the softer side, arose and bowed.

"I offer you every courtesy," he said quietly. "It is past midnight and no doubt you are weary from your ride. I shall light you to your room."

He took the candle and went before. In a few minutes he was down again.

"I could not do otherwise," he explained.

"He is not to be trusted, André," I said.

"The man's a rogue," added the Count of Gramont. "If I were you, André, I would put a guard about the house. There's something brewing that we have no knowledge of."

"I shall have one of the servants watch in the hall upstairs," my brother said. "Another will stay here during the night. We must learn what his purpose is so that we can meet the situation. In the morning if he smiles again, I shall be like honey to him. I think that is the better way."

The old Count laughed in his throat and grunted.

"If this were my house," he said, "I would make short work of him."

And he made a sign that meant that he would string him to a tree.

We were all tired. One by one we bade each other goodnight and went to bed.

Chapter V

What I Learned in the Woods.

The next morning when I awoke the sun was shining big and fairly warm. The chill of the night before had yielded to a gentle breeze that blew now steadily from the south.

I heard the clatter of pots and pans in the pantry below. The fresh odor of small bacon was wafted to my nostrils. In fits and starts the low rumble of men's voices arose like the heaviness of distant thunder here and there between a loud laugh that echoed high against the rafters.

By this I knew it was time that I was stirring. As fast as I could I washed and dressed myself and hurried down the stairs. I laid my hand on the latch to enter when another burst of laughter louder than the others smote upon my ears. I thought that some travelers or friends from the neighborhood were making a morning call, so I jerked open the door and with a smile of greeting entered the room.

In the next breath I stood stock still. There were but three men at the table—the old Count of Gramont, my brother André and the intruder of the night before. But what struck me first was that they were in the merriest of moods. The old Count was grinning and staring hard before him. André with his face in his palms was smiling like a pleased child. And De Marsac, as vivacious as a young colt, was babbling and talking like a running brook. His face was flushed. He was waving his hands as wildly as a windmill.

I never saw men so completely changed. It was all sham I knew—a kind of play in which the one was trying to beguile the other. There was no sincerity in their actions or their words. For a second I was amazed.

De Marsac must have seen the puzzled expression on my face. He leaped from his seat and hastened towards me. With the same show of outward delight with which you would greet an old acquaintance, he clapped my hand in his and tucked it under his arm.

"A sound sleeper," he cried. "An easy mind." And then, as though it were an amusing thing for a lad of my age to have a mind at all, he turned with a knowing gesture and broke into a laugh.

I flushed uncomfortably. I tried to withdraw from his grasp. But the more I pulled, the more firmly I felt the pressure of his arm. At length the two of us reached the seat which I usually occupied. Here he let go. As I sat down he continued to stand before me. With his hand over his heart he bowed pretty much as he had done the night before. Then he straightened himself again and laid his palm upon my shoulder.

"Here is what I call the makings of a man," he said to the Count and André in tones like an orator. "Strong arms. Sturdy limbs." He let his eye run the length of my body. "A great fighter some day—and a stubborn one. Is it not true, Henri?"

I smiled a sour smile, for his mockery was all too clear. He was, to my discomfort, treating me like a baby. He took his seat next to me. Then he began to pile my platter high with meat and wheaten cakes and poured a noggin full of whey. I sat there like a log, boiling within and wishing him out of the way.

"We'll be great friends yet, won't we, Henri?" he said in a soft sneering tone. "You know I was down to the armorer's long before you were out of bed. My horse has gone lame. It'll be three or four days before he'll be well again. In the meantime I'm going to be your guest." He stopped and drummed lightly on the table. "You'll be glad of that, won't you, Henri?"

I went on eating.

"I'll be sorry," said I, "—for the horse."

At that he turned to the Count and my brother, breaking out into a loud laugh, like a father whose child has said something unusually clever.

"Henri and I are going into the woods today," he went on in the same annoying voice. "After that we'll pay a visit to the forge. I want to show him my horse." Then he added slowly, "You can ride, can't you, Henri?"

"As well as any of them," I answered and went on hurrying through my meal.

De Marsac saw that I was nettled. He dared not drive his cajolery too far, for my brother was looking at him with half closed eyes, and the old Count had arched one brow gazing at me to see how I was standing his thrusts.

At length our visitor turned his conversation to the older men. He chattered like a magpie. One story followed the other with flashes of wit between. The spirit of merriment which was in the air when I entered the room came back. I saw my chance. As quietly as I could I arose and slipped softly out of the door.

With a feeling of relief I turned the corner of the house and was making down the gravel path when I heard a crunching of the stones behind me. I cast a glance over my shoulder. To my discomfort there was De Marsac coming quickly after me. He had his head thrown back and with his eyes towards the sky was whistling an air.

"Ah," he exclaimed when I turned, "you are going somewhere?"

I stopped.

"To the armorer's," I said shortly. Then in the hope that he would leave me to myself, "I have business there—of a private nature."

My hint fell flat. In a kind of running walk he caught up to me and said, "That's fine. We'll go together."

I would have run away had I been able. Why was I to be bothered by a man who was nothing but a nuisance and a pest? I tried to think of one excuse or other to rid myself of him. None came, so for the while I made the best of it.

We went on in silence. He had his head in the air looking brightly about. I had mine down for I hated even the sight of his face. After a little he made a jab or two but they failed. When he saw that his nonsense was of no purpose he turned serious and prodded me with all kinds of questions.

He showed an interest in the extent of our land. In a sly way he got out of me how far it ran and what crops it bore. Then he mentioned the old Count of Gramont and the size of his estates. He touched on the strength of his castle on the hill—the number of men which he kept under arms—the revenues that came from his possessions in the valley and what wealth he was said to have.

You may be sure that I told him as little as I could. In some respects I was as good a play-actor as he, for to most of his questionings I had but one stupid answer, "I don't know." If it was his intention to treat me like a dunce, I was more than willing to act the part of one.

Finally a fresh thought came to me. I halted of a sudden and stepped away from him.

"I've changed my mind," I said. "I'm not going to the armorer's. I'm going through the woods."

He let his arms fall to his sides.

"—through the woods?" he asked. "Why?"

His eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"I had an accident there last night," I replied. "I should like to see what became of a certain man."

He rolled his eyes as though he was thinking—trying to measure me in his mind.

"What's your game, Henri?" he asked. His voice was low but I felt a threat lurking in it.

I began to explain.

"You see, as I was coming home last night, I happened upon two men who were quarreling in the woods," said I, watching his face closely.

"Yes," he answered.

"The one got the better of the other," I went on, "and the man who lost was tied by the victor to a tree."

He did not change his expression, but looked steadily into my eyes.

"Dead?" he demanded.

"No. Alive."

The breath came back to him. He tried not to show it but a faint smile of satisfaction played around his mouth.

"I understand you now, Henri," he went on. "You have a good heart. If he is still there, you want to set him free."

With that he clapped my arm under his as he had done just before breakfast. With a little more hurry than was necessary he made with me towards the woods.

I led him to the spot where I thought the man was lashed to the tree. But the only trace of him we found was a length of rope. It was frayed and worn at the ends. No doubt he had set himself free by hours of rubbing against the rough bark. The ground about the trunk was stamped and torn as though by the marching of a hundred feet.

"The villain's gone," I remarked.

"Why do you call him a villain?" De Marsac came back at me with his soft sneer.

"Because, Sieur De Marsac," said I with more boldness than caution, "he tried to take my life."

De Marsac whistled.

"And he failed?" he said. His voice flattened as though it was a thing he regretted. Then he came close to me. "Do you know, Henri," he continued in the same slow tone, "any of us might be killed without a moment's warning. There is a man following me at this very minute who is thirsting for my life."

"It might be the same fellow," I suggested craftily.

"No," he said, "your fellow is an ordinary lout—stupid. He has made a mess of his work. The man who is following me is far deadlier. He never misses—and never fails."

I drew cautiously away, for De Marsac's words and the snake-like subtlety of them threw me on my guard.

"What do you mean," said I, "when you say that 'he has made a mess of his work'? Is it your opinion that I really ought to have been killed?"

His eyes sharpened. Like a man ready to strike a blow his face grew red with anger and he shifted forward.

"You are a smart lad, Henri," he said drawing his eyes together till they were almost closed, "but you should be taught to speak more respectfully to your betters."

I hardly knew what to say. There was no good in the man. He was underhand in his actions. He had something up his sleeve that he was going to have out with me. It struck me that the sooner it was over the better.

"You are not plain enough, Sieur De Marsac," I said, "for me to answer you." Then rashness got the upper hand of me and I burst out, "Why did you follow me this morning, anyway?"

He only stood glaring at me. His lips tightened. A wicked glint gathered in his eyes and he stepped in towards me. I was now truly alarmed. I looked from one side of me to the other for a way of escape. I saw him finger at his belt for his dagger. His answer came like a thunderbolt.

"—to finish the bungling of last night!" he hissed.

I was entirely on the defensive for I had no weapons. As he reached out to grasp me, I sprang to one side. Then I turned to run for it. We were somewhat aside of the path and the underbrush was matted and tangled. I made a leap, thinking to get as far from him as possible. My foot caught in a weed or trailing vine which held it as though it were tied there.

In the next second my legs were knocked from under me. I fell forward on my hands and face. Then I got another jolt as though someone were thumping me on the side and shoulders with a heavy log. I could not see, for the undergrowth was sharp and I was forced to close my eyes. A deep grunt and a squeal started near me. A brushing of the weeds and vines followed. Terror crept into my soul for I realized that it was an animal which I had startled and disturbed.

My heart was jumping like a hammer. I rose on one elbow and looked fearfully around. To my amazement and horror, as I scrambled to my feet, I saw a wild boar with its snout to the ground make its way through the underbrush and disappear deeper into the woods.

Then came another surprise. De Marsac was standing as white as a corpse. He seemed to have forgotten me entirely. His eyes were fastened on the direction which the boar had taken. His whole body was moving nervously as though he were greatly excited. From what I had noticed before I knew a fresh thought had started in his mind. Like a flash he was over helping me to my feet.

"Henri," he called. "You can thank me for saving your life! If I hadn't warned you in time, you would have been gored to death!"

I made no reply for the thoughts were scared out of me.

"We'll go home now, Henri," De Marsac said in a trembling voice.

I went along with him. From the time we left the woods he spoke not a word to me nor did he seem conscious of my presence. There was something brewing in his mind. He continually snapped his fingers as though he was impatient. He muttered under his breath and shook his head in approval of what was stirring in his thoughts.

Once I heard him mumble, "The wild boar. The very thing. We'll hunt the wild boar." Again, when he appeared forgetful that I was there, he growled, "It will be an easier way—when we hunt the wild boar." He laughed confidently to himself. "We'll start tomorrow—at dawn." When we came to the gravel path that led to the house, he clapped me on the shoulder.

"Tomorrow will be my lucky day—eh, Henri?" he said.

Chapter VI

We Hunt the Wild Boar.

We reached home in the early afternoon. It was then that I got a clearer vision of De Marsac's duplicity and of the game that he was playing. No sooner had we laid eyes upon my brother and the Count, when he began to tell of our adventure in the woods in the most excited fashion. He drew a most vivid picture of the danger I had been in. He painted himself in the rôle of my rescuer. His voice took on a high tremulous tone as though he too had suffered from the shock and were really alarmed at my nearness to death. Every now and then he turned to me to bear him out in this or that assertion but went rapidly on again before I had time to utter a sound. He clapped me on the back. He tugged me by the elbow. He looked beamingly into my face. To see and hear him you would have thought that I was lucky to be alive and you would have considered him the bravest man in the world.

At last with a fine frenzy he concluded.

"We must track this monster to his lair," he shouted. "We must drive him to his death."

I was like a fish floundering on dry land. To me this man was all fraud and froth. I looked appealingly towards my brother with the hope that he would see beneath it all.

The old Count rose and stretched himself.

“André,” he said with a sly wink, “it’ll be a fine day’s sport. What do you say?”

“We shall have everything ready by the morning, Sieur De Marsac,” he said dryly. Then he turned to the old Count and said, “We must drive this monster to its doom.”

With that he grinned and walked away.

That was final, I knew. I went off to the barn and busied myself during the afternoon with odds and ends that interested me. The day passed and the night came. We lighted the candles. Until the time for bed we sat in the great hall exchanging worthless gossip.

I dragged myself upstairs first, tired and weary. But I managed to keep awake until I heard the others follow one by one. When I thought them fast asleep, I crept noiselessly into André’s room and sat softly down on the side of his bed. To my surprise he had not closed his eyes.

“I was expecting you, Henri,” he said.

“I came to speak to you about De Marsac,” I began. “Don’t you think he is bent on harm?”

“Are you worried?” he asked.

“I have good reason to be,” I replied. “It was only by a lucky chance that I was not killed today.”

He sat bolt upright in the bed and took me by the arm.

“By him?” he demanded.

“Yes.” And I told him of the happenings in the woods.

“That is going too far,” he said. “Tomorrow must be his last day among us. He must forth from the house.”

“Why does he linger here, André?” I asked. “Do you know?”

“I can only guess,” he answered.

“It is to get possession of our estate,” I ventured, “—ours and the estate of the Count of Gramont. There is a plot hatching. The men who set upon me in the woods are in it. And I believe that De Marsac is the leader.”

“I rather thought,” said he, “that he was an agent of the King.”

“He is that and more too,” I replied. “André, you may take my word for it. De Marsac wants this place for himself.”

He made no answer. We sat there in the dark for a long time. At length he laid his hand upon my shoulder.

“Henri,” he said, “we must give the matter deep thought. But this I promise you, come what may, after the boar hunt tomorrow I shall drive this schemer from the house.”

With that I went slowly to my room. My sleep was fitful. All night long I dreamed the wildest dreams so that when morning came I was not half rested. I leaped from my bed with my heart thumping, for there below I heard the cocks crowing in the yard. There was a clamor of men shouting to each other. The horses’ hoofs clattered on the ground. There was the clang of steel against steel. The animals snorted as they sensed the excitement in the air. And above all I heard André’s voice shout a command. I knew that it was high time for me to be about and stirring.

I slipped down the stairs fastening my belt as I went. In less time than it takes to tell I was across the yard and was leading out the roan which I had always claimed as my own.

We were divided into two parties. I was to accompany the one led by the Count of Gramont, while André, with De Marsac, was to take the other. Our

enemy was in high spirits. He had borrowed one of André's horses and to display himself made it cavort and caper about with the glee of a child. I fastened a look on him. I am sure I felt nothing but contempt for a man so vain. I let my eye run from his hat with the feather in it to the spurs upon his boots. The rest of us wore tight-fitting jerkins of smooth leather, but he had on his long black cloak. It struck me as being quite strange. I was beginning to wonder if he had a motive for it when I saw that it was another trick of his, for beneath the skirts I discovered that he had brought along with him his sword!

I did not think twice. I slipped from my horse and ran into the hall. In a second I was back again with the weapon which my brother had used only two nights before. I went to André where he was among the others and tugged at his sleeve.

"Take this," I urged. "Later on I'll tell you the reason why."

With that I was on my horse again. A long loud blast of the horn and we were off. André and De Marsac swerved far to the west. The Count of Gramont and our followers turned towards the south.

We were soon in the woods. The dogs ran hither and thither searching for a scent. We rode where the trees were furthest apart lest the branches that hung low might knock us from our saddles. Here and there the ground was soggy, but for the most part we were not troubled with our footing for we followed a road that the woodsmen had made, rough, irregular, to be sure, but known to me and my companions.

Deeper and deeper we went into the forest. The smell of moss rose to my nostrils and the odor of logs, rotted on the damp ground. The dogs spread out more and more like a fan, with their noses to the earth, eager and tense.

Presently one of them raised his head in the air. He let out a long quivering bark that echoed strangely through the woods. Then the others followed. The whole pack jumped and yelped as though they had suddenly gone mad, and ran heedlessly forward. I was in need of no one to tell me that they had caught the scent and were flying after their prey.

Then, after another short while, the sound of a horn floated high through the branches of the trees. It seemed very far away. We rode on and on. The heat of the excitement was showing in our faces. The horses, too, snorted as though they were conscious of the strain.

The blast of the horn came again. This time it seemed nearer and more prolonged, with a quivering at the end that sounded like jubilation.

"They've stirred the boar," the old Count said to me, turning in his saddle, and with a motion of his hand he gave the signal to one of his followers to answer with a returning blast.

We were in the very thick of the woods. We had left the path and were in places where the underbrush was dense. The trees, too, seemed larger and of greater girth. Now and then a bird circled over our heads and flew chattering about us.

A quarter of an hour passed, with the horn sounding now and then to give us the direction. The dogs were running with their tongues hanging wet and red from their mouths. The going was getting more and more difficult.

Suddenly a blast, so loud that it shook us in our saddles, resounded in our ears. The shouts of men came to us through the trees. The barking of the dogs, sharp like the cracking of a whip, cut in between.

Before we knew it we were out in the open. That is we came to a place where few trees grew. All was covered with a soft marsh that was like ooze under the horses' feet. The weeds and vines were waist high and so knotted and enmeshed that we must go carefully through them.

The shouts came again. This time they were so near that I was able to distinguish the words. I looked ahead to catch a glimpse of André and his men. I saw the brush part at a spot not far away. Then, to my amazement, I heard the angry snort of a boar and, directly following, the long hairy back of the animal burst upon my vision.

I reined in my horse. The old Count of Gramont (who was to the fore of me) caught his spear by the haft. The dogs came pouring into the opening like rain. One of them ventured in close to the boar and in the next second was sent yelping back with a wound in his shoulder where he had been pierced by a white tusk.

The animal was foaming at the mouth from frenzy. He knew that he was beset by enemies on all sides. He lowered his head till it touched the ground and made a mad plunge forward.

At the same moment I saw André appear through the trees. At his side rode De Marsac. They let out a shout and looked swiftly over to us. The old Count and I raised our spears on high. I knew that in a moment the boar was doomed, for between us there was little chance of his escape.

While I leaned back to get the greatest force behind my blow, I caught sight of my brother and our enemy opposite. A smile started on my face but it died away again. Both men whipped their spears aloft. Without a moment's delay they whirled sidewise in their saddles. Their arms shot back and then forward again. The bright steel darted through the air like long glistening threads. They crossed in their flight as shears are crossed when you open them, and flitted onward. At the same time I let mine go too and fixed my eyes upon the boar.

Only one of the spears struck, but it was hurled with such force that it caught the boar in the middle of the back and pierced clean to the region of his heart. While it was in full career, it faltered in its plunge. Stumbling, it dug its tusks into the earth. Then it rolled over, kicking among the underbrush, and stretched out dead.

You must remember that all this happened in a very brief time. A feeling of triumph ran along every nerve. I turned towards the old Count with my face beaming with delight, when I saw him swaying unsteadily in his seat. He had gone ashen pale. The spear had dropped from his hand and his fingers were clutching at the empty air. Then, unable to steady himself any longer, he leaned far to the one side and tumbled headlong from his saddle.

On the instant I forgot all about the boar. I was down from my horse like a flash and at his side. To my horror the fresh blood was flowing in a steady stream from a wide-open gash in his chest. I raised his head and laid it in the hollow of my bended arm and looked around appealingly for help. His lips moved as though he would speak. But no words came. His eye-lids quivered. Then, with a gasp, he fell back.

In the meantime André and De Marsac were at my side. My brother stooped down and spoke to the old Count. That other stood aloof. His glance was turned half-way towards us and half-way towards the woods. The faintest trace of a smile flickered on his face and his eyes beamed as though with inward satisfaction.

“Is he dead?” he demanded finally.

I laid the old Count gently down. André and I stood for a moment with our heads bowed to breathe a prayer.

“He has been killed!” replied my brother with anger and bitterness bursting his heart.

To our amazement De Marsac stepped forward and touched André on the arm.

“You will have to answer for this deed with your life, André La Mar,” he said coldly. “You are the murderer of one of the foremost barons of Normandy!”

Chapter VII

The Black Prince.

André drew back like a man taken unawares as though he would avoid a blow. He stood motionless for a moment to gather his dazed thoughts. A silence fell over us like the hollowness of an empty tomb, with only the long strained cawing of a crow overhead to break the tenseness.

Then a clearness came into his eyes and with it a hardness about his mouth and jaws. He took one step forward and blazed a look of hate at our enemy.

“I know now, De Marsac,” he said, “why you have come among us. You planned this from the beginning.”

That other shifted his gaze and pointed to where the old Count of Gramont lay.

“You understand what this means?” he asked with a glare in his eyes.

“Better than you imagine,” answered my brother, with his voice lifting high among the trees. “By foul means young Charles of Gramont—that man’s son—was lured into a snare and carried off, a prisoner of him you choose to call your King. By fouler means still you crept into our house like a viper under pretense of hospitality. You picked a quarrel with me the moment you arrived, thinking you would kill me in the fight. You were thwarted in that. You tried to murder Henri there in the woods.” He cast a look in the direction of the old Count. A smile of scorn curled about his mouth when he faced De Marsac again. “The only plan of yours to succeed was in the slaying of an old man. Pshaw! I never dreamed a human being could stoop so low!”

A flush of wrath colored De Marsac’s face, but slowly died out to a dead white. With his eyes shifting and shining, I thought with murder in them, he flouted my brother once again.

“You are wasting words, my friend La Mar,” he sneered. “The whole brood of you is like a dying candle. It is hardly worth the snuffing out.”

My brother heard this with the coolness and firmness of a rock. When the last syllable of De Marsac’s scorn faded in the air, André planted his feet squarely on the ground. Then, with his open palm, he struck that other a stinging blow across the face.

“You have brought your sword, De Marsac,” he said in an even voice. “By good fortune I also have brought mine.” Here he laid his hand upon the pommel. “We were interrupted once. We can continue——”

Before he could end the sentence the steel was in the air. Both men in their eagerness stepped in close to each other. The blades rang out as they crossed up to the hilts. They both drew back again and made a wicked exchange of thrust and parry. They played fast and furiously at arm's length. They shifted swiftly on the loose ground. Then, after De Marsac missed his aim at a point above the heart, André touched him lightly with the point of his sword upon the ear.

"Your armor, De Marsac," he cried with a mocking laugh, "makes it difficult. To kill you I must strike you in the neck or face."

De Marsac, at the first blood, had drawn back. He was gathering his sword in his hand for another trial, when a dark shadow came towards us from behind the trees. It was the figure of a man with an oaken staff in his hand. And before any of us could stir he called out in a deep voice as though he was applauding the stroke he had just seen the single word: "Bravo!"

I gave a little start, for the suddenness of his appearance surprised me. And as though they had heard a command both my brother and De Marsac lowered their blades and gazed, one with curiosity, the other with alarm at the stranger.

He was clad entirely in black from the close-fitting cap upon his head to the toes of his fine leather boots. His doublet encircled his chest with the tightness of a drum and was of a rich cloth, durable but severely plain. As far as I could see he was without weapons of any sort save the knotted staff which he had in his hand.

He was what you might call of medium height and build. But the longer you looked at him, the more you grew aware of some hidden strength that lay within. His face was square and large boned and of a ruggedness of color that bespoke a life in the open. His eyes were deep set in their sockets. When he looked at you the steadiness of his gaze was midway between a frown and a scowl. He moved like a man who was accustomed to time his actions to the moment, but withal with such lightness and ease that constantly reminded you that, at the slightest need, he could spring forward with the litheness of a tiger and strike with the swiftness of lightning.

He remained for a while standing looking from my brother to De Marsac. Then, of a sudden he laughed. But it was a laugh that had no mirth in it but which rang like a mocking echo through the trees.

"Still at your old tricks, I see, De Marsac," he said as he advanced. "You have profited little from the lesson that I so lately taught."

De Marsac's hand shook. He rested his sword with the point upon the ground. He shifted uneasily, glancing in one direction then another. The flush on his face died out to the whiteness of parchment.

He breathed. "Ah!" he cried, but his voice choked. "You!"

The man in black folded his arms across his chest and let his club swing lightly from between his fingers.

"Yes," he said. "We have a little argument to settle between us. You will remember we began one but never finished."

De Marsac flashed a look of hate at the man.

"I have not done with him there," he said, pointing at André. "After this—"

The stranger grinned and raised his brows.

"From what I have seen, De Marsac, there may be no 'after this'," he said. "You know how disappointed I would feel to see you die!—that is by hands

other than my own! Would you have me call you a coward in the presence of these witnesses?"

"'Coward'?" echoed our enemy. "You can't say that. You know I fought you like a man until——"

The stranger mocked him again.

"Yes," he said. "You did. That is—until you ran away!"

De Marsac's eyes sought the ground. He was like a rat that is cornered. A heavy frown crossed his brows and he ground his teeth in rage.

"Come!" The man in black coaxed him. "I shall give you every advantage. You have a sword there in your hand. I have only an oaken staff. Could I offer you easier terms?"

There was no way out of it. This our enemy saw. Like a man who will risk all on one cast, without a sign of warning, he sprang with all his quickness with his sword pointed outwards at his foe. So fast was he that I feared he would kill him on the spot. But the man in black must have expected such a move. As lithely as a cat he stepped to one side. De Marsac, with no object to bring him to a stop, plunged furiously headlong and fell stumbling to the turf.

It was as ridiculous a situation as I ever saw. My brother and I, forgetful of the seriousness of the moment, let out loud peals of laughter. The stranger hardly stirred and that only to follow his enemy guardedly with his eyes. De Marsac was filled with shame and wrath that he had been so smoothly outwitted. He raised himself cautiously on his hands and knees and looked around. Then, seeing that he was not threatened, he sprang again to his feet and faced his foe.

There followed a single exchange that I shall not forget as long as I shall draw the breath of life. De Marsac raised his sword on high, as you would a battle-ax, and with all the force he could summon started a blow. If it had ever reached its mark, it would have split the stranger's skull in twain. But the man in black was this time even more alert than he had been before. With a quick step he jumped in close to his foeman's body. He raised the oaken staff over his head. He caught the blade on it as it descended. The edge of the steel must have cut deep into the wood, for it held there as firmly as though it were in a vise. A quick twist of the wrist and it was torn from De Marsac's grasp and flew twirling and spinning in the air. Like a bird that has been pierced by an arrow it came down and clattered to the earth.

The man in black showed no more concern than if he were plucking a flower from a field. He went over and took the sword in his hand. He ran his fingers along the blade and wiped away the clay that had stuck to it where it had fallen. Then with the utmost deliberation, he snapped it across his knee and tossed the pieces contemptuously at De Marsac's feet.

"I could crush the life out of you now, De Marsac," he said, "with this club of mine. Or for a second time I might let you go." He hesitated as though he was thinking and with a snap of his fingers said, "Pshaw! What are you to me but a worm crawling on the ground."

De Marsac uttered not a word. He stood with his arms at his side, his body swaying slightly waiting for a new turn in the affair. The man in black took to pacing up and down. For a moment he was deep in thought as though he had forgotten our existence. Then he looked suddenly up and with heavy brows addressed our enemy.

“Go back to your King, De Marsac,” he growled, and with a sweep of his hand as commanding as an emperor. “Tell him that I defy him to his teeth. Tell him that before the year’s end I shall sweep him from his throne.”

De Marsac frowned. He glared at the stranger with hate and anger in his eyes. Then, hesitating with every step, he made slowly towards the trees. When he felt himself secure, he faced us and raised his arm on high.

“It is you who will be blotted from the earth,” he cried. “Before the year’s end we shall meet again. We shall see then who will have the upper hand.”

With that he disappeared among the trees.

The man in black continued his pacing up and down upon the ground. What André and I had seen and heard cautioned us to keep our peace. At length he stopped and raised a finger in warning.

“I caution you,” he said, “that that fellow will be back again. He’ll scheme and plan until he gets revenge. That’s the kind of vermin the King of France sends out to stir up trouble among the Norman barons. You did wrong to let him cross the threshold of your house.”

Once more he paced to and fro. No doubt he was thinking some matter to the bottom. We stood open-mouthed, wondering at his confidence and his bearing. The next time he halted it was of another matter that he spoke.

“The heir of Gramont is gone,” he said. “He was taken a prisoner down the valley of the Loire. Is it to your interest to have him back?”

“He was like a brother to us,” said André, “and the son of my father’s warmest friend. We would gladly give our lives for him. I am sure in like predicament he would do the same for us.”

The man’s eyes lit up with a kind of fire. His jaws tightened. By the flicker of a smile that played about his mouth I was sure he was pleased with André’s answer.

