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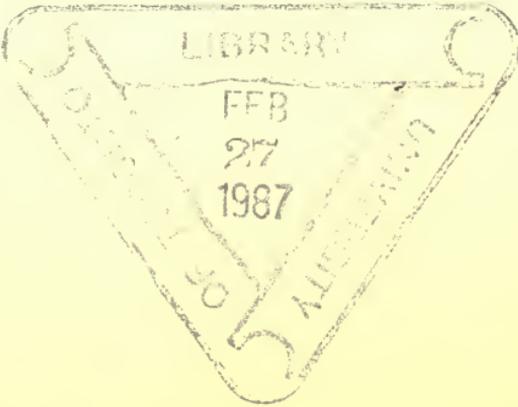
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THE WONDERFUL ADVENTURES OF

PHRA THE PHŒNICIAN.

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RETOLD BY EDWIN LESTER ARNOLD.

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY SIR EDWIN ARNOLD, M.A.

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INTRODUCTION

BY SIR EDWIN ARNOLD, K.C.L.E.

IN the garden of my Japanese home in Tokyo I have just perused the last sheets of my son's philosophical and historical romance 'Phra the Phœnician.'

Amid other scenes I might be led to analyse, to criticise, perhaps a little to argue about the singular hypothesis upon which he builds his story. Here, with a Buddhist temple at my gate, and with Japanese Buddhists around me, nothing seems more natural than that an author, sufficiently gifted with imagination and study, should follow his hero beyond the narrow limits of one little existence, down the chain of many lives, taken up link by link, after each long interval of rest and reward in the Paradise of Jô-Dô. I have read several chapters to my Asiatic friends, and they say, 'Oh, yes! It is *ingwa*! it is *Karma*! That is all quite true. We, also, have lived many times, and shall live many times more on this earth.' One of them opens the *shoji* to let a purple and silver butterfly escape into the sunshine. She thinks some day it will thank her—perhaps a million years hence.

Moreover, here is a passage which I lately noted, suggestive enough to serve as preface, even by itself, to the present book. Commenting on a line in my 'Song Celestial,' the writer thus remarks: 'The human soul should therefore be regarded as already in the present life connected at the same time with

two worlds, of which, so far as it is confined to personal unity to a body, the material only is clearly felt. It is, therefore, as good as proved, or, to be diffuse, it could easily be proved, or, better still, it will hereafter be proved (I know not where or when), that the human soul, even in this life, stands in indissoluble community with all immaterial natures of the spirit-world; that it mutually acts upon them and receives from them impressions, of which, however, as man it is unconscious, as long as all goes well. It is, therefore, truly one and the same subject, which belongs at the same time to the visible and to the invisible world, but not just the same person, since the representations of the one world, by reason of its different quality, are not associated with ideas of the other, and therefore what I think as spirit is not remembered by me as man.'

I, myself, have consequently taken the stupendous postulates of Phra's narrative with equanimity, if not acceptance, and derived from it a pleasure and entertainment too great to express, since the critic, in this case, is a well-pleased father.

The author of 'Phra' has claimed, for Romance, the ancient license accorded to Poetry and to Painting—

Pictoribus atque poetis
Quidlibet audendi semper fuit æqua potestas.

He has supposed a young Phœnician merchant, full of the love of adventure, and endowed with a large and observant if very mystic philosophy—such as would serve for no bad stand-point whence to witness the rise and fall of religions and peoples. The Adventurer sets out for the 'tin islands,' or Cassiterides, at a date before the Roman conquest of England. He dies and lives anew many times, but preserves his personal identity under the garb of half a dozen transmigrations. And yet, while renewing in each existence the characteristic passions and sentiments which constitute his individuality and preserve the unity of the narrative, the author seems to me to have

adapted him to varying times and places with a *vraisemblance* and absence of effort which are extremely effective.

A Briton in British days, the slave-consort of his Druid wife, he passes, by daring but convenient inventiveness, into the person of a Centurion in the household of a noble Roman lady who illustrates in her surroundings the luxurious vices of the latter empire with some relics still of the older Republican virtues. Hence he glides again into oblivion, yet wakes from the mystical slumber in time to take part in King Harold's gallant but fatal stand against the Normans.

He enjoys the repose, as a Saxon thane, which the policy of the Conqueror granted to the vanquished; but after some startling adventures in the vast oak woods of the South kingdom is rudely ousted from his homestead by the 'foreigners,' and in a neighbouring monastery sinks into secular forgetfulness once more of wife and children, lands and life.

On the return of consciousness he finds himself enshrined as a saint, thanks to the strange physical phenomena of his suspended animation, and learns from the Abbot that he has lain there in the odour of sanctity, according to indisputable church records, during 800 years.

He wanders off again, finding everything new and strange, and becomes an English knight under King Edward III. He is followed to Crecy by a damsel who from act to act of his long life-drama similarly renews an existence linked with his own, and who constantly seeks his love. She wears the armour of a brother knight, and on the field of battle she sacrifices her life for his.

Yet once more, a long spell of sleep, which is not death, brings this much-wandering Phra to the reign of Queen Elizabeth, and it is there, after many and strange vicissitudes, he writes his experiences, and the curtain finally falls over the last passage of this remarkable record.

Such, briefly, is the framework of a creation which, while

it has certainly proved to me extremely seductive as a story, is full, I think, of philosophical suggestiveness. As long as men count mournfully the years of that human life which M. Renan has declared to be so ridiculously short, so long their fancies will hover about the possibility of an *elixir vitæ*, of splendidly extended spans like those ascribed to the old patriarchs, and meditate with fascination the mystical doctrines of Buddhism, and the Vedantas. In such a spirit the Egyptians wrapped their dead in careful fashion, after filling the body with preservatives; and if ancient tomes have the 'Seven Sleepers' of the Koran, the Danish King who dozes under the Castle of Elsinore, and our own undying King Arthur, do we not go to see 'Rip van Winkle' at the play, and is not hybernation one among the problems of modern science which whispers that we might, if we liked, indefinitely adjourn the waste of corporeal tissue, and spread our seventy or eighty years over ever so many centuries?

But to be charming an author is not obliged to be credible, or what would become of the 'Arabian Nights,' of 'Gulliver,' and of the best books in the library? Personally I admire and I like 'Phra' enormously, and, being asked to pen these few lines by way of introduction, I counsel everybody to read it, forgetting who it is that respectfully offers this advice until the end of the book, when I shall be no longer afraid if they remember.

TOKYO, JAPAN : April 14, 1880.

THE WONDERFUL ADVENTURES

OF

PHRA THE PHOENICIAN

PROLOGUE

WELL and truly an inspired mind has written, 'One man in his time plays many parts,' but surely no other man ever played so many parts in the course of a single existence as I have.

My own narrative seems incredible to me, yet I am myself a witness of its truth. When I say that I have lived in this England more than one thousand years, and have seen her bud from the callowest barbarity to the height of a prosperity and honour with which the world is full, I shall at once be branded as a liar. Let it pass! The accusation is familiar to my ears. I tired of resenting it before your fathers' fathers were born, and the scorn of your offended sense of veracity is less to me than the lisping of a child.

I was, in the very distance of the beginning, a citizen of that ancient city whose dominion once stretched from the blue waters of the Ægean round to and beyond the broad stream of the Nile herself. Your antiquities were then my household gods, your myths were my beliefs; those facts and fancies on the very fringe of records about which you marvel were the commonplace things of my commencement. Yes! and those dusty relics of humanity that you take with unholy zeal from the silent chambers of sarcophagi and pyramids were my boon companions, the jolly revellers I knew long ago—the good fellows who drank and sang with me through warm, long-forgotten nights—they were the great princes to whom I bent an always duteous knee, and the fair damsels who tripped our

sunny streets when Sidon existed and Tyre was not a matter of speculation, or laughed at their own dainty reflections, in the golden leisure of that forgotten age, where the black-legged ibis stood sentinel among the blue lotus-flowers of the temple ponds.

Since then, what have I not done! I have travelled to the corners of the world, and forgotten my own land in the love of another. I have sat here in Britain at the tables of Roman Centurions, and the last of her Saxon Kings died in my arms. I have sworn hatred of foreign tyrants in the wassail bowls of serfs, and bestrode Norman chargers in tiltyards and battle-fields. The kingdoms of the misty western islands which it was my wonderful fortune to see submerged by alternate tides of conquest, I have seen emerge triumphant, with all their conquerors welded into one. I have seen more battles than I can easily recall, and war in every shape; I have enjoyed all sorts of peace, from the rudest to the most cultivated.

I have lived, in fact, more than one thousand years in this seagirt island of yours; and so strange and grim and varied have been my experiences that I am tempted to set them down with a melancholy faith in my own uniqueness. Though it is more than probable few will believe me, yet for this I care nothing, nor do I especially seek your approval of my labours. I, who have tasted a thousand pleasures and am hoary with disappointments, can afford to hold your censure as lightly as I should your commendation.

Here, then, are my adventures, and this is how they commenced.

CHAPTER I

REGARDING the exact particulars of my earliest wanderings, I do confess I am somewhat uncertain. This may tempt you to reply that one whose memory is so far-reaching and capacious as mine will presently prove might well have stored up everything that befell him from his very beginning. All I can say is, things are as I set them down; and those facts which you cannot believe you must continue to doubt. The first thirty years of my life, it will be guessed in extenuation, were full of the frailties and shortcomings of an ordinary mortal; while

those years which followed have impressed themselves indelibly upon my mind by right of being curious past experience and credibility.

Looking back, then, into the very remote past is like looking upon a country which a low sun at once illuminates and blurs. I dimly perceive in the golden haze of the ancient time a fair city rising, tier upon tier, out of the blue waters of the mid-lanā sea. A splendid harbour frames itself out of the mellow uncertainty—a harbour whereof the long white arms are stretched out to welcome the commerce of all the known world; and under the white fronts and at the temple steps of that ancient city, Commerce poured into the lap of Luxury every commodity that could gratify cupidity or minister to human pleasure.

I was young then, no doubt, nor need I say a fool; and very likely the sight of a thousand strange sails at my father's door excited my daily wonder, while the avarice which recognises no good fortune in a present having was excited by the silks and gems, the rich stuffs and the gums, the quaint curiosities of human ingenuity and the frolic things of nature, which were piled up there. More than all, my imagination must have been fired by the sea-captains' tales of wonder or romance, and, be the cause what it may, I made up my mind to adventure like them, and carried out my wilful fancy.

It is a fitting preface to all I have learnt since that my first real remembrance should be one of vanity. Yet so it was. More than a thousand years ago—I will not lower my record by a single lustre to propitiate your utmost unbelief—I set out on a first voyage. It might be yesterday, so well it comes before me—with my youthful pride as the spirit of a man was born within, and I felt the strong beat of the fresh salt waves of the open sea upon my trading-vessel's prow, and knew, as I stood there by her steering-oar, that she was stuffed with a hundred bales of purple cloth from my father's vats along the shore, and bound whither I listed. Who could have been prouder than I?—who could have heard finer songs of freedom in the merry hum of the warm southern air in the brown cordage overhead, or the frothy prattle of the busy water alongside, as we danced that day out of the white arms of Tyre, the queenly city of the ancient seas, and saw the young world unfurl before us, full of magnificent possibilities?

It is not my wish or intention to write of my early travels,

were it possible. On this voyage (or it may be on some others that followed, now merged into the associations of the first) we traded east and west with adventure and success. The adventure was sure enough, for the great midland sea was then the centre of the world, and, what between white-winged argosies of commerce, the freebooters of a dozen nations who patrolled its bays and corners, and rows of royal galleys sailing to the conquest of empires, it was a lively and perilous place enough. As for the profit, it came quickly to those who opened a hundred virgin markets in the olden days.

We sailed into the great Egyptian river up to Heliopolis, bartering stuffs for gold-dust and ivory; at another time we took Trinaerian wine and oranges into Ostia—a truly magnificent port, with incredible capacities for all the fair and pleasant things of life. Then we sailed among the beautiful Achaian islands with corn and olives; and so, profiting everywhere, we lived, for long, a jolly, uncertain life, full of hardship and pleasure.

For the most part we hugged the coasts and avoided the open sea. It was from the little bays, whose mouths we thus crossed, that the pirates we greatly dreaded dropped down upon merchantmen, like falcons from their perches. When they took a vessel that resisted, the crew, at those rough hands, got scant mercy. I have come across a galley drifting idly before the wind, with all her crew, a grim row of skeletons, hanging in a row along her yard and swinging this way and that, and rattling drearily against the sail and each other in melancholy unison with the listless wallow of their vessel. At another time, a Roman trireme fell upon a big pirate of Melita and stormed and captured her. The three hundred men on board were too ugly and wicked to sell, so the Romans drove them overboard like sheep, and burned the boat. When we sailed over the spot at sundown the next day, she was still spluttering and hissing, with the water lapping over the edge of her charred side, and round among the curls of yellow smoke overhead a thousand gulls were screeching, while a thousand more sat gorged and stupid upon the dead pirates. Not for many nights did we forget the evil picture of retribution, and how the setting sun flooded the sea with blood, and how the dead villains, in all their horror, swirled about in twos and threes in that crimson light, and fell into our wake, drawn by the current, and came jostling and grinning, and nodding

after us, though we made all sail to outpace them, in a gloomy procession for a mile or so.

It often seemed to me in those days there were more free-booters afloat than honest men. At times we ran from these, at times we fought them, and again we would give a big marauder a share of cargo to save the ship from his kindred who threatened us. It was a dangerous game, and one never knew on rising where his couch would be at night, nor whether the prosperous merchant of the morning might not be the naked slave of the evening, storing his own wealth in a robber cave under the lash of some savage sea-tyrant.

Yet even these cruel rovers did me a good turn. We were short of water, and had run down along a lonely coast to a green spring we knew of to fill water-butts and skins. When we let go in the little inlet where the well was to be found, another vessel, and, moreover, a pirate, lay anchored before us. However, we were consciously virtuous, and, what was of more consideration, a larger vessel and crew than the other, so we went ashore and made acquaintance round the fresh water with as villainous a gang of sea-robbers as ever caused the blood of an honest trader to run cold in his veins. The very air of their neighbourhood smelled so of treachery and cruelty we soon had but one thought—to load up and be gone.

But this was a somewhat longer process than we wished, as our friends had baled the little spring dry, and we had to wait its refilling. While we did so, I strolled over to a group of miserable slaves turned out for an airing, and cowering on the black and shadeless rocks. There were in that abject group captives from every country that fared upon those seas, and some others besides. The dusky peasant of Bœotia, that fronts the narrow straits, wrung her hands by the fair-cheeked girl snapped up from the wide Gulf of Narbo; the dark Numidian pearl-fisher cursed his patron god; and the tall Achaian from the many islands of Peloponnesian waters grit his teeth as he cowered beneath his rags and bemoaned the fate that threw him into the talons of the sea-hawks.

I looked upon them with small interest, for new-taken slaves were no great sight to me, until I chanced, a little way from the others, upon such a captive as I had rarely or never seen. She struck me at once as being the fiercest and most beautiful creature that mortal eyes had ever lit upon. Never was Umbrian or Iberian girl like that; never was Cyprian

Aphrodite served by a maid so pink and white. Her hair was fiery red gold, gleaming in the sunshine like the locks of the young goddess Medusa. Her face was of ruddy ivory, and her native comeliness gleamed through the unwashed dust and tears of many long days and nights. Her eyes were as blue under her shaggy wild hair as the sky overhead, and her body—grimy under its sorrow-stains—was still as fair as that of some dainty princess.

Knowing the pirate captain would seek a long price for his property, I determined to use a little persuasion with him. I went back to my men, and sent one of them, proficient in the art of the bowstring, to look at the slaves. Then I drew the unsuspecting scoundrel up there for a bargain, and, well out of sight of his gang, we faced the red-haired girl and discussed her price. The rascal's first figure was three hundred of your modern pounds, a sum which would then have fetched the younger daughter of a sultan, full of virtue and accomplishments. As this girl very likely had neither one nor the other, I did not see why it was necessary to pay so much, and stroking my beard, in an agreed signal, with my hand, as my man was passing behind the old pirate he slipped a length of twisted cloth over his wicked neck and tightened it with a jerk that nearly started the eyes from his head, and brought him quickly to his knees.

'Now, delicately minded one,' I said, 'I don't want to fight you and your crew for this maid here, on whom I have set my heart, but you know we are numerous and well armed, so let us have a peaceful and honest bargain. Give me a fairer price;' and obedient to my signal the band was loosened.

'Not a sesterce will I take off,' spluttered the wretch, 'not a drachma, not an ounce.'

'Come! come! think again,' I said persuasively, 'and the cloth shall help you.' Thereon another turn was taken, and my henchman turned his knuckles into the nape of the swarthy villain's neck, until the veins on his forehead stood out like cordage and the blood ran from his nose and eyes.

In a minute the rover threw up his hands and signed he had enough, and when he got his breath we found he had knocked off a hundred pounds. We gave him the cord again, and brought him down, twist by twist, to fifty. By this time he was almost at his last gasp, and I was contented, paying the coins out on a rock and leaving them there with the rogue,

well bound. I was always honest, though, as became the times, a trifle hard at bargains.

Then I cut the red maid loose and took her by the elbow and led her down to the beach, where we were secretly picked up by my fellows, and shortly afterwards we set sail again for the open main.

Thus was acquired the figure-head of my subsequent adventures—the Siren who lured me to that coast where I have lived a thousand years and more.

It was the inscrutable will of Destiny that those shining coins I paid down on the bare hot African rock should cost me all my wealth, my cash and credit at many ports, and that that fair slave, who I deemed would serve but to lighten a voyage or two, should mock my forethought, and lead my fate into the strangest paths that ever were trodden by mortal foot.