“The old spirit of the Norman race is with you yet,” he said, “tough and stubborn to the last. It is a good sign. If you will bring Charles of Gramont back, let one of you go down the valley of the Loire. It will be a dangerous undertaking, for you will be among the enemies of your country. Above all, take heed of what you see and hear. Beyond Angers the open territory is dominated by a man called the Abbot of Chalonnes. It will be your business to find him. And it will be he who will return to you the lad you seek—young Charles.”

We looked at each other, André and I.

“It may be a fool’s errand,” remarked my brother. “How will the Abbot know?—what sign or token shall we give?”

The man in black spun on his heels like a top. He said nothing, only ripped open his doublet wide across his chest. To our amazement we saw that underneath instead of a shirt he wore the tanned hide of an animal’s skin with the hair turned outward. With his hand he reached down and from under his belt brought forth a fine yellow plume such as great leaders wear on their helmets on the field of battle.

Illustration:
The Arrow Struck With a Click

“Do you know this?” he cried, holding it before us.

“It is the tail of a leopard made into a plume,” said André.

“It will be enough, then,” he said shortly, “to say to the Abbot of Chalonnes that you have seen this.”

He made to go.

“One word more,” called André after him. “Is it too much for us to know your name?”

The stranger stopped on the fringe of the woods. He turned and looked back.

“My father sits upon the English throne,” he said. “I am known as the Black Prince!”

Slowly and sadly, with the body of the old Lord of Gramont borne tenderly among us, we wended our way towards our home. We had much to talk about, but in our grief we held our tongues. We passed each other with bowed heads and sorrowful faces. There was a gloom about the place like the coldness of death.

We laid the old warrior away in the tomb of his fathers. In the evening we sat alone together—André and I—in the light of the candles. The early September day had been unusually warm and the casements were flung wide. The servants had long since gone to bed. There was scarcely a sound except our own breathing.

“I must go, Henri, to the Abbot of Chalonnes,” said my brother, breaking the silence. “There must be no more delay.”

“If you go,” I answered, “De Marsac will appear again. There will be no one left to defend the estate.”

André bit his lips but did not answer. He walked across the room and stood at the side of the great oaken table in the centre of the room. I arose, too, and stood opposite him.

“Let us toss for it, André,” said I taking a newly-minted groat from my pocket. “If it fall heads, you go, shields, I go.”

I flung the piece in the air. It fell, but fell on its edge and rolled down from the table across the room. I was about to go after it when an arrow came floating through the open window. It struck with a click and fastened its point in the hard wood. Upon the shaft, wound with a tight cord, was tied a small piece of parchment.

André drew back.

“Another enemy!” he cried. “Will there never be an end?”

“No,” said I. “You are wrong. This time it is a friend.”

With feverish fingers I drew the arrow from the wood and unrolled the parchment. With a kind of inward triumph I spread it open before my brother’s eyes. At the bottom there was drawn the figure of a leopard, very roughly to be sure, but still as plain as day. Above it in a scrawl so crude that it could hardly be deciphered were these words:

“Send the lad!”

“There, André!” said I. “Will this decide it?”

My brother waved his hand in the air like a man who yields to the will of Fate and moved across the room.

“I stay,” he said, and sank into the nearest chair.

Chapter VIII

The Silver-Hafted Dagger.

That night I slept but little. The excitement of the day had been too much for me. The old Count's death, the treachery of De Marsac, and the appearance in our parts of so great and widely known a man as the Black Prince—all this set my brain in a swirl and kindled in it a kind of fire. Besides, too, there was the prospect of the long journey that lay before me, visions of the strange characters I would meet, the odds and ends of places through which I should surely pass, and by no means least of all, the snares and pitfalls that were certain to be a menace to my unwary feet.

At the first grey of dawn I was up from my bed. As quickly as I was able I dressed myself in the same clothes that I had worn on the day of the boar-hunt—a jerkin of strong sewed leather, a doublet that would keep out both wind and rain, breeches of soft deer-hide, knitted stockings of our home-spun wool, a pair of shoes that were oiled and worked until they were as pliant as the skin upon my hand—plain clothes, but strong and lasting, clothes that would draw no comment either for their richness or their meanness. And as a last touch I set a little cap with a feather in it upon my head.

I breakfasted on a cold meat-pie that was left over from the night before. All was quiet about the house. I thought that as yet there was no one stirring. But when I walked into the open to my surprise there was André coming from the stables, leading a horse on either hand—his own and the one I was accustomed to call mine.

"I will ride with you as far as the brow of the hill," he said, and that in a voice that was almost at a breaking point.

I would have answered but a lump as big as an apple rose to my throat, so that without a word I took the reins that he offered me and swung into the saddle.

We started down the road at a slow canter. The freshness of the morning air sent the blood tingling through my veins. The brightness of the sun shone on every dewy leaf. The easy motion of the horse had a charm of its own. But with all this I could not scatter the cloud of seriousness that had come between us.

Presently we fell into an easy talk, but it was a talk that hid rather than revealed what lay deepest in our bosoms. Not a word was spoken of the happenings of the past week nor of the mission I was on until after more than an hour's ride. We came to the crest of the hill that rises southward from our home. Here we slowly gathered in the reins. We halted our horses and sat side by side for a moment in silence. Then André drew a long breath and extended his hand.

"Good-by, Henri," he said, and added in a faltering voice, "You will come safe home to me, I know."

That was all. I took his hand in mine. Our eyes met. But I had to turn mine quickly aside again.

"I shall do my best," I replied. It wasn't much of an answer, but it was as brave a speech as I was able to bring over my lips. The truth is my tongue failed me. When I looked up again a little wistful smile lay in the corners of my brother's mouth and he was drawing in the reins to turn about.

We parted. I urged the roan forward and started off down the other side of the hill. Now and then the impulse rose within me to turn and wave a last

farewell, but ever as it did, new strength came to me and I set my face resolutely forward.

The horse broke into a loose trot. Faster and faster I went over the uneven road. More than once I thought I would be pitched headlong from my mount. I entered a sharp bend in the hills. As I turned the horse's head the tall trees stood between me and my home like a great black wall. Within an hour or two I realized that I was treading on new ground. Yet the further I went, the freer I felt. I was like a bird loosed from long confinement in a cage. The joy of exploration was lending me fresh thoughts and my dependence on those at home was shaken gradually from me like the last threads of an old garment.

The highway was like a country in itself. It had its inhabitants and its customs, its laws and traditions. Its population, too, began to strike me as singularly fanciful. Traveler after traveler passed me, the one on the heels of the other. But all of them of interest. Indeed so different were they from one another that I was soon set speculating and wondering what manner of life they led and above all where in the world could they be going.

The first person worth mentioning whom I came across was a scrivener. That is to say, one of those wandering scholars—a man skilled in the art of writing. He was sitting on a stone near a little brook that ran bubbling from the cool of the trees. He was munching at some bread and cheese as contentedly as you could wish. Alongside of him in the grass lay a long round bundle wrapped in a dirty cloth. Beside this lay a handful of quills and a horn in which he carried his ink. His appearance was nothing to boast of. His forehead and hands were streaked and smeared black and a full week's growth of beard covered his face. And the worst thing about him was his clothes—an ill-fitting suit of velvet of dark blue, spotted and ragged, which some one had given him.

At the first sight of me his jaw fell agape. The bread which he had just stuffed into his mouth fell in crumbs over his knees. His eyes glared at me as though they would start from their sockets. I thought a kind of fright had overtaken him, but in the next second he jumped to his feet with the lightness of a hare and laid his hand over his heart in a way that reminded me strongly of De Marsac. Then he swept the ground with his soiled cap and bowed.

"My Lord," he said with the utmost seriousness, "I am alone. I lack company. Will you be gracious enough to dine with me?"

At that he straightened up and smiled.

"I am no lord," I answered with a twinkle in my eye. "Nor am I hungry. I have a long ride ahead of me and must be on my way."

With that I made to be off. But the scrivener seemed to have no hearing. He clapped his cap upon his head and with a skip was out in the middle of the road.

"If you are not a noble," he said with his grin spreading from ear to ear, "you ought to be. But I am sure of one thing——" He let the last words trail in the air as though he would puzzle me.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Your horse is!" he cried. And then he bent over and laughed as though he had made the smartest remark in the world.

I was feeling uneasy. The thought came to me that I was wasting my time with a madman and the sooner I could get off from him the better.

"Well," I replied dryly, "maybe he is. But don't let me interrupt your meal."

I looked down the road to let him know that I was anxious to be off. The hint was wasted, for he stepped in close to the roan and started to stroke him on the neck, muttering and mumbling to himself words of the highest praise.

He twisted his head to the one side like a bird on a perch and winked at me knowingly.

"Do you know what I'd give for this horse?" he demanded.

"He's not for sale," I said with some abruptness. But he went on as though I had not spoken.

"I'd give everything I have," he burst out. "I'd give my parchment, my inkhorn and my quills. And I'd be willing to forget all I know of the art of writing, if I could call him my own!"

I almost laughed in his face.

"You're generous, master scrivener," said I, and once more gathered in the reins.

But he was not to be so easily shaken off. He made a pretense of great affection for the animal. He laid his cheek against its head. He took to stroking its mane. Then he looked up into my face with a cunning leer.

"Do you know," he began slyly, "I don't believe the horse is yours at all."

"What!" said I. "Do you take me for a thief?"

"Ah!" he exclaimed, raising his brows. "I've hit a soft spot, now, haven't I? Why, it's true then that you gentlemen of the road are as touchy as a flock of crows."

I was almost overcome. That I would be taken for a highwayman was far from what I had ever dreamed.

"Look here!" I called. "Take your hand from that horse. I'll give you till I count 'three.' If you're not out of the way then, I'll ride you down."

The scrivener paid me no more attention than he would a fly. Without taking his eyes from me, he reached into his belt and drew forth a dagger. As he held it in the air, I saw that it was of unusual value and workmanship. The blade was as thin as a blade of grass and rang to his touch like the finest steel. Besides, the haft shone with a brightness that could hardly be believed, for it was not only of the clearest silver but was set with a scattering of brilliant stones.

"Let's start the bargaining over again, my lord," he said. "Will you exchange your horse for this?"

I was at my wit's end. I was sure now that he was not only a madman but a knave as well. The longer I lingered there with him, the more dangerous seemed my situation. I set my jaws in resolution. He must have noticed the expression on my face, for he reached out and grasped the bridle firmly in his hand. At the same time he held out the weapon in the hope it would strike my fancy.

"Who is the thief now, master scrivener?" I asked.

"Wouldn't you like to have it?" he questioned with another sly wink. "It's yours for the taking—if you will only give me your horse."

At that he began tossing the dagger over his head and with much deftness catching it again in his hand. I sat watching him with anger swelling in my heart. Higher and higher the dagger went. The more difficult the catch, the easier it seemed to him. At length it rose far over his head, spinning and twirling like a leaf in the wind. Then a thought came to me. With one grasp I reached far out. By merest chance I caught the weapon by the hilt. I sank my heels into the horse's flank. In his amazement the scrivener loosed his hold on the bridle and I was free from him.

Before I was out of hearing I drew the horse to a stop. I turned and saw the scrivener standing in the middle of the road. He had his hands flat over his hips and was grinning with all his might.

I held the dagger on high.

"Do you see this?" I called. "I am going to keep it until I find the man to whom it belongs."

His answer sent the chills down my spine.

"Fine!" he shouted. "Take it to the Abbot of Chalonnes!"

Chapter IX

A Solitary House in the Woods.

The rest of that day passed pleasantly enough. To be sure, there were wayfarers whom I met. I remember most distinctly a few scattered soldiers with heavy beards who talked deep and boastingly in their throats. Then there came a barber with a satchel in his hand. He had a white curled wig on his head and a comb tucked jauntily in the side of it over his ear. No doubt he was going the rounds among his customers, the gentry of the neighborhood. By the mincing way in which he walked, the fancy lace upon his sleeves and collar, together with the display of a red waistcoat and a pair of polished silver-buckled shoes he must have thought himself equal to any doctor of Physic of the great university of Bologna.

He doffed his cap to me with some show of delicacy. He began to ask me if any great houses lay in the direction from which I had come, where he could earn a handful of groats. He told me that if there were any sick in the neighborhood, he could make them well again by the skill he had in cupping and leeching. I knew that barbers had the reputation as idle gossips, so I answered as evasively as I could. Then, when he saw that he was strumming on the wrong string, he grew bolder and more direct. He said flatly that I needed a little care myself. He invited me down from the horse. He assured me that, if I would sit on a stone on the side of the road for the space of half an hour, he would make a new man of me by the application of his art.

But my experience with the scrivener had been enough. I knew that it was best to deal with this new nuisance as deftly as I might. I first said that he looked the master of his trade in every way. At which he puffed up like a pigeon and seemed highly flattered. Then I slowly let him know that my stock of money was very low, that I could hardly reckon on a resting place for the night (which of course was true) and that I was cautioned to be careful in the expenditure of every single coin.

I might have gone further. But when my lack of money became known to him, he dropped his smile and shot a look at me that had poison in it. He picked up his satchel, grumbling and growling under his breath, and with a remark about beggars riding on horseback, quickly strode away.

The next was a fellow with a cart, or rather a wagon on two wheels. He had shafts to it and instead of a horse had fastened himself to them by a strap similar to a yoke which reached over his shoulders. He was twice the size of an ordinary man. The rolls of fat hung under his chin and across his stomach in

great layers. He came along puffing and snorting and mopping the sweat from his brow. At the same time he seemed as happy as a lark, for he was whistling a light tune as merrily as could be.

He no sooner saw me than he lowered the cart on two props and disengaged himself from his harness. I was now so near that I saw that he had a kind of traveling show such as often stopped in our village in the early Spring. Only this fellow had no performing bear on a rope or a monkey or an acrobatic clown, but piled high on the cart, row after row, were small wooden cages. In each cage was a bird. Along the bottom were the parrots and then the further up they went the smaller the birds became until at the top sat perched the tiniest of wrens.

I was agog with curiosity. When I came within earshot the big fellow stepped out into the middle of the road. His smile spread the width of his broad face. He bowed to me from afar and then screwed his mouth into a knot and puffed out his cheeks. With such suddenness that it startled me he ran the gamut of a score of notes from the lowest to the highest, lingering now and then to warble and trill some of them in the most entrancing fashion.

At the first sound of the man's whistling there was a flutter in all the cages. Before he had uttered half a dozen notes the birds began to sing. When he had no more breath and was forced to let off, they had reached a harmony that was truly surprising. The sounds rose higher and higher. It was like the early morning at home when I awoke but even more thrilling and delightful. Then, just as I approached, the fellow put his knuckle in his mouth. He blew one loud shrill blast. The birds in the next instant were as silent as the grave.

I could not help smiling. And the man himself was even more pleased than I. He stood in the road grinning like a great calf. His eyes sparkled. He was beaming with joy as though he had just performed a truly remarkable feat. He stuck his thumb under his arm and straightened himself up as proud as an emperor.

"Greetings, sir Traveler," he cried, "from the King of the Birds."

I drew in my horse. He took this as a sign that I was interested. He screwed up his mouth again and let out a short shrill note. Of a sudden, as though they had been waiting for it, every bird in the cages started once more to sing. They were soon at the highest point. The fellow had his head cocked on one side with his ear turned towards the cages like a music master trying to detect a false note. Then, as he did before, he put his knuckle in his mouth. He blew one quick blast and the sounds died away as quickly as though the birds had been stricken dead.

"Sir," said the King of the Birds with a wave of his hand, "the parrot there can tell your fortune. He is like the owl, one of the wisest of birds." To suit his action to his words he tapped the parrot on the head. He placed a box which held a number of pieces of parchment before it. The parrot bent over and with its beak tossed one of the small sheets out on the ground. The King pounced upon it and held it out before my astonished eyes.

"Unfold it, sir, and read it at your leisure," said the man. "It may help you on your way."

With that he bowed and stood rubbing his hands. I smiled of course at his simplicity. A sort of pity took hold of me. In bulk he was almost the size of an ox. Without doubt he was as poor as any of his birds. He was dependent for all that he got upon his ability to amuse those who fell across his path. Yet, with

all that, the seriousness of the world had no resting place upon his shoulders. In his own province he was, as he claimed, as absolute as a king, and to my way of thinking far happier than any of whom I have ever heard.

I did not want to wound his feelings. With the pretext that I must be going, I leaned over and tossed a handful of small silver into his hands. At the same time I clapped my heels against the horse's flanks and with a wave of my arm bade him "Adieu."

I thought I had done with him. I had given him more than he had counted on, I am sure. I had no other idea but that he would gather up his cart and make his way to the nearest village. But my horse had scarcely carried me ten steps when there fell upon my ears the same whistling with which he had first greeted me. Then followed the chorus of the birds. I turned in the saddle and looked back. The great fellow was standing in the middle of the road. His hands were extended towards me. His chest was heaving like a bellows and the sweat was streaming from his forehead. For all that he was smiling like a pleased child. His little eyes were twinkling and blinking in the light of the sun. When he saw that I had turned about, he struck still higher notes and the birds with him.

I rode slowly on and on. I turned now and then to wave back at him. At each turning I saw the same figure in the middle of the road and heard the same trilling sounds. They grew fainter and fainter. The man himself grew dimmer and dimmer. At length the warbling ceased. For the last time I waved "farewell." But as I did, there he was with his head thrown back, his thumb under his arm and one foot proudly before the other. When he realized that I would soon be out of sight he threw both arms out towards me to wish me good fortune on my way.

So it went with me. On that great highway I found myself in a new and varied world. One strange character passed after the other with each quite different from the one before. At first I thought them only the odds and ends of all humanity driving forward without aim or purpose. But after a while I had to acknowledge that of the people I met, I was the least in experience of them all. I began to make a fresh estimate of men and their manners. They soon impressed me with the thought that they knew what they were about as well as I. The only difference between them and me was that they had interests other than my own. And to cap it all a certain shrewdness warned me that if I were to continue to cope with them, I must sharpen my wits to the keenness of theirs.

I went on and on. I took time to feed my horse and eat a bite myself in the shade of the trees. The afternoon came and went. The sun was dropping behind the hills. An uneasiness took hold of me lest I be forced to lie out in the open exposed to the uncertainties of the night. It was rapidly getting dark. My uneasiness was turning into fear, when I came upon a bend in the road and behind it a broad stretch of thick woods.

I stopped and looked circumspectly around. I might have passed on, but, as I gazed, I spied a little house or cottage hidden far in among the trees. Not a soul was in sight. It seemed a place deserted. The walls were of stone and very old for they were covered with moss in patches here and there. There was a blackness about them from the dust of the road, besides, on the corners and the window-ledges they were worn with pieces knocked off. The windows themselves were hardly visible. They were matted with cobwebs and dirt so that it was scarcely possible that any light could shine through them.

An old slab of stone served as a door-step, but it was surrounded with weeds that grew waist-high even as far as the edge of the road. There was little inviting about the house. Indeed, the more I examined it, the more I felt that I should leave it as it was.

I was about to give my horse the rein when I observed a thin curl of smoke lifting lazily in the air from a chimney in the rear. I knitted my brows in surprise. I looked again to make certain. Then, with curiosity getting the better of me, I got down from the horse, led him by the bridle and tied him to the nearest tree.

I cannot tell you why I did it. I suppose it was the mystery and the strangeness about the place, but before I gave thought to the consequences, I had brushed my way through the weeds and was knocking at the antiquated door.

I drew a deep breath and stood waiting. The time seemed very long indeed. My heart began to flutter in my breast. A feeling that my actions were rash stole over me. The horse neighed. The sound struck me like a warning that I ought to let well enough alone and be further on my way. I was about to turn when I heard a board creak within. The quick shuffling of feet came to me through the door. Then there fell a silence that was like the hollowness of an empty cave.

I was curious and fearful alike. I walked back to the middle of the road. The smoke came from the chimney in a thicker volume than before. I shifted in my mind to reason out the situation. When I had considered every side of it, I laughed at my fears.

"It is only some poor peasant," I thought, "—probably too deaf to hear."

With my mind fixed I strode boldly back. I knocked more loudly and resolutely than before. But no sound came. I waited a moment and knocked again. The only answer was the cawing of a crow that passed soaring over my head. My impatience burst its bounds. I took the latch in my hand, thinking to rattle it, when to my surprise the door yielded to my touch. As by some magic it swung slowly open and I beheld the interior of the room.

I expected to find the place within as uninviting as it was without. A fire was burning at the far end and over it hung on a chain a pot which was bubbling and boiling and giving out a most savory odor. At the side of the wall stood a chair, but of the kind you might think belonged not in a peasant's hut but in the palace of a king. It was of the finest make. The legs and back were curved and scrolled and gilded like new and the cushions of a velvet delicately blue. In that one flash I saw, too, a table standing in the middle of the room. The top reflected the shine of the fire, for it was polished like wax.

If I was surprised at the first glance, I was the more amazed as my eyes got accustomed to the semi-darkness of the interior. The walls, instead of being black or grimy were as white and cheerful as though they were entirely new and instead of the stone flags which I expected to find, the floor was laid in the smoothest wood.

"Whoever lives here," I said half aloud, "has gone out for a while. I'll take a seat. When they return, we can strike a bargain for a lodging for the night."

To suit the purpose I shut the door. It was swinging slowly when of a sudden it was dashed past my face and struck the door-jam with a bang. The unexpectedness of it made me wink. When I opened my eyes there was a man standing before me. His brows were drawn into an ugly frown. The look on his

face was of the blackness of night. His jaws were set but his lips were curled back in a snarl and his fists knotted in anger as though he was about to strike.

"Dog!" The word came from between his teeth in a hiss.

I was so taken unawares that I retreated a step. I glared helplessly at him. Then a bitter smile of hatred slowly crossed his features like that of a savage who has run down an enemy.

"So," he drawled, "you've proved the mouse at last."

I was too stupefied to reply.

"Why!" I gasped. "There's some mistake—mouse——?"

"You've fallen into a trap, haven't you?"

By degrees my breath came back to me.

"I've never seen you before," I managed to say. "Surely——"

He cut me off with a growl.

"You don't have to see a man to do him a harm, do you?" he said, and took a step towards me. "The next time a man is tied to a tree and asks for a drink of water——"

He did not finish, but made a lunge at me with his arms outstretched. It took all my alertness to spring back out of his way. Then, like a flash the thought of the scrivener's dagger popped into my mind. I jerked it from my belt and raised it menacingly over my head.

The fellow stopped in his tracks. He shot a glance over my shoulder to the back of the room. I swung the dagger in the air with the thought that if I forced him from the door, I might escape. But my arm was hardly half way around when a sharp crack caught me on the wrist. The pain shot through me like the cutting of a knife. I loosed my grasp. The dagger flew across the room and fell clattering onto the wooden floor.

In the next breath my arms were caught from behind. They were pinned together with the firmness of a vise. A foot shot out and entangled itself in mine. A quick twist and I was jerked sideways and sent tumbling like the dagger across the room.

I was stunned from the force of the fall. I got slowly up on one elbow and looked dazedly around. The fire was dancing as though it mocked me. I laid my hand on my hip where it hurt me most. My fingers fumbled aimlessly somehow or other around my pocket. I was so stupefied that I was hardly conscious of what I was doing. My thumb and forefinger touched the bit of parchment which the King of the Birds had given me. I drew it out. By good fortune my assailants were at my back. I unfolded it more by habit than by purpose. When it lay open before the light of the blazing wood I was amazed to read a warning that had come altogether too late:

"Avoid the house in the woods!"

With nervous fingers I put the parchment back again. The one fellow who had faced me first came over and jerked me roughly to my feet. Then, as though I were a log, shoved me back until I fell into the chair.

"Where did you get that dagger?" he demanded. He had picked the weapon from the floor and had thrown it on the table.

"I took it from a man on the road," said I.

"Was it a short fellow—a churchman—dressed like an Abbot?" he asked further.

I was loath to give these rascals more information than was good for them so my answer was as short as I could make it.

“I don’t know whether he was an Abbot or not,” I said. “I couldn’t tell.”

They looked at each other in alarm.

“If he’s in the neighborhood,” said the first, “we’d better get out.”

The other came forward into the light of the fire. His hand was bandaged with a strip of an old shirt and the blood was caked where it had oozed through and hardened.

“Do you know me?” he asked.

“You tried to kill me in the woods,” I said, without lifting my eyes.

“Do you see this?” he went on.

I looked at his hand.

“It’s cut to the bone,” he said, threateningly. “It’ll take weeks for it to heal.” He narrowed his eyes till they were mere slits and studied me. “You’re going to pay for this, do you hear?”

I said nothing, but looked helplessly around.

The first fellow had his gaze upon the floor. He was worried, that I plainly saw. Then, after a little, he touched this fellow on the shoulder.

“Let’s put him out of the way,” he said, glancing towards me. “If we’re caught here, we’ll be in a trap ourselves.”

They were both willing, but still some doubt held them in leash.

“If we do,” was the answer, “what will De Marsac say? You know he wants him” (meaning me) “for a purpose.”

The word De Marsac struck strangely on my ears.

“Oh!” I exclaimed. “De Marsac had better look out for himself. There is some one on his heels.”

They turned to me together like a flash.

“What!” they exclaimed. “Who?”

“The Black Prince!” I called boldly. “He will——”

They laughed in my face.

“The Black Prince is on his way to the west to join the starving remnants of his army,” I was told. “We thought you meant the Abbot of Chalonnes.”

My mouth fell agape. I searched their faces and they searched mine. The fellow who had grappled with me first made a signal to the other, and turned towards the table to pick up the dagger. The man with the wounded hand slouched over towards me. He had his good fist curled in a knot, no doubt to crash it against my skull.

I felt that it was my end. I took a firm hold on the arms of the chair to dodge or fight them to the last of my strength.

The door suddenly flew back on its hinges and banged against the wall. Both men jumped and in my tenseness I jumped with them. They stood with frightened faces looking towards the entrance.

A form appeared—the form of a little man clad in rags, smeared with ink and dirt so that his face was hardly to be seen. His beard was clotted with mire where he had been sleeping in the open. His quills and ink-horn and roll of parchment were gone but he still wore the same curious grin that I had noticed earlier in the day.

With one skip he was in the middle of the room. He clapped the fellow with the injured hand roundly on the back and cried in a voice of glee.

“Well, I see you have him at last!”

Chapter X

The Highwayman of Tours.

The three of us turned with amazement on our faces. Before a word was spoken the scrivener bounded clear across the room. He came to a stop before the table and took the dagger in his hand. Then he faced us.

"Now," said he, "I should like to know who gave you permission to befoul my house?"

He spoke in a high, commanding key. One of the fellows shifted slowly to the side of the room. The other looked uneasily about. The scrivener, who held his head, pointed at each of them in turn with the dagger.

"Do you know, my gentles," he demanded in a terrible voice, "who I am?"

The two men knotted their brows, puzzled. One of them bit his lips and the other growled under his breath and flashed a knowing look at his companion. It was a hint, I knew, that at the first chance they would make the attack together.

The scrivener seemed to consider them as children. He took his soiled cap from his head and flung it on the floor.

"Do you know me now?" he cried. "Have you never heard of 'Will-o'-the-wisp'?"

As though they had been struck by a club, both men drooped and turned instinctively towards the door. Then they called out loud enough for me to hear, "The highwayman of Tours!"

The scrivener snapped his fingers in the air. Then like a showman he took the dagger by the point. He gave it a twist and sent it spinning towards the floor. It struck and buried itself in the wood, where it stood quivering like a living thing.

"'The highwayman of Tours!'" he echoed after them. "The only man who ever had the courage to stand before the Abbot of Chalonnes and flaunt him to his face. That dagger there I took from him—with a dozen of his followers at his back. I was the only man in all the country round to meet the Dwarf of Angers—alone—unarmed—in the woods—at night. I killed the Dwarf and threw his body into the waters of the Loire." He stopped and laughed a long, weird, tormenting laugh that rang through the room like the echo of a ghost. "The man who is my enemy is foredoomed to die!"

A chill crept along my spine. A sullen look spread over the faces of my two captors. They exchanged glances once again and grinned.

"You can't fool us with talk like that," said one. "We're men."

The scrivener whistled a quick, sharp note and with the ease of a kitten sprang upon the table.

"There is a price upon my head!" he called. Then he pointed to the dagger. "If either of you has the boldness to collect it, let him pluck that weapon from the floor."

The fellow who had spoken brightened up. He lurched forward. His huge body bent over and his arm reached out to take the scrivener at his word. But his slow brain had reckoned without thought to the consequences. He had no sooner taken a step when the scrivener raised himself on the balls of his feet. He shot through the air with the straightness and speed of an arrow. He landed

with all his weight on the back of his enemy. His one hand encircled his throat. The other, by a calculation as unerring as it was quick, caught the dagger by the hilt.

There followed a struggle that I shall not soon forget. The scrivener twisted his lithe body like a snake. He squirmed around and before I could wink was on top of his foe. He was smiling as though he was highly pleased with the dagger now raised ready for the descending blow.

He knew that the second fellow would not allow his companion to be killed. He halted the weapon so that it rested not more than an inch from his opponent's throat.

"One move and you're a dead man!" he cried. Then he looked to the side. He saw the other coming on with venom in his eyes.

"Take your choice," he called to him. "Lay a finger on me and you're this man's murderer!"

The fellow stopped. In the twinkling of an eye the scrivener sprang to his feet. He faced the two with his face lit up and a confidence that was amazing. The man with the wounded hand slid his hand into his shirt. He drew forth a long knife with a curved blade. He ran his tongue over his lips to moisten them and with one bound made for his enemy.

I expected to see him run the scrivener through. But once again his quickness surprised me. He sprang onto the table again with even greater suppleness than before. This time he jumped feet foremost. He caught the fellow in the middle of the chest. The knife went flying from his hand and he was hurled back against the wall. His head struck with a thump and his knees buckled under him as he sagged to the floor.

Up to this time the action had been so fast and so unexpected that I was hardly able to take a breath let alone take a part in it. But when I saw the knife flying across the room my senses stirred within me. I saw the second fellow take a hasty glance at the knife. He moved with all his speed towards it. He was stooping over to snatch it up, when I realized the danger we would be in if he were able to get it in his grasp.

I took a flying leap like the scrivener, only I went face down, sliding along the smooth floor. Just as my fingers were curling around the haft, the fellow was upon me. I must have slid under him for he fell over me with all his weight. The breath was knocked out of my body. A thousand stars flicked across my vision. A pain shot over my back. My nose and forehead were crushed against the boards and a smothering made it hard for me even to gasp.

But I clung to the knife with all my strength. My assailant dug his hands into my ribs. He caught my wrist and twisted it till the pain almost made me cry out. He took a firm hold upon my neck and tried to squeeze the life out of me. He bent my arm back till it cracked in the socket. But with all that I clung to my knife as though it was the dearest thing I possessed.

As a last trial the fellow dug his knees into my sides and held them there. I felt the breath leaving me. Then with an effort that took all my strength I jerked myself loose and turned over on my back. The danger now was even greater for my opponent than it was for me. Although I was down, yet I had a freer swing for my weapon. If I had thought in time I could have slashed him on the legs and probably cut him across the arm. But he saw what was coming. He stood up and backed away and in the same moment, with what was left of me, I, too, got hastily to my feet.

In the next second it was all over. A form came hurtling through the air. I felt the breeze of the passing body fan my cheeks. It was the scrivener who had gotten once more upon the table. He must have been on the alert for such an opportunity. He caught my fellow, as he had done the other. His feet struck him a dull blow full on the chest. As though he were a sack of meal he gave a low groan and crumpled together against the wall.

I stood for a moment with my mouth open, gasping for breath. I was anxious, too, about the first fellow whom the scrivener had knocked senseless against the wall. He was slowly opening his eyes and made a move as though he would rise. His hands were behind him. He twisted and pulled to bring them forward. Then it dawned on me that while I was deep in the struggle, the scrivener had tied them securely behind his back.

I felt a clap on my shoulder. There stood the scrivener with his eyes shining. His head was darting from side to side like a bird's. He danced a few steps on the hard floor and to my surprise leaned over and turned a handspring as smoothly as you please.

"You're a grand fighter, lad," he cried. "A grand fighter." He held out his hand and grasped mine. "And to think I don't even know your name."

I took the hint.

"It's Henri," I said. "Henri La Mar."

"Well, Henri," he answered, "we'll get along fine together, you and I." He looked me over and felt of the muscles of my arm. "The makings of a man," he muttered. "I'll make the greatest highwayman of you that ever lived."

I was stopped for an answer.

"I'm not so sure that I want to be one," I replied, but with a smile that I would not anger him. "It's a dangerous calling."

His face fell in astonishment. He looked for all the world as though he had received a blow.

"It's the only life for a man to live," he replied. "Ah, if you were to tell the truth, I think you enjoyed the little fight tonight as well as I."

"I'm glad we won," I said. Then I fell to thinking. After a while I drawled out, "Listen, master scrivener, haven't I seen you some time before?"

He waved me aside and pointed to the two on the floor.

"We'll have to fix them for the night so they'll do no harm," he said. "Come, we'll carry them outside and tie them to the trees."

We took them one by one and dragged them out of the house. We bound them hand and foot and lashed them each to a single tree. When we had finished the scrivener started to whistle a tune.

"You're good at that, master scrivener," I began again.

"Good at what?" he demanded.

"—at tying men to trees," I suggested slyly.

"I'm good at everything I touch," he replied. "Never yet has any man got the better of me."

Then he whistled again louder than before.

"You're good with the bow and arrow, too, aren't you?" I insisted.

"I could knock the eye out of you at a hundred paces," he declared. "I'll do it if you say the word."

I laughed.

“I don’t want to be killed yet,” I said. Then I continued, “You’re quick on your feet. You’re a shifty wrestler. Are you just as clever tying messages to the haft of an arrow?”

It was a sly dig, for I had my suspicions and was curious to learn the truth. His answer was just as evasive as before.

“I told you I could do anything,” he replied like a flash, “whether it be tying messages or tying men.”

“And that’s that,” I said. “When a bird won’t sing, no one can force him. No doubt, you’ve heard that saying before, master scrivener?”

“What you hear and what’s the truth,” he came back, “are sometimes at great variance.”

At this the whistling grew louder and, I thought, more piercing than ever. The scrivener stuffed his hands into his shirt and strutted up and down the floor. On each occasion when I turned to him to speak, he threw back his head and let the notes out of him with such vehemence that I was almost deafened. At length he ceased from sheer exhaustion.

“You’re a fine masquerader, master scrivener,” I continued prodding him. “You remind me of a certain fool.”

I meant of course the man with the bauble and the bells whom I happened on at the armorer’s forge.

“It’s a wise man who can play the fool,” he winked. “Sometimes it’s handier than a sharp sword.”

It was plain I could get nothing from him. I raised my brows and looked at him from head to heel. First I grinned. Then I laughed openly.

“You’re a dark, secret man, master scrivener, full of tricks and wiles,” I said. “But with all your cunning I am sure of this, if you shaved the hair from your face and washed the dirt away, you would strongly remind me of a certain gentleman with whom I had a little tiff a week or so ago at Le Brun’s forge.”

Chapter XI

I Find a Companion.

He turned on me like a flash.

“Do you know,” said he with an assumption of great dignity, “that when you are in another man’s house, it is wise to take things as they are!”

“Is this really your house?” I asked. “Or are you toying with me?”

He spun on his heel and went to the far end of the room. He came back with a candle in his hand which he had lit at the open fire.

“I’ll show you the rest of it,” he remarked. “Come with me.”

At that he inserted his finger in what seemed to be a knot-hole in the floor. To my surprise he lifted a great door which was set in the wood and bent it back on its hinges. Then, with the light high over his head he passed down a set of broad oak steps. A dank odor of damp air came to my nostrils. I set my foot on the first step with much caution and circumspection. I descended one by one until I stood on a clay floor. All around me were solid stone walls with no opening for air or ventilation. And here and there in these walls I saw recesses

which were covered with doors that were of natural wood stained with dirt and finger-marks.

Without stopping the scrivener went to the largest of these closets at the furthest corner of the cave and flung it open. If I was amazed at first I was quite beside myself now, for the whole of it was filled with all sorts of articles of clothing. Some of them were the trappings of soldiers with gilt and lace, others were suits of velvet, quite new, smooth and beautiful to see. Again there were common clothes such as peasants wear or even common laborers in the fields.

"I know now," I said, "why those fellows called you the 'Will-o'-the-wisp'. You're never the same man."

"When you live as I live, my lad," he answered, "you must use your wits." Then he turned my attention to another box or closet in the wall. When this was open he took from it a bundle tied and wrapped with thick cloth and matted straw. As carefully as if it were alive he untied the knots one by one and laid it flat upon the floor.

"My arsenal," he said. Then he revealed a bow about as long as he was high and with it a quiver containing a score of arrows. So unexpected was this that I let out a gasp.

"I keep them wrapped up like this to protect them from the damp," he explained. "When trouble comes——"

"But why do you need all these?" I cried. "Surely——"

He rose and pointed sternly towards the stairs.

"If I'm hard pressed, I'm as safe here as in a castle," he explained. "If they happen to get in the house, I can take refuge here. Look! Don't you think I could drop them easily enough as they came down those steps one by one?"

It seemed true enough but I was not yet satisfied.

"Suppose they set the house afire?" I asked.

He took me by the arm and led me to the part of the cave that was hidden under the stairs. Here it was gloomiest and very dark. The rays from the candle flickered as though they were sucked by a slight current of air. But where I expected to find a wall there was no wall at all, only a great hole large enough for a man to enter by stooping a little. It was of jagged rock on all sides, as canny a place as I had ever seen.

"Let them fire the house," he declared. "There is the way to freedom and the open air. It is fifty roods long. The other end leads out among rocks and the roots of ancient trees. You'd never find it in a week's search not even if I showed it to you beforehand."

He put the clothing and the bow and arrows back as he had found them and we went again up the stairs.

"Why have you shown me this hiding place of yours, master scrivener?" I inquired. "Aren't you afraid lest some day I betray you?"

He snapped his fingers.

"It's known already," he said. "I'll have to abandon it. Those two knaves outside will spread the news to all the world."

"It's a shame," I ventured.

"It has served its purpose," he answered. "But the Highwayman of Tours has a card up his sleeve. Further down the valley of the Loire I have another even better than this."

He tossed his head and sat down in the chair. He stared for a while at the floor deep in thought. I bethought me of my horse, for it was high time that I

looked to him for the night. I went out to where I had tied him. My heart sank in my breast, for he was gone. I went over to where the two knaves had been lashed to the trees. All I found was a couple of strands of rope upon the ground.

I burst into the house hot and excited.

"They have gone!" I cried. "They have taken my horse with them!"

The scrivener never raised his head.

"I was hoping they would go," he said calmly.

"It's your fault, master scrivener," I flung at him. "When you were tying them, I noticed that you didn't draw the knots tight enough."

"And that's true," he replied looking out from under his brows with a crafty smile. "But, Henri, you wouldn't like to stand with your back against a tree for the whole night long, now, would you?"

"But my horse?" I said.

"They took that too?" he smiled.

"Of course!" said I.

"Well, well. It's a great loss, indeed," he replied. "A great loss." He rose and yawned. Then he stretched himself. "There's another way to look at it, Henri. What do you care about the horse when you have me?"

"But I want him back," I insisted. "I've a long——"

"Tut. Tut. Lad," the scrivener returned. "I know where they've taken him. He'll be at the inn of »The Three Crows«. That's the gathering place for all the desperate characters in the neighborhood. We'll be there tomorrow and I'll see to it that you get him back again."

Chapter XII

The Three Crows Inn.

We came to the »Three Crows« about the middle of the afternoon. The place was set in somewhat from the road and like the scrivener's house, almost surrounded by trees. It must have been a hundred years old. The walls were of wood rough hewn from the forest. In some places the bark still hung in shreds where it waved in the breeze. The logs themselves were as brown as walnuts where the rain had beaten upon them. The windows were quite small—hardly large enough for a man to climb through and to judge by the cob-webs and dust had not been cleaned for ages.

The scrivener had been swinging along with me the whole day. He was as lighthearted as a kitten. The thought of the danger we were approaching never seemed to enter his mind. Even when we crossed the green that was between the inn and the road he was whistling a tune and smiling away as hard as you please. Then he suddenly grasped me by the arm.

"They are playing bowls," he exclaimed. "Look there!"

To be sure, I saw two men at the end of a long alley on the green. They were at bowls, as the scrivener said. That is, they had pins set up and were rolling smooth round rocks or stones at them to knock them down. It was nothing new to me for I am sure that you will find the same sport in the smallest village in France. I was about to ask what there was unusual about it all when he clapped me on the back.

“Have you any money?” he demanded with some eagerness.

“A little,” I answered. Then the thought came to me that he made his living by tricks and even more questionable means. For all I knew he might have at the back of his head some scheme or other to rob me of what money I had. So I asked him cautiously, “Why?”

“I’m going to double it,” he replied in an off-hand way.

We made directly for the bowling-place. The scrivener strutted over to the men with all the airs of a great baron with an army at his back. He clapped his hands when a good stroke was made. He let out a loud “ah” when the stone rolled out of its track and missed the pins. He capered from one end of the alley to the other, following the stone and talking to it encouragingly as though it had life. He clapped the players on the back. In short he did all in his power to make a show of himself.

From where I stood it struck me that he was acting like a fool. But at that time I did not know the man. I realized that he could masquerade in a dozen different rôles, but I little imagined that he was able to alter the character of his disposition.

Finally the play came to an end. The winner—a tall gaunt man whose name was Nicole—straightened himself and puffed out his chest. The scrivener was on him in an instant. He shook him by the hand. He beamed in his face.

“A master!” he cried. “You can play almost as well as I can play myself.”

Nicole’s smile faded. He looked down at the scrivener and frowned.

“For ten years,” he said, “I’ve beaten every man who has set his foot upon this green.”

The scrivener struck him a hard blow upon the chest. Then he laughed a high mocking laugh.

“A fine boast!” he cried and snapped his fingers under Nicole’s nose. “Well, the tenth year will be your last.”

The fire gathered in the man’s eye. The blow was humiliating enough but the words cut him like a sharp knife. He swallowed hard and flung one hand out.

“Will you play with me?” he demanded.

“—for money?” asked the scrivener.

“For the clothes on your back, if you will,” was the reply.

At that the scrivener leaped into the air. He placed his hand on the ground and turned a circle as neatly as he had done on the day I met him at the forge. Then he stuck his hand in his shirt and looked as important as a prince.

“Boy!” he called to me as though I were his servant. “Come here and count me ten crowns from my purse.” He turned to Nicole. “This lad of mine carries my wealth. If we are beset by thieves, no one would look to him for the money. Is not that a wise trick?”

He laughed loud again as though he might be proud of his cunning. I hesitated. I tried to make an estimate of what was going on in his mind. I was wavering in uncertainty, when he snapped me a wink from the corner of his eye.

“Not so slow!” he commanded. Then when I counted the money, he threw it contemptuously on the grass. “Ten crowns, Nicole,” he said. “That will be one for every year you have been the master of bowls.”

Nicole drew forth a well-worn leather purse such as merchants carry. With a sly smile he looked sideways at the scrivener and slowly counted out the

money. This he threw piece by piece on the grass. It was as though he was trying to shake the scrivener's nerves with his deliberation.

With a bound the scrivener seized the stone ball. He swung it around his head two or three times, spinning on his heel. He drew far back and came forward on the run. He let out a warning shout. He was about to make the heave when to the amazement of all, his feet slid from under him. The stone rolled harmlessly to the side of the green. The scrivener fell on his back and his heels kicked in the air.

It was a ridiculous situation of course. In the beginning I was burning with anger that he should make such a show of himself. But when I considered the nature of the man, his unexpected whims and fancies, I knew that he was playing a rôle that would be wise enough in the end.

When he arose he looked crestfallen. With a serious expression on his face he brushed the dirt away from his clothes. He even growled under his breath at his poor luck.

Nicole was standing with his arms folded across his chest as proudly as though he were already the victor. He took forth his purse once more and held it dangling in his fingers. With a taunting sneer he winked at me and then turned to the scrivener.

"Another ten?" he asked with raised brows.

"You must be a rich man," the scrivener replied. "Are you a merchant that you have so much to waste?"

"I make my living from such as you," Nicole answered, "——who think they can play—and can't!"

At this cut the scrivener flew into a rage. He threw his arms above his head and paced up and down. He jerked his fists convulsively.

"It was a slip," he cried. "Only a slip. I know I can do better than that." He spat upon the ground as though he had finally come to a resolution.

"Henri!" he cried. "Twenty crowns more!" Then in a flash to Nicole, "Have you the courage?" he demanded.

In a trice the coins were on the ground, both mine and the stranger's. Then they went at it again. At the first stroke the scrivener lagged far behind. At the second his nerves grew more collected. After a little he was skillful enough to topple over all the pins with the one try. As the game went on he began a running talk with Nicole. His voice grew high. He made light of his opponent's efforts. He counseled him to stand this way or that. He interrupted him at the moment when he was about to cast the stone. He clapped him on the back when he made a bad play and comforted him with the hope that he would do better on the next try. In short he did all in his power to confuse him.

The ruse worked well. Nicole played with a sort of canny caution. But when the scrivener had equaled his score, his nerves gave way on him. He took more time to poise himself before the cast. He fussed about to be sure of his footing. His brows narrowed and an expression of intense seriousness crossed his face.

Towards the end it was nip and tuck. Now Nicole was ahead, now the scrivener. The longer the game lasted, the more boastful my companion became. He took to strutting about between shots like a cock-o'-the-walk. He wanted to double the money he had laid on himself. He shouted aloud that he was the master of the best man in the Kingdom of France. He said he could prove it with a wager that would be the ransom for a prince. Then at last just when Nicole was measuring the green with his eye he let out a whoop, turned

one of his somersaults, put his knuckles in his mouth and whistled so shrilly that it rent the very air.

The stone that Nicole held in his hand shot forward. But the scrivener had done his work. It flew in full career down the middle of the green. Then it seemed to strike a tuft of hidden grass for it bounced a little in the air and veered over towards the side. It struck the pins however, but only slightly. Three of the nine were tumbled over and the rest left standing.

The scrivener raised the stone. He walked to the green with his head high. He made the cast without so much as an aim, but I saw that he put all his force behind it. It sped on in a straight line. It crashed in among the pins with the straightness and speed of an arrow. It hit the middle one and sent it leaping over to the side. The stone continued on its course in among the others. They fell one by one in quick succession until the last spun around and rolled in a semi-circle out over the green.

At that the scrivener snapped his fingers and gave a cry. He turned to Nicole.

"You have seven still to make," he said. "I have only two to win. Will you——"

Nicole had had enough. With a frown of disappointment he waved his hand towards the green and then towards the money.

"It is yours," he said. "I never played so poorly in my life."

He was soured to the core. But with all that I picked up the coins and put them in my purse. We went into the inn and sat down at a long oaken table. Soon we had the meat before us and were eating to our hearts' content.

It was well on towards dark when we finished. One by one the country gossips entered and took their places. The landlord lit the oil lanthorn that hung from the ceiling. Its yellow rays cast flitting shadows about the room. The air was heavy from the odor of the cooking and the dampness of the clay floor. The scrivener eyed every stranger in the place as keenly as though he were cutting him open with a knife. He began to yawn. He bade me fling a coin on the table to pay the score and make ready for bed.

We stood up. We were about to turn when the door of the inn flew open with a bang. I jumped as though the floor had suddenly given way. We both turned. In the next second my heart sank to my shoes, for in the wavering light of the lanthorn I saw De Marsac with half a dozen troopers at his back peering eagerly over his shoulders. He strode to the middle of the floor and whirled searchingly around. When his eyes rested on us, he raised his arm and pointed.

"I knew I would find you here!" he cried. His voice was shaking between joy and anger. "I have caught you like mice in a trap!"

I looked searchingly at the scrivener. He stood with his hands at his side as unmoved as a piece of marble, with only the flicker of a smile playing about the edges of his mouth.

"It is my friend, De Marsac!" he cried. "You have indeed cornered us at last."

A chill shot down my spine. De Marsac flung out his arm.

"Seize them!" he called. "Bind them till the thongs cut into their flesh. Let one of you stand guard over them for the night." He spun on his heel. His men rushed at us as though we were mad dogs. In the twinkling of an eye we were thrown to the floor and lashed hand and foot with thongs of deer hide.

De Marsac halted at the door.

"Tomorrow, at the break of day, they are to be hanged upon the nearest tree!"

In the next breath he was lost in the dark.

Chapter XIII

The Silver-Hafted Dagger.

In another hour the inn was deserted. The scrivener and I lay huddled together on the floor. One of De Marsac's crew remained guard over us—an ugly fellow with a face scarred with small-pox and earrings in his ears. He must have come from somewhere in the south of France for his language was heavier than the French in our part of the country.

For a while he paced up and down the floor and glanced suspiciously at us at every turn. About midnight he began to yawn and stretch his arms over his head. Then he came and sat on a bench opposite us. The quiet of the place was like a balm for he fell into short naps. He arose and went to the other side of the table (where he could see us) and spread out his elbows. He yawned again and muttered something under his breath. Then little by little his head sank and before long it fell between his arms and he was snoring like the rumble of distant thunder.

As gently as I could I shoved the scrivener in the ribs.

"What'll we do?" I whispered.

His answer was a gentle touch on the arm.

"Wait!" he said.

I was more than uncomfortable. The thongs were cutting into my wrists and ankles. At my shoulders where the muscles were stretched back a numbness crept over me. The hardness of the floor made me wish that I could stand up and walk a bit. But the worst of all was the dryness that was parching my tongue and mouth.

I heard a cock crow loud and long like the blast of a trumpet as if it would awaken the world. I looked at our captor. He never stirred. His mouth was open and he breathed in heavy sighs.

A door to my left creaked. The rays of the yellow lanthorn were only a little better than the gloom. I wanted to turn but the scrivener pressed his knee against my thigh. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the door open wider and wider but so slowly that I imagined an hour was passing.

Then I saw a face. It was the landlord. I had not noticed him much during the meal but now his nose seemed sharper than ever and the leanness of his face was almost of the keenness of a knife. He had his eyes drawn together and his teeth clenched showing white.

As he came towards us the tassel of his nightcap bobbed about in a little circle and his slippers gave to his steps the softness of a cat's. His long loose nightgown made him look like a ghost. But he was a kindly ghost at that for he carried a noggin of water in his hand.

Without a word he stooped over the scrivener and moistened his lips. Then he gave me a swallow. Always with one eye on the sleeping guard he made a sign towards the door.

"Guarded!" he whispered, "——from the outside!"

The scrivener's eyes almost burnt a hole in him so intensely did he look at him.

"Have you no sense?" he demanded in a tone that was low but hard.

The landlord raised his brows slightly as though he did not understand.

"I cannot die with a bad conscience," muttered the scrivener. "Nor will I die with a murder on my hands." He stopped a breath and glared even harder than before. "The lad here is a dangerous character. He'll not give up till the last. He be like to kill some one in the struggle." He halted but kept his eyes steadily on the landlord as though he would speak with them.

The guard gave a loud sigh. He breathed with a deep moan. His lips quivered like a horse snorting. He tried to raise his head but it fell again like a dead weight across his arms.

Not one of us stirred. The cock crowed again. The sound of it sent my nerves quivering. Then the scrivener spoke again in a voice that was quiet but determined.

"I want you to search the lad there," he said. "He has a knife in his jacket that can do much harm—or good. Take it away from him. If you have a grain of sense you will understand."

I felt myself jump in my bonds. On the impulse I wanted to resist. I wanted to throw myself on the scrivener and denounce him for a traitor and a coward. My second thoughts were calmer. I was as good as done for as I was. Was there a hidden understanding between him and the landlord that had a meaning of its own?

Before I could think further the landlord had his hand under my doublet. The dagger which I was to carry to the Abbot of Chalonnes was torn from me with no further ado. For one second he held it under the rays of the lanthorn. The light, dull as it was, shone like a clear stream along the silver haft. In spite of himself he gave a start and looked searchingly from the one of us to the other. Then without a word he shuffled slowly away and disappeared behind the door.

I nudged the scrivener in the ribs. I wanted some kind of explanation to be sure. But all I got was a yawn and a reply that came like a rebuke.

"Go to sleep!"

The scrivener curled up on his side as well as he could. Whether he was feigning or not I cannot tell but before a quarter of an hour had passed he was snoring as loudly as the guard. I was wide awake, alert, for I expected the landlord to return. I felt that something would happen. A half hour passed. A dullness came into my eyes. The thoughts of what had occurred during the day revolved themselves in my mind. A dread of the morning took hold of me, for I realized that the chances were that I was to die. Then a weariness seized me. My head drooped to one side. All kinds of fanciful images started chasing one another in my brain. After that, sheer exhaustion laid a hand on me and with my nose against the scrivener's shoulder I, too, fell into a slumber.

It was a fitful sleep at best. The dreams that tumbled around in my mind must have made me cry out. I awoke trembling with the sound of my voice still echoing in the air. I started up. To my amazement my bonds no longer held me. I swung my arms to make sure that I was not dreaming and even pinched my leg.

Then I looked about. The lanthorn was still there, lit, burning as it had during the entire night. The guard was as quiet as a mouse with his head down between his arms. I turned my head. No sign of the scrivener could I see. Then it flashed upon me that something had happened while I slumbered and I rose startled to my feet.

It was as if I had been suddenly dropped from the clouds. I wanted to run for it as fast as I could to the door and make my escape while it was possible. With long stealthy steps I made to pass the guard. My eyes were fastened on him with dread and fear. If he should awake I would be even worse off than before.

Then I stopped dead in my tracks. A long sobbing breath came to my throat. The dagger which the landlord had taken from my doublet earlier in the night lay straight before me on the table. It was covered with fresh blood the whole length of the blade. I looked closer. I was about to touch the guard's shoulder when I recoiled in terror. The back of his coat was torn and in the rent a stream of red oozed slowly down!

For a moment I stood dazed. I rubbed my eyes to make sure that I was actually awake. The stillness of the inn reminded me of the emptiness of a tomb. A fear of the awfulness of it all sent the shivers down my legs and I looked around me for some sign of a living creature who might be able to explain.

Then the thought of what might happen if I lingered there the space of one second came to me. De Marsac's command that I should hang in the morning knocked the dullness out of me. I took the dagger and wiped the blade against the guard's coat. He did not stir but seemed like a block of solid wood.

I remembered the landlord's warning that the front of the inn was guarded so I crept silently towards the back. I opened the door through which he had entered when he gave us the drink of water. It creaked a little and cast a scare over me. I passed through the kitchen where the pots and pans hung in order from pins, all of them bright and shining. I put my hand on the latch of the back door. To my surprise it opened almost at the touch. In the next moment I was outside in the open.

It was still dark but a haze covered the sky to the east. By that I knew it would soon be dawn. I ran across the open space between the inn and the woods. When I was hidden among the trees I gave a great sigh of relief.

But I did not stop. I ran on and on. I did not know where I was going but followed a kind of forest path that was like a thread rather than a road, for in no place was the grass worn entirely away. The light to the east grew brighter and brighter. Then the birds began to chatter and whistle in the branches over my head. A hare crossed in front of me and with the fear I was in it almost took my breath away.

There was little that I noticed. It was only weariness that slackened my pace. My running fell away to a shambling nervous walk. I was on the high ground overlooking a valley that lay off to my left. I knew that within an hour my enemies would be in full hue and cry after me so I decided to keep far away from the highway.

I came to a tiny brook that rippled out from between some broken rocks. I stooped and drank one deep draught after another. I was about to go on when I spied a man sitting on a boulder. It was the scrivener smiling as calmly as you please. He had a loaf of bread under his arm and was stuffing a lump into his mouth. On the grass next to him I noticed a fairly large lump of fresh cheese.

As though we were at peace with all the world he grinned as gleefully as a child.

"Good morning, Henri," he said. "Have you had your breakfast?"

Chapter XIV

Pursued.

I sank down on the rock beside him.

"We're in for it now," I said.

He raised his brows.

"To my way of thinking, Henri," he replied, "we're just out of it." He munched on his bread thoughtfully for a while. With a pleased expression on his face he turned to me. "Isn't it a grand thing to be in trouble?" he asked.

"It's all right if you have friends," I returned. "Master scrivener," I went on, "do you realize that you have killed a man?"

"—and that's a great pity, isn't it," he remarked dryly. He looked at me carefully as though he was trying to read my thoughts. "Have you proof of that, Henri?" he said.

"Who else would have done it?" I demanded.