In truth, that sunny virago bewitched me. She combined such ferocity with her grace, and was so pathetic in her reckless grief at times, that I, the immovable, was moved, and softened the rigour of her mischance as time went on so much as might be. At once, on this, like some caged wild creature, which forgives to one master alone the sorrows of captivity, she softened to me; and before many days were over she had bathed, and, discarding her rags for a length or two of cloth, had tied up her hair with a strand of ribbon she found, and, looking down at her reflection in a vessel of water (her only mirror, for we carried women but seldom), she smiled for the first time.

After this progress was rapid, and, though at first we could only with difficulty make ourselves understood, yet she soon picked up something of the Southern tongue from me, while I very fairly acquired the British language of this comely tutoress. Of her I learnt she was of that latter country, where her father was a chief; how their coast-village had been surprised by a Southern rover's foray; she knew not how many of the people slain or made captive, and herself carried off. Afterwards she had fallen into the hands of other pirates by an act of sea barter, and they were taking her to Alexandria, hoping, as I guessed, in that luxurious city to obtain a higher price than in the ordinary markets of Gaul or Italy.

What I heard of Britain from these warm lips greatly fired my curiosity, and, after touching at several ports and finding trade but dull, chance clenched my resolution.

We had sailed northward with a cargo of dates, and on the sixth day ran in under the high promontory of Massilia, which you moderns call Marseilles. Here I rid myself of my fruit at a very good profit, and, after talking to a brother merchant I met by chance upon the quay, fully determined to load up with oil, wine, stuffs, and such other things as he recommended, and sail at once for Britain.

Little did I think how momentous this hasty decision would be! It was brought about partly as I have explained, and partly by the interest which just then that country was attracting. All the weapons and things of Britain were then in good demand: no tin and gold, the smiths roundly swore, were like the British; no furs in winter, the Roman ladies vowed, were so warm as those; while no patrician from Tarentum to the Tiber held his house well furnished unless a red-haired slave-girl or two from that remote place idled sad and listlessly in his painted porticoes.

In these slaves there was a brisk and increasing traffic. I went into the market that ran just along inside the harbour one day, and saw there an ample supply of such curious goods suitable for every need.

All down the middle of a wide street rough booths of sail-cloth had been run up, and about and before these crouched slaves of every age and condition. There were old men and young men—fierce and wild-looking barbarians, in all truth—some with the raw, red scars on chest and limbs they had taken a few weeks before in a last stand for liberty, and some groaning in the sickness that attended the slaver's lash and their condition.

There were lank-haired girls submitting with sullen hate to the appraising fingers of purchasers laughing and chatting in Latin or Gaulish, as they dealt with them no more gently than a buyer deals with sheep when mutton is cheap. Mothers, again—sick and travel-stained themselves—were soothing the unkempt little ones who cowered behind them and shrunk from every Roman footstep as the quails shrink from a kestrel's shadow. Some of these children were very flowers of comeliness, though trodden into the mire of misfortune. I bought a little girl to attend upon her upon my ship, who, though she wore at the time but one sorry cloth, and was streaked with dirt and dust, had eyes clear as the southern sky overhead, and hair that glistened in uncared-for brightness upon

her shoulders like a tissue of golden threads. Her mother was loth to part with her, and fought like a tiger when we separated them. It was only after the dealer's lash had cut a dozen red furrows into her back, and a bystander had beat her on the head with the flat of his sword, that she gave in and swooned, and I led the weeping little one away.

So we loaded up again with Eastern things, such as the barbarians might be supposed to like, and in a few weeks started once more. We sailed down the green coast of Hispania, through the narrow waters of *Herculis Fretum*, and then, leaving the undulating hills of that pleasant strait behind, turned northward through the long waves of the black outer sea.

For many days we rolled up a sullen and dangerous coast, but one morning our pilot called me from my breakfast of fruit and millet cakes, and, pointing over the green expanse, told me yonder white surf on the right was breaking on the steep rocks of *Armorica*, while the misty British shore lay ahead.

So I called out *Blodwen* the slave, and told her to snuff the wind and find what it had to say. She knew only too well, and was vastly delighted, wistfully scanning the long grey horizon ahead, and being beside herself with eagerness.

We steered westwardly towards the outer islands, called *Cassiterides*, where most of our people collected and bought their tin, but we were fated not to reach them. On the morrow so fierce a gale sprang out of the deep we could by no means stand against it, but turned and fled through the storm and over such a terrible expanse of mighty billows as I never saw the like of.

To my surprise, my girl thought naught of the wind and sea, but came constantly to the groaning bulwarks, where the angry green water swirled and gleamed like a cauldron, and, holding on by a shroud, looked with longing but familiar eyes at the rugged shore we were running down. At one time I saw her smile to recognise, close in shore, and plunging heavily towards some unknown haven, half a dozen of her own native fisher-boats. Later on, *Blodwen* brightened up even more as the savage cliffs of the west gave way to rolling downs of grass, and when these, as we fled with the sea-spume, grew lower, and were here and there clothed with woods, and little specks among them of cornfields, she shouted with joy, and, leaping down from the tall prow, where she had stood indif-

ferent to the angry thunder of the bursting surges upon our counter, and the sting and rattle of the white spray that flew up to the swinging yard every time we dropped into the bosom of the angry sea, she said exultingly, with her face red and gleaming in a salt wet glaze, she could guide us to a harbour if we would.

I was by this time a little sick at heart for the safety of all my precious things in bales and boxes below, and something like the long invoice of them I knew so well rose in my throat every time we sank with a horrible sinking into one of those shadowy valleys between the hissing crests—so I nodded. Blodwen at once made the helmsman draw us nearer the coast. By the time we had approached the shore within a mile or so the white squalls were following each other fast, while heavy columns of western rain were careering along the green sea in many tall spectral forms. But nothing cared that purchase of mine. She had gone to the tiller, and, like some wild goddess of the foam, stood there, her long hair flying on the wet sea wind and her fierce bright eyes aglow with pleasure and excitement as she scanned the white ramparts of the coast down which we were hurtling. She was oblivious of the swarthy seamen, who eyed her with wonder and awe; oblivious of the white bed of froth which boiled and flashed all down the rim of our dipping gunwale; and equally indifferent to the heavy rain that smoked upon our decks, and made our straining sails as hard and stiff as wood.

Just as the great shore began to loom over us, and I sorely doubted my wisdom in sailing these unknown waters with such a pilot, she gave a scream of pleasure—an exulting, triumphant note that roused a sympathetic chorus in the piping wildfowl overhead—and, following the point of her finger, we saw the solid rampart of cliffs had divided, and a little estuary was opening before us.

Round went our felucca to the imperious gesture of that girl, and, gripping the throbbing tiller over the hands of the strong steersman, aglow with excitement yet noting everything, while the swart brown sailors shouted at the humming cordage, she took us down through an angry cauldron of sea and over a foaming bar (where I cursed in my haste every ounce I had spent upon her) into the quieter water beyond; and when, a few minutes later—reeking with salt spray, but safe and sound—we slowly rolled in with the making tide to a secure, land-

locked haven, that brave girl left the rudder, and, going forward, gave one look at the opening valley, which I afterwards knew was her strangely recovered home, and then her fair head fell upon her arms, and, leaning against the mast, under the tent of her red hair she burst into a passionate storm of tears.

She soon recovered, and stealing a glance at me, as she wiped her lids with the back of her hands, to note if I were angry, her feminine perception found my eyes gave the lie to the frown upon my forehead, so she put on some extra importance (as though the air of the place suited her dignity), and resumed command of the ship.

Well! There is much to tell, so it must be told briefly. We sailed into a fair green estuary, with woods on either hand dipping into the water and nodding to their own glistening reflections, until we turned a bend and came upon a British village down by the edge. There were, perhaps, two hundred huts scattered round the slope of a grassy mound, upon top of which was a stockade of logs and mud walls encompassing a few better-built houses. Canoes and bigger boats were drawn up on the beach, and naked children and dogs were at play along the margin; while women and some few men were grinding corn and fashioning boat-gear.

As our sails came round the headland, with one single accord the population took to flight, flung down their meal-bags and tools, tumbling over each other in their haste, and yelling and scrambling they streamed away to the hill.

This amused Blodwen greatly, and she let them run until the fat old women of the crowd had sorted themselves out into a panting rearguard halfway up, and the long-legged youngsters were already scrambling over the barrier: then, with her hand over her mouth, she exerted her powerful voice in a long, wailing signal-cry. The effect was instantaneous. The crowd stopped, hesitated, and finally came scrambling down again to the beach; and after a little parley, being assured of their goodwill and greatly urged by Blodwen, we landed, and were soon overwhelmed in a throng of wondering, jostling, excited British.

But it was not me to whom they thronged, but rather her; and such wonder and surprise, broadening slowly in joy as she, with her nimble woman's tongue, answered their countless questions, I never witnessed. At last they set up yelling and shouting, and, seizing her, dragged and carried her in a tumultuous procession up the zigzag into the fortalice.

Blodwen had come home—that was all; and from a slave-girl had blossomed into a Princess!

Never before was there such a yelling and chattering and blowing of horns and beating of shields. While messengers rushed off down the woodland paths to rouse the country, the villagers crowded round me and my men, and, having by the advice of one of their elders, relinquished their first intention of cutting all our throats in the excess of their pleasure, treated us very handsomely, feeding and feasting the crew to the utmost of their capacity.

I, as you will suppose, was ill at ease for my fair barbarian who had thus turned the tables upon me, and in whose power it was impossible not to recognise that we now lay. How would the slave Princess treat her captive master? I was not long in doubt. Her messenger presently touched me on the shoulder as I sat, a little rueful, on a stone apart from my rollicking men, and led me through that prehistoric village street up the gentle slope and between the oak-log barrier into the long, low dwelling that was at once the palace and the citadel of the place.

Entering, I found myself in a very spacious hall, effective in its gloomy dignity. All round the three straight sides the massive walls were hidden in drapery of the skins and furs of bear, wolf, and deer, and over these were hung in rude profusion light round shields embossed with shining metal knobs, javelins, and boar-spears, with a hundred other implements of war or wood craft. Below them stood along the walls rough settles, and benches with rougher tables, enough to seat, perhaps, a hundred men. At the crescent-shaped end of the hall, facing the entrance door, was a dais—a raised platform of solid logs closely placed together and covered with skins—upon which a massive and ample chair stood, also of oak, and wonderfully fashioned and carved by the patient labour of many hands.

Nigh it were a group of women, and one or two white-robed Druids, as these people call their priests. But chief among them was she who stepped forth to meet me, clad (for her first idea had been to change her dress) in fine linen and fair furs—how, I scarcely know, save that they suited her marvellously. Fine chains of hammered gold were about her neck, a shining gorget belt set with a great boss of native pearls upon her middle, and her two bare white arms gleamed like

ivory under their load of bracelets of yellow metal and prismatic pearl-shell that clanked harmoniously to her every movement. But the air she put on along with these fine things was equally becoming, and she took me by the hand with an affectionate condescension while, turning to her people, she briefly harangued them, running glibly over my virtues, and bestowing praise upon the way in which I had 'rescued and restored her to her kindred,' until, so gracefully did she pervert the truth, I felt a blush of unwonted virtue under my callous skin; and when they acclaimed me friend and ally, I stood an inch taller among them to find myself of such unexpected worth—one tall Druid alone scowling on me evilly.

For long that pleasant village by the shallow waters remembered the coming of Blodwen to her own. Her kinsmen had all been slain in the raid of the sea-rovers which brought about her captivity, and thus—the succession to headship and rule being very strictly observed among the Britons—she was elected, after an absence of six months, to the oak throne and the headship of the clan with an almost unbroken accord. But that priest, Dhuwallon, her cousin, and next below her in birth, scowled again to see her seated there, and hated me, I saw, as the unconscious thwarter of his ambition.

Those were fine times, and the Princess bought my cargo of wine and oil and Southern things, distributing it to all that came to pay her homage, so that for days we were drunk and jolly. Fires gleamed on twenty hilltops round about, and the little becks ran red down to the river with the blood of sheep and bullocks slaughtered in sacrifice; and the foot-tracks in the woods were stamped into highways; and the fords ran muddy to the ocean; and the grass was worn away; and birds and beasts fled to quieter thickets; and fishes swam out to the blue sea; and everything was eaten up, far and wide; that time my fair slave-girl first put her foot upon the daïs and prayed to the manes of her ancestors among the oak-trees.

CHAPTER II

NOTHING whatever have I to say against Blodwen, the beautiful British Princess, and many months we spent there happily in her town: and she bore a son, for whom the black priest, at the accursed inspiration of his own jealous heart and thwarted hopes, read out an evil destiny, to her great sorrow.

Going down one morning to the shore somewhat sad and sorry, for the inevitable time of parting was near, my ship lying ready loaded by the beach, I rubbed my eyes again and again to see that the felucca had gone from the little inlet where she had lain so long. Nor was comfort at hand when, rushing to a promontory commanding a better view, to my horror there shone the golden speck of her sail in the morning sunlight on the blue rim of the most distant sea.

I have often thought, since, the crafty Princess had a hand in this desertion. She was so ready with her condolence, so persuasive that I should 'bide the winter and leave her in the spring' (the which was said with her most detaining smile), that I could not think the catastrophe took my gentle savage much by surprise.

I yielded, and the long black winter was worn through among the British, until, when the yellow light came back again, I had married Blodwen before all the tribe and was rich by her constant favour, nor, need it be said, more loth than ever to leave her. In truth, she was a good Princess, but very variable. Blodwen the chieftainess urging her clansmen to a tribal fight, red-hot with the strong drink of war, or reeking with the fumes and cruelty of a bloody sacrifice to Baal, was one thing; and, on the other hand, Blodwen tending with the rude skill of the day her kinsmen's wounds, Blodwen the daughter weeping gracious, silent tears in the hall of her fathers as the minstrels chanted their praises, or humming a ditty to the listening blue-eyed little one upon her knee—his cheek to hers—was all another sight; and I loved her better than I have ever loved any of those other women who have loved me since.

But sterner things were coming my erratic way. The proud Roman Eagle, having in these years long tyrannised

over fertile Gaul, must needs swoop down on our brothers along that rocky coast of Armorica that faces our white shore, carrying death and destruction among our kinsmen as the peregrines in the cliffs harry the frightened seamews.

Forthwith the narrow waters were black with our hide-sailed boats rushing to succour. But it was useless. Who could stand against the Roman? Our men came back presently—few, wounded, and crestfallen, with long tales of the foeman's deadly might by sea and shore.

Then, a little later on, we had to fight for ourselves, though scantily we had expected it. Early one autumn a friendly Veneti came over from Gaul and warned the Southern Princes the stern Roman Consul Cæsar was collecting boats and men to invade us. At once on this news were we all torn by diverse counsels and jealousies, and Blodwen hung in my arms for a tearful space, and then sent me eastward with a few men—all she could spare from watching her own dangerous neighbours—to oppose the Roman landing; while the priest Dhuwallon, though exempt by his order from military service, followed sullen behind my warlike clansmen.

We joined other bodies of British, until, by the beginning of the harvest month, we had encamped along the Kentish downs in very good force, though disunited. Three days later, at dawn, came in a runner who said that Cæsar was landing to the westward—how I wished that traitor lie would stick in his false throat and choke him!—and thither, bitterly against my advice, went nearly all our men.

Even now it irks me to tell this story. While the next young morning was still but a yellow streak upon the sea, our keen watchers saw sails coming from the pale Gaulish coast, and, by the time the primrose portals of the day were fully open, the water was covered with them from one hand to the other.

In vain our recalling signal-fires smoked. A thousand scythed chariots and four thousand men were away, and by noon the great Consul's foremost galley took the British ground where the beach shelved up to the marshy flats, which again rose, through coppices and dingles, to our camp on the overhanging hills. Another and another followed, all thronged with tawny stalwart men in brass and leather. What could we do against this mighty fleet that came headlong upon us, rank behind rank, the white water flashing in tangled ribbons

from their innumerable prows, and the dreaded symbols of Roman power gleaming from every high-built stern?

We rushed down, disorderly, to meet them, the Druids urging us on with song and sacrifice, and waded into the water to our waists, for we were as courageous as we were undisciplined, and they hesitated for some seconds to leave their lurching boats. I remember at this moment, when the fate of a kingdom hung in the balance, down there jumped a Centurion, and, waving a golden eagle over his head, drew his short sword, and calling out that 'he at least would do his duty to the Republic,' made straight for me.

Brave youth! As he rushed impetuous through the water my ready javelin took him true under the gilded plate that hung upon his chest, and the next wave rolled in to my feet a lifeless body lapped in a shroud of crimson foam.

But now the legionaries were springing out far and near, and fighting hand to hand with the skin-clad British, who gave way before them slowly and stubbornly. Many were they who died, and the floating corpses jostled and rolled about among us as we plunged and fought and screamed in the shallow tide, and beat on the swarming impervious golden shields of the invaders.

Back to the beach they drove us hand to hand and foot to foot, and then, with a long shout of triumph that startled the sea-fowl on the distant cliffs, they pushed us back over the shingles ever farther from the sea, that idly sported with our dead—back, in spite of all we could do, to the marshland.

There they formed, after a breathing-space, in the long, stern line that had overwhelmed a hundred nations, and charged us like a living rampart of steel. And as the angry waves rush upon the immovable rocks, so rushed we upon them. For a moment or two the sun shone upon a wild uproar, the fierce contention of two peoples breast to breast, a glitter of caps and javelins, splintered spears and riven shields, all flashing in the wild dust of war that the Roman Eagle loved so well. And then the Britons parted into a thousand fragments and reeled back, and were trampled under foot, and broke and fled!