"Why, if you put two and two together, it was the landlord who took the dagger. You saw him with your own eyes. You know I fell fast asleep. I was bound hard and fast. You couldn't take an oath on it, now, could you, Henri?"

"Well, no," I replied. "But I'm sure of this, it was either you or the landlord."

He patted me on the arm.

"Now," he said, "you are talking sense. As far as you are concerned it was the landlord, for I wouldn't like you to think you were traveling with a murderer."

"Was it you, really?" I asked.

"As far as the landlord goes, it was," he said. "It all depends which side of the fence you are on."

He left me more puzzled than ever. I tried again but with the same result. The same dry smile and the same cunning expression from those knowing eyes greeted me at every turn.

"Well," I said after we had finished our meal. "What are we to do now?"

"Play the fox," he answered. "We must do the contrary to what they think we'll do."

"They will think that we'll keep on ahead to get out of the way," I replied. "Isn't that natural?"

"It is," he agreed. "You're a gentleman of fine understanding."

He lowered his head thoughtfully and gathered a few loose stones in his hand. These he threw into the air and caught again as they came down. He broke out into a soft whistle and stamped his foot to the tune. I got up from my seat and stood before him waiting for a move.

"Are you going to loiter here till we're caught, master scrivener?" I asked.

"If we're caught, there's always a way out," he remarked. "You have seen already it's a little knack I have."

With that he arose slowly and brushed the crumbs from his clothes. He took a last draught of water from the stream and gazed about.

"We'll not go far," he said at length. "We'll keep in the neighborhood. The worst of it is that we've no arms but your dagger."

He went on ahead and I followed. Whatever his thoughts were I cannot tell. But I know that mine were none of the lightest. I was beset with dread. In my imagination I heard the confusion when the body of the guard was found. I saw

the consternation of the rest of them. I pictured to myself the fury they were in. That they would not let us off unpunished was all too clear. It was about two hours since I left the inn. By this, no doubt, they were on foot and even in pursuit of us.

I soon felt a jar run through me. We had wandered straight along the side of the hill in a line with the valley. Of a sudden we came to a point of rock that stood jutting higher than the ground roundabouts. There were no trees upon it, only the bare stone. When we reached the summit the whole country spread on either hand like a rolling field. A white line curled and circled in and around the wanderings of a little stream that flowed slowly towards the south. It was the great highway that leads down the valley of the Loire to the west of France. It was the road that I would have been traveling in peace and comfort, if it had not been for the interference of my enemies.

Of a sudden the sound of clattering hoofs came to my ears. Then there shot into view two horsemen with bows and arrows slung over their shoulders. From where I was I could even see the grim expression on their faces and the foam dripping from their horses's mouths.

I glanced anxiously at the scrivener.

"There they go," he remarked.

"—after us?" I inquired.

He nodded his head.

"Don't you feel the thrill of it?" he asked beaming in my face. "And doesn't it warm your blood to see them go flying past when we are standing here at our ease?"

I had to laugh in spite of myself, but for all that the seriousness of our situation tormented me. To live like a hunted animal was little to my liking. The long and short of it was that the scrivener was used to danger. I had my trials yet to come.

We had to keep on the move so we started back to wander under the protection of the trees. We crossed the forest path at a right angle and directed our steps towards the north. Here the woods grew thicker. The ground was more and more covered with brush and knotted weeds and there ran tiny streams down the hillside in and out among the rocks.

I came to a sudden stop and touched the scrivener on the arm.

"I hear a noise of some one walking," I said. "A stone just clattered against a rock."

The scrivener raised his finger to silence me.

"I saw them when we were watching the horsemen ride past," he said. "It's two fellows armed with bows and arrows. They are behind us."

I asked no further questions. I knew that they were on our tracks. It was a sign that our enemies were combing the country round in their search and would leave no stone unturned till they found us.

The scrivener halted and pointed to a large tree.

"Hide there," he explained. "That's where they will pass. When they come abreast of you, keep your eye open. Wait for an opportunity."

With not another word he was off through the woods. I stood for a moment in doubt. Then I walked quickly to the place he had pointed out and took my position in the shelter of the tree. My heart was thumping like a hammer. I laid my hand involuntarily on my dagger. I gave a pull at my jerkin. I was now on

one foot, now on the other. A nervousness came over me that made me as uneasy as a young colt.

Presently the sound of voices came through the trees—deep rumbling voices of men. Then the brush swished and here and there the noise of a stone that one of them kicked with the toe of his heavy boot. I peered out as cautiously as I could. They came into view a flash at a time from among the thick trunks.

Then I summoned my will and took in a deep breath. The men were not ten feet away muttering and talking and growling that they had been aroused so untimely from their sleep. I saw their faces clearly and even the color of their eyes.

Illustration:
They Came Into View From Among the Thick Trunks

Suddenly they looked up and stopped as though they had been confronted by a ghost. I sprang to the other side of my tree and peered out again. To my amazement, the scrivener was standing directly before them. He was swinging his cap low so that it swept the ground and he laid his hand over his heart like a courtier. With a bow that might have shamed a prince he said in a soft voice:

"Gentlemen, I am the highwayman of Tours. Are you looking for me?"

I knew it was my time to act. While the two fellows stood thus uncertain trying to collect their wits, I leaped out. Before either of them could stir, I had gathered my fist into a ball. I swung as hard as ever I delivered a blow in my life. My bare knuckles struck the man nearest me so violently that I felt the jar of it clear to my elbow. I caught him behind the ear. He hung for a second as though he were suspended in the air. Then, like a bag that is suddenly dropped, he sank unconscious to the earth.

Before I could glance about the scrivener had straightened himself. With one of his springs he came hurtling through the air. The fellow had half turned when he saw his companion fall and was not entirely on his guard. The scrivener's heels struck him like a weight in the chest. As though his legs were cut away from under him, he flew back and rolled over to the foot of the tree.

"Quick!" cried my companion.

I needed no urging. As fast as my anxious fingers could manage, I undid the fastenings that bound the quiver of arrows to my fellow's shoulder. Then I snatched up the bow and turned to see what the next move would be.

The scrivener had done as I had done, only with more dispatch. He stepped back and laid an arrow in the bow.

"Up with you!" he cried. "Back to your master, De Marsac, and say that the highwayman of Tours sends him his compliments. Tell him that we shall meet him further down the road on the way to Angers. Tell him to keep a keen edge on his sword for when we meet again the one or the other of us shall die!"

I never saw a man fly before an enemy so quickly. Before I could wink he had turned and was soon hidden among the trees.

"That's one of them," muttered my companion. He pointed to the man whom I had felled. He was rolling over and trying to raise himself on his elbow. "He's safe enough where he lies," he continued. "By the time he has his wits again, we shall be out of reach."

"Where are we going now, master scrivener?" I asked.

"I'm not sure, my lad," he said. He pointed to the sun which stood over our heads. "First we'll eat what is left of our breakfast. We'll go ahead slowly for a while. When it gets dark I shall make a quiet visit to the inn."

Chapter XV

The Scrivener Disappears.

It was far into the night when the scrivener returned. The first quarter of the moon was all the light we had, but even at that how he made his way through the gloom of the trees was more than I could guess. He had left me in a spot that was far back from the highway where there was no path nor even a rock to guide him. But he was as unerring as one of his arrows.

"We have been outlawed," he said with a laugh. "There's a price on our heads."

"Ah!" was all that I could say.

"It's posted in the inn," he explained, "and on some of the trees, for him who can to read. Fifty crowns for each of us, dead or alive." He clapped me playfully on the shoulder. "It's more than I ever counted myself to be worth."

I knotted my brows. For all his gaiety I felt a chill climb slowly up my back. I was little more than an animal to be a target for all mankind.

"We're done for, then," I said and sighed.

"If they catch us," he replied. "Even if they do, we have fifty arrows and two strong bows. If you can shoot, that will mean that fifty of them will drop before they lay hands on us. Don't you think the odds are in our favor?"

I was not so sure.

"Fifty crowns is a large sum," I said half to myself. "A man will go far for that."

The scrivener made no answer but laid a bundle on the ground, which he spread out with the greatest care. In the light of the moon I saw him quietly smiling to himself.

"I've brought enough for a week," he said, "cheese and bread and smoked meat. While they are running mad in search of us, we can live like kings."

With all my fears, I was as hungry as a bear. The two of us sat down upon the hard ground with a flat stone for a table. We ate in silence, for each of us was busy with his own thoughts. Now and then I caught the scrivener glancing up at me through his brows with that quaint smile on his face, as though he was secretly amused.

"I can go with you until we come into the country of the Abbot of Chalonnes," he said suddenly. "After that it will be for you to shift for yourself."

"Scrivener," said I, "who is this Abbot of Chalonnes?"

"He's a strong man, Henri," came the answer. "A man to be feared."

"But what is his importance?" I demanded. "Has he an army? Does he rule a part of France? Or is he only a churchman?"

"No one knows—exactly," replied the scrivener cautiously. "He's as mysterious as a fox. He has power enough to move a mountain. He can break the most arrogant prince. He can tear his castle down about his ears. But his

ways are dark and secret. He is seldom seen. He has no followers as far as I can learn, but somehow men are afraid to go against his will."

"But his land? Where does he live?"

"That's uncertain, too," he explained. "——mostly in the valley of the Loire beyond the fortress of Angers."

"Have you ever seen him?" I continued.

"Never! Never in my life!"

The answer came quick and sudden. The scrivener sprang from the ground and looked circumspectly about. He put his hand to his ear as though he was listening to a sound and stood in utter silence for several minutes. At length he dropped his arm to his side and walked away.

"I thought it was some one moving about in the woods," he said. "It was only a deer or boar rustling the leaves."

If I hadn't been so tired I would have laughed in his face. I was enough at home in the woods to know that there had been no sound, not even of the tiniest bird. The truth of the matter was that I had put a question to him that he was loath to answer. He had been evasive before when I tried to pry him open and now he had made this pretext to avoid me once again. I let the matter drop, but the determination lingered that at the first opportunity I would corner him and drive my questioning further.

He wandered off to pick up some sticks and shreds of moss and dried grass. When he had his arm full, he returned and spread what he had gathered upon the ground. He took off his coat and laid it like a pillow under his head. Then, without a word or even a look at me, he lay down and curled himself into a knot. It was not long before he was breathing deeply and snoring like the croaking of a frog.

I was weary with the day's excitement. Perhaps the example of the scrivener set me to yawning. However it was, I was soon stretched out beside him asleep under the waving branches of the trees and the stars.

It was bright day when I awoke. The scrivener was about whistling with the merriment of a lark. He had a fire going in a crevice between two craggy rocks and on it was the remains of the meat which he had brought from the inn the night before. I fell to with a good appetite. When I arose to brush the crumbs from my clothes, he took to walking about with his hands behind him, lost in study with his brow wrinkled, frowning and talking to himself, as though he was trying to solve a riddle. Then suddenly he halted before me.

"We've got to get away from here," he said. "It's a wasps' nest. They're searching the woods. If we stay, we'll be shot down like dogs."

I looked at him.

"Lead," said I, "and I'll follow."

We went off among the thickest of the trees and over ground that was almost impassible for jutting rocks. We made no speed for at every dozen steps the scrivener stopped and peered around. The woods were as silent as a grave with only the faintest breeze blowing in our faces that ruffled the leaves and sighed gently over our heads.

Now and then he stooped to examine the ground for signs of footsteps or of human visitation, that is, in places where there was clay or soil. On and on we went, slowly. I for my part had a stifling fear in my heart that boded no good; the scrivener as quiet and preoccupied as I had as yet seen him.

By noon we had covered the length of the whole range of hills. We were come into a deep valley with a little stream winding through it. The place was dank with moisture and very dark, for the trees were well watered and the soil lost much of its rockiness. With cautious steps we went ahead. We stumbled over projecting roots and long spindling weeds. A hare started out of the underbrush and nearly frightened me to death. Not a sound did we make save the laboring of our breaths and an occasional rattle when the toe of a boot caught against a scattered stone.

We were on the edge of the forest. For a moment the scrivener hesitated and gazed thoughtfully around. He touched me on the arm and with his finger bade me look ahead. The direction in which he pointed was between an opening among the trees. I peered carefully but at first saw nothing. Then, as my eyes got more accustomed to the distance, I was able to make out a thin curl of white smoke rising in the air. When it reached a level with the tops of the trees it scattered and disappeared in the sky.

"We can go no further," the scrivener said. "The whole side of the valley is filled with men."

"—searching for us?" I asked.

"Yes," he answered with a nod of his head.

I knew that they were lying there to block us off. My thoughts turned this way and that. I looked at my companion for some sign or other but his face was set with the seriousness of a stone.

"Do you think it so fine now to be in danger?" I cast at him.

A hard smile caught at the corners of his mouth.

"Have I shown fear?" he demanded.

"They're drawing a ring around us," I said. "We'll starve in the woods in a day or two. We'll be as weak as cats. Then they'll close in."

The scrivener gave a twang to his bow-string. The old spirit of his flashed out for a second and he grinned.

"I wish they would close in now," he replied. "They know the mettle of the highwayman of Tours. They know how I can strike when they least expect it. Pshaw!" He spat contemptuously on the ground. "They have all the same feeling—if they harm a hair of my head, they will die like dogs!"

"If you're not afraid, master scrivener," I went on, "why are you so serious?"

He spun around like a top.

"Serious!" he exclaimed. "Do you think a man ought not to plan? Why, lad, I'm scheming as hard as I can to pull you out of this difficulty."

"—me!" I cried.

He shot a look at me.

"Do you think I care for myself?" he answered. "Why, lad, if I were alone, I would be on my way by this and as free as a bird in the air."

I considered for a moment.

"Why have you stuck to me at all, master scrivener?" I asked slyly. "Is there a purpose to it?"

He examined me suspiciously out of the corner of his eye. He rolled his forehead upwards and set his mouth to whistle a tune. I realized that he was going to evade my question as he did before.

"Scrivener," I began deliberately, "why don't you lay aside the mask? You know you are leading me as you would a dog upon a string. Can't you be frank enough to tell me why?"

At these words he leaped in the air. He let out one long breath of surprise and threw his arms towards the sky.

"Listen to him, will you!" he cried as though he were speaking with some one invisible. "Harken to his nonsense! Has there ever been——"

He stopped as suddenly as he began. His arms dropped to his side. He put his finger over his mouth to caution me to silence and gazed intently far over my shoulder. Then he backed away towards the trunk of the nearest tree.

"Pist!" he exclaimed under his breath. "Don't move!"

I had no time to judge whether it was one of his pranks or not, whether it was an attempt to turn a conversation that was distasteful to him. A click at my feet threw a cloud of dust in my face and sprinkled me with a shower of small stones. I looked and there standing before me was an arrow a yard long with its point buried deep in the earth.

In spite of the warning I jumped up. At the same time another arrow sped past me so near and with such speed that I felt the breeze fan my cheeks. I made a leap to get within the protection of a tree when I glanced to the side and saw the scrivener lay an arrow in his bow. The string gave a twang. He followed the missile with his eyes. A slow pleased smile spread over his countenance and he turned to me.

"He has shot his last shot," he said.

"Do you know who it was?" I asked.

"Stay where you are," he cautioned, "If you are threatened, run for it as fast as you can."

He disappeared among the trees. As for me, I had not seen the man who sent the arrow at all, nor was I even able to figure the exact place from which it had come. I took my bow in my hands to have it ready. I listened with all my ears for the slightest sound. I kept turning this way and that. Minute after minute passed in the utter silence of those woods. I expected the scrivener to return at almost any second. I took to pacing up and down. A nervousness stirred within me for I was growing conscious that I was next to helpless against the odds that surrounded me. Where had the scrivener gone and what was detaining him?

I waited. The time went by so slowly that it seemed an age. My heart beat off the seconds as though it were counting out the span of my life. My head was now in this direction, now in that, for the fear of a surprise was strong in my mind.

Then a thought struck me. Perhaps he was more in need of me than I was of him. Maybe the man who shot the arrow was only a decoy to lead him into a trap. Could it be possible that he had been captured and killed while I was loitering there in idleness?

My mind was running on with one thought chasing the other. My nerves were jumping like strings. I grasped the bow in my hand and began to run. I took the same course as the scrivener. With all my speed I leaped over roots of trees, rocks and what lay in my path. I covered twice the space that an arrow could fly. I went out of my course and made a wide circle through the woods. I wound in and about here and there so that finally I returned to the spot from which I had set out. Not a sound did I hear. Not a trace of a human being did I discover. It was as though I were standing in the emptiness of a desert.

I sat down on a rock to think the matter over. The more I pondered, the deeper the mystery became. To add to my concern the sun was sending

slanting rays from the west. By that I was sure that in another half hour it would be dark and in that sea of enemies I would have to shift for myself.

I resolved that I would make one more search. I got to my feet with much misgiving and bent my steps once again through the woods. I had not gone ten paces when I came across a dark body huddled up against the root of a tree. It was in a spot where the shadows were thickest and I had to peer closely to observe it.

Then I received a shock that went through me like the stab of a dagger, for there face down in the grass lay the scrivener. In the middle of his back stuck an arrow. He must have been dragged from the place where he was killed, for his shoes were gone and his coat was ripped and torn under the arm-pits, and the old hat which he wore was crushed down over his head as though his murderer had flattened it.

With a gulp in my throat as big as an apple I stooped and shook him by the arm. He was stone dead for he moved with the heaviness of a log. Then I arose and took my hat in my hands to mutter a prayer. In the next second a hand as hard as iron and as strong as a vise was laid on my shoulder. I turned my head. In the growing darkness I looked into a face that was frowning as black as night. The fellow was of about the same size as myself. He had on a coat and trousers such as the soldiers wear only they were threadbare and very ragged. A rough cap was pulled down over his eyes and a loose scarf was wound about his throat and came up over his chin. As he grinned at me I remember that a pair of silver ear-rings shook menacingly from his ears.

The sight of him made me as limp as a rag. I realized instantly all that had happened. The bow fell from my grasp and I turned helplessly away.

“Forward!” a rough voice commanded. At the same time I was shoved roughly in the direction of the highway.

Chapter XVI

The Scrivener Turns Traitor.

I stumbled along over the uneven ground with my captor at my back. By the time we reached the road it was pitch dark. The trees grew on either side of us like a great dark wall. There was no light save the glimmering of the new moon and an occasional star or two.

For the first half hour I was as docile as a lamb, for I was shaken by the unexplained loss of the scrivener and by the seriousness of my own plight. My captor never uttered a word. Indeed I would not have been aware of his presence had it not been for the crunching of the stones under his feet and a cautioning pinch on the arm when I lagged in my gait.

But I soon found a ray of hope in my situation and new and daring thoughts popped up in my mind. It was easily two miles to the inn. We were utterly alone. The thought of what would happen to me once I fell into De Marsac’s power strengthened my resolution. I was determined, if I could ferret out a means, that I would escape and take my chances again in the woods.

I tossed the question about in my brain. The night was warm for the season of the year. I had on a heavy jerkin of deer-hide that was beginning to be

uncomfortable. If I took it off, I should certainly find relief. I drew one arm out slowly with a grunt to let my captor know that I was suffering from the heat. Then I had it entirely free. I rolled it up into folds as though I was going to tuck it under my arm. When I had it ready, I wheeled on my heel and with a swift swing hurled it with all my strength into his face!

I started to run. In that one moment of his confusion I had to make the best of my opportunity. In three strides I had gotten a start. My feet flew over the hard ground as they never flew before. A certain joy filled my heart that I was on my way to freedom. A few more strides and I was headed for the trees. It was my only salvation, for once I could lose myself in the darkness of the woods my captor would have his own trouble in finding me.

I jumped over the ditch that lined the road with the swiftness of a hare. I was making good headway up the side of the bank when my feet were suddenly entangled and I fell my whole length on the sod. It was the coat that I had thrown into my captor's face. He was more alert than I had reckoned. He must have recovered instantly from his surprise and have started after me. With an aim that was as accurate as it was quick he was able to enmesh my feet as I ran.

He was upon me like a cat. With a jerk at my collar he landed me on my feet. Then with a shove so violent that his fist dug into my ribs he urged me on ahead.

"One trick more," he growled, "and it will be the end of you."

I took the affair evenly enough. It was a chance in which I failed. But, even at that, I was resolved that at the next opportunity, I would try again.

Throughout the length of that march I tormented him to the full. At times I walked as fast as my legs could carry me, thinking to wear him out. I expected him to catch me again by the collar and command me to go more slowly, but I met only with disappointment. Every time I turned he was at my heels breathing as smoothly as if he were sitting in a chair. Then I lagged. I drew my feet after me as though they were a weight. I zigzagged from one side of the road to the other. I stopped to pick up a stick that lay in my path and took to swishing the weeds along the edges of the highway. In a word I tried all manner of nonsense to worry and anger him with the notion that at the end he would call me to account. I had hopes that in case he fell into a quarrel with me, it would come to an open fight in which I was sure I would have as great advantage as he.

My pranks came suddenly to an end. I had forgotten the dagger which I still had concealed in my shirt. Surely I could make use of it, even if my captor had his bow and arrows, if I chose a moment when he was off his guard.

I steadied myself and walked along in the middle of the road. I glanced over my shoulder and at the same time felt for the weapon. The haft was near my hand. In a second I could draw it forth and take my enemy by surprise. Slowly and more slowly I advanced. I did not turn again but listened intently for the crunching of the stones under his feet. By the sound I could measure the distance between him and me. When he came near enough I could—

"Do you want to die?" His voice came like a sound from the tomb. So surprised was I that I wheeled about.

"—die?" I repeated. "What do you mean?"

"Get that thought out of your head!" he commanded.

My hopes fell. I knew now for the first time that I had a man of more than usual insight and cunning to deal with. If I were to try any further tricks, they must be managed with the utmost skill and daring.

We went on. The moon rose higher in the heavens. The trees waved their long branches over our heads. The road twisted and turned like a snake. One scheme after another came into my head, but I cast them all aside, for with his alertness and the quickness of his mind my captor had a hold on me as firm as chains.

Of a sudden the road bent. As we turned the corner the dull light from the windows of the inn shone before us. To make sure that I would not make a final break for freedom, the fellow behind me grasped me by the arm.

In a few steps we were at the inn door. It was standing open. The old dust-covered lanthorn was hanging from the ceiling in the middle of the room, sputtering forth its uncertain yellow light. To my dismay I saw De Marsac sitting directly under it at the table. He seemed impatient for he was twisting his mustache with the thumb and forefinger of one hand and drumming nervously with the other.

My captor had just shoved me across the threshold. He opened his mouth to speak when two fellows in the garb of common soldiers brushed roughly past. Their faces were white from fear, and from the way they were breathing I judged that they had been running. They threw themselves at De Marsac's feet.

"My lord!" they cried. "The highwayman of Tours is running wild in the forest! He has shot three of your men already. If you will——"

My captor broke him off. He advanced with his chest thrown out and his head high in the air.

"The highwayman of Tours is dead!" he growled in a voice deep in his throat. "I shot him with my own hand. His body lies under a tree about a league to the south on the left of the road. To prove it, here is the boy who accompanied him." He stopped for a moment and gazed proudly at De Marsac. "My lord," he went on, "the fifty crowns that you have offered as a reward is mine!"

De Marsac rose slowly from his seat. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and let his eye roam over me. He smacked his lips and smiled, as though I was a tender morsel he was about to devour.

"I was glad you weren't hanged this morning," he said with a sly leer. "If you had died, my scheme would have gone astray. I'm going to care for you now like a bird in a cage. I'm going to send you down the river to a safe, snug place where you will come to no harm." He rubbed his hands together like a merchant who has just made a clever deal. "When your brother sees fit to surrender his estates, I shall give you back to him. Till then——" He raised his arm and snapped his fingers in the air.

He turned to the fellow who had taken me and clapped him on the back.

"You have earned every groat of your reward, my man," he said, and drew from an inside pocket a leather purse. "I am proud of you." Then he counted out upon the table the fifty crowns in glittering pieces of gold.

My captor was beside himself from joy and bashfulness—joy, that he had been the lucky one to effect my capture, bashful, that he was made so much of by so great a person as De Marsac. He wanted to mutter a word of thanks, but he choked in trying it, so that all he could do was to hang his head and turn his face aside.

But after he had put the money in his jerkin, he took me by the arm and led me to a place at the far end of the room. By merest chance it was the very seat I had occupied the night before.

"You have been the means of making me a rich man, lad," he puffed as he sat down. "And I'm going to feast you to your heart's content for it."

The landlord came—the same wiry hatchet-faced fellow who had taken my dagger. Not a sign of recognition showed on his face. As though he had never laid eyes on me before, he bowed graciously to us, asked us what we would eat and was off.

While we sat waiting, I ran my eyes searchingly around the room. In the semidarkness of the old lanthorn, I noticed De Marsac sitting over his supper with the same smile upon his face. Soldiers came in and out, some of them to bring reports to their master, others to snatch a bite and to make off again.

I rested my gaze upon my captor. The cap was still drawn down half way over his eyes. The flaring red scarf hung about his neck, reaching well up under his chin. A scowl crossed my brow. I fastened a look on him that was filled with hate and chagrin. His two beady eyes twinkled their strange light into mine as though they were laughing at me. The corners of his lips curled slightly up in amusement. Then he winked slyly at me as though there was something I ought to understand.

I grew interested. As though he were a curiosity, I began to examine him more closely. The shine of those eyes and the slight arch of his nose seemed strangely familiar to me.

"You like to eat, don't you?" he asked, but in a low tone and in a voice that was different from the heavy growl that he had used on our way to the inn.

I leaned towards him across the table. He shot an inquiring glance around the room. Then he put his forefinger straight over his lips. It was a signal that I must be on my guard. With the same motion he let the scarf fall from his chin.

I nearly tumbled from the chair. Of all the surprises of my life this was the greatest. For the man whose prisoner I was, who had sold me to De Marsac for a handful of gold, who had betrayed me as though I were the meanest dog, was the man whom I for the past days had considered my closest friend—the scrivener!

I opened my mouth and gasped.

"You!" was all I could say.

"Pist!" he cautioned.

"I thought you were dead!" I went on.

"Dead?" he said with a shrug of his shoulders. "Not much."

"Why, I saw you lying there under the tree," I argued. "I touched you and you didn't stir."

"No, you didn't," he contradicted, "not me."

"Why, your clothes——" I began.

He waved his finger before my face.

"Ah," he remarked. "There's where you are jumping at conclusions. It's a lesson you'll have to learn, and you might as well begin now—you should never judge a man by his clothes."

I didn't know what to say.

"Why did you do this?" I demanded finally.

"To save your life—and mine," he answered blandly. "There were too many of them in the woods."

“Don’t you realize that this will be the end of me?”

“No,” he replied, “it’s only the beginning.”

“Where will they take me?” I asked.

“Down the valley of the Loire. Keep your ears and eyes open,” he said with all seriousness.

“—and what about you?”

“I’m going back,” he replied. “The country’s too dangerous.”

“Will you tell my brother never to give up the estates—no matter what happens?” I asked, “—even if I’m a prisoner in De Marsac’s castle for life?”

“It won’t be necessary,” he said. “You’ll never see De Marsac’s castle.”

Chapter XVII

On the Highway.

That was a long night. I fell asleep with my head in my arms over the table with the scrivener opposite me. De Marsac took no chances of my escape. He left four men in the room, two to stand guard in turn while the others snatched a wink of sleep. After he had cleared the plates and dishes away the landlord disappeared. Once in a while I awoke and looked around. But this time I was sure there would be no rescue, no helping hand.

The first streaks of dawn were struggling in at the little window when I got to my feet. My muscles were as sore as if I had been dragged a mile through a mire. I yawned and stretched myself and listened for a moment to the birds chirping and quarreling in the ivy that covered the outer walls of the inn.

One of my guards brought breakfast for us all. It was then that I observed for the first that my companion, the scrivener, was nowhere to be seen. He must have slipped out in the dead of night, unnoticed. The men looked at each other in question, puzzled, but I smiled to myself. I knew it was one of those little tricks that he so dearly loved to play.

We went once again out on the highway. The sun was up big and red. Three of the men remained at the inn, but the fourth, a fellow called Pierre, was to lead me far down the valley of the Loire. For days I was to be his prisoner. I was to eat and sleep with him. He was to be all the companion I was to have, so I determined I would make the best of it and be on as friendly a footing as I could.

But I found from the first that he was the surliest and coarsest man alive. During the afternoon, he scarcely uttered a word, but went on grumbling and muttering to himself. His face wore a perpetual scowl. He kicked viciously at the stones along the road as if they were actually his enemies. He complained of the long journey ahead of us.

“One man gets the money,” he said under his breath. “Another does the work.”

“You don’t have to go,” I said. “If you say the word, I’ll leave you.”

He shot a look at me that was enough to kill me.

“Try it,” he growled. And his jaws came together with a snap.

After that I shrank back into my shell. I knew I was in company with a savage. At the slightest sign of trifling, I was convinced, he would stick a dagger into my heart and leave me on the road to die.

At noon we halted in the shade of the trees along the side of the highway. He took from his shoulder a packet which he had brought from the inn. In it were a lump of cheese and a length of hard bread. With as much deliberation as he could show, he took a dagger from his coat and wiped the blade two or three times over the knees of his trousers. Then he cut the cheese into squares and tore the bread into pieces with his hands. As though I were only an animal to be fed, he tossed them to me through the air.

The first piece flew past me and fell into the dirt. The second landed at my feet. Another caught me in the chest and tumbled in between my folded hands. I was hungry, of course, but the manner of the man sickened me. So I sat there glaring into his face.

He fell to with the appetite of a bear. He stuffed one lump after another between his teeth and shoved them into his mouth with his thumb. He gulped to swallow and that so hard that I thought he would choke. When he had eaten twice as much as an ordinary man he rose and threw what remained into my lap.

"You should starve," he said, "—you spy!"

"I am no spy," I declared.

He made no answer but gave me a look that was filled with hate.

I picked up the pieces that were clean and began to eat slowly. Thoughts of my home and of the comfort I had there started to run through my mind. A burning anger rose within me that I should be treated thus by a fellow who was no equal of mine—who should have been glad to run at my beck and call.

Without a word of warning he came over and caught me by the collar. With a swift jerk he landed me on my feet. I was amazed at the suddenness of it and the enormous strength of the man. I was sure that he could have held me in the air with his outstretched arm as easily as I could have held a bundle of straw.

We were on the road again, both going along in silence. During the afternoon, I noticed small groups of men, some clad as ordinary soldiers, some in finer dress like captains and officers, others on horseback with armor and coats of mail. I had seen the like before in the village at home to be sure, for in my day there was always war in this or that part of France to attract the minds of men. But what struck me was that these were all going in the same direction (towards the west); they all seemed bent on the same errand; and they were so numerous that I was set wondering.

That night we found no place in an inn. The common room was crowded to the doors with swashbuckling soldiers of every kind. Loud talk and boasting filled the air, together with the clanking of swords, the thumping of heavy boots on the floor, the clamoring of men hungry for their supper, quarrels over this or that and even blows struck and returned.

We were lucky to get any food at all, but the worst of it all was that we were forced to sleep in the open. Pierre found a spot in the shelter of the barn where we would be protected from the wind. He brought an armful of straw and scattered it over the ground. Then he took from his pockets two strands of rope and bade me lie down. He tied one strand firmly about my right wrist, the other about my left. The ends he drew apart in opposite directions, tying one to a post

at the corner of the barn, the other he fastened on the other side of me to a stone that was imbedded in the soil.

It was as though I was stretched out like a cross. I could move my hands outwards as far as I liked. But when I drew them together as far as the ropes allowed, they remained more than a foot apart. If I rolled over on my side the one arm was behind me and the other in front. If I had tried to get to my feet, I wouldn't have been halfway up before I would have been forced down again.

It was thus I passed the night. You can imagine that I slept only in fits and starts, for as soon as I was in a doze I was sure to stir and the tautness of the ropes, with the pain awakened me.

The day came as a relief. My captor let me lie until he brought me my breakfast. Then he loosed my bonds. After we had eaten we started out on the journey that was becoming irksome and even a torment.

That day passed about the same as the first. We toiled along the road for the most part in gloomy silence. The soldiers were pouring in thicker and thicker. Sometimes as many as two hundred of them in a single body passed us so that we were forced to leave the highway and stand on the banks to let them go by.

At another time later on a great lord from the east swept along. He was dressed in shining armor from head to heel. In his helmet waved a plume of feathers dyed red and white and a broadsword hung in its glittering scabbard by his side. In his train were at least five hundred followers, some of them of almost as high degree as he; others with long lances rode directly behind him, while further back a troop of archers completed the array.

It was a sight to admire. From where we had halted on the side of the road, my captor pointed at them with his finger.

"That," said he, "is what you have come to see."

His grimness puzzled me.

"Has a war broken out?" I asked.

"Not yet," was the answer, "—and it will never be called a war. These men are on their way to crush the Black Prince of England."

I drew a long breath.

"—the Black Prince!" I exclaimed. "Why, you can't do that. There is not a leader alive who can cope with him in the field."

A slow smile came over his face.

"Within a week, there will be fifteen thousand men on their way down this valley," he replied. "The Black Prince is far off towards the west. He is as ignorant of this preparation as a child."

"But he'll learn of it?" I said.

My captor shook his head.

"He'll be struck with the suddenness of a thunderbolt. We're going to cut him off at Poitiers—when he starts back to his headquarters at Bordeaux." He snapped his fingers in contempt. "He has seven thousand men who are half starved, weak from long marches and disease. What can they do against these?"

He pointed with pride at the men marching past.

"When the Black Prince is a prisoner of the King of France," he went on, scowling in my face with a wicked grin, "we shall move against Normandy——"

"The Norman Barons can defeat any army the French can send against them!" I cried. "They have proved that more than once."

He clenched his fingers over my arm till the pain of it shot up through my shoulder.

"No, they won't," he said, gritting his teeth. "They won't have time to unite."

"I see it all now," I cried again. "That is why De Marsac is so anxious. He thinks he has a claim on our estates already. He can't wait—"

A hard expression covered his countenance.

"Before the snow flies I shall be toasting my shins before the fire-place in your house," my captor boasted. "De Marsac has promised that I shall be the bailiff when he is master there."

A long breath like a sob broke from my throat. It was plain to me now for the first time why I was sent on this errand down the valley of the Loire.

"Have you ever heard of a youth called 'Charles of Gramont'?" I demanded.

"Of course," came the answer, "he's the son of the old Count. He was a prisoner of ours for a while—but escaped—"

"—escaped?" The word jumped from my mouth.

"Yes," was the reply. "Gone. Like smoke in the air."

"He has joined the Black Prince!" I exclaimed. "I am glad of that. He will let him know of the danger he is in."

My captor threw back his head and uttered a low grunt that was meant for a laugh.

"A fly couldn't get out of this valley—or into it—unless we knew it," he said. "That lad has either starved to death or is hiding somewhere in the woods."

A thrill of joy ran up and down every nerve in my body. For a while I stood staring at the soldiers passing before us, but with eyes that did not see. A world of new thoughts was seething in my brain. Then a fresh notion came to me.

"Just to think how I have wasted my time," I said slyly to my captor. "I was sent here to find him. I might as well have remained at home."

He turned on me with a knowing look.

"You weren't sent here for any purpose of the kind," he answered with as much cunning as he could show. "You came to learn of this army that is passing down the valley of the Loire. You were to find out the numbers of it, where it was heading, how soon it would be ready to strike. In one word you were sent here as a spy!"

If I had had the strength, I would have felled him with a blow. Yet for all that I now realized that every syllable he uttered was the naked truth. If I had been told in the beginning that I was to act as a sneak, (as he said "a spy") I would have refused boldly and I was sent in blindness to follow a false trail. I was duped into a position that was contrary to my ideas of manliness and honor.

I had information that the Black Prince would give half a kingdom to know. The cruelties of De Marsac and the men whom he had set on my heels were as humiliating as ever I had suffered. His trickery and deceit were of the kind that no man of self-respect would practice. It was his aim to drive my brother and me from the home which our family had enjoyed for generations. All these things galled me and drove me to a kind of desperation. The thought came slowly to me to be sure, but while I stood gazing on the soldiers whose mission was to destroy the only friend that Normandy had at this time—the Black Prince—I resolved that I would go no further with my captor than force compelled me. I would watch every opportunity. I would play the fox to the last degree. When the time came I would try once more to escape. If I could get through that circle of men who guarded the Valley of the Loire I would risk my

very life to inform the Black Prince of the plans that were ripening against him, for I knew that if I did, I would be saving my home in Normandy.

Chapter XVIII

Escape!

My chance came three days later. During this time we had traveled a long way. When the sun was up we plodded along footsore and weary. At night we lay down wherever we were able to find a soft place in the grass or under the protection of a tree. The inns were crowded, not only with soldiers but with all the riff-raff of humanity. Wandering jugglers and mountebanks, sleight-of-hand artists, men with bears on ropes, quack doctors of medicine who sold simples made of the roots of marvelous trees,—all these and more lined the highway. Their booths were set up alongside the inns. They barked and called to the passers-by. They were the followers of an army who sapped the soldiers of their hard earned pay.

As for myself I was almost sick of life. My companion was in the sourest of moods. He growled at his ill luck and laid the blame for it at my door. He took every occasion to make me miserable, now by threats, again by actual brutality. He gave me only the coarsest fare which he could purchase in the inns. And to make me the more miserable he chose the daintiest morsels for himself and taunted me while he shoved them down his throat.

By the third day we were come almost to the boundaries of the Kingdom of France. To the west of us lay a stretch of country which was as wild as a desert. It was only sparsely inhabited. The inhabitants owed no allegiance to any ruler alive. They were neither on the side of the Black Prince nor the King, for the country was half way between the two. In one word, it was the stamping ground for war and whoever had the upper hand was for the time its lord.

It was about noon when we left the highway, for here it took a sharp turn towards the south, and continued our journey over a narrow path through the woods. There was a winding path that was beaten bare—used by many feet. My captor seemed well acquainted with the lay of the land for he went ahead with all the confidence in the world and indeed with more buoyancy than he had shown on the entire journey.

At length we came to the banks of the stream, at a place with a long shelving landing made of smooth stones, paved clear down to the water's edge. A rusted length of chain and a long boat-hook lay in the grass. To my observation it was a landing for a ferry.

My companion bade me halt.

"Where's the boat?" he asked, gazing around. "They told me that the boat would be here to take us across."

He picked up the chain and threw it down again. He walked to and fro several times as though he was turning a question over in his mind. Then he came to a stop before me.

"Can you swim?" he demanded.

"Yes," I answered.

He sat down on a rock and began to remove his shoes. To throw him off his guard I did the same. When we had stripped ourselves he bade me tie my clothes into a firm bundle and fasten them around my neck. We went into the water a little at a time. The current was fairly swift, for it gathered here to broaden out into a wide sweep far beyond. I cast my eyes carefully down the river and saw that in the middle of this broadening lay an island, not very big to be sure, but covered with tall trees that grew so thick that the branches were woven into one another.

"It is now or never," I thought.

In the next moment we were beyond our depths. I saw at once that my captor was as much at home in the water as he was on land. He swam with long, easy strokes and with no sense of fatigue. He kept his head continually turned toward me as a cat watches a mouse. I for my part paid no heed to him, for I was busy with thoughts of my own.

Slowly, a bit at a time, I began to loose the knot that bound my clothes about my neck. When it was entirely free the bundle floated off. The weight of my shoes soon sank it beneath the surface. With a cry I dived after it. I drew myself as far under the water as I could. I put all the strength I had into every stroke. I held my breath so that no bubbles would arise and inform my captor where I was. It was down-stream with the current in a straight line.

I rose to the surface to fill my lungs and looked back. He was swimming after me, lashing the water with his great hands like some monster. His face was heavy with anger and his teeth shone white like the fangs of a wolf when he breathed.

Once again I dived as far as I could go. This time I did not swim straight ahead but swerved off towards the left. If I could throw him off long enough for him to get beyond me in the current, I would have the better of him and be surer of my escape.

But he was as wary as a fox. When I came up for the second time he was in the middle of the river but moving more slowly. His eyes roamed continually searching for some trace of me. When he saw that I had edged off to one side, he raised his fist out of the water and shook it viciously in my direction and shouted a threat which I did not clearly hear.

I was down again under the surface. To puzzle him the more, I made for it with all speed towards the island. If I once set my foot upon it I could lose him among the trees. I could swim to the mainland that lay either on the right or the left. It would be a chase in which I would have an even chance. If I had a speck of luck, it would mean my deliverance.

The thought strengthened me. This time I held my breath so long that I felt I would burst. When I arose I cast a swift glance around. To my surprise he was nowhere to be seen. He had gone under the water. He was swimming somewhere, perhaps quite near to grapple with me in case he could lay hands on me. Perhaps he had decided that I was bound for the island and that, if he could get there before me, he could conceal himself behind a tree and pounce on me as I came to land.

I lingered a moment in doubt. To fall into a trap would be the height of folly. I was now as good as free. I was near the left bank of the stream. Not far off was the dry land and grass and tall trees. A new enemy was better than an old one. I took the risk. With slow even strokes I made my way to the shore and climbed in among the high weeds on the sloping bank.

You may be certain that every move I made was with the greatest caution. I hid myself from view and peered out through the brush. Before I drew half a dozen breaths I saw my captor rise to the surface far down the stream. He looked in every direction. Then as though he had made up his mind he swam swiftly with the current straight for the island and drew himself up on the shore.

It was close on to dusk. The sun was shining over the tops of the trees to the west. A soft breeze started which, wet as I was, sent the shivers through my body. There was one thing sure. I could not go far with no clothes. Nor could I risk sleeping in the open naked as I was, for it would be the death of me.

I resolved that, come what might, as soon as it got dark, I would swim for the island. There would be danger, to be sure. But I was certain that my man would be there drying his clothes. I would be in the protection of the trees. There was no light. If I could come upon him unawares, I might snatch enough to cover me. Then I could make off with all my speed and lose him in the woods.

It was worth the try. Indeed it was the only thing I could do. I sat huddled there on the bank of the stream until the sun had disappeared and the blackness of night covered the earth. I slid into the water. With long, easy strokes I headed for the island. In a few minutes I was dragging myself up on dry land.

Chapter XIX

On the Island.

I was chilled to the bone. The touch of my feet on the hard earth made my going slow and cautious. Now and then I stubbed my toe on a sharp stone that made me wince. But even with that I advanced in among the trees.

My ears were keyed for the slightest sound and my eyes glanced round with the wariness of a cat's. I stopped once in a while to listen for the cracking of a twig, which was the surest sign that my man was near. I scarcely breathed. It was one step after the other, and every time I put my foot down I felt the ground as carefully as you would with your hand.

After a quarter of an hour I had advanced, maybe two or three hundred paces. My eyes were so accustomed to the dark that the trunks of the trees were dimly outlined against the background of the night. As I peered on ahead it seemed that a faint glow of a far off light shone like a veil through the woods. I halted. It must be my captor who by some means that I could not puzzle out had lighted a fire.

I groped around on the ground until I found a stout stick that would serve me as a weapon. With this firmly grasped in my hand I grew all the bolder, so that with less caution than before I went on towards the place where I was sure there was the light.

In another quarter of an hour I was leaning against the trunk of a tree from which position I could plainly see the blaze. It was in the centre of an open space in the forest, on bare hard ground covered with stones and boulders. I wanted to make certain of myself so I moved in a broad circle around the fire, darting a glance here, a glance there so as not to be taken by surprise.

At length I came back to the point from where I had started. Not a soul did I notice on my rounds. I walked in closer and closer with the club balanced ready in my hand. I could feel the heat. The fire blazed and shot off sparks high into the branches of the trees. Then at last I was able to spy the form of a man sitting on a rock. He had a long stick with which he was stirring up the embers. He seemed to be without a care in the world, but what amazed me most was that he was not naked, as I expected my captor to be, but fully clothed.

From where I was, of course, I saw him only dimly. I watched him for a long while toying with the fire as idly as a child. Then he rose and moved towards the left, for the smoke was floating in his face. He must have been blinded for the moment, for he put his fist in his eyes to rub them.

I was trembling with anxiety. I gave one more glance about in every direction. Suddenly I noticed a form—the naked figure of a man—crawling on his hands and knees from out the fringe of woods. He had a club bigger and heavier than my own, which he pushed before him on the ground. Like a flash he straightened himself. The man who was fully clad had his back to him and was still rubbing his eyes. It was my captor, who now began to run forward like an animal eager to fell its prey. He lifted the club high over his head. His eyes shone with savage eagerness in the light of the fire and a grin of victory spread over his countenance.

For a second I was paralyzed with fright. Then I collected myself. I cast all caution aside and ran likewise out of the woods. Just as the club was poised in the air ready to fall I called out in a terrified voice the words, “Look out!”

My voice was pitched high and resounded in the silence of the woods like the crack of a crashing thunderbolt.

The man who was clad jumped as though he had been stuck with a spear and edged off to one side. The club came down. It was a little beside its mark, but even then it struck the man on the side and knocked the breath out of him so that he fell in pain to the ground.

I had betrayed myself to my captor. He had heard my voice and turned. I was coming up at full speed with my staff high in the air. I did not hesitate. With a swinging motion, before he could right himself, I caught him as hard a blow as I could deal and sent him face down sprawling in the dirt.

I had no time to lose. My captor would soon struggle to his feet. I knew I was no match for him in a hand-to-hand combat. I would have to have aid. So I went over to the man whom he had knocked senseless and caught him by the shoulder. I shook him to bring him the more quickly to his senses. I turned him over so that I could see his face. Then I let out a gasp that shook me from my heels to my head. Never in the whole course of my life was I more amazed for there before me on the ground was the lad I had come so far to seek, the son of the old Count of Gramont, Charles!

With my heart thumping like a hammer, I did all in my power to bring him around. I chafed his hands and temples. I took him under the arm-pits and lifted him to his feet. Slowly he opened his eyes. There was a look of terror in them first. Then he blinked. It was as though he could hardly trust his senses. He grasped me by the shoulder. He took in a deep breath. A smile of recognition played about his face and I knew that he understood.

“Quick!” I whispered, and pointed to my captor who was now raising himself on one arm.

In a second he threw off his stupor. He ran back to the fire and seized a length of a limb of a tree which he could use as a weapon against his savage foe.

It was none too soon. The fellow had the strength and vitality of an ox. He scrambled to his feet even while Charles was picking up the stick. With his big body swinging from side to side he came running with his arms outstretched like a bear. Charles brought his weapon down. It was a heavy blow, but the fellow caught it on his arm and it glanced off as lightly as if it were against the trunk of a tree. Then with a murmur of hate he rushed in.

You may suppose that I was not standing there in idleness. As soon as I saw what was happening, I wrapped my fist about my club. I knew that the first blow would be my last. I put every speck of strength in it and made the aim as accurate as my haste would allow. To my joy I met the fellow along the crown of the head. The jar of it shot along the bone of my arm that I thought it was broken. But my victim reeled. His knees sagged and shook. His mouth opened and his eyes turned upward, showing all their white. Like a weight that was suddenly let drop he fell in a heap on the ground.

He was as good as dead. I gave a sign to Charles to give me a hand. Between the two of us we dragged and carried him to the side of the island. There we laid him down until he showed by the blinking of his eyes that he was regaining his senses. When his strength had come back so that he was able to stir, we took him under the arms and the crooks of his legs and heaved him into the river as far as we could swing him.

"He'll waken as soon as he touches the water," said Charles.

"What then?" I asked. "Will he come back?"

He shook his head.

"No. He'll go for help. He knows me. He was one of the men who brought me down the valley of the Loire. He'll come again tomorrow with others."

"We'll have to get away from here."

"Tomorrow," he replied. "We can rest here till dawn."

"I'm chilled through," I said, "That fellow has left his clothes lying here somewhere. I'll dry them and put them on. After that we can sit by the fire." Charles took me by the shoulder. "Ah, Henri!" he said in a shaking voice. "We'll battle it through together, you and I. And we'll win yet!"

We sat by the fire, with each of us telling of his adventures, till far into the night. Then in turns we lay down on a couch of twigs and leaves that Charles had built for himself in the hollow of an overhanging rock. In the morning I had new life. We went down to a cove on the side of the island where Charles had a boat fastened and hidden among the roots of overhanging trees. It was the one, he explained, that my captor had searched for to carry us across the river.

We landed on the other bank and stepped ashore. We went up the steep bank as far as the brow of a hill. The whole country,—wooded and wild,—stretched before us. Whether we would come upon friend or enemy we had yet to learn. We turned and looked back at the river winding in long slow curves at our feet. We saw the island in all its outline as green and peaceful as you could wish.

My eye was caught by an object moving on the opposite shore. When my gaze grew accustomed to the distance I counted six men. Some of them were armed with bows and arrows. The rest were cutting down young trees and dragging

them to the river. Now and then I saw the flash of a sword-blade in the light of the sun.

There was no doubt of it. Our enemies were on foot. They were building a raft to carry armed men over to the island. They would search it from end to end. When they learned that we were gone, they would make for our side of the stream. They would leave no stone unturned to find us. They would examine every blade of grass for traces of us. They would be on our heels like hounds. We were in a country that was unknown to us, while they were as familiar with it as I was with my own.

The Black Prince with his army lay twenty or at most thirty leagues to the west. I had information that would save them. One thought drove us headlong on and on—if our enemies should come upon us, there would be no parleying or hesitation. They would shoot us down like dogs.

Chapter XX

No Man‘s Land.

That day we went on as fast as our legs could carry us. We gauged our position by the sun. During the morning we kept it in our rear while in the afternoon we made sure of ourselves by the shine of it (when there was an opening in the woods) in our faces.

There were no roads that you could speak of—only rutted trails of mud hardly wide enough for two ox-carts to pass without touching the hubs of each other’s wheels. Once in a while we saw the hut of a peasant or a charcoal burner. These we carefully avoided, for we hoped to leave no sign behind us for our enemies to follow, nor did we wish to fall stupidly into a trap. Fortunately it was the season of the year when the nuts were beginning to ripen and we contented ourselves with what we could get of these.

We slept curled up beside each other at the root of a tree. The next morning we were on our way again, but I may say with less speed, for our feet were sore from the unevenness of the ground and our bodies were stretched and tired from the uncomfortable position in which we had spent the night.

About noon we halted for a rest. There was a little brook running over irregular stones down the hill-side where we washed ourselves and drank of the fresh water. I was sitting on a boulder with my back to a tree as limp and wearied as an old cloth. My stomach was rumbling and growling from hunger. I was wishing with all my heart that there would soon be an end to my difficulties. To amuse myself I picked up a stone and threw it aimlessly at a tree. It struck the bark with a resounding crack. I threw another. It missed and went on far beyond. But where it lighted on the ground, I noticed that it stirred up a cloud of dust like fine ashes and with it a few scattered sparks—the smouldering remnants of a fire.

I jumped from my rock. I went over to the place to examine it. Sure enough there was a dying fire on a bare spot among the trees and all about it were the marks where men had trodden the grass with their heavy boots. Besides I saw two pieces of the rind of cheese that had been cut off and thrown away.

“They must have traveled in the night,” I said to Charles. “They’ve passed us and gone on ahead.”

“There’ll be more of them behind us,” he answered. “We must——”

The words stuck in his throat. He looked far off over my shoulder at something in the distance. Like a flash he dropped to his hands and knees. I was about to turn when an arrow whizzed through the air and sped over his shoulder and fastened itself in the trunk of the nearest tree. I thought that caution was the best plan to follow so I ducked likewise. It was a lucky pass, for I had no sooner bent my head when another arrow whistled past me and shot out into the distance beyond me.

We exchanged no words. There was little need for them. With our heads as close to the ground as was possible, we made for it into a deeper section of the woods. In a few seconds a third arrow hummed towards us, but struck the smooth surface of a rock well to one side.

We were out of shot at last, but the terror we were in gave speed to our heels. After about a quarter of an hour we drew up, puffing and panting like tired horses.

“To the south,” said Charles between breaths. “We must hold to the south.”

I knew what he meant. We had betrayed ourselves by keeping in a straight line towards the west, for it was the direction where lay the Black Prince.

We went on again, but now more slowly than before. At almost each step, one or the other of us turned to see if we were followed. At the same time our eyes penetrated every bush and behind every tree in search of a lurking foe. After an hour we could go no further. The pace had been too hot for us, so we settled ourselves on a stone to rest and collect our frightened senses.

Hunger like a gnawing pain bore into the pit of my stomach. Since we had left the island on the morning before, we had eaten no food except the few nuts that we came upon. A kind of sickening weakness overtook me. My legs were trembling as though they were made of straw and the soles of my feet ached as though I were standing over a burning fire.

“If they catch us now,” I said, “it’s all over with me. I can go no further.”

Charles clapped me on the shoulder and laughed, but it was a laugh that was meant only to encourage me and had no heart to it.

“We’ll snap our fingers in their faces yet, Henri,” he said. “Look what we’ve passed through already.”

I only shook my head and stared hopelessly towards the ground.

“We have no weapons,” I replied. “Even the dagger that I was to carry to the Abbot of Chalonnes is with my clothes at the bottom of the river.”

There was no more said. We were both worn out. We went forward through the trees. There was no path. Indeed, the ground seemed to have been trodden now for the first time since the beginning of the world. The moss was everywhere on the earth. The little unexpected stones, as sharp as the tips of arrows, cut into our feet. Above all the darkness and sombreness of the forest was about us like a blanket as gloomy as the night.

We came upon an irregular rising in the ground. There was a solid piece of rock as big as an ordinary house, but with no shape to it. All about, it was cut into crevices. The earth itself broke into risings and depressions. Parts of it were like an uneven wall of stone with great blocks of the rock in a rounded line. It seemed as though nature had begun to build a fortress here, but for some reason or other had left off.

We climbed in among the boulders and found ourselves on smooth ground covered with coarse grass and weeds, with great trees over and about us. Through the middle flowed a stream that had its starting place in a spring that bubbled up like a fountain from the earth.

For a moment we stood gaping in amazement.

"If we only had a few bows and arrows here," said Charles, "we could hold off an army."

"At any rate," I answered, "we can hide here and rest. They will think we have gone on through the woods."

We turned and faced the great rock which, I said, was as big as a house. The front of it was like an overhanging shed. Underneath was what seemed an opening to the mouth of a cavern—dark and smelling of dampness.

Step by step we ventured forward. The ground under our feet grew sticky like wet clay. The light slowly faded. A mustiness like the odor of the cellar of an old inn crept into our nostrils. The opening widened and as we advanced the light was so far gone that we had to feel along the rough wall with our hands.

Suddenly the wall turned and shut us off. I groped on further and further in the hope that the opening was only narrowing and not entirely closed. I was running my fingers from one stone to the other when I felt something flat. There was no dampness to it and it had the evenness of smooth wood. I was about to examine it further when my hand touched a latch.

Like a flash I realized I had come upon a door.

"Charles!" I exclaimed. "We are only at the beginning. There's another cave beyond!"

My curiosity scattered all caution to the winds. I gave the latch a click and shoved on the door. To my surprise it went back on its hinges as though they were swimming in oil. And I beheld a sight that took my breath away and made me gasp in amazement.

A light shone in my eyes. It was not bright, but the unexpectedness of it made it seem like a flash. As soon as my eyes grew accustomed to it, I saw that it was only a small fire burning in a grate in the far end of the cave. There was no smoke. By some means or other a draught drew it upwards through the irregular crevices in the ceiling. I put one foot in the room and gazed around. It was as large as the common room in an inn, but scrupulously clean and neat. The floor, which was as smooth as you could wish, was covered with new straw that cracked with dryness as my foot touched it. On the walls were pegs driven in between the stones and from them were hung at least a dozen bows while the quivers filled with arrows stood beneath.

Charles grasped me by the arm.

"Let's get away," he whispered. "We've come upon a thieves' den."

"If we could lay our hands, each of us, on a bow and a quiver of arrows," I said, "we wouldn't have to run so fast from our enemies."

"And that's right," he agreed. With that he gave me a shove forward.

I went quietly across the floor with Charles at my heels. It was one step at a time with our eyes always turning towards the door. The warmth of the place lured me. If I had had my own way, I would have thrown myself down upon the floor before the fire and have given rest to my weary legs. As it was, Charles was reaching out for a bow and I had my hand already on another when a voice shot through my ears like the blast of a trumpet.

"Gentlemen," it said, "I'm glad you're here. I've been expecting you!"

Chapter XXI

The Defense of the Cave.