Britain was lost!

Soon after this all the coppices and pathways were thronged with our flying footmen. Yet Dhuwallon and I, being mounted, had lingered behind the rest, galloping hither

and thither over the green levels, trying to get some few British to stand again; but presently it was time to be gone. The Romans, in full possession of the beach, had found a channel, and drawn some boats up to the shelving shore. They had dropped the hinged bulwarks, and, with the help of a plank or two, had already got out some of their twenty or thirty chargers. On to these half a dozen eager young patricians had vaulted, and, I and Dhuwallon being conspicuous figures, they came galloping down at us. We, on our lighter steeds, knowing every path and gully in the marsh lands, should have got away from them like starlings from a prowling sheepdog; but treachery was in the black heart of that high-priest at my elbow, and a ravening hatred which knew neither time nor circumstance.

It was just at the scraggy foot-hills, and the shouting Centurions were close behind us; the last of our fighters had dashed into the shelter ahead, and I was galloping down a grassy hollow, when the coward shearer of mistletoe came up alongside. I looked not at him, but over my other shoulder at the red plumes of the pursuers dancing on the sky-line. All in an instant something sped by me, and, shrieking in pain, my horse plunged forward, missed his footing, and rolled over into the long autumn grass with the scoundrel priest's last javelin quivering in his throat. I heard that villain laugh as he turned for a moment to look back, and then he vanished into the screen of leaves.

Amazed and dizzy, I staggered to my feet, pushed back the long hair and the warm running blood from my eyes, and, grasping my sword, waited the onset of the Romans. They rode over me as though I were a shock of ripe barley in August, and one of them, springing down, put his foot to my throat and made to kill me.

'No, no, Fabrius!' said another Centurion, from the back of a white steed—'don't kill him. He will be more useful alive.'

'You were always tender-hearted, Sempronius Faunus,' grumbled the first one, reluctantly taking his heel from me and giving permission to rise with a kick in the side. 'What are you going to do with him? Make him native Prefect of these marshes, eh?'

'Or, perhaps,' put in another gilded youth, whose sword itched to think it was as yet as innocent of blood as when it

came from its Tuscany smithy—‘perhaps Sempronius is going to have a private procession of his own when he gets back to the Tiber, and wishes early to collect prisoners for his chariot-tail.’

Disregarding their banter, the Centurion Sempronius, who was a comely young fellow, and seemed just then extremely admirable in person and principles to me, mounted again, and, pointing with his short sword to the shore, bid me march, speaking the Gallic tongue, and in a manner there was no gainsaying.

So I was prisoner to the Romans, and they bound me, and left me lying for ten hours under the side of one of their stranded ships, down by the melancholy afternoon sea, still playing with its dead men, and rolling and jostling together in its long green fingers the raven-haired Etrurian and the pale, white-faced Celt. Then, when it was evening, they picked me up, and a low plebeian in leather and brass struck me in the face when, husky and spent with fighting, I asked for a cup of water. They took me away through their camp and a mile down the dingles, where the Roman legionaries were digging fosses, and making their camp in the ruddy flicker of watch-fires, under the British oaks, to a rising knoll.

Here the main body of the invaders were lying in a great crescent towards the inland, and crowning the hillock was a scarp, where a rough pavilion of skins and sails from the vessels on the beach had been erected.

As we approached this, all the noise and laughter died out of my guard, who now moved in perfect silence. A bowshot away we halted, and presently Sempronius was seen backing out of the tent with an air of the greatest diffidence. Seizing me by my manacled arms, he led me to it. At the very threshold he whispered in my ear—

‘Briton, if you value that tawny skin of yours I saved this morning, speak true and straight to him who sits within’: and without another word he thrust me into the rough pavilion. At a little table, dark with usage and scarred with campaigning, a man was sitting, an ample toga partly hiding the close-fitting leather vest he wore beneath it. His long and nervous fingers were urging over the tablets before him a stylus with a speed few in those days commanded, while a little earthenware lamp, with a flickering wick burning in the turned-up spout, cast a wavering light upon his thin, sharp-cut features—the im-

perious mouth that was shut so tight, and the strong lines of his dark commanding face.

He went on writing as I entered, without looking up; and my gaze wandered round the poor walls of his tent, his piled-up arms in one place, his truckle bed in another, there a heap of choice British spoil, flags and symbols and weapons, and there a foreign case, half opened, stocked with bags of coins and vellum rolls. All was martial confusion in the black and yellow light of that strange little chamber, and as I turned back to him I felt a shock run through me to find the blackest and most piercing pair of eyes that ever shone from a mortal head fixed upon my face.

He rose, and, with the lamp in his hand, surveyed me from top to toe.

'Of the Veneti?' he said, in allusion to my dark un-British hair; and I answered 'No.'

'What, then?'

I told him I was a knight just now in the service of the British King.

'How many of your men opposed us to-day?' was the next question.

'A third as many as you brought with you where you were not invited.'

'And how many are there in arms behind the downs and in this southern country?'

'How many pebbles are there on yonder beach? How many ears of corn did we pull last harvest?' I answered, for I thought I should die in the morning, and this made me brave and surly.

He frowned very blackly at my defiance, but curbing, I could see, his wrath, he put the lamp on the table, and, after a minute of communing with himself, he said, in a voice over which policy threw a thin veil of amiability—

'Perhaps, as a British knight and a good soldier, I have no doubt, you could speak better with your hands untied?'

I thanked him, replying that it was so; and he came up, freeing, with a beautiful little golden stiletto he wore in his girdle, my wrists. This kindly slight act of soldierly trust obliged me to the Roman General, and I answered his quick, incisive questions in the Gaulish tongue as far as honestly might be. He got little about our forces, finding his prisoner more effusive in this quarter than communicative. Once or

twice, when my answers verged on the scornful, I saw the imperious temper and haughty nature at strife with his will in that stern, masterful face and those keen black eyes.

But when we spoke of the British people, I could satisfy his curious and many questions about them more frankly. Every now and then, as some answer interested him, he would take a quick glance at me as though to read in my face whether it were the truth or not, and, stopping by his little table, he would jot down a passage on the wax, scan it over, and inquire of something else. Our life and living, wars, religions, friendships, all seemed interesting to this acute gentleman so plainly clad, and it was only when we had been an hour together, and after he had clearly got from me all he wished, that he called the guard and dismissed me, bidding Sempronius in Latin, which the General thought I knew not, to give me food and drink, but keep me fast for the present.

Sempronius showed the utmost deference to the little man in the toga and leather jerkin, listening with bent head and backing from his presence; while I but roughly gave him thanks for my freed hands, and stalked out after my jailer with small ceremony.

Once in the starlight and out of earshot the Centurion said to me, with a frown—

‘Briton, I feel somewhat responsible for you, and I beg the next time you leave that presence not to carry your head so high or turn that wolf-skinned back of yours on him so readily, or I am confident I shall have orders to teach you manners. Did you cast yourself down when you entered?’

‘Not I.’

‘Jove! And did not kneel while you spoke to him?’

‘Not once,’ I said.

‘Now, by the Sacred Flame! do you mean to say you stood the whole time as I found you, towering in your ragged skins, your bare braceleted arms upon your chest, and giving Cæsar back stare for stare in his very tent?’

‘Who?’

‘Cæsar himself. Why, who else? Cæsar, whose word is life and death from here to the Apennines, who is going to lick up this country of yours as a hungry beggar licks out a porringer. Surely you knew that he to whom you spoke so freely was our master the great Prætor himself!’

Here was an oversight! I might have guessed so much;

but, full of other things, I had never supposed the little man was anything but a Roman General sent out to harry and pursue us. Strange ideas rose at once, and, while the Tyrian in me was awestruck by the closeness of my approach to a famous and dreaded person, the Briton moaned at a golden opportunity lost to unravel, by one bold stroke—a stroke of poignard, of burning brand from the fire, of anything—the net that was closing over this unfortunate island.

So strong rose these latter regrets at having had Cæsar, the unwelcome, the relentless, within arms' length, and having let him go forth with his indomitable blood still flowing in his lordly veins, that I stopped short, clapped my hand upon my swordless scabbard, and made a hasty stride back to the tent.

At once the ready Sempronius was on me like a wild cat, and with two strong legionaries bore me to the ground, and tied me hand and foot. They carried me down to the camp, and there pitched me under a rock to reflect until dawn on the things of a disastrous day.

But by earliest twilight the bird had flown! At midnight, when the tired soldiers slept, I chafed my hempen bonds against a rugged angle of earth-embedded stone, and in four hours was free, rising silently among the snoring warriors, and passing into the forest as noiselessly as one of those weird black shadows that the last flashes of their expiring camp-fires made at play on the background of the woods.

I stole past their outmost pickets while the first flush of day was in the east, and then, in the open, turned me to my own people and ran like a hind to her little one over the dewy grasslands and through the spangled thickets, scaring the conies at their earliest meal, and frightening the merles and mavis ere they had done a bar of their matin songs, throwing myself down in the tents of my kinsmen just as the round sun shone through the close-packed oak-trunks.

But, curse the caitiff fools who welcomed me there! It would have been far better had I abided Cæsar's anger, or trusted to that martial boy Sempronius Faunus!

The British churls, angry and sullen at their defeat of yesterday, were looking for a victim to bear the burden of their wrongs. Now the priest Dhuwallon, who had turned livid with fear and anger when I had come back unharmed from the hands of the enemy, with a ready wit which was surely

lent him from hell, saw he might propitiate the Britons and gratify his own ends by one more coward trick to be played at my expense. I do not deny his readiness or grudge him aught, yet I hate him even now from the bottom of my heart with all that fierce old anger which then would have filled me with delight and pride if I could have had his anointed blood smoking in the runnels of my sword.

Well. It was his turn again. He procured false witnesses—not a difficult thing for a high-priest in that discontented camp—and by midday I was bound once more, and before the priests and chiefs as a traitor and Roman spy.

What good was it for me to stand up and tell the truth to that gloomy circle while the angry crowd outside hungered for a propitiatory sacrifice? In vain I lied with all the resources I could muster, and in vain, when this was fruitless, denounced that pale villain, my accuser. When I came to tell of his treachery in killing my horse the day before, and leaving me to be slain by the enemy, I saw I was but adding slander in the judges' eyes to my other crimes. When I declared I was no Roman, but a Briton—an aged fool, his long white locks filleted with oak-leaves, rose silently and held a polished brass mirror before me, and by every deity in the Northern skies I must own my black hair and dusky face was far more Roman than native.

So they found me guilty, and sentenced me to be offered up to Baal next morning before the army as a detected spy.

When that silvery dawn came, it brought no relief or respite, for the laws of the Druids, which enjoined slow and deliberate judgments, forbade the altering of a sentence once pronounced. It was as fine a day as could be wished for their infernal ceremonial, with the mellow autumn mist lying wide and flat along the endless vistas of oak and hazel that then hid almost all the valleys, and over the mist the golden rays of the sun spread far and near, kissing with crimson radiance the green knobs of upland that shone above that pearly ocean, and shining on the bare summits of the lonely grass hills around us, and gleaming in rosy brilliancy upon the sea that flashed and sparkled in grey and gold between the downs to the southward. Here in this fairy realm, while the thickets were still beaded with the million jewels of the morning, and the earth breathed of repose and peace, they carried out that detestable orgie of which I was the centre.

My memory is a little hazy. Perhaps, at the time, I was thinking of other things—a red-haired girl, for instance, playing with her little ones outside her porch in a distant glen; my shekels of brass and tin and silver; my kine, my dogs, and my horses, mayhap; such things will be—and thus I know little of how it came. But presently I was on the fatal spot.

A wide circle of green grass, kept short and close, in the heart of a dense thicket of oak. Round this circle a ring of great stone columns, crowned by mighty slabs of the same kind, and hung, to-day, with all the skins and robes and weapons of the assembled tribesmen; so that the mighty enclosure was a rude amphitheatre, walled by the wealth of the spectators, and in the centre an oblong rock, some eight feet long, with a gutter down it for the blood to run into a pit at its feet. This was the fatal slip from which the Druids launched that poor vessel, the soul, upon the endless ocean of eternity.

All round the great circle, when its presence and significance suddenly burst upon me, were the British, to the number of many hundreds, squatting on the ground in the front rows, or standing behind against the grey pillars, an uncouth ring of motley barbarians, shaggy with wolf and bear skins, gleaming in brass and golden links that glistened in the morning light against naked limbs and shoulders, traced and pictured in blue woad with a hundred designs of war and woodcraft.

They forced me and two other miserable wretches to the altar, and then, while our guards stood by us and the mounted men clustered among the monoliths behind, a deadly silence fell upon the assembly. It was so still we could hear the beat of our own hearts, and so intolerable that one of us three fell forward in a swoon ere it had lasted many minutes. The din of battle was like the murmur of a pleasant brook before that expectant hush; and when the white procession of executioners came chanting up the farther avenue of stones into the arena, I breathed again as though it was a nuptial procession and they were bringing me a bride less grim than the golden adze which shone at their head.

They sang round the circle their mystic song, and then halted before the rude stone altar. Mixing up religion and justice as was their wont, the chief Druid recited the crimes of the two culprits beside me, with their punishment, and immediately the first one, tightly bound, was pitched upon the

stone altar ; and while the Druids chanted their hymns to Baal the assembled multitude joined in, and, clanging their shields in an infernal tumult which effectually drowned his yells for mercy, the sacred adze fell, and first his head and then his body rolled into the hollow, while twenty little streams of crimson blood trickled down the sides of the altar stone. The next one was treated in the same way, and tumbled off into the hollow below, and I was hoisted up to that reeking slab.

While they arranged me, that black priest stole up and hissed in my ear, 'Is it of Blodwen you think when you shut your eyes? Take this, then, for your final comfort,' he said, with a malicious leer—'I, even I, the despised and thwarted, will see to Blodwen and answer for her happiness. Ah!—you writhe—I thought that would interest you. Let your last thought, accursed stranger, be I and she: let your last conception be my near revenge! Villain! I spit upon and deride you!' And he was as good as his word, glowering down upon me helpless, with insatiate rage and hatred in his eyes, and then, stepping back, signed to the executioner.

I heard the wild hymn to their savage gods go ringing up again through the green leaves of the oaks ; I heard the clatter of the weapons upon the round brass-bound targets, the voices of the priests and the cry of a startled kite circling in the pleasant autumn mist overhead. I saw the great crescent of the sacred golden adze swing into the sky, and then, while it was just checking to the fall which should extinguish me, there came a hush upon the people, followed by a wild shout of fear and anger, and I turned my head half over as I lay bound upon the stone.

I saw the British multitude seethe in confusion and then burst and fly like the foam strands before the wind, as, out of the green thickets, at the run, their cold, brave faces all emotionless over their long brass shields, came rank upon rank of Roman legionaries. I saw Sempronius on his white charger at their head, glittering in brass and scarlet, and finding my tongue in my extremity, 'Sempronius!' I yelled, 'Sempronius to the rescue!' But too late.

With a wavering, aimless fall the adze descended between my neck and my shoulder, the black curtain of dissolution fell over the painted picture of the world, there was a noise of a thousand rivers tumbling into a bottomless cavern, and I expired.

CHAPTER III

I DO confess I can offer no justification for the continuation of my story. Once so fairly sped as I was on that long-distant day, thus recalled in such detail as I can remember, the natural and regular thing would be that there should be an end of me, with, perhaps, a page or two added by some kindly scribe to recall my too quickly smothered virtues. Nevertheless, I write again, not a whit the worse for a mischance which would have silenced many a man, and in a mood to tell you of things wonderful enough to strain the sides of your shallow modern scepticism, as new wine stretches a goat-skin bottle.

All the period between my death on the Druid altar and my reawakening was a void, whereof I can say but little. The only facts pointing a faint clue to the wonderful lapse of life are the brief phenomena of my reawakening, which came to hand in sequence as they are here set down.

My first consciousness was little better than a realisation of the fact that practically I was extinct. To this pointless knowledge there came a dawning struggle with the powers of mortality, until very slowly, inch by inch, the negativeness was driven back, and the spark of life began to brighten within me. To this moment I cannot say how long the process took. It may have been days or weeks or months, or ages as likely as not; but when the vital flame was kindled the life and self-possession spread more quickly, until at last, with little fluttering breaths like a new-born baby's, and a tingling trickle of warm blood down my shrunken veins, in one strange minute, four hundred years after the close of my last spell of living (as I afterwards learned), I feebly opened my eyes, and recognised with dull contentment that I was alive again.

But oh! the sorrows attendant on it! Every bone and muscle in me ached to that awakening, and my very fibre shook to the stress of the making tide of vitality. You who have lain upon an arm for a sleepy hour or two and suffered as a result ingenious torments from the new-moving blood, think of the like sorrows of four hundred years' stagnation! It was scarcely to be borne, and yet, like many other things of which the like might be said, I bore it in bitterness of spirit, until life had trickled into all the unfamiliar pathways

of my elay, and then at length the pain decreased and I could think and move.

In that strange and lonely hour of temporal resurrection almost complete darkness surrounded me, and my mind (with one certain consciousness that I had been very long where I lay) was a chaos of speculation and fancy and long-forgotten scenes. But as my faculties came more completely under control, and my eyes accepted the dim twilight as sufficient and convenient to them, they made out overhead a dull, massy roof of rock, rough with the strong masonry of mother earth, and descending in rugged sides to an uneven floor. In fact, there could be no doubt I was underground, but how far down, and where, and why, could not be said. All round me were cavernous hollows and midnight shadows, round which the weird gleam of rude pillars and irregular walls made a heavy mysterious coast to a black, uncertain sea. I sat up and rubbed my eyes—and as I did so I felt every rag of clothing drop in dust and sheds from my person—and peered into the almost impenetrable gloom. My outstretched hands on one side touched the rough rocks of what was apparently the arch of a niche in this chamber of the nether world, and under me they discovered a sandy shelf, upon which I lay some eight or ten feet from the ground, as near as could be judged. Not a sound broke the stillness but the gentle monotony of falling water, whereof one unseen drop twice a minute fell with a faint silver cadence on to the surface of an unknown pool. I did not fear, I was not frightened, and soon I noticed as a set-off to the gloom of my sullen surroundings the marvellous purity of the atmosphere. It was a preservative itself. Such an ambient, limpid element could surely have existed nowhere else. It was soft as velvet in its absolute stillness, and pure beyond suspicion. It was like some thin, sunless vintage that had mellowed endless years in the great vat of the earth, and it now ran with the effect of a delicate tonic through my inert frame. Nor was its sister and ally—the temperature—less conducive to my cure. In that subterranean place summer and winter were alike unknown. The trivial changes that vex the cuticle of the world were here reduced to an unalterable average of gentle warmth that assimilated with the soulless air to my huge contentment. You cannot wonder, therefore, that I throve apace, and explored with increasing strength the limits of my strange imprisonment.

All about me was fine deep dust and shreds, which even then smelt in my palm like remnants of fur and skins. At my elbow was a shallow British eating-dish, with a little dust at the bottom, and by it a broken earthenware pitcher such as they used for wine. On my other side, as I felt with inquisitive fingers, lay a handleless sword, one of my own I knew, but thin with age, the point all gone, rusty and useless. By it, again, reposed a small jar, heavy to lift and rattling suggestively when shaken. My two fingers thrust into the neck told me it was full of coins, and I could not but feel a flush of gratitude in that grim place at the abortive kindness which had put food and drink, weapons and money by my side with a sweet ignorance, yet certainty of my future awakening.

But now budding curiosity suggested wider search, and, rising with difficulty, I cautiously dropped from my lofty shelf on to the ground. Then a wish to gain the outer air took possession of me, and, peering this way and that, a tiny point of light far away on the right attracted my attention. On approaching, it turned out to be a small hole in the cave out of reach overhead; but, feeling about below this little star of comfort, the walls appeared soft and peaty to the touch, so at once I was at work digging hard, with a pointed stone; and the farther I went the more leafy and rough became the material, while hope sent my heart thumping against my ribs in tune to my labour.

At last, impulsive, after half an hour's work, a fancy seized me that I could heave a way out with my shoulder. No sooner said than done. I took ten steps back, and then plunged fiercely in the darkness of the great cavern into the mouldy screen.

How can I describe the result! It gave way, and I shot in a whirlwind of dust into a sparkling golden world! I rolled over and over down a spangled firmament, clutching in my bewilderment my hands full of blue and yellow gems at every turn, and slipping and plunging with a sirocco of colour, red, green, sapphire, and gold flying round before my bewildered face. I finally came to a stop, and sat up. You will not wonder that I glared round me when I say I was seated at the foot of all the new marvels of a beautiful limestone knoll, clothed from top to bottom with bluebells and primroses, spangled with the young spring greenery of hazel

and beech overhead, and backed by the cloudless blue of an April sky!

On top of this fairy mountain, at the roots of the trees that crowned it, hidden by bracken and undergrowth, was the round hole from which I had plunged; nor need I tell you how, remembering what had happened in there, I rubbed my eyes, and laughed and marvelled greatly at the will of the Inscrutable, which had given me so wonderful a re-birth.

To you must be left to fill up the picture of my sensations and slowly recurring faculties. How I lay and basked in the warmth, and slowly remembered everything: to me belongs but the strange and simple narrative.

One of my first active desires was for breakfast—nor, as my previous meal had been four centuries earlier, will I apologise for this weakness. But where and how should it be had? This question soon answered itself. Sauntering hither and thither, the low shoulder of the ridge was presently crossed and a narrow footway in the woods leading to some pleasant pastures entered upon. Before I had gone far up this shady track, a pail of milk in her hand, and whistling a ditty to herself, came tripping towards me as pretty a maid as had ever twisted a bit of white hawthorn into her amber hair.

I let her approach, and then, stepping out, made the most respectful salutation within the knowledge of ancient British courtesy. But, alas! my appearance was against me, and Roman fancies had peopled the hills with jolly satyrs, for one of which no doubt the damsel took me. As I bowed low the dust of centuries cracked all down my back. I was tawny, and grim, and unshaved, and completely naked—though I had forgotten it—and even my excellent manners could not warrant my disingenuousness against such a damning appearance. She screamed with fear, and, letting go her milk-jar, turned and fled with a nimbleness which would have left even the hot old wood-god himself far in the rear.

However, the milk remained, and, peering into the pitcher, here seemed the very thing to recuperate me by easy stages. So I retired to a cosy dell, and, between copious draughts of that fine natural liquor, overwhelmed with blessings the sleek kine and the comely maid who milked them. Indeed, the stuff ran into my withered processes like a freshet stream into a long-dry country, it consoled and satisfied me, and after-

wards I slept as an infant all that night and far into another sun.

The next day brought several needs with it. The chief of these were more food, more clothes, and a profession (since fate seemed determined to make me take another space of existence upon the world). All three were satisfied eventually. As for the first two, I was not particular as to fashion or diet, and easily supplied them. In the course of a morning stroll a shepherd's hut was discovered, and on approaching it cautiously the little shed turned out to be empty. However, the owner had left several sheepskin mantles and rough homespun clothes on pegs round the walls, and to these I helped myself sufficiently to convert an unclothed caveman into a passable yeoman. Also, I made free with his store of oak-cakes and coarse cheese, putting all not needed back upon his shelf.

Here I was again, fed and clothed, but what to do next was the question. To consider the knotty matter, after spending most of the day in purposeless wandering I went up to the top of my own hill—the one that, unknown to everyone, had the cavern in it—and there pondered the subject long. The whole face of the country perplexed me. It was certainly Britain, but Britain so amplified and altered as to be hardly recognisable. Wide fields were everywhere, broad roads traversed the hills and valleys with impartial straightness, the great woodlands of the earlier times were gone or much curtailed, while wonderful white buildings shone here and there among the foliage, and down away in the west, by a river, the sunbeams glinted on the roofs and temple fronts of a fine, unknown town. That was the place, it seemed to me at length, to refit for another voyage on the strange sea of chance; but I was too experienced in the ways of the world to travel citywards with an empty wallet. While meditating upon the manner in which this deficiency might be met, the golden store of coins left in the cave below suddenly presented themselves. The very thing! And, as heavy purple clouds were piling up round the presently sinking sun, earth and sky alike presaging a storm that evening, the cavern would be a convenient place to sleep in.

Finding the entrance with some difficulty, and noticing, but with no special attention, that it looked a little larger than when last seen, my first need was fire. This I had to make for myself. In the pouch of the shepherd's jerkin was a length

of rough twine ; this would do for matches, while as a torch a resinous pine-branch, bruised and split, served well enough. Fixing one end of the string to a bush, I took a turn round a dry stick, and then began laboriously rubbing backwards and forwards. In half an hour the string fumed pleasantly, and, something under the hour—one was nothing if not patient in that age—it charred and burst into flame.

Just as the evening set in, and the earth opened its pores to the first round drops of the warm-smelling rain that pattered on the young forest leaves, and the thunder began to murmur distantly under the purple mantle of the coming storm, my torch spluttering and hissing, I entered the vast gloomy chamber of my sleep, and, not without a sense of awe, stole up along the walls, a hundred yards or more, to my strange couch.

The coins were safe, and shining greenly in their earthen jar : so, sticking the light into a cleft, I poured them on to the sand, and then commenced to tuck the stuff away, as fast as might be, into my girdle. It was strange, wild work, the only company my own contorted shadow on the distant rocks and such wild forms of cruel British superstition as my excited imagination called up, the only sound the rumble of the storm, now overhead, and the hissing drip of the red rosin gleaming on the wealth, all stamped with images of long-dead Kings and Consuls, that I was cramming into my pouch !

By the time the task was nearly finished, I was in a state of nerves equal to seeing or hearing anything—no doubt long fasting had shaken a mind usually calm and callous enough—and therefore you will understand how the blood fled from my limbs and the cold perspiration burst out upon my forehead, when, having scarified myself with traditions of ghouls and cave devils, I turned to listen for a moment to the dull rumble of the thunder and the melancholy wave-like sough of the wind in the trees even here audible, and beheld, twenty paces from me, in the shadows, a vast shaggy black form, grim and broad as no mortal ever was, and red and wavering in the uncertain light, seven feet high, and possessed of two fiery, gleaming eyes that were bent upon my own with a horrible fixity !

I and that monstrous shadow glared at each other until my breath came back, when, leaning a moment more against the side of the cavern, I suddenly snatched the torch from its

cleft with a yell of consternation that was multiplied a thousand times by the echoes until it was like the battle-cry of a legion of bad spirits, and started off in the supposed direction of the entrance. But before ten yards had been covered in that headlong rush, I tripped over a loose stone, and in another moment had fallen prone, plunging, thereby, the spluttering torch into one of the many little pools of water with which the floor was pitted. With a hiss and a splutter the light went out, and absolute darkness enveloped everything!

Just where I had fallen stood a round boulder, a couple of yards broad, it had seemed, and some five feet high. I sprang to this, instinctively clutching it with my hands, just as those abominable green eyes, brighter than ever in the vortex, got to the other side, and hesitated there in doubt. Then began the most dreadful game I ever played, with a forfeit attaching to it not to be thought of. You will understand the cave was absolute sterile blackness to me, a dim world in which the only animated points were the twin green stars of the cruel ghoul, my unknown enemy. As those glided round to one side of the little rock, I as cautiously edged off to the other. Then back they would come, and back I went, now this way and now that—sometimes only an inch or two, and sometimes making a complete circle—with every nerve at fullest stretch, and every sense on tiptoe.

Why, all this time, it may be asked, did I not run for the entrance? But, in reply, the first frightened turn or two round the boulder had made chaos of my geography, and a start in any direction then might have dashed me into the side of the cave prone at the mercy of the horrible thing, whose hot coarse breath fanned me quicker and quicker, as the game grew warm and more exciting. So near was it that I could have stretched out my hands if I had dared and touched the monstrous being that I knew stood under those baleful planets that glistened in the black firmament, now here and now there.

How long exactly we dodged and shuffled and panted round that stone in the darkness cannot be said—it was certainly an hour or more; but it went on so long that even in my panting stress and excitement it grew dull after a time, so monotonous was it, and I found myself speculating on the weather while I danced *vis-à-vis* to my grim partner in that frightful pastime.

'Yes,' I said; 'a very bad storm indeed [once to the left], and nearly overhead now [right]. It is a good thing [twice round and back again] to be so [a sharp spin round and round—he nearly had me] conveniently under cover [twice to the left and then back by the opposite side]!'

Well, it could not have lasted for ever, and I was nearly spent. The boulder seemed hot and throbbing to my touch, and the floor was undulating gently, as it does when you land from a voyage; already fifty or sixty green eyes seemed circling in fiery orbits before me, when an extraordinary thing befell.

The thunder and lightning had been playing wildly overhead for some minutes, and the rain was coming down in torrents (even the noise of rushing hill-streams being quite audible in that clear resonant space), when, all of a sudden, there came a pause, and then the fall of a Titanian hammer on the dome of the hill, a rending, resounding crash that shook mother earth right down to her innermost ribs.

At the same instant, before we could catch our breath, the whole side of the cave opposite to us, some hundreds of paces of rugged wall, was deluged with a living, oscillating drapery of blue flame! That magnificent refulgence came down from above, a glowing cascade of light. It overran the rocks like a beautiful gauze, clinging lovingly to their sinuousness, and wrapping their roughness in a tender, palpitating mantle of its own winsome brightness. It ran its nimble fiery tendrils down the veins and crevices, and leapt in fierce playfulness from point to point, spinning its electric gossamers in that vacuum air like some enchanted tissue spread between the crags; it ran to the ledges and trickled off in ambient, sparkling cascades, it overflowed the sandy bottom in tender sheets of blue and mauve, feeling here and there with a million fingers for the way it sought, and then it found it and sank, as silent, as ghostly, as wonderful as it had come!

All this was but the work of an instant, but an instant of such concentrated brightness that I saw every detail, as I have told you, of that beautiful thing. More; in that second of glowing visibility, while the blue torch of the storm still shone in the chamber of the underground, I saw the stone by me, and beyond it, towering amazed and stupid, with his bulky strength outlined against the light, *a great cave bear in all his native ruggedness!* Better still, a bowshot on my right was the narrow approach of the entrance—and as the gleam sank

into the nether world, almost as quick as that gleam itself, with a heart of wonder and fear, and a foot like the foot of the night wind overhead, I was gone, and down the sandy floor, and through the gap, and into the outer world and midnight rain I plunged once more grateful and glad !

After such hairbreadth escapes there was little need to bemoan a wet coat and an evening under the lee of a heathery scar.

When the morning arrived clear and bright, as it often does after a storm, I felt in no mood to hang about the locality, but shook the rain from my fleece, and breakfasting on a little water from the brook, a staff in my hand, and my dear-bought wealth in my belt, set out for the unknown town, whose wet roofs shone like molten silver over the dark and dewy oak woods.

Five hours' tramping brought me there ; and truly the city astonished me greatly. Could this, indeed, be Britain, was the constant question on my tongue as I trod fair white streets, with innumerable others opening down from them on either hand, and noticed the evidence of such art and luxury as, hitherto, I had dreamed the exclusive prerogative of the capital of the older empires. Here were baths before which the Roman youth dawdled ; stately theatres with endless tiers of seats, from whose rostra degenerate sons of the soil, aping their masters in dress and speech, recited verse and dialogue trimmed to the latest orator in fashion by the Tiber. Mansions and palaces there were, outside which the sleek steeds of Consuls and Prætors champed gilded bits, while waiting to carry their owners to gay procession and ceremonial ; temples to Apollo, and shrines to Venus, dotted the ways ; forums, market-places, and the like in bewildering profusion.

And among all these evidences of the new age thronged a motley mixture of people. The thoughtful senator, coming from conclave with his toga and parchments, elbowed the callow British rustic in the rude raiment of his fathers. The wild blue-eyed Welsh Prince upon his rough mountain pony would scarce give right of way to the bronzed Roman mercenary from the Rhine : Umbrians and Franks, pale-haired Germans, and olive Tuscans laughed and chattered round the booths and fountains, while here and there legionaries stood on guard before great houses, or drank on the tressels of way-

side wine-shops. Now and again two or three soldiers came marching down the street with a gang of slaves, or a shock-headed chieftain from the wild north, fierce and sullen, on his way to Rome; and over all the varied throng the crows and kites circled in the blue sky, and the little sparrows perched themselves under the lintel and in the twisted column tops of their mistress's fane.

Half the day I stared, and then, having eaten some dry Etrurian grapes—the first for four hundred years—I went to the bath, and threw down a golden coin on the doorkeeper's marble slab.

'Why, my son,' said that juvenile official of some trivial fifty summers, 'where, in the name of Mercury, did you pick up this antique thing?' and he handled it curiously. But being in no mind to tell my tale just then, I put him off lightly, and passed on into the great bathing-place itself. Stage by stage 'balneum,' 'concamerata,' 'sudatio,' 'tepidarium,' 'frigidarium,' and all their other chambers I went through, until in the last a mighty slave, who had rubbed me with the strength of Hercules himself for half an hour, suddenly stopped, and, surveying me intently, exclaimed—

'Master! I have scrubbed many a strange thing from many a Roman body, but I will swallow all my own towels if I can get this extraordinary dirt from you, and he pointed to my bare and glowing chest. There, to my astonishment, revealed for the first time, was a great serpent-like mark of tattoo and wode circling my body in two wide zones! What it meant, how it came, was past my comprehension. Shrunk and shrivelled as I was with long abstemiousness, it seemed but like a gigantic smudge meandering down my person—a smudge, however, that with a little goodly living might stretch out into an elaborate design of some nature. Of course, I knew it was thus the British warriors were accustomed to adorn themselves; but who had been thus purposely decorating one that had never knowingly submitted to the operation, and to what end, was past my guessing.

'Never mind, Sir; don't despond,' said the slave, 'we will have another essay;' and, hitching me on to the rubbing couch, he knelt upon my stomach—these bath attendants were no more deferential than they are now—and exerted his magnificent strength, armed with the stiffest towel that ever came off a loom upon me, until I fairly thought that not only would

he have the tattoo off but also all the skin upon which it was engrossed. But it was to no purpose. He rose presently, and sulkily declared I had had my money's worth. 'The more he rubbed the bluer those accursed marks became.' This might well be, so I tossed him an extra coin, and, dressing hastily, covered my uninvited tattoo and went forth, fully determined to examine and read it—for those things were nearly always readable—more closely on a better and more private opportunity.

My next visit was to an Etruscan barber, who was shaving all and sundry under a green white awning, in a pleasant little piazza. To him I sat, and while he reaped my antique stubble, with many an exclamation of surprise and disgust at its toughness, my thoughts wandered away to the train of remembrances the bath slave's discovery had started. Again I thought of Blodwen and my little one; the seaport, with its golden beaches, and the quiet pools where the trout and salmon of an evening now and again shattered the crystal mirror of the surface in their sport as she and I sat upon some grassy bank and talked of village statecraft, of conquests over petty princelings, of crops and harvests, of love and war. Then, again, I thought of the Roman galleys, and Cæsar the penman autocrat; of the British camp, and, lastly, the great mischance which had, and yet had not, ended me.

'Ah! that was a bad slash, indeed, Sir, wasn't it?' queried the barber in my ear. 'May I ask in what war you took it?'