We turned. Before us stood a man so small that he might be taken for a dwarf. His head was so large that it was remarkable, and the way it rolled from side to side caused me a certain uneasiness. His eyes were the size of two peas, but they twinkled with a kind of knowing wisdom that continually forced you to look away and in the next moment to return and gaze at him again. A smile covered his mouth, but it was a smile that never changed. You could not tell whether it came from amusement or whether mockery lay behind it. We had hardly caught our breath when he shifted over to us. It was then that I noticed for the first time that his legs were bent in an arch like a bow. They seemed very thin, scarcely able to support the weight of his thick body.

He took off his cap and drew his head in between his shoulders like a turtle.

"I have been on the look-out for you the last three days," he said. "Where have you been?"

I said not a word but glanced at Charles.

"Who are you?" he gasped, "—friend or enemy?"

"I am the Dwarf of Angers," was the reply. He hesitated. The smile broadened into a wicked grin. "If I were your enemy," he went on, "you would have been dead long before this."

"You say you have been expecting us——," I began, but he broke in and interrupted me.

"You are a friend of the Abbot of Chalonnes," he said in the most matter of fact way. "He heard that you were threatened with danger. I came to see you through."

I drew back in surprise. My first impulse was to tell him that I had never seen the Abbot of Chalonnes in my life. On second thought, I decided to let him believe as he would.

"We are surrounded by at least a score of men," I said with some caution. "They are French—followers of a man by the name of De Marsac. The three of us can hardly make a stand against them. They are too many."

A little cackle of laughter broke from him. He went to the corner of the room where a basket stood. He took from it an apple that was as large as your fist. He stretched out his hand and laid the apple between the middle finger and the forefinger. He extended his arm to full length and slowly drew his fingers together. There came a crushing sound. Then with as much force as if it were struck by a hammer the apple flew apart. One half of it shot over against the wall and the other dropped a little distance from his feet.

My mouth opened in amazement. Such a feat of strength I never believed possible.

"There has never lived a man with hands and arms like these," he said. "Nature gave me a misshapen body. But she made up for it in another way." He jumped back and turned to the wall. With a leap as quick as lightning he came towards us, turning one somersault after the other. Not once did his hands

touch the floor nor, when he came to a halt, did he draw a single breath that gave a sign of fatigue.

"I can draw a bow that would drive an archer to despair," he explained. "I never weary. I can go on and on till they drop. I am all hands and arms." He stopped and looked up at us. The same smile covered his face, only now he opened his lips far enough to show us a line of ugly twisted teeth.

"Can you shoot?" he then demanded with a sudden burst.

"A little," we stammered, "—but not like you, I am sure."

He cackled again.

"A little is enough," he said. "Come!" He spun on his heel and went over to where we had first seen the bows suspended on the wall. "Take this," he said to Charles. "—and you take this. There'll be a merry time in the woods before the setting of the sun."

With that he handed each of us a bow and a quiver of finely made arrows. As though he were the leader of an army, he marched proudly to the door. He swung it open and with a bow stood like a soldier at attention till we filed out.

We were once more among the rocks and stones—and the trees of the forest. It was light, but the rays of the sun shone only here and there in long threads where the breeze for a time drove the branches apart.

We went on stealthily. We kept our bodies low so that if a chance shot were fired at us, it might pass over our heads. I got as far as the row of boulders that, I have said, was like an irregular stone wall. I was on the verge of straightening myself to look further into the woods when an arrow sang past me and struck with a click against the cave.

In the next moment a shriek echoed through the woods. Far off in the shadows of the trees I saw, faintly, of course, a man throw his arms into the air and pitch forward on his face. Before I could recover from my astonishment another ran to lift him to his feet. He had hardly stooped when a shaft easily a yard long pierced his side and he, too, fell forward over his companion.

For a second I was set wondering. I looked around to see if the Dwarf was at our backs. He was nowhere to be seen. Then I was certain that he had gone out among the trees. It was he who had shot the men who were lying there on the ground. I heard a branch over my head crack and saw it bend. A form twisted itself around and dropped quickly to the earth. Before I could wink, the Dwarf was standing between us with the grin stretching from ear to ear. His face was glowing with excitement.

"Did you see them fall?" he cried, and took me by the coat. "Could an archer have reached them at that distance?"

"I never thought that an arrow could carry so far," said Charles.

The Dwarf bent over and clapped himself on the knee.

"—and neither it did!" he exclaimed. "The arrows I shot didn't travel a hundred feet. I was up there in the trees—almost over their heads. I shot down upon them. These arms did that—these strong arms of mine!"

I understood.

"You mean that you climbed from one tree to the other?" I asked. "You worked your way from branch to—?"

For an answer he reached up and took hold of the branch from which he had just dropped. He lowered his body as far as he could. Then with a spring as light as a monkey's he shot into the air. He twisted his small legs, curling them with the suppleness of a snake. His body swung forward. He took another hold.

He swung forward again. There was no strain nor gasping for breath. With a litheness that I had never judged possible he squirmed and swung himself, till in a short time he had completely disappeared among the trees.

I looked at Charles and shook my head. We stood there forgetful of our enemies in utter amazement at the Dwarf's agility. Then without a warning an arrow came darting through the air and dug its point deep into the ground at our feet.

We jumped back and dodged behind a rock. We held our bows in readiness for an attack, with our eyes dancing anxiously in every direction.

Then came a sharp, cackling laugh from over our heads. The branches swayed and the Dwarf dropped nimbly to the earth. He swung the bow which he held in his hand with a kind of childish pride and said, "I could have killed you both! The one arrow would have done it, for you were standing in a straight line!" He puffed himself out and strutted back and forth. "Nature has given me a crooked body," he went on, "but I'm worth a dozen perfect men."

It began to dawn on me that the Dwarf was a bit of a fool. He was deformed, of course, but his imagination had played on him so that he pictured himself as the ugliest man on earth. I saw, too, that he was sensitive to a degree. It was this that caused him to boast about the strength of his arms and hands. His continual dwelling on his marksmanship with the bow was a balance to his shortcomings.

My thoughts were interrupted by a cry from Charles. He grasped me by the shoulder and drew me down behind the wall of stone.

"Look!" he cried. "There are a dozen of them moving through the woods!"

Sure enough. I raised my head a little above the wall. I saw the forms of several men passing from tree to tree. They darted as though they feared to trust themselves in the open.

"I have roused them!" cried the Dwarf. "I have stung them to the quick. They are forming for an attack. They will come forward with a rush."

He was right. No sooner had he spoken when a dozen arrows sped towards us. Their white feathers were like streaks in the air. We hid behind the wall as near to the earth as we could crouch. Two or three hard clicks against the rock in front of us showed that they had gotten the range. The flight of half a dozen others over our heads was warning enough that they were determined to drive us from our fortress at the cost of their lives.

Charles and I raised our bows and peeped out through a crevice in the rock. Our heads were scarcely above the top line of the wall when three arrows in quick succession whizzed past. One of them came so near that the point of it clipped a tiny piece from the stone and sent it flying into my face.

"Now!" cried the Dwarf. "Hold ready!"

I heard a shout. A score of our enemies rushed out from behind the trees. They raised their bows. The arrows came as thick as hail. Another shout and the men strung their bows and shot again. It was now or never. The three of us raised ourselves each on one knee. I cannot speak for the others. As for myself I singled out a fellow who was darting forward from one tree to seek the cover of the next. My arrow caught him in the shoulder between the arm and the neck. His bow dropped from his grasp. As well as I could see, an expression of intense pain crossed his features. He clapped his hand to the wound and reeled back to the tree from which he had just come.

Charles must have hit his man, and even with more accuracy than I hit mine. I saw a fellow spin around like a top and fall staggering to the earth a little to the left. In the turning of my head I caught the flash of hatred on the Dwarf's face. The bow he carried was of unusual size and the string of great strength. The missile went so fast I could not even see its passage in the air. But the twang had hardly reached my ear when the arrow pierced the neck of an enemy as he was running past a tree. It stopped him in full career. It pierced him through and through, and fastened him to the trunk as firmly as if he were tied with a taut rope.

In the next breath we were down again. A flight of arrows clattered against the stone face of our fortress or passed close over our heads. The enemy must have been filled with bitterness that so many of them had fallen while they had not been able to touch one of us. They paused for a space to form again. This time they came on, not scattered as before, but rather in groups. The first of them shot their arrows and dropped to the ground. Those behind sent their missiles at us just at the moment when they expected we would raise our heads above the wall.

They were coming in. There was no doubt of that. And so close on the heels of each other did their arrows fly that we were unable to look out long enough to take a good aim, for on the second try I shot wide of the mark and in ducking back an arrow almost ended my life, for it grazed the top of my head and cut into my scalp far enough to draw a few drops of blood.

I began to fear for our safety. I knew the kind of enemy we had before us. If they could lay hands upon us they would tear us limb from limb. If we were to get out of our difficulty, it would be only by the death of them all. But how it was to come about was more than I could guess, for their numbers far surpassed ours. Even if we were to make off, there were more and more of them about us in the woods.

I took the risk once more and raised my head above the wall. At the same time I took a shot at a fellow who was half hidden by a tree. It was as good as a miss, for the arrow only grazed his arm and tore a piece of the cloth of the sleeve of his coat. But he let out a roar that echoed to my ears. As though I had destroyed something of the greatest value, he threw all caution to the side. He strung his bow and shot an arrow at me with such force that it struck the rock and shivered into a thousand pieces. Then with the same running motion he came on. He zig-zagged from one tree to the other. He fumbled with his bow, but in his madness could not steady himself long enough to string it. When he was within fifty feet of our wall, he cast it to the ground in anger. He fumbled for a moment at his belt. He drew out a dagger and raised it on high as though he would sweep us all to death with the very fury of his attack.

Both Charles and I (the Dwarf was far to one side) saw him advancing. At the same time we raised ourselves to shoot him down before he reached the wall. But we had no sooner showed the tops of our heads when a rain of arrows forced us to drop back again. In the next second the fellow was bellowing like a wild bull. With one leap he had a footing on the wall. Another, he had sprung over it and bounded into our midst.

It was a situation that we had not foreseen. In a certain sense he was as safe as he would have been if he had remained among the trees. We knew that if we rose to grapple with him we were as good as dead, for the men without were on their guard. They were protecting him with their eyes alert and their bows

strung to kill the first of us who would be so forgetful as to raise his head or shoulders in a line with their arrows.

The fellow flew at me like a fury. He caught me by the arm and spun me around. I slid away from him and rolled over two or three times on the ground. Charles lowered his body and made a flying leap. He struck him in the middle of the back and sent him sprawling on his face.

I got to my hands and knees, poising myself on the balls of my feet ready to move in case he came at me again. He rose. His countenance was black with anger. The hand that held the dagger quivered with the wrath that was boiling in him. He stood straight up and glared at me as though his very looks would kill.

The Dwarf was edging over towards us, shuffling with his body low to the earth. His face was covered with the same smile that I had noticed when I first saw him. The fellow had one foot ahead of the other ready to move. The Dwarf made one leap—a long, low horizontal leap. He fastened the fingers of his powerful hands in the calves of my attacker's legs. He sunk his nails into the flesh with a grip like the claws of a wild animal that is desperate. I heard him snarl and gnash his teeth. The fellow tried to kick him away. He might as well have struggled against the grip of an iron trap. The Dwarf gathered his strength into his shoulders. He took in a deep breath. With a twist he jerked his victim's legs to the one side. The fellow came down with the swiftness with which you would snap a whip. His head struck a stone and that so loudly that I heard the crack of it. He gave a groan. His arms fell limp to his sides and he rolled over with his eyes glazed on his back.

I breathed a sigh of relief. That I had been near death I fully realized. But I had no time to reflect, for an arrow came darting over our heads and sang its way beyond us into the forest. I sprang to the wall, for I surely thought that the enemy suspected that their companion was captured or injured and would make an attempt to save him.

But here the Dwarf surprised us again. With the litheness of a cat he picked the fallen man in his arms. He stood straight up holding him face towards the foe. He advanced step by step until he came to the edge of our defenses. Then he raised the man like a bundle in his arms. By this the lower part of his body was exposed. I trembled for a moment for I was certain that it was a vulnerable spot for an arrow.

Illustration:
His Countenance Was Black With Anger

My guess was right. An arrow came speeding at him. Its aim was as true as ever an aim was. The Dwarf's eye was keen. In a twinkling he lowered the man so that his legs dragged on the ground. The arrow found its mark. It struck the fellow clean in the chest. So great was the force of it that the Dwarf staggered back a step to keep his footing. Then he let out a screech—a horrible sound that came from his throat and echoed in and out among the trees. With a heave as powerful as three strong men he raised the body of the dead man over his head and cast it far out over the wall. It turned and rolled. The arrow twisted under its side and it came to a stop at the foot of a tree.

"Come and get him!" the Dwarf cried. "You're a fine lot who kill your own men!"

We were answered. As many arrows as a bird had feathers came shooting towards us. On the heels of them the men in the woods ran from their shelter, stringing fresh arrows as they came. The Dwarf began to bounce about like a toad. His hands moved twice as fast as ours. Before I had my bow to my shoulder he had brought a man down. The more excited he grew, the deeper his voice resounded in his throat and the more unearthly his screeches became. There was a savage instinct in him that led me to think he was hardly human.

The first of our assailants got as far as the wall. The Dwarf struck him over the heart and sent him tumbling back. A second followed. Charles made short work of him. Then there came three of them together. They had a daring recklessness in their eyes that told us they had made their calculations and would risk all to rout us from our wall. In their bravado they called to their companions in the rear to have no fear, that this assault would be the last, that they were going to make an end of us.

The Dwarf called to us to hold steady. He sent the foremost of them kicking to the ground. I took the second, while Charles, whose aim was true, dropped the third not a dozen feet from where we crouched. But that was not the end. The others had been roused to a feeling of desperation by our stubbornness. They kept on running. They shot their arrows one after the other so that it was a risk for any of us to show his head above the line of rocks.

The Dwarf gave another screech. Without a word to us he swung himself into the branches of the nearest tree and disappeared from sight. We were left alone, Charles and I, to make what we could of the attack. The first two were easy enough. The third limped away, wounded in the leg. The fourth (it was I who tried the shot) was only grazed along the wrist.

Then we were in for it. Three of our enemies got as far as the wall. The two foremost jumped over and made for us. The third fell as limp as a rag where he had been shot by the Dwarf in the back. I thought we were done for. To avoid a struggle hand to hand I ran with my body lowered to the far corner of our defenses. Charles moved more slowly in the opposite direction. Our separation had this advantage, the men could not pounce upon us two at a time and so singly overcome us.

My fellow had cast his bow away. With his fingers outstretched like the talons of a bird he ran at me and grasped me by the arm. I tore myself loose and sprang still farther away. I saw an advantage and with bent body made a running dive at his legs with about the same motion with which you would dive into deep water. My shoulders struck him on the shins. I fell to the earth, of course, but he fell with me. And in the fall he struck his elbow a sharp crack on the edge of a stone that made him wince with pain.

My mind was running in a hurry. I had no time to think of anything but a safe way out of my predicament. But yet, withal, it occurred to me that there were no more men vaulting over our defenses. I was sure that the Dwarf was guarding us with his arrows in the trees.

I grew strong with a kind of hope. My fellow was gathering himself for a fresh lunge. We were both on our feet. I waited until he came forward. His lips drew back in a snarl. Then of a sudden he caught me by the sleeve of my coat and dragged me towards him. I swung around on the one side as far as I could. Then I gathered my hand into a fist. With a swing that, I am sure, he did not expect I wheeled about and caught him a stunning blow on the jaw.

He was hurt and not a little dazed. With a jerk I tore his grasp from my coat. Then his face filled with fury. The blood shot into his eyes and he gave me a look that had murder in it.

He saw that I was not to be caught, for I was quicker and more lithe than he. As though he was groping for a missile he looked searchingly around on the ground. He picked up a stone that was as large as my head and smiled at me as though to tell me that I was facing my doom.

I stepped back, so that by chance I might dodge the stone if he happened to have a good aim. He raised his arm. He placed one foot before the other and measured me with his eye. But the stone, to my amazement, never was thrown. The man stiffened up with a jerk. His face twisted in intense pain. With a look on his face that I shall not soon forget, he tottered forward and fell at my feet. In another second he was dead with one of the Dwarf's arrows sticking in his back, swaying and moving like a warning sign.

I was shaking. My nerves were jumping like the cords of a whip. I gave a glance at Charles and saw him struggling with his man on the ground. The two were wrestling, with the one grasping the other's wrist. As they rolled over a dagger shot into the air and fell at Charles' side. He reached out and took it by the hasp. Then he bounded quickly to his feet. His face was hot and covered with dirt where he had been rolling in the earth. He made a jump towards his enemy with the dagger raised above his head.

But fright won the victory. The fellow no sooner saw that Charles had the upper hand when he leaped far to the one side. He never stopped but kept on ahead. With a spring he bounded over our wall, and as fast as ever a man ran he made for the shelter of the trees.

That much was over, thanks to the Dwarf. The two of us lowered our bodies again lest an arrow take us unawares. I risked a peep out through one of the crevices. I had every thought that another band of assailants would be on us to take vengeance for the damage we had done their companions. To my surprise the woods were as still for a time as a peaceful countryside. Then, after a little, far off, I heard the screech of the Dwarf coming to us like an echo through the trees. When it died away a silence fell over us once more. I was beginning to count the victory ours, for I was sure that the Dwarf with his arrows, his terrible arms and hands had done their work. Single-handed he had driven our enemies from the neighborhood.

The sun was casting slanting rays out of the west. A new thought rose in my mind. The night would be dark, for there was no space for the shining of the stars through the matted branches of the trees. We would stand guard, of course, ready to ward off an attack. But in case our enemies returned it would be difficult to see them as clearly as we had done during the afternoon. They could storm our little stronghold. By sheer numbers they could overwhelm us. Before we could raise a bow in our defense they could slaughter us where we cowered behind our stone-wall.

This thought grew stronger in my mind as the darkness came on. I spoke to Charles, who only nodded his head.

"If they come," he said, after turning the matter over, "we must leave. The woods will be safer than it is here."

To this we agreed. We kept our eyes on the alert, searching in every direction for a foe. The sun had dropped behind the horizon and the shadows of night were stretching themselves like black sheets on every side of us. The woods

were silent and mysterious. Not a sound came to our ears except the twittering of a bird or two as he settled in his nest. The shrieking of the Dwarf had long since stopped.

"We must wait till he returns," said Charles. "We cannot go without a word from him. He will——"

We both jumped to our feet. There was a rustling of the branches over our heads. The Dwarf dropped lightly to the ground and stood facing us in the gathering gloom. His mouth was spread open in a wide grin that showed his big pointed teeth.

"There's no fear, now," he said. "I've scattered them. Come into my cave. We must eat."

He led the way. The fire had gone out. He relit it with a piece of tinder and dry wood. When the blaze had started up he drew from out the folds of his shirt a dagger and cast it at my feet. It was the dagger which I had from the scrivener, the one which I was to take to the Abbot of Chalonnes—which I thought I had lost forever in the Loire.

"I found that in the shirt of one of the men I shot down," he explained. "Take it with you. Guard it better than you have already done. In another hour it will be safe for you to leave. You can keep to the road that leads towards the south. If there is any trouble, show it to the keeper of the inn that stands at the cross-roads. He is a friend of mine."

Chapter XXII

Trapped!

It was close on to midnight when we left the Dwarf and his cave. We headed for the south, at first over rocks and stones and through the depths of the woods; then we came upon a white ribbon of a road, which we followed till the dawn overtook us.

We reached the inn at the cross-roads in less than an hour—an old stone house covered with moss and windows grilled and barred. There was no one about, so with a bit of a stick which I had found, I knocked on the panels of the heavy oaken door. We stood and waited. There came to our ears not a sound, not even the barking of a dog or the rattle of pots and pans.

I knocked again, this time more violently than before. The echo died away across the empty fields. Then I heard a window creak over our heads and a nightcap with a tassle to it appeared.

"What do you want?" said a voice.

"Is this an inn?" I returned. "Is this the inn of the Cross-roads?"

The voice squeaked.

"Cross-roads?" it said as though it did not quite understand. "Who are you that come knocking at my door?"

"We're honest travelers," called Charles. "We want a bite to eat and then we'll be on our way."

At this my rashness showed itself.

"We're friends of the Abbot of Chalonnes!" I added.

I thought thus to bring the matter to a head. If there was any suspicion in the man, the mention of the Abbot's name ought to be enough to soften his fears.

For a moment there was no answer. Then his voice began again, this time in a low coaxing tone.

"—the Abbot of Chalonnes," he repeated slowly as though he was turning the name over in his mind. "These are dangerous times, my son. Have you, by any chance, a proof that you are a friend of the Abbot of Chalonnes?"

I drew the dagger from my shirt and held it high in my hand.

"Here!" I called. "Can you see this?"

The voice creaked like a rusty hinge. "And what is that?" it asked.

"It's a token," I replied with some show of anger, for the caution of the man prodded me like a knife. "We were sent here. We were told that you would recognize this. It belongs to the Abbot of Chalonnes."

The man coughed to clear his throat. His voice changed to a hasty wheeze. A cracked smile curled around his mouth.

"I was only toying with you, my lad," he said. "Of course I recognize it. Of course it belongs to the Abbot of Chalonnes. Bide a bit. Bide there and I'll open the door to you and let you in."

With that he shuffled off from the window wheezing and muttering to himself.

We were puzzled at this odd reception. I looked at Charles with doubt written clearly on my face.

"The Dwarf has made some mistake," he began. But the rattle of bolts and chains interrupted him and the head with the nightcap poked itself sooner than we had expected through the chink in the door.

We stepped over the threshold. There was hardly a ray of the sun's light in the room. Besides, the odor that struck our nostrils made us draw back. We saw now, indistinctly of course, the man who had spoken to us from the window. He was clad in a long loose nightgown of a dirty flannel and had a bend to his shoulders like the curve in a pot. His jaw seemed to have no firmness for it hung loose in his head and twisted from side to side with the motion of a cow chewing its cud. His eyes were small and as sharp as a fox's like two cunning little beads. And when he pulled off his cap with the tassel to it, to make us a kind of salutation, a great shock of unkempt greasy hair fell down over his neck.

"I am glad to welcome you to my house, sirs," he said with his voice reaching a high piping note.

I looked to Charles to hear what he would say, for to tell the truth I was now even more anxious to get away from this hole than I was before bent on getting in.

"Do you know the Dwarf of Angers?" he demanded.

The old man started to rub his hands in one another and stuck out his chin. A slow encouraging grin spread over his face.

"Of course I do," he said and repeated it. "Why of course I do. Are you a friend of his, too?" he ended with a snap.

"He sent us here," continued Charles. "We have enemies. He told us you would give us help."

At this the man leaned forward and peered closely into our faces. Then he began to laugh in the same cackling tone that I had heard from the window. He

stepped to one side and bowed almost to the floor and made a motion with a sweep of his hand.

"If you will sit down," he said, "I will bring you something to eat."

He made off in a shuffling gait dragging his feet along the bare boards of the floor. In a few minutes he returned with a wooden bowl of gruel steaming hot and two large wooden spoons.

By this time we were able to look around and make an estimate of the place. The room was like a stable for filth. The one long table that stood in the middle was cut and scarred with figures where men had dug into it with their knives. Cobwebs hung in every nook and corner. An old lamp was fastened to a slab of wood on the wall, but even if it had been lit, I think there would have shone little light through it, for it was as black as the sooty rafters over our heads.

To all this there was an air of confusion everywhere. A chair with the legs broken off lay in a corner. A great hole was worn in the bottom panels of the door that led to the kitchen where a dog had by slow degrees pawed his way through. Alongside of it, on the wall, the plaster had a large dent in it where something had struck and just beside it a red smear that reminded me of the color of human blood.

You may be sure that we ate little. Even if the food had been savory the sight of the old fox of a landlord was enough to take our appetites away, for he hung over us like a sinister shadow with his nightcap in his hands and his beady eyes watching every morsel as it passed down our throats.

"The Dwarf of Angers," he reminded us, when we laid our spoons aside, "—he's a grand man, isn't he?"

Then came that short cackling laugh that stabbed me like a knife.

"He saved us from death," I remarked.

The old fellow gave a start as though he was suddenly clapped on the shoulder.

"He did, did he?" he said. And then after a while, "And he sent you to me?" He cackled again as though he had reason to be highly flattered. "And by any chance did he give you a message?"

Here I drew the dagger from my shirt and laid it on the table.

"This!" said I. And, with the word, looked him square in the eye in hopeful anticipation.

He pounced upon the weapon like a greedy child. He took it between his skinny fingers and turned it over and over. A crafty smile sharpened his features so that his face resembled a rat's. With his thumb he examined the silver of the haft. He snapped the blade till it sang.

"That dagger," I said as though he needed some urging to entirely understand, "belongs to the Abbot of Chalonnes."

But his eyes were fastened like glue upon it, so that all the answer I got was a sort of mumbling.

"Ay, ay," he said, "—the Abbot of Chalonnes." Then he looked up suddenly. His jaws stopped shaking and his smile faded. "Where do you come from?" he demanded with a jerk.

I was getting weary of his dallying. I was sure that he knew more than he pretended. There was something at the back of his head that prompted him to doubt us, so with no more ado I burst forth, "Look here," I began. "We are on our way to find the Black Prince. We have traveled a long distance and have been beset by enemies. We have been nearly killed half a dozen times. We're in

a strange country and need a word of advice. Maybe we ought to have a guide. Can't you see that your friends are our friends?" I pointed to the dagger in his hands. "Isn't that proof enough for you?"

At the mention of the dagger his hands clasped together with a quick convulsive motion and his jaws took to wagging again.

"Ay, ay," he muttered, "it's worth a hundred crowns, if it's worth a groat... It was fine of the Dwarf of Angers to send it to me."

I jumped from my seat. As though he were suddenly attacked, the old man straightened up. A flash came to his eye and a sternness came upon him that was unexpected. I think if I had taken another step he would have showed fight.

"But the dagger is not for you," I cried. "It's only a sign that we are no frauds, no imposters."

I reached out to take the weapon from his hand. He swung around with the quickness of an eel and backed away from me. I made another try. This time he shot a look at me and raised the dagger as though he would strike.

My blood was up. All in all I felt that he was not what the Dwarf had represented him to be, so with the single thought of getting my dagger back at any cost, I made a lunge to grasp him by the arm. Then by sheer strength I could wrest it from his grasp.

"Back!" His voice was shrill but strong with the cackle entirely gone. "Back! I'll kill you if you make a move!"

He drew his arm far over his head. There was wickedness in his eyes that told me he meant all that he said. For a second I stood there irresolute. Then out of the corner of my eye I saw Charles flit past me. His arm shot out. It caught the old fellow by the wrist. With one jerk his fingers opened. The dagger dropped clattering to the floor. One bound, I had it in my hand and in the next second it was tucked away in my shirt.

Then came a surprise. As though the affair was a joke the old man leaned over and clapped himself time and time again on the knee. His voice rose and fell in a kind of whistling laugh. He coughed and sputtered from sheer mirth and to cap it all reached out his hand for me to shake.

"A fine lad!" he exclaimed. "The both of you are fine lads. I know now there's no deceit in either of you." He laughed again. The cackling grew stronger than ever. "What is it you say you want? A guide to take you on your way? Ay, ay. A guide. But no harm meant, mind you. No harm—" He shuffled, bent over, towards the door, where he stood for a minute looking back at us. Then with a quick nervous snap he jerked out, "I'll aid you all I can. Will you stay here till I come back?"

With a kind of a stumbling skip he was outside and had closed the door behind him.

We sat and waited till the shuffling of his feet died away on the road. Then we arose and walked about the room, more from restlessness, I am sure, than from curiosity.

If it had not been for the advice of the Dwarf, I should have said that we were fallen into the thieves' den. The place was in no sense an inn for there was no sign of provision for the comfort or entertainment of a guest. Besides it was too far removed from the course of travel to be of any profit.

"I don't like the looks of it," remarked Charles. "There have been knives flying here—and throats cut. That smear on the wall is hardly dry."

"We ought to get out," I said. "We were safer in the Dwarf's cave."

"Let us wait till the old rat returns," he answered. "There will be time then."

The heaviness of the place made me feel that I was standing in the face of danger. Everything I touched seemed to warn me that we were falling deeper and deeper into a trap. The broken chair, the hole in the plaster, the blood upon the wall, the very darkness of the room, but above all the slow-witted craftiness of the old man, sent the creeps along my spine and made me anxious.