This very echo of my fancy came so startlingly true, I sprang to my feet and glowered upon him.

'O culler of herbs,' I said, 'O trespasser along the verge of mystery and medicine'—pointing to the dried things and electuaries with which, in common then with his kind, his booth was stocked—'where got you the power of reading minds?'

He shook his head vaguely, as though he did not understand, pointing to my neck, and replying he knew naught of what my thoughts might have been, but there, on my shoulder, was obvious evidence of the 'slash' he had alluded to.

I took the steel mirror he offered me, and, sure enough, I saw a monstrous white seam upon my tawny skin, healed and well, but very obvious after the bath and shaving.

'Why, Sir, I have dressed many a wound in my time, but that must have been about as bad a one as a man could get and live. How did it happen?'

‘Oh! I forget just now.’

‘Forget! Then you must have a marvellously bad memory. Why, a thing like that one might remember for four hundred years!’ said the sagacious little barber, bending his keen eyes on me in a way that was uncomfortable. In fact, he soon made me so ill at ease, being very reluctant that my secret should pass into possession of the town through his garrulous tongue, that I hastily paid him another of those antique green coins of mine, and passed on again down the great wide street.

Even he who lives two thousand years is still the serf of time, therefore I cannot describe all the strange things I saw in that beautiful foreign city set down on the native English land. But presently I tired, and, having become a Roman by exchanging my sheepskins for a fine scarlet toga, over a military cuirass of close-fitting steel, inlaid, after the fashion, with turquoise and gold enamel, sandals upon my feet, and a short sword at my side, I sought somewhere to sleep. First, I chanced upon a little house set back from the main thoroughfare, and over the door a withered bush, and, underneath it, on a label was written thus:—

Hic Habitat Felicitas.

‘Ah!’ I said, as I hammered at the portal with the brass knob of my weapon, ‘if, indeed, happiness is landlord here, then Phra the Phœnician is the man to be his tenant!’ But it would not do. Bacchus was too bibulous in that little abode, and Cupid too blind and indiscriminate. So it was left behind, and presently an open villa was reached where travellers might rest, and here I took a chamber on one side of the square marble courtyard, facing on a garden and fountain, and looking over a fair stretch of country.

No sooner had I eaten than, very curious to understand the nature of the bath slave’s discoveries upon my skin, I went to the disrobing-room of the private baths, and, discarding my gorgeous cuirass, and piling the gilded arms and silken wrappings with which a new-born vanity had swathed me, in a corner, I stood presently revealed in the common integument—the one immutable fashion of humanity. But rarely

before had the naked human body presented so much diversity as mine did. I was mottled and pictured, from my waist upwards, in the most bewildering manner, all in blue and purple tints, just as the slave had said. There were more pictures on me than there are on an astrologer's celestial globe; and as I turned hither and thither, before my great burnished metal mirror, a whole constellation of dim uncertain meaning rose and set upon my sphere! Now this was the more curious, because, as I have said, I had never in my life submitted me for a moment to the needle and unguents of those who in British times made a practice of the art of tattooing. I had seen young warriors under that painful process, and had stood by as they yelled in pain and reluctant patience while the most elaborate designs grew up, under the stolid draughtsman's hands, upon their quivering cuticle. But, to Blodwen's grief, who would have had me equal to any of her tribesmen in pattern as in place, I had ever scorned to be made a mosaic of superstition and flourishes. How, then, had this mighty maze, this pictorial web of blue myth and marvel, grown upon me during the night time of my sleep? On studying it closely it evolved itself into some order, and, though that night I made not very much of it, yet, as time went on and my body grew sleek and fair with good living, the design came up with constantly increasing vigour. Indeed, the narrative I translated from it was so absorbingly interesting to one in my melancholy circumstances that again and again I would hurry away to my closet and mirror to see what new detail, what subtle deduction of stroke or line, had come into view upon the scroll of the strangest diary that ever was written.

For, indeed, it was Blodwen's diary that circled me thus. It began in the small of my back with the year of my demise upon the Druid altar, and ever as she wrote it she must have rolled, with tender industry, her journal over and over, and so worked up from my back, in a splendid widening zone of token and hieroglyphic, for twenty changing seasons, until my chest was reached, and there the tale ran out in a thin and tremulous way, which it made my heart ache to understand.

There is no need to describe exactly the mode of deduction or how I came to comprehend without key or help the sense of the things before me, but you will understand my wits were sharp in the quest, and once the main scheme of the

idea was understood the rest came easily enough. The Princess, then, had taken a sheaf of corn as her symbol of the year. There were twenty of them upon me, and I judged their very varying sizes were intended to indicate good or bad harvest seasons in the territories of my careful chieftainness. Round these central signs she had grouped such other marks or outlines as served to hint the changing fortunes of the times. There were heads of oxen by each sheaf, varying in size according to the conditions of her herds, and fishes, big or small, to indicate what luck her salmon spearsmen had met with by the tuneful rapids of that ancient stream I knew so well.

Following these early designs was one that interested me greatly. The gentle chieftainness had, when I left her, expectation of another member to her tribe of her own providing. I had thought when we should have beaten the Romans to hurry back, and mayhap be in time to welcome this little one, but you know how I was prevented; and now here upon my skin, nigh over to my heart, was the sketch and outline of what seemed a small new-born maid, all be-swaddled in the British fashion and very lovingly limned. But what was more curious, was that its wraps were turned back from its baby shoulder, and there, to my astonished interpretation, in that silent maternal narrative was just the likeness, broad, lasting, indelible, of the frightful scar I wore myself! Long I pondered upon this. Had that red-haired slave-princess by some chance received me back—perhaps at Sempronius's compassionate hands—all hurt as I was, and had that portentous wound set its seal during anxious vigils upon the unborn babe? I could not guess—I could but wonder—and, wondering still, pass on to what came next.

Here was a graphic picture, no bigger than the palm of my hand, and not hard to unriddle. An eagle—no doubt the Roman one—engaged in fierce conflict with a beaver—that being Blodwen's favourite tribal sign, for there were many of those animals upon her river. Jove! how well 'twas done! There were the flying feathers, and the fur and the turmoil and the litter of the fight, and well I guessed the proud Roman bird—that day he brought my gallant tribe under the yoke—had lost many a stalwart quill, and damaged many a lordly pinion!

And, besides these main records of this fair and careful chancelloress of her state, there were others that moved me

none the less. Yes! by every gloomy spirit that dwelt in the misty shadows of the British oaks, it gave me a hot flush of gratified revenge to see —there by the symbol of the first year—a severed, bleeding head, still crowned with the Druid oak.

‘Oh! oh! Dhuwallon, my friend,’ I laughed, as I guessed the meaning of that bloody sign, ‘so they tripped you up at last, my crafty villain. By all the fiends of your abominable worship, I should like to have seen the stroke that made that grizzly trophy! Well, I can guess how it came about! Some slighted tribesman who saw me die peached upon you. Liar and traitor! I can see you stand in that old British hall, strong in your sanctity and cunning, making your wicked version of the fight and my undoing, and then methinks I see Blodwen leap to her feet, red and fiery with her anger. Accursed priest! how you must have sickened and shrunk from her fierce invective, the headlong damnation of her bitter accusation with all the ready evidence with which she supported it. Mayhap your cheeks were as pale that day, good friend, as your infernal vestments, and first you frowned and pointed to the signs and symbols of your office, and pleaded your high appointment before the assembled people against the answering of the charge. And then, when that would not do, you whined and cringed and called her kinswoman. Oh, but I can fancy it, and how my pretty Princess—there upon her father’s steps—scorned and cursed you before them all, and how some ready faithful hand struck you down, and how they tore your holy linen from you and dragged you screaming to the gateway, and there upon the threshold log struck your wicked head from your abominable shoulders! By the sacred mistletoe, I can read my Blodwen’s noble anger in every puncture of that revenge-commemorating outline!’

Here again, in the years that followed, it pleased me to see her little State grow strong and wide. At one time she typified the coming and destruction of two peak-sailed southern pirates, and then the building of a new stockade. She also made (perhaps to the worship of my manes!) a mighty circle. It began with a single upright on my side. The next year there were two. In the summer that followed she crossed them by a third great slab, and so on for ten years the tribesmen seemed to have toiled and laboured until they had such a temple of the sun as must have given my sweet heathen vast pleasure to look upon! She feared comments

and portents much, and punctured me with them most exactly ; she kept her memoranda of corn-pots and stores of hides upon me like the clever, frugal mother of her tribe she was ; and now and then she acquired territory or made new alliances—printing the special tokens of their heads in a circle with her own, until I was illustrated from waist to shoulder—a living lexicon of history.

Many were the details of that strange blue record I have not mentioned ; many are the strokes and flourishes that still expand and contract to the pulsations of my mighty life—undeciphered, unintelligible. But I have said enough to show you how ingenious it was—how sufficient in its variety, how disappointing in its pointless end. For, indeed, it stopped suddenly at the twentieth season, and the cause thereof I could guess only too well !

There, in that Roman hotel, I stayed reflecting. It was in this rest-house, from the idle gossip of the loungers and chatter of Roman politicians, that I came to comprehend the extent of my sleep in the cave, and as the truth dawned upon me, with a consciousness of the infinite vacuity of my world, I went into the garden, and there was no light in the sunshine, and no colour in the flowers, and no music in the fountain, and I threw my toga over my head and grieved for my loneliness, with the hum of the crowd outside in my ears, and mourned my fair Princess and all the ancient times so young in memory yet so old in fact.

Many days I sorrowed purposeless, and then my grief was purged by the good medicine of hardship and more adventure.

CHAPTER IV

ONE day I was sitting in gloomy abstraction in the sunny garden, when, looking up suddenly, a little maid stood by demurely and somewhat compassionately regarding me. Grateful just then for any sort of sympathy, I led her to talk, and presently found, as we thawed into good-fellowship, drawn together by some mutual attraction, that she was of British birth, and more—from my old village ! This was bond enough in my then state ; but think how moved and pleased I was when the comely little damsel laughingly said, ‘ Oh, yes ! it is

only you Roman lords who come and go more often than these flowers. We British seldom move; I and my people have lived yonder on the coast for ages!' So I let my lonely fancy fill in the blanks, and took the little maid for a kinswoman, and was right glad to know someone in the void world into which four hundred years' sleep had plunged me.

Strange, too, as you will take it, Numidea, who, now and then, to my mind was so like the ancestress she knew naught of: Numidea, the slave-girl who had stood before me by predestined chance in that hour of sorrow—it was she who directed my destiny and saved and ruined me in this chapter, just as her mother had done distant lifetimes before!

Between this fair little friend and my inexhaustible wallet I dried up my grief, and turned idle and reckless in that fascinating town of extravagance and debauchery. It was not a time to boast much of. The degenerate Romans had lost all their valour and most of their skill in the arts of government. All their hardihood and strength had sunk under the evil example of the debased capital by the Tiber; and, though some few unpopular ones among them railed against the effeminate luxury of the times, few heeded and none were warned. It shamed me to find that all these latter-day Romans thought of was silks and linens, front seats at the theatre, pageantry and spectacles, trinkets and scents. It roused my disdain to see the senators go by with gilded trains of servitors and the young centurions swagger down the streets in their mock armour—their toy, peace-time swords hanging in golden chains from their tender sides, and the wind warning one of their perfumed presence even before they came in sight. Such were not the men to win an empire, I thought, or to hold it!

As for the native British, a modicum of them had dropped the sagram for the toga, and had put on with it all its vices but few of its virtues. Such a witless, vain, incapable medley of arrogant fools never before was seen. To their countrymen they represented themselves as possessed of all the keys of statecraft and government, stirring them up as far as they durst to discontent and rebellion, while to their masters they stood acknowledged sycophants and apes of all the meannesses of a degenerate time. All this was the more the pity, for magnificent and wide were the evidences of what Rome had done for Britain during the long years she had held it. When

I slept, it was a chaotic wild, peopled by brave but scattered tribes; when I awoke, it was a fair, united realm—a beautiful territory of fertility, rich in corn and apple-yards, arteried by smooth white-paved roads and ruled by half a dozen wonderful capitals, with countless lesser cities, camps, and villas, wherein modern luxury, like a rampant, beautiful-flowered parasite, had overgrown, and choked and killed the sturdy stuff on which it grew.

Well, it is not my province to tell you of these things. The gilded fops who thronged the city ways I soon found were good enough for drinking bouts and revelry, and, by all Olympus! my sleep had made me thirsty and my sorrow full of a moroseness which had to be constantly batted down under the hatches of an artificial pleasure. All the old cautious, frugal, merchant spirit had gone, and the Roman Phra, in his gold and turquoise cincture, his belt full of his outlandish, never-failing coins, was soon the talk of the town, the life and soul of every reckless bout or folly, the terror of all lictors and honest, benighted citizens.

And, like many another good young man of like inclinations, his exit was as sudden as his entry! Well I remember that day, when my ivory tablets were crowded with suggestions for new idleness and vanities, and bore a dozen or two of merry engagements to plays and processions and carnivals, and all my new-found world looked like a summer sea of pleasure. Under these circumstances I went to my hoard one evening, as I had done very often of late, and was somewhat chagrined to discover only five pieces of money left. However, they were big plump ones, larger than any I had used before, and, as all *those* had been good gold, *these* still might mean a long spell of frolic for me—when they were nearly spent it would be time to turn serious.

I at once sat down to rub the general green tint of age from one, noticing it was more verdant than any of its comrades had been, and rubbed with increasing consternation and alarm moment after moment, until I had reduced it at last to an ancient British copper token, a base, abominable thing, not good enough to pitch to a starving beggar!

Another and another was snatched up and chafed, and, as I toiled on by my little flickering earthen lamp in my bachelor cell, every one of those traitor coins in an hour had shed its coating of time and turned out under my disgusted fingers

common plebeian metal. There they lay before me at length, a contemptible five pence wherewith to carry on a week's carousing. Five pence! Why, it was not enough to toss to a noisy beggar outside the circus—hardly enough for a drink of detestable British wine, let alone a draught of the good Italian vintages that I had lately come to look upon as my prerogative! Horrible! and as I gazed at them stolidly, that melancholy evening, the airy castle of my pleasure crumbled from base to battlement.

As the result of long cogitation—knowing the measure of my friends too well to think of borrowing of them—I finally decided to make a retreat, and leave my acquaintance my still unblemished reputation in pawn for the various little items owing by me. Taking a look round, to assure myself everyone in the house was asleep, I argued that to-night, though a pauper, I was still of good account, whereas with daylight I should be a discredited beggar; so that it was, in fact, a meritorious action to leave my host an old pair of sandals in lieu of a month's expenses, and drop through the little window into the garden, on the way to the open world once more. Necessity is ever a sophist.

It is needless to say the grey dawn was not particularly cheerful as I sprang into the city fosse and struck out for the woods beyond. The fortune which makes a man one day a gentleman of means and the next a mendicant is more pleasant to hear of when it has befallen one's friends than to feel at first-hand. It was only the fear of the detestable city jail and the abominable provender there, added to the ridicule of my friends, perhaps, that sent me, scrippless, thus afield. Grey as the prospect ahead might be, behind it was black: so I plodded on, with my spear for a staff and Melancholy for a companion.

The leafy shades reached in an hour or so invited rest, and in their seclusion an idle spell was spent watching, through the green frame of branches, the fair, careless city below wake to new luxurious life; watching the blue smoke rise from the temple courtyards, and the pigeons circling up into the sky, and the glitter of the sun on the legionaries' arms as they wheeled and formed and reformed in the open ground beyond the Prefect's house. Oh, yes! I knew it all! And how pleasantly the water spluttered in the marble baths after those dusty exercises; and how heavy the lightest armour was after

such nights as I and those jolly ones down there were accustomed to spend! As I, breakfastless, lent upon the top of my staff, I recalled the good red wine from my host's coolest cellars and the hot bread from slaves' ovens in the street, and how pleasant it was to lie in silk and sandals, and drink and laugh in the shade and stare after the comely British maids, and lay out in those idle sunny hours the fabrics of fun and mirth.

On again, and by midday a valley opened before me, and at the head, a mile or so from the river, was a very stately white villa. Thither, out of curiosity, my steps were turned, and I descended upon that lordly abode by coppices, ferny brakes, and pastures, until one brambly field alone separated us. An ordinary being, whom the Fates had not set themselves to bandy for ever in their immortal hands, would have gone round this enclosure, and so taken the uneventful pathway, but not so I: I must needs cross the brambles, and thus bring down fresh ventures on my head. In the midst of the enclosure was an oak, and under the oak five or six white cows, with a massive bull of the fierce old British breed. This animal resented my trespass, and, shaking his head angrily as I advanced, he came after me at a trot when half way across. Now, a good soldier knows when to run no less than when to stand, and so my best foot was put forth in the direction of the house, and I presently slipped through a hole in the fence directly into the trim gay garden of the villa itself.

So hasty was my entry that I nearly ran into a stately procession approaching down one of the well-kept terraces intersecting the grounds: a seneschal and a butler, a gorgeously arrayed mercenary or two, men and damsels in waiting, all this lordly array attending a litter borne by two negro slaves, whereon, with a languidness like that of convalescence, belied, however, by the bloom of excellent health and the tokens of robust grace in the every limb, reclined a handsome Roman lady. There was hardly time to take all this in at a glance, when the gorgeous attendants set up a shout of consternation and alarm, and, glancing over my shoulder to see the cause, there was that resentful bull bursting the hedge a scanty twenty paces away, with vindictive purpose in his widespread nostrils and angry eyes.

Down went the seneschal's staff of office, down went the base mercenaries' gilded shields; the butler threw the dish of grapes he was carrying for his lady's refreshment into the

bushes; the waiting-maids dropped their fans and, shrieking, joined the general rout! Worse than all, those base villains the littermen slipped their leather straps and in the general panic dropped the litter, and left to her fate that mistress, who, with her sandalled feet wrapped in silks and spangled linens, struggled in vain to rise. There was no time for fear. I turned, and as the bull came down upon us two in a snorting avalanche of white hide and sinew I gave him the spear, driving it home with all my strength just in front of the ample shoulder as he lowered his head. The strong seven-foot haft of ash, as thick as a man's wrist, bent between us like a green hazel wand, and then burst into splinters right up to my grasp. The next moment I was hurled backwards, crashing into the flowers and trim parterres as though it were by the fist of Jove himself I had been struck. Hardly touching the ground, I was up again, my short sword drawn and ready as ever—though the gay world swam before me—to kill or to be killed.

It was not necessary. There had been few truer or more forceful spears than mine in the old times; and there lay the great white monster on his side in a crimson pool of blood, essaying in vain to lift his head, and dying in mighty tremors all among the pretty things the servants had thrown down. The gush of red blood from his chest was wetting even the silken fringes of the comely dame's skirts and wrappings, while she, now at last on her feet, frowned down on him, with angry triumph rather than fear in her countenance.

Though there was hardly a change of colour on her face or a tremor in the voice with which she thanked me, yet I somehow felt her ladyship was in a fine passion behind that disdainful mask. But whether it were so or not, she was civil enough to me, personally evincing a condescending interest in a trifling wound that was staining my bare right arm with crimson, and sending her 'good youth' away in a minute or two to the house to get it bound. As I turned to go the stately lady gathered up tunic folds and skirt in her white fist and moved down upon the group of trembling servants who were gathering their wits together slowly under the nervous encouragement of the seneschal. What she said to them I know not, but, if ever the countenances of men truly reflected their sensations, her brief fierce whispers must have been exceedingly unpleasant to listen to.

The damsel who bound the scratch upon my shoulder told

me something of this beautiful and wealthy dame. But, in truth, when she called her Lady Electra I needed to hear little more. It was a name that had circulated freely in the city yonder, and especially when wine was sparkling best and tongues at lightest! I knew, without asking, the lady was niece to an Emperor, and was reputed as haughty and cruel as though she had been one of the worst herself; I knew her lawful spouse was away, like most Romans, from his duty just then, and she stood in his place to tyrannise over the British peasants and sweep the taxes into his insatiate coffers. I knew, too, why Rome was forbidden for a time to the vivacious lady, as well as some stories, best untold, of how she enlivened the tedium of her exile in these 'savage' places.

In fact, I knew I had fallen into the gilded hold of a magnificent outlaw, one of the worst productions of a debased and sinking State, and, being wayward by predestination, I determined to play with the she-wolf in her own den.

No fancy of mine is so rash but that Fate will countersign it. When Electra sent for me presently in the great hall, where the fountains played into basins of rosy marble, it was to inform me that the destruction of the bull, and my bearing thereat, had caught her fancy, and I was to 'consider myself for the present in her private service, and attached to the bodyguard.' This decision was announced with an easy imperialness which seemed to ignore all suggestion of opposition—a suavity such as Juno might use in directing the most timorous of servitors—so, as my wishes ran in unison, I bowed my thanks, and kissed the fringe of my Ladyship's cloak, and thought, as she lay there before me on her silken couch in the tessellated hall of her stately home, that I had never before seen so beautiful or dangerous-looking a creature.

Nor had I long to wait for a sight of the Vice-Prefect's talons! While she asked me of my history, the which I made up as I told it (and, having once thus baulked the truth, never afterwards told her the real facts), a messenger came, and, standing at a respectful distance, saluted his mistress.

'Ah!' she said, with a pretty look of interest in her face, and rising on her elbow, 'are they dead?'

'One is, Madam,' the man responded: 'one of your bearers fled, but the other we secured. We took him into the field and tied him, as your ladyship directed, to the horns of the strongest white cow. She dragged him here and there,

and gored him for full ten minutes before he died—and now all that remains of him,' with a wave of the hand towards the vestibule, 'most respectfully awaits your Ladyship's inspection in the porch!'—and the messenger bowed low.

'It is well. Fling the dog into a ditch! And, my friend, let my brave henchmen know if they do not lay hands on the other villain before sunset to-morrow, I shall come to them for a substitute.'

The successful termination of this episode seemed to relieve my new mistress.

'Ah! my excellent soldier,' she said with a pretty sigh, 'you cannot conceive what a vexation my servants are to me, or how rebellious and unruly! Would there were but a man here, such as yourself for instance, to protect and soften a lonely matron's exile.'

This was very flattering to my vanity, more especially as it was accompanied by a gracious look, with more of condescension in it than I fancied usually fell to the lot of those who met her handsome eyes. In such circumstances, under a lordly roof and careless again of to-morrow, a new spell of experience was commenced in the Roman villa, and I learnt much of the ways of corrupt Roman government and a luxurious society there which might amuse you were it not all too long to set down. For a time, when her Ladyship gave, as was her frequent pleasure, gorgeous dinners, and all the statesmen and soldiers of the neighbouring towns came in to sup with her, I pleaded one thing and another in excuse for absence from the places where I must have met many too well known before. But Electra, as the time went on, was proud of her handsome, stalwart Centurion, and advanced me quicker than my modest ambition could demand, clothed me in the gorgeous livery of her household troops, raised me to the chief command, and finally, one evening, sat me at her side on her own silken couch before all the lords and senators, and, deriding their surprise and covert sarcasm, proclaimed me first favourite there with Royal effrontery.

Did I but say Electra was proud of her new find? Much better had it been simply so; but she was not accustomed to moderation in any matters, and perhaps my cold indifference to her overwhelming attractions, when all else fawned for an indulgent look, excited her fiery thirst of dominion. Be this as it may, no very long time after my arrival it was palpable

her manner was changing; and as the days went by, and she would have me sit on the tiger-skin at her knee, a second Antony to this British Cleopatra, telling wonderful tales of war and woodcraft, I presently found the unmistakable light of awakening love shining through her Ladyship's half-shut lids. Many and many a time before and since has that beacon been lit for me in eyes of every complexion—it makes me sad to think how well I know that gentle gleam—but never in all my life did I experience anything like the concentrated fire that burnt silently but more strongly day by day in those black Roman eyes!

I would not be warned. More; I took a lawless delight in covertly piling on material and leading that reckless dame, who had used and spurned a score of gallant soldiers or great senators according to her idle fancy, to pour out her over-ample affection on me, the penniless adventurer. And, like one who fans a spark among combustible material, the blaze that resulted was near my undoing.

The more dense I was to her increasing love, the more she suffered. Truly, it was pitiful to see her, who was so little accustomed to know any other will, thwarted by so fine an agency—to see her imperialness strain and fret at the silken meshes of love, and fume to have me know and answer to her meaning yet fear to tell it, and at times be timorous to speak and at others start up palely wrathful that she could not order in this case as elsewhere. Indeed, my lady was in a bad way and now she would be fierce and sullen, and anon gracious and melancholy. In the latter mood she said one day as I sat by her *bisellium*—

'I am ill and pale, my Centurion: I wonder you have not noticed it.'

'Perhaps, Madam,' I said, with the distant respect that galled her so—'perhaps your Ladyship's supper last night was over-large and late—and those lampreys, I warned you against them that third time.'

'Gross! Material!' exclaimed Electra, frowning blackly. 'Guess again—a finer malady—a subtler pain.'

'Then, maybe the valley air affects my lady's liver, or rheumatism, perhaps, exacts a penalty for some twilight rambles.'

Such banter as this, and more, was all the harder to bear since she could not revenge it. I was sorry for the tyrantess,

for she was wonderfully attractive thus pensive-wise, and wofully in earnest as she turned away to the painted walls and sighed to herself.

‘Fie! to be thus withstood by a fameless mercenary. Why thus must I, unaccustomed, sue this one—the least worthy of them all—and lavish on his dull plebeian ears the sighs that many another would give a province or two to hear?—I, who have slighted the homage of silk and scarlet, and Imperial purple even! Lucullus was not half so dull—or Palladius, or Decius; and that last of many others, my witty Publius Torquatus, would have diagnosed my disease and prescribed for it all in one whisper.’

Poor lady! It was not within me—though she did not know it—to hold out for long against the sunshine and storm of her impetuous nature. Neither her abominable cruelties nor her reckless rapacity could suffice to dim her attractions—many a time since, when that comely personage has been as clearly wiped from the page of life, as utterly obliterated from the earth as the very mound of her final resting-place, have I regretted that she was not born to better days, and then, perchance, her fine material might have been run into a nobler mould.

She was jealous, too; and it came about in this way. Very soon after I had taken service with her, whom should I espy, one morning, feeding the golden pheasants outside the verandah but my little friend Numidea. Often I had thought of that maid, and determined to discover that ‘big house’ where she had told me she was bondwoman, and the ‘great lady’ who sent her tripping long journeys into the town for the powders and silk stuffs none could better choose. And now, here she was on my path again, a roof-mate by strange chance, with her graceful tender figure and her dainty ways, and that chronic friendly smile upon her mouth that brought such strange fancies to my mind every time I looked upon it. Of course, I befriended the maid as though she were my own little one, not so many times removed, and equally, of course, Lady Electra noticed and misread our friendship. Poor Numidea! she had a hard life before I came, and a harder, perhaps, afterwards. You compassionate moderns will wonder when I tell you that Numidea has shown me her white silk shoulders laced with the red scars of old floggings laid on by Electra herself, and the blood-spotted dimples here and there

where that imperious dame had thrust, for some trivial offence, a golden bodkin from her hair deep into that innocent flesh. No one knew better than my noble mistress how to give acute torture to a slave without depreciating the market price of her property.

But when I became of more weight—when, in brief, my comely tigress was too fast bound to be dangerous—I spoke up, and Electra grew to be jealous and to hate the small Christian slave-girl with all the unruly strength that marked her other passions.

Thus, one day having discovered Numidea weeping over a new-made wound, I sought out the offender, and as she sauntered up and down her tessellated pavements I shook my fist at her Queenship, and said—

‘By the bright flame of Vesta, Lady Electra, and by every deity, old or new, in the endless capacity of the skies, if you get out your abominable flail for that girl again or draw but once upon her one of your accursed bodkins, I will—marry her among the smoking ruins of this white sty of yours!’

When I spoke to her thus under the lash of my anger, she would uprising to the topmost reach of her height, and thence frowning down upon me, her shapely head tossed back, and her draperies falling from her crossed arms and ample shoulders to the marble floor, she would regard me with an imperious stare that might have withered an ordinary mortal. So beautiful and statuesque was her Ladyship on these occasions, towering there in her own white hall like an image of an offended Juno in the first flush of her queenly wrath, that even I would involuntarily step back a pace. But I did not cower or drop my eyes, and, when we had glowered at each other so for a minute or two, the Royal instinct within her was no match for traitor Love. Slowly then the woman would come welling into her proud face; and the glow of anger gave way upon her cheeks; her arms dropped by her sides; she shrank to mortal proportions, and lastly sank on the ebony and ivory couch in a wild gust of weeping, wofully asking to know, as I turned upon my heels, why the slave’s trivial scars were more to me than the mistress’s tears.

My Vice-Prefect was avaricious too. There was, stored in the spacious hollows below her villa, I know not how much bronze and gold squeezed from those reluctant British hinds

whose old-world huts clustered together in the oak clumps dotting the fertile vales as far as the eye could see from our roof-ledges on every hand. Had all the offices of the Imperial Government been kept as she kept her duties of tax-collecting, the great Empire would have been further by many a long year from its ruin. And the closer Electra made her accounts, the more deadly became her exactions, the more angry and rebellious grew the natives round us.

Already they had heard whispers of how hard barbarians were pressing upon Rome, day by day they saw Britain depleted of the stalwart legionaries who had occupied the land four hundred years, and as phalanx after phalanx went south through Gaul to protect the mother city on the Tiber their demagogues secretly stirred the people up to ambition and discontent.

Nor can it be denied the villains had something to grumble for. Society was dissolute and debased, while the country was full of those who made the good Roman name a byword. The British peasant had to toil and sweat that a hundred tyrants, the rank production of social decay, might squander and parade in the luxury and finery his labour purchased. Added to this, the pressing needs of the Emperor himself demanded the services of those who had taken upon themselves for centuries the protection of the country. As they retired, Northern rovers, at first fitfully, but afterwards with increasing rigour, came down upon the unguarded coasts, and sailing up the estuaries harried the rich English vales on either side, and rioted amid the accumulated splendour and plenty of the luckless land to their hearts' content.

Saddled thus with the weight of luxurious conquerors who had lost nearly every art but that of extortion, miserable at home, and devastated from abroad, who can wonder that the British longed to throw off the Roman yoke and breathe the fresher air of a wholesome life again? And as the shadow of the Imperial wings was withdrawn from them their hopes ripened; they thought they were strong and ruleworthy. Fatal mistake! I saw it bud, and I saw it bitterly fruitful!

If you turn back the pages of history you will find these hinds did indeed make a stand for a moment, and, when Honorius had withdrawn his last legionaries and given the islanders their liberty, for a few brief years there was a shepherd government here—the British ruled again in Britain.

Then came the next strong tide of Northern invasion, and another conquest.

I well remember how, in the throes of the first great change that heralded a new era in Britain, the herdsmen and serfs were crushed between waning Roman terrors, such as Electra wielded, and the growing horrors of the Northmen.

Of these latter I saw something. On one occasion when the storm was brewing I was away down in the coast provinces hunting wolves, and thus by chance fell in with a 'sea-king's' foray and a British reprisal. On that occasion the spoilers were spoilt, and we taught the Northern ravishers a lesson which, had they been more united so that such a blow might have been better felt by the whole, would have damped their ardour for a long time. As it was, to rout and destroy their scattered parties was but like mopping up the advancing tide of those salt waves that brought them on us.

Those down there by the Kentish shore had been unmolested for some years, they had lived at their leisure, had got their harvests in, had rebuilt their villages out in the open, and set up forges and hammered spearheads and bosses, rings for the women, of silver and brass, and chains and furniture for their horses, of gold; shearing their flocks, and living as though such things as Norsemen were not—when one day the infliction came upon them again.

It was a gusty morning in early summer—I remember it well—and most of the men were from the villages hunting, when away towards the coast went up to the brightening sky a thin curl of smoke followed by another and another. The sight was understood only too well. Line after line crept up in the silence of the morning over the green tree-tops and against the grey of the sea, while groups of black figures (flying villagers we knew them to be) went now and then over the sky-line of the wolds into the security of the valleys to right and left. As the wail went up from the huts where I rested, a mounted chief, his toes in the iron rings of his stirrups and his wolf-skins flying from his bare shoulders, came pounding through the woods with the bad news the raiders were close behind.

Rapid packing was a great feminine accomplishment in those days, and, while the women swept their children and more portable valuables into their cloths and disappeared into the forest, we sent the quickest-footed youths that were with

us to call back the hunters, and made our first stand there round the huts and mounds of the old village of Caen Edron.

And we kept its thatch and chattels inviolate, for, by this time, the countryside was all in arms, and, as the sea was far behind them, the despoilers but showed themselves on the fringe of the open, exchanged a javelin or two, and turned.

Hot on their track that morning of vengeance we went after them; over the scrubby open ground and down through the tangles of oak and hazel. We pressed them back past the charred and smoking remnants of the villages they had burnt, back by the streams that still ran streaky in quiet places with blood, back down the red path of ruin and savagery they had trodden, back by the cruel finger-posts of dead women, back by the halting-places of the ravishers—ever drawing new recruits and courage till we outnumbered them by six to one—and thus we trampled that day on the heels of those laden pirates from the valley-head down to the shore.

It was a time of vengeance, and our women and children crowded singing and screaming after us to kill and torture the wounded. Every now and then those surly spoilers turned, and we fled before them as the dogs fly from a big boar who goes to bay; but each time we came on again, and their standing-places by the coverts and under the lichened rocks were littered with dead, and all bestrewn amid the ferns in the pink morning light was the glittering spoil they disgorged. Truly that was an hour of victory, and the Britons were drunk with success. They followed like starving wolves after a herd of deer, leaping from rock to rock, crowding every point of vantage, and running and yelling through the under-wood until surely the Northmen must have thought the place in possession of a legion of devils.

But all this noise was as nothing to the frightful yell of savage joy which went up from us when we saw the raiders draw together on the shingle ridge of the beach, and knew instinctively by their pale, tideward faces and hesitation that they were trapped—the sea was out, and their ships were high and dry!

Somehow, I scarcely know how it was when those men turned grimly and prepared to make their last stand under their ships, a strange silence fell upon both bands, and for a minute or two the long, wild rank of our warriors halted at the bottom of the slope, every man silent and dumb by a

strange accord, while opposite, against the sky-line, were the mighty Norsemen clustered together, and looking down with fierce sullen brows equally silent and expectant, while the sun glinted on their rustling arms and tall peaked casques.

We stood thus a minute or two, and I heard the thumpings of my own heart, like an echo of the low wash of the far-away sea—a plover piping overhead, and a raven croaking on the distant hills, but not another sound until—suddenly some British women who had come red-handed to a mound behind broke out into a wild war-song. Then the spell was loosed, and we were again at them, sweeping the sea-kings from the ridge into the tangle of long grass and sand and stunted bushes that led to the shore, and there, separated, but dying stubbornly, powerless against our numbers, we pulled them down, and killed them one by one, lopping their armour from them and stripping their cloths, till the pleasant lichened alleys of the seashore wood and the green footways of the moss were stamped full of crimson puddles and littered with the naked bodies of those tawny giants.