A half hour passed. We had paced the length of the room a dozen times. We had sat down and risen again more than once. Charles went to the door.

"I'll take a look up the road," he said. "If he's not in sight, we'll go."

I turned to follow him. He snapped the latch. He rattled it. He shook it with all his might. He faced me with his face gone white.

"We're locked in!" he exclaimed. "The old rat has made us prisoners."

I ran back to the door that led to the kitchen.

"We're caught!" I called. "The windows are too small for us to crawl out. The old fellow has gone to summon our enemies."

"The truth of it," said Charles, "is that we have come to the wrong place. The inn of the Cross-Roads must be further down the highway."

"Well?" I said. "What's to be done?"

He motioned me to the long oaken bench that lay at the table.

"We'll hammer down the door," he replied. "Do you take that end. I'll take this——"

It was as much as we could do to lift it. We held it lengthwise towards the door. Then with a run we crashed the end into the lower panels. The echo was like thunder in the room. The door trembled on its hinges and the lock creaked.

Again we drew back. Again we came forward. The door bent in the middle and a long crack let the light in from the outside.

"Once more," cried Charles, "and we'll be free."

We took a short rest and caught our breath. The third time the end of the bench crashed against the cross-piece in the middle. There was a noise of splintering wood. I thought the house was tumbling about our ears. The door was torn from its hinges and with a clap fell towards the outside flat on the road.

I blinked against the bright light of the sun. Then I recoiled, for not ten feet away there came running the landlord, panting for dear life, with his mouth open and his beady eyes glittering with the fire of anger. At his side were two men, rough fellows, who looked as though they might slit your throat for a copper groat. To my dismay one of them was the man from whom I had escaped while we were swimming in the river.

"There they are!" cried the landlord pointing at us with his skinny finger. "They're tearing my house down. Stop them!" His jaw wriggled from side to side and his hands shook with excitement. His voice which began in a high shrill cackle turned to a shaking laugh. "That one there" (he meant me) "wants to know how he can go to the Black Prince. Ha! Ha! Ha!"

In the next breath they were upon us.

Chapter XXIII

The Fight in the Inn.

I shall not forget that morning as long as I have life in my body. At the first sight of the three men I drew my dagger. Charles had nothing but his bare hands. But the fellows were scarcely across the threshold and were reaching out for us, when he caught the foremost of them a stinging blow on the point of the jaw. In the first moment we had an advantage, for their eyes were not yet grown accustomed to the dimness of the room. The man reeled, then gathered himself together. He had a knife in his hand. As he raised it Charles seized him by the wrist and the two stumbled and staggered over the pieces of the broken door like two men wrestling for an opportunity to drive home a telling blow.

My hands were then full, for I had the bigger and stronger man to face—Pierre who had been my captor during the days when we wandered along the highway with the army of the King. A flash of sullen hate came into his eyes as soon as he saw me. To make it all the worse the sight of his clothes upon me (which he recognized at once) stirred him as deeply as if I had flaunted him with open mockery.

He forgot the dagger which he had drawn from his shirt. With one hand he reached out to grasp me by the throat. I jumped to one side. He came lunging forward, swaying with his big shoulders like a log upon a stormy sea.

I knew him from my former experience. He was powerful. There was a savage twist to his mind that was hard to equal. But even at that I was more than a match for him in agility and speed. My one thought, then, was to keep out of his reach and to battle him till he was out of wind. I could last longer than he. If nothing else came between, I could wear him down and finally get the upper hand.

The faster he came at me, just so much the faster did I dodge. While Charles and his man were struggling at the door we had made our way almost to the middle of the room. I had a double care. I had to keep one eye on him. I had to watch my step in falling back lest I stumble over an object on the floor.

At length I had my back to the table, and was sliding slowly along the edge. Pierre made a grab once more at my coat. I sprang away. He missed. So hard did he come at me that he bumped his legs against the edge and in trying to steady himself knocked his elbows on the hard wood.

I saw him wince, and laughed. It was a laugh that cut him to the bone. He uttered a few words under his breath and gritted his teeth. He worked his hands, closing and opening them, as though he already felt my throat in his grip. He lowered at me with his brows drawn down and started at me, slowly measuring me with his eyes.

I backed off little by little, keeping step with him. I rounded the end of the table. I danced and sprang lightly now to one side now to the other. He never wavered nor took his eyes off me. He laid his hands flat on the table and worked his way after me around the edge. His steps were like a cat's, stealthy and slow, but I knew he was getting ready for a leap.

Then it came. He had worked himself into a crouch. Like a snake uncoiling he straightened out. His body shot into the air. At the moment a shrill cackling back of me broke upon my ears and by instinct I half turned in the thought that the old landlord was threatening me from the rear.

I saw over my shoulder that he had the broken chair in his hand, ready to bring it down upon my head.

"Don't kill him!" It was the deep growl of Pierre. "He is to be taken alive!"

The chair fell from the old man's grasp to the floor. At the same time I jumped to the rear with the intention of avoiding Pierre's outstretched claws. The chair was in my path. With a swoop I picked it up and with a swing I sent it crashing into my assailant's face.

In the next instant the air was filled with a roar like the bellowing of a hundred bulls. Pierre clapped his hand over his wounded nose and forehead. Through his fingers I saw that I had drawn the blood. He was blinded for the moment. Then he shook with mounting rage. He shot one glance at me. I am sure that all the trouble which I had caused him during the past few days flashed through his brain at once.

He shifted his knife from the one hand to the other. He poised it for a second in the palm. Then with a dexterity that surprised me he sent it flying point outward towards my chest. It came like a small arrow and with the speed of a drop of rain. It was fortunate that I was bobbing from side to side for I should never have had the quickness to dodge out of harm's way. As it was, it passed over my shoulder but the point of it nicked a little wound in my flesh that sent a tiny stream of warmth trickling down my arm.

We were now on more even terms. I had my dagger still, but he was without a weapon save the great strength of his huge body. But at that I think he would have risked his life against a dozen men for his fury had gathered like a brewing storm. He crooked his elbow over his face and came at me on the run. He groped with his outstretched hand hoping to gather me in, like a man feeling his way in the dark.

I yielded before him. I backed off once more around the table and had come so far that he was on one side and I on the other. He planted his big hands flat on the surface. The sweat was running off the end of his nose mingling with the blood and his breath came in pants from the strain of his exertions.

"Catch me if you can," I called, laughing. At the same time I danced back on the balls of my feet to draw him on.

I didn't have to wait. He breathed one long breath. Without a sign of warning, he laid his weight on his hands. He leaped into the air. His huge body came at me like a mountain. He crossed the table without once touching it. I made to jump aside. I was too late for I never counted on such agility. He landed on his feet and grasped me, as I was turning away, by the arms. He drew them back and pinned them to my side. With a twist he threw me to the ground. He raised his heavy fist in the air. I looked up with an expression on my face of terror and despair. I was certain my end was come, when I heard a shout at the door. A flash of white like the wing of a bird passed between him and me. The fist never came down, for an arrow was sticking in the flesh of his upper arm shaking and swaying like a reed in the wind.

I scrambled to my feet. With much blinking I looked about. I saw the skirts of the nightgown of the old landlord pass through the kitchen door. On his heels followed Pierre with a glance back into the room. He was white from fear and pain. He was holding the arm that was wounded, in the other. But there was a look in his face that reminded me of an animal that is angry enough to devour alive its prey. I was sure that if he could have gotten his hands on me then, he would have torn me limb from limb.

I turned towards the door. On the threshold stood two archers clad in hunting costumes of light green. The one who had shot Pierre was drawing a fresh arrow from his quiver while the other was searching every nook and cranny for signs of a hidden foe.

"There were two of you who came here together?" he demanded.

I was more surprised than they for I noticed now that Charles and the man with whom he was fighting were gone. But before I could answer he came running from the trees that grew about the place and halted at the door. His face was drawn as tight as a drum and covered with dirt and sweat. In his hand he held the knife which I had first seen in the grasp of his foe.

"He drew me out into the woods," he explained. "He was the toughest man I ever met."

Then I bethought me of Pierre and the old landlord.

"They will escape!" I cried. "They will go and bring others of their kind. They'll——"

The archer waved his hand.

"Let them go," he said. "Let them bring twenty. There are a dozen of my followers already on the way here——"

"Are you of the party of the Black Prince?" I interrupted.

"We are," he said. "He sent us out to scour the countryside. We have fallen in with a few stragglers of the King and beaten them. The country is as tame as you could wish."

I uttered a gasp. I was on the verge of telling him all the preparation I saw while I passed down the valley of the Loire. But on second thought I was reminded that it were wisest not to take strangers too soon into your confidence.

"Where is the Black Prince now?" I asked with some caution.

"He's to the northwest," was the reply. "He has sacked and burned the castles and strongholds that lie over towards the sea. He's going to march to the south in a few days—to Bordeaux to pass the winter."

"Oh!" I exclaimed. I was about to prod him more when a streak shot between us. It was an arrow from someone hiding in the woods.

Chapter XXIV

Besieged.

We had no time for thought.

"Back!" cried the archer. And we dropped behind the open door as quickly as we could.

Another arrow sped past and fastened itself in the far wall. Then a second came and a third.

"That makes four all together," said the first archer. "There are four men outside against the four of us here. If we can hold out for an hour, help will be on the way."

"We must barricade the door," said the second. "As it is, they have every advantage."

He pointed to the table.

We lifted it up and stood it on its end. Then, with care lest we expose ourselves to another shot, we moved it slowly until it stood before the entrance. It was hardly wide enough for there was a space of half a foot on either side.

The first archer who seemed to be the leader touched the second on the arm.

"Do you hold the door, Raoul," he said, "while I look closer at our defenses."

With that he stepped back and began to examine the room. He sent a sharp glance at the windows and tossed his head when he saw the smallness of them. When he came to the door that led into the kitchen, a worried expression crossed his brow.

"Can you fight?" he demanded turning to me.

"I can try," said I.

"Do you and your friend take your stand here," he commanded. "If an attack comes, be on your guard and repel it."

He left us and went back to the door. Charles picked up the chair with the broken legs while I, with my dagger in my hand, stood ready.

A sharp click echoed through the room. It was an arrow crashing against the table. Then three more followed in quick succession. By that I knew that our enemies were still in the front of us and for the moment we had nothing to fear from our end of the inn.

Then came a lull. The leader of the archers passed his hat across the opening between the table and the jamb of the door. Before he had time to breathe an arrow sung in the air. It passed into the room and caught with a snap in the plaster not far from my legs.

"They know how to shoot," exclaimed the archer.

He walked back where the light was dim and raised his bow. He peered out for a moment, taking careful aim. The twang hummed in my ears and the arrow sped through the opening at the door.

A cry as of a man hurt came back to us, loud and penetrating.

"That's one of them!" I shouted in glee.

The archer gave me a look.

"Don't be deceived, lad," he said with a frown. "I missed. My arrow is sticking there in a tree. It was only a trick of theirs."

I was sure the leader was mistaken for in the next instant there came only three clicks against the surface of the table. But I held my own counsel and looked on while the archers, one at each opening, raised their bows and watched for a mark among the men in the woods across the road.

They shot at the same time. The arrows had scarcely left the bows when another yell louder than the first came over to us.

The leader lowered his bow in disgust.

"He got back too quickly," he said. "Our only hope is to wait."

There was another lull. For a long time we stood with our hearts thumping hard against our ribs. I listened for footsteps outside the kitchen door, but the whole place, even the road and the tree opposite were as silent as an empty church.

Then came a single arrow. It was not shot in a line but in a slow arching curve. It passed through the opening and landed sticking in the wood in the floor. Around the haft was tied a piece of white cloth.

I jumped towards it and raised it in my hand.

"A signal!" I cried.

The leader flashed his eyes on me.

“It’s a trick,” he answered. “Back! And watch your door!”

But it soon proved that I was right. Within a few minutes another piece of white cloth larger than the first fluttered among the trees. Regardless of the leader’s warning I walked to the middle of the floor. The old landlord came into view tottering and filled with fear. His jaw was twisting like a leaf spinning in the wind. He put one foot forward and then half turned as though he would draw back. When he got half across the road, he broke into a shifting run.

“A truce!” he cried holding the white cloth before him.

“What would you have?” asked the leader from behind the table.

“You’ve killed two of them already,” said the landlord. “They want to let you know that there’ll be a score of their comrades here within the hour.” He hesitated. The old crafty smile broke over his face. “If you give in, they’ll do you no hurt but send you back to Normandy where you belong.”

“Is that all?” demanded the leader.

“I’ve come to save my house,” was the next move.

“Well?”

“You see,” went on the old man, “if you don’t give in, they’ll burn it down about your ears.”

“Oh, ho!” replied the leader with a short laugh. “So that’s the tune now, is it? Well. Let them.” Here he held out his bow before the old man’s eyes. “Do you see this?” he demanded. “This bow has drawn the heart’s blood of half a hundred of their countrymen. It’s still athirst for more. Go back and ask them if they are willing to be the next.”

The landlord stood twisting the white rag between his skinny hands. He looked up sharply and saw me peering eagerly over the leader’s shoulder.

“That lad has eaten of my food,” he said with the old wheezing whistle in his voice. “I have treated him like a father. And he has brought all this trouble on me,—I’ll remember this when the time comes to settle our accounts.”

With a frown as black as pitch he turned and went wobbling and shaking across the road.

He had about disappeared among the trees when the leader called out, “Ready now for the brush!”

The words had scarcely left his lips when two arrows sped through the openings on either side of the table. On the heels of them a crash resounded against the kitchen-door. I ran back to where Charles had been pacing up and down the floor. The panels shook as though they were of straw. Another crash, and the door fell from its hinges with all the wood scattered into a thousand pieces.

Then there burst in on us two men. Charles swung the broken chair with all his force against the head of the first. I slipped in under his arm and thrust my dagger into the second’s ribs. I might just as well have tried to cut down a log of oak for the point stopped against something hard and by that there went through me the realization that he had on under his jerkin a coat of mail.

I jumped back to safety before he could lay hold of me. The fellow whom Charles had hit with the chair was down on one knee. The chair came up again and descended with great force. If it had struck, the man would have breathed his last. But with an effort he curled his body into a knot and covered his head in his arms. The chair glanced off his elbow and crashed against the floor. The back, which Charles had used as a hold, broke in two and the seat went flying and spinning across the room.

The fellow got to his feet. He was in pain but for all that was filled with wicked wrath. He reached out one hand and caught Charles by the coat. His dagger was over his head ready to descend when the leader of the archers turned and sent an arrow through his neck. He reeled and spun like a top. Then like a weight sank to the floor.

You will remember that all this happened almost in the twinkling of an eye. The man who was my opponent saw the danger that he faced. He had made for me to be sure with his knife ready to drive it into my body. I had taken two or three steps back towards the middle of the room. But when his companion fell, he gave one swift glance at the archer and turned his back. As fast as he could make it, he darted to the kitchen door. I heard his footsteps, as he ran along the wooden floor. He disappeared beyond, out among the trees to hide himself from death.

I breathed a sigh. The arrow of the archer had been our deliverer. I turned to the front of the inn and saw the men guarding the entrance stringing their bows and shooting time after time into the woods. The table was split in a dozen places showing the light in the cracks. By this I judged that while we had been busy with our foes, the enemy without had rained missile after missile at us with the intention of drawing us away while the two invaded the room.

Then came another lull. No doubt by this time the fellow who had escaped had gotten once more among his friends. That there was a council of war going on among them was as sure as fate. We waited a long time. There came no more arrows to crash with a click against the table nor to fly into the room.

A sound far off came to our ears. It was the clatter of horses' hoofs on the hard road. For a time we listened. Then they died off as though the riders had stopped or had entered the woods. Hope rose in our breasts that it was friends who were coming to our aid. But in a short time it died, for we were to learn that it was the enemy now with a dozen men to where they had one before.

The clatter of hoofs started again irregularly as though the horses were cavorting in a circle. Then they came swiftly down the road. At each second they grew more and more distinct. At length they came into view—a whole troop of them. The chief wore a coat of shining mail and had a plume in his hat. His gauntlets flashed in the sun.

Without any ado they reined in their horses before the inn. The men dismounted as one, like drilled soldiers. They formed behind their captain and walked towards us. With his fist he knocked heavily against the surface of the upright table.

"Who are you?" demanded the archer.

"Servants of his Majesty, the King!" came the abrupt reply.

"—and what do you want?"

"You have a lad there who is a spy," was the answer. "He is to be delivered into our hands."

The archer waited a moment before he made reply.

"And if we refuse?" he said.

"We are not here to parley with you," declared the captain. "If you do not deliver him forthwith, you are taking your life in your hands."

The archer was as cool as the captain.

"I cannot give him up," he said. "You will have to take him at your risk."

There was no more said. The captain stepped aside as though he would leave. He uttered a word to his men. They rushed forward. Before we could put

ourselves on guard, or before one of the archers could string his bow, the table was sent flying across the room. They came in. They covered us three or four to each one of us. To have shown resistance would have been the height of folly.

In less time than it takes to tell we were bound hand and foot and huddled along the wall at the far end of the room. When all was finished the captain stood before us twirling his mustache.

"You almost got through," he said to me. "Well, my lad. In another day you'll be at the end of your wanderings for a long, long time. For when you'll get out of the fortress of my lord De Marsac, you'll be an old man."

With that he bade his men take us and tie us to the horses.

Chapter XXV

Friends and Enemies.

It was at the break of day when we came to the inn which we had mistaken for the Inn of The Cross-Roads. It was well after ten in the morning when we were led captives to the horses of the men who had taken us.

They tied us with long ropes—the one end around our waists, the other to the pommels of the saddles. We were to go on foot between the riders the whole distance of two or three days' journey like the prisoners of chain gangs on their way to the galleys.

Fear and dread were strong within me. The September sun was shining down upon our heads. The road was rutted—full of holes and covered with sharp stones. I knew that we would get little enough to eat. As for water, they would let our tongues rot at the root before they would satisfy our thirst.

The country was wild and rugged. Hardly a house—or what you might call a house—was to be seen over vast stretches of it. Where the land was tillable there rooted in the weeds a few starved cattle, who gazed at us stupidly as we passed. Once in a while we came to a hut—a small place built of native rock with a low thatched roof hidden amidst a clump of scrawny trees and high straggling bushes. When a face appeared at the door, there was always a look of suspicion upon it as though we were surely enemies and to that the owner usually had a weapon of some kind in his hand, ready to defend himself in case he was attacked, or to drive us away if we invaded his land.

Shortly after noon we came to a halt to rest the horses and snatch a bite to eat. The men who had taken us seated us on a rock and drew a circle about us while one of their archers stood with his bow in his hand ready to shoot if any of us tried to escape.

Then we were up again and on our way. We plodded on and on over the hard surface of the road. Weariness began to show in our faces. In a little while I caught a small stone in my boot. It slipped down and rested under my heel. It bored and bored till I began to feel the pain of it. I stooped to loose the thong with the intention of easing myself. But the moment I halted the rope that tied me to the saddle grew taut. I was snatched along with a jerk and with a tightening about my waist that was so sudden that it caused me even more grief than the stone.

I limped along with my heel glowing like the heat of a fire. To make it worse the captain looked at me with a smile and laughed.

"If the rope were around your neck," he said, "it would be more fitting."

The others must have thought it was a fine jest for they, too, broke into mirth and clapped their hands on their thighs.

Towards the middle of the afternoon I could hardly drag one foot after the other. I was in despair with my head down. Suddenly it came up with a snap for the horses reared back on their hind legs. They neighed and lifted their noses in the air as though they were frightened. I had to jump from one side to the other to keep from being trodden underfoot. The shouts of the riders drew my attention to an object to the left of us on a huge rock not twenty paces from where we had halted.

It was a man. He was standing on his hands with his head down. His feet were in the air. And what made him so ridiculous—it was this that had frightened the horses—he was kicking with his legs with all the energy in his body. So great was his exertion that we expected to see him drop at any moment. But the longer he kept it up, the greater his strength seemed to grow. At length after several minutes he came to a sudden stop, tossed his body in the air with a lithe movement of his wrists and landed on the surface of the rock flat on his feet.

My nerves jumped and the men with us uttered a low exclamation of surprise. We all recognized him at once, for each of us, quite in the same breath, called out his name, "The Dwarf of Angers!"

The Dwarf was grinning from ear to ear. His long teeth were as sharp as the points of two rows of daggers. He placed one hand in the bosom of his shirt and threw his head back proudly. With the other he waved at the captain and his men.

"I warn you, sirs," he said in his shrill voice, "that you are on your way to your deaths!" He waited a minute to let the words sink home. Then he pointed with sudden fierceness to the sun and called out, "If you go on, there will not be one of you who will see the light of another day!"

The captain started. His face paled. I heard him growl under his breath. Then in an instant he collected himself and barked out a command to his men. They raised their bows. A dozen arrows sped on their way. Some hit the rock. Some glanced over it. None struck for the Dwarf was quicker than they thought. With a leap he dropped down behind the rock and disappeared.

When the last arrow was shot he popped his head into view and let out a long savage laugh full of mockery and contempt. Then he was gone again.

The captain was by this time boiling with rage. He commanded three of his men to dismount. They searched the rock and the ground around it. They went up the side of the hill. With their bows strung ready to shoot at the first object that moved they peered cautiously behind every rock that was large enough to conceal a man. They came back again with blank faces and worried looks. The Dwarf seemed to have been swallowed up for no sign of him was to be found.

We started again, this time more slowly than before. The captain with his brow knotted kept his gaze straight down. It struck me that the Dwarf was like a phantom in the country, or like the visitation of a spirit. He had created a fear in the hearts of the people by the uncanny way in which he came and went and by the outlandish tricks he performed. But there was more than that too, for he struck with a certain fearlessness and accuracy that swept men off their feet.

Besides he had a reputation for fulfilling every one of his predictions. It was this last that troubled the captain and buried him in gloom.

In another half hour the country to the sides of the road became more and more barren. What trees there were grew far apart and were hardly more than ragged stumps. Rocks abounded everywhere—boulders of all sizes, some as big as houses, others smaller, of every shape and form.

We had just turned a bend in the road. With no word of warning the man riding next to the captain threw his hands in the air. He uttered a short sobbing cry. His mouth fell agape and, although he struggled, he swung over to one side and toppled like a log from his horse. To the terror of the rest there in his chest stuck an arrow longer than your arm pointing upwards to the sky.

We turned instinctively to the road and the archers unslung their bows. No Dwarf appeared, but from in among the rocks there came to us a shrill penetrating laugh that echoed far and near and sent the shivers up and down my captors' spines.

"That's the first!" It was a cry like a prolonged wail. "Which of you will be the next?"

The men dismounted as they did before. They searched every speck of ground from the edge of the road far back to the ridge of the hill. They returned once again disappointed with doubt and anxiety impressed on their faces.

From then on we proceeded with utmost caution. The eyes of the men roved continually over the sides of the road. The archers sat with their bows slung across their saddles. Now and then, even when there was no sign of danger, a few of them dismounted and scoured among the rocks and rugged ground to either side of us.

For a quarter of an hour we went along peacefully enough. Then a white streak cut the air. The arrow did not come straight, but curved upwards in a long smooth arch. It struck point downward in the middle of the road where it trembled a little and then remained perfectly still.

Every man in that company reined in his horse. The archers raised their bows. They searched with their eyes every nook in the rocks where a man could have hidden. Not a sound came to us. Not a motion did we see. As far as appearances went the missile might have dropped from the sky.

One of the men rode on ahead and slid from his horse. He stooped to pick up the arrow. As his hand was about to touch the shaft, another arrow darted through the air like a flash of light. It cut the first in two, splitting it as cleanly as you would with a sharp knife. The man jumped back with his face the color of chalk and got once more upon his horse.

Our enemies were by this time thoroughly alarmed. There was no dismounting to hunt among the rocks. Fear was in every face and their nerves were keyed up as though they had been lashed with whips. A bird flying across the road or a dry leaf blown by the breeze would have started every one of them in his saddle.

Next we came to a clump of short stubby trees. Before he would risk passing it, the captain grouped his men together. He sent five of them to examine every tree, every bush and rock as far back from the road as they could venture. They returned. There was not a twig or branch which had escaped their eyes. A human soul was nowhere to be seen.

We started. The horses had scarcely taken ten steps when a long screeching laugh echoed to us through the trees. The captain and the rest of them drew in

their reins. In the next second an arrow caught him in the chest and struck with terrific force against his coat of mail. It clicked and dropped to the ground but the power behind it jolted him so hard that it was within an ace of driving him from his saddle.

But that shot was enough. If their nerves were on edge before, they were broken now. The captain sank his spurs into his horse's flanks. With a shout to save themselves he called to his men to follow. He dashed on ahead. A tug on the rope that bound my waist almost cut me in two. I was jerked forward, hobbling on my bruised foot, with a snap. I uttered a groan and tried to break into a run, with the sweat streaming down my face and my breath coming in painful gasps.

Then we suddenly stopped. My eyes were looking ahead. I saw an arrow dart in the direction of the captain. It cut one of the reins as cleanly as though it were of straw. The horse stumbled and the captain lost his hold. With the end of the rein in his hand he grasped into the air, spun around to the side and toppled heavily to the ground.

The archers were down beside him in a second. They raised him to his feet. For the moment they were forgetful of the Dwarf and of the danger they were in. In the midst of it all there came a weird mocking laugh—long and shrill. We turned. I saw the men recoil as though they were facing death itself.

The Dwarf was standing on a boulder half hidden by the stubby trees. He held his bow in his hands with an arrow in it ready to let it fly. Before any of us could have winked he could have killed the first he chose.

"Steady!" he cried. "Not a stir among you! I give you warning. Let the two lads and the two archers go free or at the next turning of the road there will not one of you be left alive!"

For a second there was only silence. The faces of the men were of the whiteness of death. Not one of them moved.

Then the captain gasped. He drew in a deep breath and in a voice that was shaking called back, "The next one of us to fall, they will fall, too! I shall drive my dagger into their hearts!"

The Dwarf only smiled. In tones like the heaviness of thunder he said, "I have warned you!" And he disappeared among the trees.

For what seemed a long while we went on ahead. A weight hung in the heart of every man of the small company. A sparrow could have frightened them. I was as weary of it all as I could be. Now and again I glanced at Charles who was tied to the horse on the opposite side of me. He did not speak, but by the look and nod he gave me, he stirred hope and courage in my breast and led me to believe that the worst of our journey had passed.

In a quarter of an hour we saw before us a sharp bend in the road. The words of the Dwarf still rang in our ears. The captain drew his sword and bade each of his archers to make ready his bow. The horses were lined up three abreast and in straight array. If we were about to enter on a field of battle the men could have been scarcely more carefully arranged.

The captain hardened his jaws. With a glint of determination in his eyes he urged his horse forward. We slowly entered the turn in the road. We made the bend. At any moment I expected to see an arrow come singing through the air and a man drop. In spite of myself my heart began to flutter like a bird's. The soreness in my foot died out and the fact that I was a prisoner on my way to my

doom faded from my mind like a passing cloud, for in one word the tenseness of the situation stirred every fibre and I was excited.

But the fall of the horses' hoofs was all that broke the silence. With a grimness that surprised me the captain held doggedly on his way. He looked neither to the right or left but held his head high. In the face of what we all expected it was his courage that gave strength to his men and pulled them through.

We passed the bend in the road with no sign of the Dwarf or his deadly missiles. As far as we could see there was nothing ahead of us but a straight line. I looked along it in the hope that I would see some object or other that would give us hope.

My eye rested on a speck. It was small and far away and black. It came nearer little by little. The captain and the men noticed it too and kept their gaze upon it steadily. The rays of the sun glinted upon it for a second and then I was able to see that it was a man on horseback, fully equipped with armor that shone and glittered in its newness. The closer he came the more of the details we could distinguish. He had on his head a casque with the closed visor concealing his face, and gauntlets on his hands that were of the same blackness as his armour. He was quite small and rode with an ease that assured us of long years spent in the saddle. As for weapons he carried no spear or lance like most knights on their way to tournament or field of battle, but only a sword that hung from his belt in a scrolled scabbard and a mace of tough wood with the knots pointed with steel, that dangled loosely at his side.

He kept to the middle of the road. Not once did he urge his horse nor swerve to the right or the left. When he was finally abreast of us, he let the reins fall on the horse's neck.