The last man to fall was a chief. Twice I had seen him hard pressed, and had lifted my javelin to slay him, but a touch of silly compunction had each time held my hand, and now he stood with his back to his ship like some fierce beautiful thing of the sea. His plated brass and steel cuirass was hacked and dented, his white linen hung in shreds about him; his arms were bare, and blood ran down them, while his long fair hair lifted to the salt wind that was coming in freshly with the tide, and the sun shone on his cold blue eyes, and his polished harness, and his tall and comely proportions standing out there against the dark side of his high-sterned vessel.

But what cared the Britons for flaxen locks or the goodliness of a young Thor? He had in his hands a broken spear, his own sword being snapped in two; and with this weapon he lay about fiercely every now and then as the men edged in upon him. Luckless Viking! there is no retreat or rescue! He was bleeding heavily, and even as I watched his chin sank upon his chest. At once the Britons ran in upon him; but the life flared up again, and the gallant robber crushed in a pair of heads with his stave and sent the others flying back, still glaring upon the wide circle of his enemies with death and defiance struggling for mastery in his eyes in a way wonderful to behold. Again and again the yellow head of the

young Thor nodded and sank, and again and again he started up and scowled upon them, as each savage cry of joy, to see him thus bleeding to death, fell upon his ears. Presently he wavered for a moment and leaned his shoulder against the black side of his ship, and his lids dropped wearily; at once the Britons rushed, and, when I turned my face there again, they were hacking and stripping the armour from a mutilated but still quivering corpse!

A few such episodes as this repulse of the Northmen, magnified and circulated with all the lying exaggeration that a coward race ever wraps about his feats of arms, made the Britons bold, and their boldness brings me to the end of my chapter.

Many a pleasant week and month did I live and enjoy all the best things life has to give: the master of my Roman mistress; the foremost spearman where the boar went to bay among the rocks on the hill-side; the jolliest fellow that was ever invited to a lordly banquet; the penniless adventurer whose fortune every one envied—and then fate put me by again, and wiped my tablets clean for another frolic epoch.

It came about this way. The British grew more and more unruly as time went on, and legion after legion left us. At length, when the last of the Romans were down to the coast, about to embark, Electra made up her mind to go too—and with all her hoards. But in this latter particular the new authorities in the neighbouring town could not concur, and they sent two brand-new civilian senators to expostulate and detain her, the last representative of the old rule. Electra had those gentlemen stripped in the vestibule, and flogged within an ace of their lives, and then them sent home, bound, in a mean country-cart.

All that afternoon we were busy sewing up the gold and bronze in bags, and by dusk a long train of mules set out for the coast, in charge of a score of our mercenaries, who, having served a long apprenticeship to cruelty and extortion, had more to fear from the natives than even we. Nor was it too soon. As the last of the convoy went into the evening darkness, Electra and I ascended the flat, wide roof of her home, and there we saw, westwards, under the stormy red of the setting sun, the flashing of arms and the dust-wreaths against the glow which hung above the bands of people moving out and bearing down on us in a mood one well could guess.

Her Ladyship, having safely packed, was disdainful and angry. Her fine lips curled as she watched the grey column of citizens swarming out to the assault; but when her gaze wandered over the fair valleys she had ruled and bled so long, she was, perhaps, a little regretful and softened.

‘My good and stalwart Captain,’ she said, coming near to me, ‘yonder sun, I fear, will never rise again on a Roman Briton! We must obey the Fates. You know what I would do, had I the power, to yonder scum; but, since we must desert this house to them (as I see too clearly we must), how can we best ensure the safety of the treasure?’

We arranged there and then, with small time for parley, that I should stay with a handful of her mercenaries and make a stand about the villa, while she, with the last of her servants, should go on and hurry up by every means in her power the slow caravan of her wealth. In truth, my mistress was as brave as she was overbearing, and, but for those endless shining bags of gold, I do believe she would have stayed and fought the place with me.

As it was, she reluctantly consented to the plan, and bid me adieu (which I returned but coldly), and came back again for another kiss, and said another good-bye, and hung about me, and enjoined caution, and held my hands, and looked first into my eyes and then back into the darkness where the laden mules were, as much in love as a rustic maid, as anxious as a usurer, and torn and distracted between these contending feelings.

At last she and all the women were gone, whereon with a lighter mind we set ourselves down to cover their retreat. Here must it be confessed that, for myself, I was ill at ease: treachery lurked within me. I had grown somewhat weary of her Ladyship, nor had longer a special wish to be dragged in her golden chains, the restless spirit chance had bred within moved, and I had determined to see my enamoured Vice-Prefect safe to her ships, and then—if I could—if I dared—break with her! I well knew the wild tornado of indignation and love this would call up, and hence had not confessed my intentions earlier, but had been cold and distant. The dame, you will see presently, had been sharper in guessing than I supposed.

We made such preparation as we could with the small time at our disposal, barricading the white façade of the villa and closing all approaches. Then we pulled the winter stacks

to pieces in the yard, making two great mounds of faggots in front of the porch, pouring oil upon each, and stationing a man to fire them, by way of torches, at a given signal. My hope was that, as the wide Roman way ran just below the villa, the avengers of the Ambassadors would not think of passing on until they had demolished the house and us.

Of the loyalty of the few men with me I had little fear. They were brave and stubborn, all their pay was on Electra's mules, and the British hated them without compunction. There were in our little company that black evening seven wild Welshmen, under a shaggy-haired, blue-eyed princeling: Gwallon of the Bow, he called himself—fifteen swarthy Iberians, all teeth and scimitar—a handful of Belgic mercenaries, with great double-headed axes—but never a Roman among them all in this last stand of Roman power in Britain!

Was *I* a Roman, I wondered, as I stood on the terrace waiting the onset of the liberated slaves? What was I? Who was I? How came it that he who was first in repelling the stalwart Roman adventurers of endless years before was the last to lift a sword in their defence? And, more personally, was this night to be, as it greatly seemed, the last of all my wild adventures; or had fate infinite others in store for her hantling?

You will guess how I wondered and speculated as my golden Roman armour clanked to my gloomy stride in Electra's empty corridors, and the wet fleecy clouds drifted fitfully across the face of a broad full moon, and a thousand things of love or sorrow crowded on my busy mind.

We had not long to wait, however. In an hour the mob came scuffling round the bend, shouting disorderly, with innumerable torches borne aloft, and they set up a yell when they caught sight of our shining white walls silently agleam in the moonlight.

There could be no parley with such a leaderless rush, and we attempted none. Without a thought of discipline they stormed the pastures and swarmed into the garden, a motley, angry crowd, armed with scythes and hooks and axes, and apparently all the town pressing on behind.

Well, we fired our faggots, and they gleamed up fiercely to welcome the scullion levies to their doom. Never did you see such a ruddy, wild scene—such a motley parody of noble war! The bright flames leapt into the tranquil sky in volcanoes of

spark and hissing tongues, the British rushed at us between the fires like imps of darkness, and we met them face to face and slew them like the dogs they were. In a few minutes we were hemmed in the verandah, under whose columns we had some shelter, and then my brave Welshmen showed me how they could pull their long bows, which indeed they did in right good earnest, until all the trim terraces were littered with writhing howling foemen.

But again they drove us back, this time into the house, and there we soon had a better light to fight by, for the sparks had caught the roof, and soon everything far and near was ablaze. Every man with me that night fought like a patrician, and Electra's polished floors were slippery with blood; her pretty walls, with their endless painted garlands of oak and myrtle, their cooing doves and tender Cupids, were horribly besmeared and smudged; and her marble pillars were chipped by flying javelins and gashed by random axe-strokes.

Ten times we hurled ourselves upon the invaders and drove them staggering backwards over the slippery pavements into the passages--sixteen men had fallen to my own arm alone, and we crammed their bodies into the doorways for barricade. But it would not do. The sheer weight of those without made the men within brave against their will. Nothing availed the stinging shafts of my Welshmen, the Iberian scimitars played hopelessly (like summer lightning in the glare) upon a solid wall of humanity, and the German axes could make no path-way through that impenetrable civilian tangle.

Overhead and among us the smoke curled and eddied, and the flames behind it made it like a hot noonday in our fighting-place. And in the wreaths of that pungent vapour, circling thick and yellow in the great open-roofed hall of the noble Roman villa, her Ladyship's statues of faun and satyr still fluted and grinned imbecilely as though they liked the turmoil. Niobe wept for new griefs as the marble little ones at her feet were calcined before her eyes, and the Gorgon head wore a hundred frightful snakes of flame; the pale, proud Pallas Athene of the Greeks looked disdainfully on the dying barbarians at her feet, and Pan, himself in bronze, leered on us through the reek until his lower limbs grew white hot—and gave way, and down he came—whereon a mighty Briton heaved him up by his head, and with this hissing, glowing flail carried destruction and confusion among us.

It was so hot in that flaming marble battle-place that foreigner and Briton broke off fighting now and then to kneel together for a moment at the red fountain basins where the jets still played (for the fugitives had forgotten to turn them off), and quenched their thirst in hurried gasps, ere flying again at each other's throats, and so wild the confusion and uproar, and so dense the smoke and flame, so red and slippery were the pavements, and so thick the dead and dying, that hardly one could tell which were friends and which foes.

For an hour we kept them at bay, and then, when my arms ached with killing, all on a sudden the face of a man unknown to me, whom I never had seen before, shone in the gleam at my shoulder.

'Phra, the Phœnician,' he said, calling me by an appellation no living man then knew, 'I am bidden to get you hence. Come to the inner doorway—quick!'

I hardly knew what he meant, but there was that about him which I could not but obey, so I turned and followed his retreating figure.

I ran with him across the courtyard, under the white marble pillars all aglow, through the silent banquet-hall that had echoed so often to the haughty laughter of my mistress, and then when we reached the cool, damp outer air—like a wreath of mist in November, like an eddy among the dead leaves—my guide vanished and left me!

Angry and surprised, but with no time for wonder, I turned back.

Even as I did so there was a mighty crack, a groaning of a thousand timbers, and there before my very face, with a resounding roar, Electra's lordly mansion, and all the wings, and buttresses, and basements, the rooms, and colonnades, and corridors of that splendid home of luxury and power, lurched forward, and heaved, and collapsed in one mighty red ruin that tintured the sky from east to west, and buried alike in one vast, glowing hecatomb besiegers and besieged!

It had fallen, the last stronghold of Roman authority, and there was nothing more to defend! I turned, and took me to the quiet forest pathways, every nook and bend of which I knew. As I ran, the sweet, moist air of the evening was like an elixir to my heated frame; now into the black shadows I plunged, and anon brushing the silver moonlight dew from

bramble and bracken, while a thousand fancies of our stubborn fight danced around me.

In a little time the road went down to a river that sparkled in flood under the moonbeams. Here the laden mules had crossed into comparative safety, and now I had to follow them with a single guide-rope to feel my way alone across the dangerous ford. I struggled through the swollen stream safely, though it rose high above my waist, and then who should loom out of the dark on the far side but Electra, standing alone and expectant at the brink.

Faithful, stately matron! She was so glad to see me again, I was really sorry I did not love her more. I told her something of the fight, and she a little of the retreat. Some time before the long train of mules and slaves had gone on up the steep sloping bank, and into the coppice beyond, and now I and the Roman dame lingered a minute or so by the brink of the turgid stream to see the last flickers of her burning home. We were on the point of turning; indeed, Lady Electra seemed anxious to be gone, when, stepping out of the dark pathway into a patch of moonlight on the farther shore, a little silver casket in her duteous hands, and those dainty skirts in which she took so much pride muddied and soiled, appeared the poor little slave Numidea.

She tripped fearfully forth from the shadows and down to the brink, where the water was swirling against the stones in an ivory and silver inlay; and when she saw (not perceiving us in the shadows) that all the people had gone on and she was deserted to the tender mercies of the foemen behind, she dropped her burden, and threw up her white, clasped hands in the moonlight, and wailed upon us in a way that made my steel cuirass too small for my swelling heart.

Surely such a pitiful sight ought to have moved any one, yet Electra only cursed those nimble feet under her breath, and from this, though I may do her heavy injustice, I have since feared she had planned the desertion and sent the maid back to be killed or taken on some false errand which for her jealous purpose was too quickly executed.

That noble Roman lady pulled me by the hand, and would have had me leave the girl to her fate, scolding and entreating; and when I angrily shook myself free, turning her wild, untutored passions into the channels of love, told me she had guessed my project of leaving her 'for Numidea,' and clung to

me, and endeared me, and promised me 'the tallest porch on Palatina' (as I threw off my buckler and broadsword to be lighter in the stream) and 'the whitest arms for welcome there that ever a Roman matron spread' (as I pitched my gilded helmet into the bushes and strode down to the torrent), if I would but turn my back once for all upon my little kinswoman.

Three times the white arms of that magnificent wanton closed round me, and three times I wrenched them apart and hurled her back, three times she came anew to the struggle, squandering her wild, queenly love upon me, while, under the white light overhead, the tears shone in her wonderful upturned eyes like very diamonds; three times she invoked every deity in the hierarchy of the southern skies to witness her perjured love, and cursed, for my sake, all those absent youths who had fallen before her. Three times she knelt there on the black and white turf, and wrung her fair hands and shook out her long thick hair, and came imploring and begging down to the very lapping of the water. And there I stood—for I too was a Southern, and could be hot and fierce—and spoke such words as she had never heard before—abused and scoffed and derided her: laughed at her sorrow and mocked her grief, and then turned and plunged into the torrent.

The ford was not long: in a minute or two I struggled out on the farther shore, and Numidea, with a cry of pleasure and trustfulness, came to my dripping arms.

The British, hot on the track, were shouting to one another in the dark pursuit, so the little maid was picked up securely, and, with her in my left arm upon my hip, her warm wrists about my neck, and my other hand on the guide-rope, we went back into the stream again. By the sacred fane of Vesta, it ran stronger than a mill sluice, and tugged and worried at my limbs like the fingers of a fury! I felt the pebbly gravel sifting and rolling beneath my feet, and the strong lift of the water, as it swirled, flying by in the moonlight, hissing and bubbling at my heaving chest in a way that frightened me—even me. At last, with my every muscle on fire with the strain and turmoil, and my head giddy with the dancing torrent all about it, I saw the farther bank loom over us once more, and, heaving a heavy sigh of fatigue, collected myself for one more crowning effort.

But I had forgotten that royal harpy my mistress: and,

even as I gathered my last strength in the swirl of the black water below, she sprang to the verge of the bank overhead, vengeance and hatred flashing in the eyes that I had left full of gentleness and tears, and gleaming there in her wrath, her white robes shining in the moonlight against the ebony setting of the night, and glowered down upon us.

‘Down with the maid!’ she screamed, with all the tyrant in her voice. ‘Down with her, Centurion, or you die together!’

‘Never! never!’ I shouted, for my blood was boiling fiercely, and I could have laughed at a hundred such as she. But while I shouted my heart sank, for Electra was terrible to behold—an incarnation of beautiful cruelty, hot, reckless hatred ruling the features that had never turned upon me before but in sweetness and love. For one minute the passion gathered head, and then, while I stood still in the current with dread of the coming deed, she snatched my own naked sword from the ground. ‘Die, then!’ she yelled; ‘and may a thousand curses weigh down your souls!’ As she said it the blade whirled into the moonlight, descending on the guide-rope just where it ran taut and hard over the posts, severing it clean to the last strands with one blow of those effective white arms, and the next minute the hempen cord was torn out of my grasp, and over and over in a drowning, bewildering cascade of foam we were swept away down the stream.

It was the wildest swim that ever a mortal took. So fiercely did we spin and fly that heaven and earth seemed mixed together, and the white clouds overhead were not whiter than the sheets of foam that ran down seawards with us. I am a good swimmer, but who could make the bank in such a cauldron of angry waters? and now Numidea was on top, and now I. It went to my heart to hear the poor little Christian gasp out on ‘Good St. Christopher!’ and to feel the flutter of her breast against my leather jerkin, and then presently I did not feel it at all. Many an island of wreckage passed us, but none that I could lay hold on, until presently a mighty log came foaming down upon us, labouring through that torrent surf like a full-sailed ship. As it passed I threw an arm over a strong root, and thus, for an hour, behind that black midnight javelin we flew downwards, I knew not whither. Then it presently left the strong stream, and towing me towards a soft alluvial beach, just as dawn was breaking in the east,

deposited me there, and slowly disappeared again into the void.

This is all I know of Roman Britain; this is the end of the chapter.

As I reeled ashore with my burden, some friendly fisherfolk came forward to help, but I saw them not. Numidea was dead! my poor little slave-girl—the one speck of virtue in that tyrant world—and I bent over her, and shut her kindly eyes, and spread on the sand her long wet braids, and smoothed the modest white gown she was so careful of, with a heart that was heavier than it ever felt yet in storm or battle!

Then all my grief and exertions came upon me in a flood, and the last thing I remember was stooping down in the morning starlight to kiss the fair little maid upon that pallid face that looked so wan and strange amid the wild-spread tangles of her twisted hair.

CHAPTER V

WHEN consciousness came to my eyes again, everything around me was altered and strange. The very air I drew in with my faint breaths had a taste of the unknown about it, an impalpable something that was not before, speaking of change and novelty. As for surroundings, it was only dimly that any fashioned themselves before those dull and sleepy eyes of mine that hesitated, as they drowsily turned about, whether to pronounce this object and that true material substance, or still the idle fantasy of dreams.