Then I was stirred by the strangest feeling that ever possessed me. I lost all interest in the man and his armor and in my captors. When the horse neighed I gave a sudden start. I examined him from his fetlock to his mane and from his head to his tail. At first a certain sense of familiarity shot through me. Then by degrees every suspicion of mine moulded itself into solid fact. Like a blast my brain told me that I had seen that horse before. It was the roan which I had brought with me from home—which I had ridden as far as the scrivener's house in the woods—which was stolen from me by the two men whom De Marsac had set upon me. That horse, in one word, was mine!

The man in armor raised his hand. We had all come to a halt and for a second there was empty silence.

"You cannot pass," he said in a voice that was strong and steady. "The prisoners which you have there must be given up."

His hand dropped.

The captain thought before he spoke.

"And who are you?" he demanded.

"I am the ruler of all this waste land," came the reply with a smoothness that went through us like a jar, "—of all these rocks and trees and the people, I am lord and master."

The captain furrowed his brows.

"I never heard of you," he answered.

The man in armor gave a little laugh.

"Have you never heard of the Abbot of Chalonnes?" he asked.

Chapter XXVI

The Abbot of Chalonnes.

The captain gave a start. He stared a while at the man. A slow understanding smile curled at the corners of his mouth and he said, “There is no such person as the Abbot of Chalonnes. He is only a myth for the simple country folk to believe in. You are some one else.”

The Abbot raised his hand.

“The two archers, whom you have taken captive, are mine,” he said with great calm. “I have also an interest in the two lads. If you are wise, you will give them up.”

The captain stiffened himself.

“—and if I don’t?” he demanded.

For a second there was no answer. The Abbot sat on his horse as silent as a statue without a stir. Then, with a gesture that was more convincing than words, he said, “Did you not hear the warning of the Dwarf?”

A jar ran through us and even the captain recoiled. The Abbot had come to us straight down the road. The Dwarf, as far as we knew, was a mile or more behind us. How the two ever could have had an understanding was more than we could guess.

But the captain was not easily rebuffed.

“There are ten of us here, Sir Abbot,” he said pointing to his men. “You are but one. It is true you are clad in armor, but even at that you are taking a chance.”

The Abbot took the reins again in his hands.

“For the last time, I ask you,” he said, “will you give up your prisoners?”

The captain fairly roared.

“No!” he cried.

The Abbot clapped his spurs into the horse’s flanks. The archers raised their bows. As he came on an arrow or two struck against his armor and dropped like dead leaves to the road. He made straight for the captain. Within the space of a single breath the horses were side by side. The captain drew a dagger and leaned far forward, but the Abbot curled his fist and bent his arm. He caught his enemy alongside the jaw with a sweeping blow. The captain’s head went back with a snap. The light left his eyes and he dropped from his horse as though he had been felled with a mighty club.

That was the first stroke. The Abbot was now in the midst of us. The archers, seeing that their prisoners were only an encumbrance to their movements, loosed the ropes that bound us from their saddles. You may be sure that Charles and I, and the two captive archers made for the side of the road as fast as we were able so that we might not only be out of danger but might view a fight that promised enough of excitement.

The Abbot spun the horse about. One of the men who was nearest him realized that neither arrow nor dagger could wound a man who was so finely protected, raised himself in his stirrups. He then threw himself with all his weight at his opponent. It was his intention to thus overcome him and drag him to the earth. If they once could pounce upon him they could pummel him to

death, or, what was just as good, could bind him and lead him off, their prisoner.

But this fellow had counted without a knowledge of the skill and adroitness of his foe. No sooner had he thrown himself forward when the Abbot bent his elbow into a kind of a crook. The sharp point of his armor was opposite the archer's throat. With a jerk the Abbot drove it forward. It caught the man hard like the thrust of a pike or lance. He uttered a low moaning cry and toppled, like the captain, in a heap to the road.

From where we were standing we saw the Abbot wheel about. Once more he dug his spurs into the horse and rode back a dozen paces. Here he turned and faced the others who were left.

"He," he cried pointing to the man who had just fallen, "is the second. Who of you will be the third?"

The men looked questioningly at each other. One of them growled and said something about their fallen captain. I heard the words "disgrace" and "punishment if we return." They glanced at us and frowned and then, although I knew it was against their wills, they drew up once more in a kind of line and faced the Abbot.

Each of the archers drew taut his bow. The Abbot urged the horse forward with a touch of the spur. Eight arrows flew as straight as they could go. The eight of them crashed against the steel of the armor. A few were turned aside and sped on a little further but the most of them struck with a ring and dropped to the ground.

Like a flash the archers fastened each another arrow in his bow. Then of a sudden one of them sang out, "Kill the horse! We can get him when he is dismounted on the road!"

The Abbot was coming on. At the sound of the man's voice he pulled in hard and rose in the saddle.

"Touch him if you dare!" he cried and his voice rang out like a trumpet. "For every drop of his blood that's spilled, I'll roast one of you alive!"

With that he went back to the starting place at a slow canter and then with all the deliberation in the world wheeled the horse once more about to face his foes.

I saw now that he was anxious to end the fray. He dug the spurs in deeper than before. The arrows of the archers rattled against his casque and armor and fell without injury at the horse's feet. He came on, but this time he took the mace from the saddle at his side. He struck the first man he met a blow in the arm. It cracked with a noise like the snapping of a dry branch, so by that I knew he had broken the bone. Like a flash the Abbot swung in his saddle. He struck the second man in the chest with his mailed fist. Then he rode through the others and came out in their rear.

It was like mowing in a field of grain. The Abbot was the scythe and his enemies were standing stalks. At this second thrust the six of them, who had struck at him with what they had at their command, saw the futility of their attempts. They drew aside and lined themselves along the edge of the road. One of them began to unsling his quiver of arrows as a sign of submission when he glanced in an off-hand way down the road. Then he brightened up. He rose in his stirrups and uttered a loud cry to the others to follow him, sank his spurs into his horse and was off at a hard gallop.

The Abbot by this time had wheeled about to face them once again. But they rode past him with the speed of the wind. I shaded my eyes and peered in the direction they were going. To my surprise I saw riding to meet them three other men, each of them on horseback with armor that covered them from head to heel. And what troubled me most was that the foremost carried a long lance in rest that sparkled and shone in the afternoon sun.

A kind of fear ran through me for I realized that the odds were against us. It had been easy enough for the Abbot to tumble over men who were as open to attack as the archers. It would be a different thing to confront men who were armed equally as well as he, one of whom besides had a lance that could knock him from his seat before he could come at him with his shorter weapons like the sword and the mace.

I waited with my breath in my throat. As soon as the Abbot saw over his shoulder these new enemies riding towards him, he touched the horse in the side and cantered slowly down the road. The three in armor spurred on faster. When the Abbot was within a stone's throw of them he cut over to the edge of the highway. Then he hastened his speed. His enemy swerved to meet him and as the first of them came on lowered his lance to strike him full in the chest.

It was this sudden turning that saved the day. As the knight with the lance drove into the Abbot he was forced to take his aim a little off the straight line. The point of the weapon struck the Abbot a hard blow on the mail under his arm. His horse veered, half staggering but continued on his course. The knight found himself in a sort of a knot, for the shaft of his lance was twisted by the swerving of the Abbot's horse and was almost torn from his grasp. The butt of it drove back and took him on the shoulder with such force that it was within a hair of knocking him from the saddle.

Then the skill of the Abbot showed itself. As soon as his horse had steadied itself, he drove his spurs into its side. As fast as he could ride he made for the two knights who were coming up in the rear. He laid his hand upon his mace and held it in readiness by his side. The two knights, who had just witnessed the smoothness with which he had warded off the attack of the rider with the lance, now braced themselves to deliver him a blow that would end the fight once for all. They saw him coming down the middle of the road. They separated with a space between them wide enough to allow him to pass through. It was plain to be seen that they intended to let him into the trap so that they could attack him with one on each side.

The Abbot sped on. Little by little he verged to the edge of the road. The two knights verged with him but kept the opening between them as wide as before. They came on and on. They drove their spurs into their horses. But the Abbot never altered his pace until he was within a few feet of them. Then he drew his left rein, sharply and with great quickness. The horse under him was as sure-footed as a mountain goat. He crossed to the side of the two assailants. When he was abreast of them he swung his mace a crashing blow on the head and shoulders of the nearest rider that shook him to his heel. From where we were standing we saw the man try to shift his weapon from the one hand to the other. We heard the clang of the mace upon the ringing steel. The knight fell forward. In his helplessness he tried to hold on by grasping the horse's mane. But his strength was gone. His fingers clutched into the empty air and he sprawled like a sack of meal to the earth.

The Abbot, after he passed these two, drew up with a jerk. He wheeled around before the last of the three men could think fast enough to make a move, and before the first knight (the one with the lance) was in position to return to the fray. It was now one against one. With all odds for the final victory in favor of the Abbot, he grasped his mace in his hand and was about to put spurs to his horse to make an attack.

I heard a cry from one of the archers who were now coming up at a slower pace in the rear. He rose in his saddle and pointed down the road towards the bend. Just turning into full view we saw first the glint of the sun upon bright steel. There were four men riding towards us now—four, who, if they proved to be our foes, would settle the combat without the shadow of a doubt.

The Abbot lowered his mace. As though it were hardly worth his effort to strike down the last of the three who was now turning towards him to defend himself alone, he pressed his knees against the horse, and with a courage which I considered nothing more than folly rode on to meet his new foes.

You will understand, of course, that what I have been telling you happened in a very short time and with a swiftness that kept our eyes dancing from spot to spot. It was a whirlwind for speed and suddenness. Most of the time I was filled with marvel. Never once did I consider, now that I was free, that I ought to find a means of escape nor did Charles or the two captive archers, I am sure, have any other thought except their interest in the fight.

The Abbot took his course down the road. The men who had attacked him at the very beginning (the archers of the King) drew up on the side to let him pass. Not one of them raised his bow. With all the ease in the world they could have shot down the horse from under him, but instead they let out a shout that rang with approval. It was their sense of fairness, I suppose, that caused them to do this, and their respect for the boldness of the man. His deliberation, his surpassing skill, his ease, but above all now his utter confidence against such odds stirred their hearts with admiration and regard.

The battle was to be fought further down the road. Like a crowd of spectators at a tournament we saw we had no advantage where we were standing, so swept by the fervor and excitement of it all, the two captive archers, Charles and I ran along the bank at the side of the highway. We were within earshot when the four knights and the Abbot met. Indeed the latter was maneuvering his horse to dash into the fray when the foremost of his adversaries raised his hand as a signal that he was anxious for a parley.

“You are not a servant of the King?” he demanded.

“I am his enemy!” came the sturdy answer.

“There are four of us here,” were the next words. “Are you anxious to die?”

“I shall die when my time comes, not before,” replied the Abbot. “If there were a dozen, it would make little difference.”

The knight made a gesture with his hand.

“We will give you every advantage,” he said. “We will fight you one by one. Before we begin, will you let me see your face?”

The Abbot hesitated and then laughed.

“Agreed!” he replied. “Provided you let me see yours.”

Both men made a move with their hands, when the eyes of us all were drawn to the figure of a lone rider who had just come into sight around the bend in the road. He was on a horse as black as the raven’s wing. He must have been driving hard for its flanks were covered with white sweat and the froth was

dripping from its mouth. The man himself was not much bigger than the Abbot. Although he was clad in a suit of black chained mail and had a casque on with the visor closed, I was able to see that his body was of unusual sturdiness with great breadth of shoulders and thickness of limb.

When he came up he drew rein, and with a smoothness that I had not expected, asked, “A fight, my gentles?”

The Abbot answered.

“—about to begin,” he said.

“Ho, ho!” was the reply. “But, I hope, not the four of you against one?”

I am sure the knight flushed under his helmet at the slyness of the taunt.

“Not at the same time,” he answered, and shifted uneasily on his saddle. “But no matter. He ought to die, for he is enemy of the King.”

The other laughed, and slowly moved over to the side of the Abbot.

“And so am I,” he answered. “Do you think I ought to die too?”

The knight gathered the reins in his hands.

“Who are you?” he demanded.

The Abbot interrupted.

“When you were coming up, my lord,” he said turning to the rider, “we were about to uncover. I have a suspicion that I know this man. He tells me that before I die he would like to know me——”

But the knight made a gesture full of wrath.

“We are wasting time!” he cried and put his hand to his visor. “When you drop from your saddle—dead, you will know that it was the Sieur de Marsac who killed you!”

The Abbot laughed, a slow taunting laugh.

“You know me as the Abbot of Chalonnes, my lord de Marsac. My shadow has hovered over these hills and valleys. I have balked your schemes and plans a hundred times,” he said impressively. “But I have worn other garbs than these,—and other faces. I have been a fool, a beggar, a highwayman—a dozen persons in one. I have watched you try trick after trick. I have snapped my fingers under your nose. All the time you thought yourself so clever, you have been but a bungler and a dunce.” He raised his visor inch by inch till his whole face was revealed. “Did you ever dream that you would be confronted, in armor such as this and on a footing equal to yours, your old friend, the Scrivener, the Highwayman of Tours?”

De Marsac’s mouth fell open. He looked, as though he were in a dream, from the Scrivener to the knight on the black horse.

“You!” he cried. “I have seen you, too, some time and some place before!”

“You have, de Marsac,” came the reply in a voice that shook like a peal of thunder. “We have met ere this. But today it will be for the last time. I shall not raise my visor, for I think you know now it would be useless. I am Edward, the son of England’s King, the Black Prince!”

Chapter XXVII

The Black Prince Again.

The last sentence came like the crack of doom. The four men started in their saddles. Even the horses raised their heads and snorted. Without a word De Marsac and the Abbot—or the Scrivener as I knew him—closed their visors and with a grimness faced their foes. The Black Prince drove his spurs into his horse's side and plunged forward. He closed his huge fist and swung his arm with all his might against the knight who was nearest. There was no time to draw a weapon. So sudden and with such determination was the attack that the man caught the blow on his helmet full in the face. His head went back with a snap and he fell to the road without a sigh or groan.

The Abbot was not far behind. He, too, urged his horse to the fore. But even in the hurry he took time to lay his hand upon his mace. The knight whom he had singled out was quick enough to draw his sword and to take a steady aim at the Abbot's head. As the mace wheeled in the air the sword fell. It struck the top of the Abbot's helmet so sharply that I heard the ring of it where I was standing. The steel was dented in but the sword shivered into a hundred pieces and left the useless pommel in its owner's hand. Then the mace struck. The clang of it was like the sound of a great muffled bell. The Abbot had lifted himself in his stirrups to get a better swing. The knotted points crashed against the neck of his opponent. There was no armor broken but the force of the blow was strong enough to drive him forward with his face down flat over the horse's mane.

That made two knights out of the fight at the first encounter. It is true that De Marsac and the other had tried to maneuver so that they could all strike at the same time. But the speed with which the Black Prince and the Scrivener had acted was more that they had counted on. They were left, with their horses prancing madly about, in the middle of the road while the two victors galloped on past and slowly reined in their steeds and turned around ready for the next trial.

They came back at an even trot. The Abbot had his mace grasped in his right hand taking a sure aim as he came up. The Black Prince sat like an iron statue on his horse. His mace, which was thrice the ordinary size, hung idly at his side. The Abbot singled out the remaining knight as his target. The men met. Their maces rose and fell in the same breath. Their aim was each at the other's head. But their arms locked. The maces crashed together with a loud clap. The Abbot turned in his saddle and with a slight movement gave his wrist a twist. The mace fell out of his enemy's hand and he was left on his horse with no weapon save his sword.

The Black Prince looked on the fight as though it were a mere play. He came on a little behind the Abbot, straight at his foe. De Marsac knew the strength he was to encounter. He poised his weapon in his hand to get the balance of it so that he might strike his hardest blow. He intended to come down upon his enemy's head, for it was there that he considered him most vulnerable, and if successful, would put a quick end to him.

He rose in his saddle. His mace was in the air. The Black Prince stuck out his arm as though with it he would ward off the force of the blow. The mace descended. In the same second the Black Prince urged his horse a little to the side. The arm that was to receive the weight of De Marsac's mace suddenly dropped. The blow was spent in the air and the weight of the weapon and the force he had behind it toppled De Marsac from his balance. His feet left the stirrup and he fell in a cloud of dust to the road.

The Black Prince could have ended the fight here. He might have jumped to the ground and crushed his enemy with his mace. The advantage was his, but he made no move except to lean over his foe and laugh.

"De Marsac," he cried, "you ought to wear a cap and bells and carry a bauble in your hands. You would make a good king's fool."

If De Marsac was angry before, he was full of venom now. His horse had galloped off in fright and his mace lay on the ground.

"I am not done yet!" he cried and he took his weapon in his hand. "I will fight you till the end."

It was only an idle boast. The Black Prince threw his leg over his horse and dropped lightly to the road. De Marsac with the fury of a madman whirled his mace about his head. He caught the Prince a heavy blow on the shoulder which would have knocked an average man kicking to the earth. The Prince stiffened himself to receive the shock, then, when it was spent, he knotted his mailed fist. He drove it with all his strength into De Marsac's chest and dented the armor flat against his body. De Marsac spun and staggered like a man walking in a dream. Then, with his breath catching in his throat, he uttered a heavy groan and fell his whole length sprawling to the road.

I was so intent on the actions of the Black Prince that I almost forgot the Abbot. He had knocked the mace from his enemy's hand to be sure. And then, when I turned to him again, I saw that the two men had wheeled their horses about and were running at full tilt at each other for the second time. The knight had his sword in his hand but the Abbot, like the Black Prince, was without arms of any kind, for he had hung his mace at the side of his saddle. When the knight raised his weapon to strike, the Abbot lowered his head and shoulders. With a deft movement he caught his foe by the wrist. As his horse was speeding past, he drew in the reins and gave the wrist a sudden twist. It was the same trick that he had done with the mace. The sword dropped from the knight's hand but this time the Abbot held on. He half dragged his foe from his saddle and as he was slipping backward he dealt him a swinging blow on the side that sent him headlong from his seat rolling over till he flattened out on his back with his arms extended in the form of a cross.

I thought that the fight was now over and that all we had to do was to join the victors. I was burning to deliver my message to the Black Prince and to warn him of the great danger that threatened him from the army that was marching down the valley of the Loire. But I had counted too soon. The archers, who up till now, had drawn themselves up along the side of the road to witness the fray, began to feel the doubtfulness of their own safety. They saw, to their surprise, the Black Prince and the Abbot bowl over the four knights as though they were as inexperienced as boys. And when the leader, De Marsac, was sent tumbling to the ground, they looked to one another for a signal. Their captain was, of course, gone, but the boldest of them strung an arrow to his bow. The others followed suit. Before I could grasp the situation there were the lot of them, some aiming at the Black Prince, some at the Abbot, and one, indeed, had the thought even to cover us.

Charles gave me a shove in the ribs. I knew what he meant, so while the going was opportune, we edged back step by step, until we found ourselves in the shelter of one of the scrub trees. There were rocks around, as I have already said, so that with no more ceremony we jumped behind the first, then the second, till we were far enough away to be entirely safe.

Then I got the jar of my life. I heard a laugh, a wicked mocking laugh. Before the echo of it died away the Dwarf of Angers popped his head out from behind the boulder next to us. He must have gone the whole distance back to his cave, for he carried in his hands three strong bows and as many quivers full of arrows slung over his shoulder.

"Take this," he said, "and go back."

We were none too soon. The archers had already shot a round at the Black Prince and the Abbot and were stringing their bows for a second attack. The armor of the two warriors had, of course, protected them from hurt. They were both on foot and advancing step by step with dogged resolution. But there was always a chance that the point of an arrow pierce their armor at the vulnerable spot where the headpiece is joined to the corslet or through the opening for the eyes or mouth.

As soon as he saw what was happening, the Dwarf let out one of his unearthly yells. He bade each of us to single out a man. We raised our bows and the next second the twang of them sung in our ears.

One fellow dropped kicking in the dust. The archer, whom Charles hit, clapped his hand to his side and sank down on the grass at the edge of the road. My fellow was more fortunate, for, although I had taken a steady aim at the region of his heart, he made a sudden move as the arrow left the bow. I caught him above the elbow in the fleshy part of the arm. Although his wound was not deadly, it must have stung him with pain, for he uttered a scream. He threw his bow at his feet and with his arm limp at his side shuffled off to tear his shirt into strips to stop the flow of blood.

The victory was ours. It took only one round of arrows to bring our foes to our feet. The few of those left standing did not know which way to turn. The Dwarf with Charles and me at his heels broke from out our cover of the rocks. Each of us once more drew an arrow on his man. But it was only a threat that needed no carrying out. Our enemies saw that we had the upper hand and that to make a further show of fight would only mean their deaths. As though they were obeying a command, they threw their weapons out into the road and advanced with their hands extended as a sign of their submission.

It was all over. I ran faster than I had ever run before to the Abbot of Chalonnes. By this time he had raised his visor and was beaming on me with all the old-time twinkle in his eye.

"Where is the dagger that you were to bring to the Abbot of Chalonnes?" he demanded playfully.

"It is in the shirt of one of those fellows lying on the road," I said. "He took it from me when they captured us in the inn."

He gave me a resounding clap on the shoulder.

"It's of no consequence," he said. "I let you take it from me when I met you on the highway near your home. I knew you were without weapons and I was sure you would have need of it to protect yourself." He smiled and looked at me a long time. "Ah, lad," he said finally, "you have made a great fight of it. The best of it all is that you have come through."

"But," said I, "how did you get here?"

"I went back and made a long detour through the north of France. I knew you would have trouble near the end of your journey."

"But, my horse?" I insisted. "Where did you find him?"

He jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

"The fellow who took him is lying back there somewhere in the woods."

"And you're not a highwayman, nor a thief, nor a scrivener after all?"

"Tut, tut!" he replied. "I told you once before that you should never judge a man by his clothes. I'm a simple servant of the greatest fighter in France—the Black Prince there. Come," he said touching me on the arm. "I think you have a word for him."

Chapter XXVIII

Victory ... and Home.

I may say now that I have come to the end of my tale. I had come through as the Abbot said. But to my way of thinking it was more by blundering and good luck than by any craft or circumspection of mine.

I was glad to have my horse back again. The feel of him under me was like home. I rode along towards the west—that is towards the encampment of the army of the Black Prince—with more joy in my heart than had been my share for many a day.

It was by merest chance, I learned, that the Prince was in the neighborhood at all. His army lay a good two days' journey off. He had sent scouts out to scour the country round about to warn him if the highways were safe for him to march to the south to his headquarters for the winter at Bordeaux. He had even gone out on an expedition himself. He had come upon a troop of the King's horsemen and in pursuing them had ridden far out of his way, had outdistanced his followers and was lost for a night in the woods. He was on his way back when he came upon us, riding hard, for he had suspicions that there were more foes in the neighborhood than he had imagined.

But when I unfolded to him the tale of what I had gone through—of the activities in the valley of the Loire, the preparations for war that were going on on every hand, the vast number of soldiers (there were sixteen thousand, twice the number of his entire force) that were moving with the greatest secrecy towards the west, when he heard this, I say, he gritted his teeth and cried out, "They want to cut us off on our way south. They think they can crush the power of England in France. They are tricksters and knaves, men like De Marsac and his crew. But we have English brawn back of us, men who will take their lives in their hands for the joy of battle and of conflict. We'll beat them yet." He clenched his fists and repeated it. "We'll beat them yet."

And in the end it proved that he was right. I could spend another hour in your company and relate to you all that followed. But I feel that my manner of telling it would be incomplete. Besides the scribes of our times—men who knew how to wield the quill with greater skill than I—have written a history of it for all who will to read.

We came to the army of the Prince on the morning of the third day where it was lying north of the city of Poitiers. At once the movement started towards the south. The wisest plan would be to avoid a battle if we could. But we were scarcely under arms and it was while we were passing the city to the east that we saw the pennons of the King and after a while his horsemen and his knights. The army that I had seen piecemeal traveling down the valley of the

Loire was joined in one. There was no escape from it now for they were bent on destruction and slaughter.

We faced them. The Prince was a master in the art of war. He chose his ground with all the care he could for he had to offset the greater number of his foes with matchless skill. The battle raged from early morn to the setting of the sun. The archers shot their arrows as thick as hail so that the air seemed filled with flakes of snow with the darting of the white feathers. Knights, who had won fame and name in every part of Europe, hewed and hacked with their battle-axes and their maces. Bright swords flashed like polished silver. The lancers charged. Men were toppled from their horses and rose again to fight it out upon the ground. It was like a sea tossed into storm. And when night fell the enemy withdrew fewer in number than they began, humiliated in defeat, with a blow delivered at them from which they for years to come were not able to recover.

The flower of their warriors threw their lives away in their arrogance and pride. The valley of the Loire was opened up in case we chose to take it. If we had had an army big enough the whole of France might have been annexed to the English crown, for when the prisoners were brought in it was to the amazement of us all that among them was the greatest enemy we had—the King of France himself!

You may be a bit curious to learn what part I took in the fight. I was but a lad, of course, and hardly of the strength to cope with knights who were seasoned and toughened by years of life in camp and on the field of battle. But even at that I did what might be considered my share. The Abbot furnished me with what accoutrement was needful. I rode beside him in the fray. The mace he gave me was of a weight that I could wield and the sword I used did its work as well as it might have done in older hands than mine.

At the first go I was overfull of haste. I had singled out a foe and was hard at it when the swaying of the fight carried him from me down the field. On another occasion I found myself between two knights who were vying with each other to see who could strike me down the first. I warded off their fury with what skill I had until one of them was stricken from behind by a hand that was as sudden as it was sure. The other I struck a fortunate blow for I stunned him so hard that he rode off the field to nurse his wound.

Late in the afternoon I was knocked from my horse, but had wit enough left to scramble again into the saddle. I was tossed here and there with driving force as the battle swayed this way or that. My helmet was dented in from the swing of a mace. My right arm near the shoulder was numbed from over action and from a sword beat that had landed on it.

But I came out of it with a whole skin and no bones broken which was enough to make me thankful. As for Charles of Gramont, I never laid eyes on him from the outbreak of the fight. It was long after dark when I found him inquiring among the troops who had been near me if they knew if I had fallen. When he saw me he threw out his hands. I must confess that a kind of weakness came over me at the sight of my companion. As though we were children we flew to each other's arms and cried like babies.

Then came the parting. It is true that the Black Prince asked us to go along with him to Bordeaux to stay there for the winter with the promise that he would take us with him in the early spring on a campaign into Spain. For a while we were divided two ways, but the longing for home won in the end.

Charles was anxious to get home to put his house in order and (now that he was left alone) to give care to the estate. As for me, I knew that my brother, André, was lying awake far into the nights, wondering what had become of me and whether he would ever lay eyes on me again. Besides the fall was coming on (it was already September) and I knew the streams were full of fish and that the woods about my home were thick with game.

You should have been present in our village when we rode in. The country folk (they had been warned of our coming beforehand) gathered from the fields. They wore their best of everything and I can tell you that their simple dress of velvet jerkins, their breeches of leather, their hats with feathers in them, never looked more welcome or more pleasing to my eye. You would have thought it was some great holiday for the country players were assembled. Jugglers and sleight-of-hand artists and to my surprise the man with the birds whom I had met on my journey out, came to greet us and to display the best of their wares. And in the midst of all the merrymaking it was my brother, André, who was the proudest man alive. He never left my side and when my name was mentioned, he boasted of my courage and my strength of will that led me on a quest through the heart of our enemies, till I had to turn my face away in shame.

We settled down to the quiet life of the countryside. The first snows of winter came and the fields about the house were covered white, when a courier rode into the yard. He was from Bordeaux on his way to the great city of Paris to negotiate for peace and a return of the King. He had been commanded, he said, to deliver a letter from his master, the Black Prince.

With my brother André looking over my shoulder, I broke the seal and read,

At Bordeaux. December
To Henri la Mar, the Norman,

My lad,

It has long been in my minde to write you a lettre of thanks for the helpfull deed you performed. Your name shall always be enscrolled in my memorie and I shall think of you as a brave and worthie servant of your countrie. If there come a time when you wish to try your hande as a soldier of England, you will but come to me.

Your timely warning saved an army from destruction. Not only that, it saved your land and fireside from the greed of your enemies.

Edward.

Postscriptum.

It may be to your interest to learn that De Marsac recovered from the blow I gave him when we fought together on the highway. But he was slain later at Poitiers.

That was all.

“Well, Henri,” said André, “that letter is worth while.”