As time went on certainty developed out of doubt, and I found myself speculating on as strangely furnished a chamber as anyone was ever in. All round the wall hung the implements of many occupations in bunches and knots. Here the rude tools of husbandry were laid aside, the mattock and the flail; the woodman's axe and the neatherd's goad, just as though they had been suspended on the wall by some invisible labourer after a good day's work. Yonder were a sheaf of arrows and a stout bow strangely shaped, a hunting-horn, and there again a long withy peeled for fishing, and a broad rusty iron sword (that truly looked as if it had not been used for some time) over against a leash for dogs, and a herdsman's

cowl, with other strange things festooning the walls of this dim little place.

Among these possessions of some many-minded men were shelves I noted with clay vessels of sorts upon them, and bunches of dried herbs and roots and apples put by for the winter, and, more curious still, in the safest niche away in the quietest corner were stored up in many tiers more than a score of vellums and manuscripts, all neatly rolled and tagged with coloured ribbons, and wound in parchments and embroidered gold and coloured leathers, forming such a library of learning as only the very studious could possess in those days. Beyond them were flasks and essences, and dried herbs, and ink-horns, and sheafs of uncut reeds for writing, with such other various items as astonished me by their incongruous complexity and novelty.

All these lay in the shadows most commendable to my weakly eyes. As for the centre of the room, I now began to notice it was a brilliant golden haze, a nebulous cloud of yellow light, to my enfeebled sense without form or meaning, whence emerged constantly a thin metallic hammering, as though it might be some kindly invisible spirit were forging a golden idea into a human hope behind that shining veil.

I shut my eyes for a minute or two to rest them, and then looked again. The haze had now concentrated itself into a circle of light, radiating, as I perceived, from a lamp hung from the low roof, and under that pale, modest radiance, seated at a trestle table, was a venerable white-bearded old man. Never so far, perhaps, in long centuries of intercourse with brave but licentious peoples had a face like his been before me. It was restful to look at, a new page in history it seemed, full of a peace which had hitherto passed all understanding and a dignity beyond description or definition. Before him, on the board was a brilliant mass of shining white metal, and, as he eagerly bent over it, absorbed in his work, his thin and scholarly hands, wielding a chisel and a mallet and obeying the art that was in his soul, caused the rhythmical hammering I had noticed, while they forced with loving zeal the bright chips and spiral flakes from the splendid dazzling crucifix he was shaping.

And all behind that lean and kindly anchorite the black shadows flickered on the walls of his lonely cell, and his little fire of sticks burnt dimly on the open hearth, and the shining

dust of his labour sparkled in his grizzly beard as brightly as the reverent pleasure in his eyes while the symbol before him took form and shape.

So pleasant was he to look upon, I could have left him long undisturbed, but presently a sigh involuntarily escaped me. Thereon, looking up for the first time from his work, the recluse peered all round him into the recesses, and, seeing nothing, fell to his task once more. Again I sighed, and then he arose without emotion or fear, and stared intently into the shadows where I lay. In vain I essayed to speak—my tongue clove to my mouth, and naught but a husky rattle broke the stillness. At that sound he took down the lamp and came forward, wonder and astonishment working in his face; and when, as the light shone on me, with a great effort my head was turned to one side, even that placid monk started back and stood trembling a little by the table.

But he soon mastered his weakness and advanced again, muttering, as he did so, excitedly to himself, 'He was right! He was right!' And when at last my tongue was loosened, I said:—

'Who was right, thou grey-bearded chiseller?'

'Who? Why, Alfred. Alfred, the son of Ethelwulf, the son of Egbert—Alfred the great Thane of England!'

'One of your British Princelings, I suppose,' I muttered huskily. 'And wherein was he so right?'

'He was right, O marvellous returner from the dim seas of the past, in that he prophesied your return! To him you owe this shelter and preservation.'

'All this may be so, my host,' I replied, beginning to feel more myself again; 'but it matters not. I fought a stubborn fight last night, and I was carried away by a midnight torrent. If you have sheltered and dried me, and'—with a sudden sinking of my voice—'if you have protected the little maid I had with me, then I am grateful to you, Alfred or no Alfred,' and I threw off a mountain of mouldy-seeming rags and coverlets, and staggered up.

But that worthy monk was absolutely dumb with astonishment, and as I tottered to my feet, holding out to him a gaunt trembling hand, brown with the dust of ages, and drunkenly reeled across his floor, he edged away, while the long hair of his silvery head bristled with wonder.

'My son, my son!' he gasped at length, over the shining

crucifix, 'this is not so; none of us know the beginning of that sleep you have slept; that night of yours is of immeasurable antiquity. History has forgotten your very battles, and your maid, I fear, has long since passed into common, immaterial dust.'

This was too much, and suddenly, overwhelmed by the tide of hot Phœnician passion, I shook my fist in his face, and swearing in my bitter Roman that he lied, that he was a grizzle-bearded villain with a heart as black as his tongue, I staggered to the doorway, and pushing wide the hinges tottered out on to a grassy promontory just as the primrose flush of day was breaking over the hilltops. There, holding on to a post, for my legs were very weak and frail, and peering into the purple shadows, I lifted my voice in anger and fear, and shouted in that green loneliness, 'Numidea! Numidea!' then waited with a beating heart until—thin, sullen, derisive—from the hills across the ravine came back the soulless response—

'Numidea! Numidea!'

I could not believe it. I would not think they could not hear, and stamping in my impatience, 'Electra!' I shouted, 'Numidea! 'tis Phra—Phra the friendless who calls to you!' then again bent an ear to listen, until, from the void shadows of the purple hills, through the pale vapours of the morning mist, there came again in melancholy-wise the answer—

'Tis Phra, Phra the friendless who calls to you!'—and I dropped my face into my hands and bent my head and dimly knew then that I was jettisoned once more on the shore of some unknown and distant time!

It was of no use to grieve; and when the kindly hand of the monk was placed upon my shoulder I submitted to his will, and was led back to the cell, and there he gave me to drink of a sweet, thin decoction that greatly soothed these high-strung nerves.

Then many were the questions that studious man would have me answer, and busy his wonder and awe at my assertions.

'What Emperor rules here now?' I said, lying melancholy on my elbow on the couch.

'None, my son. There are no Emperors but the Sovereign Pontiff now—may St. Peter be his guide!'

'No Emperor! Why, old man, Honorius held sway in Rome that night I went to sleep!'

'Honorius!' said the monk, incredulously stopping his excited paces to stare at me; and he took down a portly tome of history and ran his fingers over the leaves, until, about midway through that volume, they settled on a passage.

'Look! look! you marvellous man!' he cried: 'all this was history before you slumbered; and all this, nigh as much again, has been added while you slept! Five hundred years of solid life!—a thousand changing seasons has the germ of existence been dormant in that mighty bulk of yours! Oh! 'tis past belief, and had you not been my lodger for so long a time, though all so short in comparison, I would not hear of it.'

'And how has the world spun all this period?' I said, with dense persistence. 'Who is Consul now in Gaul? And are all my jolly friends of the Tenth Legion still quartered where I left them?'—and I mentioned the name of the town by which Electra lived.

'I tell thee, youth,' the priest replied quite hotly, 'there is no Consul, there are no legions. All your barbarous Romans are long since swept to hell, and the noble Harold is here anointed King of Saxon England.'

'I never heard of him,' I said coldly.

'Perhaps not, but, by the cowl of St. Dunstan! he flourishes nevertheless,' responded my saintly entertainer.

'And is this Harold of yours successor to the other Thane, Alfred, whom you describe as taking such a kindly interest in me?'

'Yes; but many generations separate them. It was the great Bretwalda you have mentioned who, tradition says, once found you inanimate, yet living, in a fisherman's hut where he sheltered one day from a storm, and, struck by the marvel and the tale of the poor folk that their ancestors had long ago dragged you from a swollen river in their nets, and that you slumbered on without alteration or change from year to year, from father to son, there on your dusty shelf in their peat smoke and broken gear, he bought and gave you to the holy Prelate at the blessed cathedral of Canterbury, whence you came a few months ago into my hands. All else there is to know, my strangely gifted son,' the monk went on, 'is locked in the darkness of that long slumber, and such acts of your other life as your vacant mind may recall.'

This seemed a wonderful thing, very briefly told, but it

was obviously all there was to hear, and sufficient after a style. The old man said that, having a mind for curiosities, and observing me once in danger of being broken up as rubbish by careless hands, he had claimed me, and brought the strange living mummy here to his cell 'on the hill Senlac, by the narrow English straits.'

'That, inscrutable one,' he added with a twinkle in his eye, 'was only some months ago, and the mess I made my hut in in cleaning and wiping you down was wonderful. Yonder little stream you hear prattling in the valley ran dusty for hours with your washings, and your form was one shapeless bulk of cobwebs and dishonoured wrappings. Many a time as I peeled from you the alternate layers of peat smoke and rags with which generations of neglect had shrouded that body, did I think to roll you into the valley as you were, and see what proportions the weather and the crows would make of it. But better counsels prevailed, and for seven days you have been free and daily rubbed with scented oils!'

I thanked him meetly, and hoped I had not been a reluctant patient?

'A more docile never breathed.'

'Nor an expensive lodger afterwards?'

'Never was there one more frugal, nor one who less criticised his entertainment!'

Then it was the good monk's turn, and his wise and kindly eyes sparkled with pleasure and astonishment as I told him in gratitude such tales of the early times—drew for him such brilliant, fiery pictures on the dark background of the past—illumined and vivified his dry histories with the colours of my awakening memory, and set all the withered puppets of his chronicles a-dancing in the tinsel and the glitter of their actual lives; until, over the lintel of his doorway and under the lappets of his roof, there came the first thin, fine fingers of the morning sunshine, trickling into our dim arena thronged thus with shadowy imagery, and playing lovingly, about the great silver crucifix that lay thus ablaze under it in the gloom! Then I slept again for two days and two nights as lightly and happily as a child.

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When I woke I was both hungry and well. Indeed, it was the scent of breakfast that roused me. But, alas! the meal

was none of mine. The little table had been cleared, and at it, on clean white napkins, were places for three or four people. There were wooden platters with steel knives upon them, oaten loaves, great wooden tankards of wine and mead, with fish and fowl flesh in abundance. Surely my entertainer was going to turn out a jolly fellow, now the night's vigils were over! But as I speculated in my retired couch there fell the beat of marching men, a clatter of arms outside and a shouting of many voices in clamorous welcome, the ringing of stirrup-irons and the champing of bits, and then, to my infinite astonishment, in stalked as comely a man as I had ever seen, and leading by the hand a fair, pale, black-haired girl, who looked jaded and red i' her eyes.

'There, my Adeliza,' he said; 'now dry those lashes of yours and cheer up. What! A Norman girl like you, and weeping because two hosts stand faced for battle! What will our Saxon maids say to these shining drops?'

'Oh, Harold!' the girl exclaimed, 'it is not conflict I fear, or I would not have come hither to you, braving your anger; but think of the luckless chance that brings my father from Normandy in arms against my Saxon love! Think of my fears, think how I dread that either side should win—surely grief so complicated should claim pardon for these simple tears.'

'Well, well,' said he—whom I, unobserved in the shadows, now recognised as the English monarch himself—'if we are bound to die, we can do so but once, and at least we will breakfast first,' and down he sat, signing the girl to get herself another stool in rough Saxon manner.

And a very good meal he made of it, putting away the toasted ortolans and cheese, and waging war with his fingers and dagger upon all the viands, washing them down with constant mighty draughts from the wooden flagons, and this all in a jolly, light-hearted way that was very captivating. Ever and anon he called to the 'churls' outside, or gave a hasty order to his captains with his mouth full of meat and bread, or put some dainty morsel into the idle fingers of his damsel, as though breakfasting was the chief thing in life, and his kingdom were not tottering to the martial tread of an invader.

But even gallant Harold, the last King of the Saxons, had finished presently, and then donned his pointed casque and his

flowing silken-filigreed cloak, thrusting his whinger into his jewelled girdle, he threw his round steel target on his back—then held out both his arms. Whether or not his Norman love, the reluctant seal of a broken promise, had always loved him, it is not for me to say, but, woman-like, she loved him at the losing, and flew to him and was enfolded tight into his ample chest, and mixed her raven tresses with his yellow English hair, and sobbed and clung to him, and took and gave a hundred kisses, and was so sweet and tearful that my inmost heart was moved.

When Harold had gone out, and when presently the clatter of arms and shouting proved he was moving off to the field of eventful battle, Adeliza the proud bowed her head upon the table, and abandoned herself to so wild a grief that I was greatly impelled to rise and comfort her. But she would not be consoled, even by the ministrations of two of her waiting maidens, who soon entered the place; and seeing this I took an opportunity when all three were blending their tears to slip out into the open air.

There I found my friendly Saxon monk in great tribulation, with a fragment of vellum in his hand.

'Ah, my son,' he said—'the very man. Look here, the air is heavy with event. Ycuder, under the sheen of the sun, William of Normandy is encamped with sixty thousand of his cruel adventurers, and there, down there among the trees, you see the gallant Harold and his straggling array, sorry and muddy with long marching, on the way to oppose them. But the King has not half his force with him, nor a fourth as many as he needs! Take this vellum, and, if you ever put a buskin in speed to the grass, run now for the credit of England and for the sake of history—run for that ridge away there behind us, where you will find the good Earl of Mercia and several thousand men encamped—and, if not asleep, most probably stuffing themselves with food and drink,' he added bitterly under his breath. 'Give him this, and say Harold will not be persuaded, say that unless the reserves march at once the fight will be fought without them—and then I think Dane and Saxon will be chaff before the wind of retribution. Run! my son—run for the good cause, and for Saxon England!'

Without a word I took the vellum and crammed it into my bosom and spun round on my heels and fled down the hillside,

and breasted the dewy tangles of fern and brambles, and glided through the thickets, and flying from ridge to ridge, and leaping and running as though the silver wings of Mercury were on my heels, in an hour I dashed up the far hillside, and, panting and exhausted, threw down the missive under the tawny beard of the great Earl himself.

That scion of Saxon royalty was, as the monk had foreseen, absorbed in the first meal of the day, but he was too much of a soldier, though, like all his race, a desperate good trencherman, to let such a matter as my errand grow cold, and no sooner had he read the scroll and put me a shrewd question or two than the order went forth for his detachments to arm and march at once. But only a captain of many fights knows how slow reluctant troops can be in such case. Surely, I thought, as I stood by with crossed arms watching the preparations it was none of my business to help—surely a nation, though gallant enough, which quits its breakfast board so tardily, and takes such a perilous time to cross-garter its legs, and buckle on its blades, and peak its beard, and tag out its baldric so nicely, when the invader is on foot—surely such a nation is ripe to the fall! And these comely English troops were doubly weary this morning, for they were fresh, as one of them told me, from a hard fight in the far north of the kingdom, where Harold had just overthrown and slain Hardrada, King of Norway, and the unduteous Tosti, Harold's own brother. Less wonder, then, I found them travel-stained and weary, no marvel for the once they were so slow to my fatal invitation.

It was noon before the English Earl led off the van of his men, and an hour later before I had seen the last of them out of the camp and followed reflective in the rear—a place that never yet sorted with my mood—wondering, with the happy impartiality of my circumstances, whether it were best this morning to be invader or invaded.

When we had gone a mile or two through the leafy tangles, a hush fell upon the troop with which I rode, and then with a shout we burst into a run, for up from the valley beyond came the unmistakable sound of conflict and turmoil. We breasted the last ridge, I and two hundred men, and there, suddenly emerging into the open, was the bloody valley of Senlac beneath us, and the sunny autumn sea beyond, and at our feet right and left the wail and glitter and dust of nearly

finished battle—Harold had fought without us, and we saw the quick-coming forfeit he had to pay.

The unhappy Saxons down there on the pleasant grassy undulations and among the yellow gorse and ling stood to it like warriors of good mettle, but already the day was lost. The Earl and his tardy troops had been merged into the general catastrophe, and my handful would have been of naught avail. The English array was broken and formless, galled by the swarming Norman bowmen, the twang of whose strings we could mark even up here, and fiercely assailed by foot and horsemen. In the centre alone the English stood stubbornly shoulder to shoulder around the peaked flag, at whose foot Harold himself was grimly repelling the ceaseless onset of the foeman.

But alas for Harold, alas for the curly-headed son of Ethelwulf, and all the Princes and Peers with him!

We saw a mighty mass of foreign cavalry creeping round the shoulder of the hill, like the shadow of a raincloud upon a sunny landscape: we saw the thousand gonfalons of the spoilers fluttering in the wind: we saw the glitter on the great throng of northern chivalry that crowded after the black charger of William of Normandy and the sacred flag—accursed ensign—that Toustain held aloft: we saw their sweeping charge, and then when it was passed, the battle was gone and done, the Saxon power was a hundred little groups dying bravely in different corners of the field.

The men with me that luckless afternoon melted away into the woods, and I turned my steps once more to the little hill above Senlac and my hermit's cell.

There the ill news had been brought by a wounded soldier, and the women were filling the evening air with cries and weeping. All that night they wept and wailed, Harold's wife leading them, and when dawning came nothing would serve but she must go and find her husband's body. Much the good monk tried to dissuade her, but to no purpose, and swathing herself in a man's long cloak, with one fair maiden likewise disguised, and me for a guide, before there was yet any light in the sky the brave Norman girl set out.

And sorry was our errand and grim our success. The field of battle was deserted, save of dead and dying men. On the dark wind of the night went up to heaven from it a great fitful moan, as all the wounded groaned in unison to their

unseen miseries. Alas! those tender charges of mine had never seen till now the harvest field of war laid out with its swathes of dead and dying! Often they hesitated on that gloomy walk and hid their faces as the fitful clouds drifted over the scene, and the changing light and shadows seemed to put a struggling ghastly life into the heaps of mangled corpses. Everywhere, as we threaded the mazes of destruction or stepped unwitting in the darkness into pools of blood and mire, were dead warriors in every shape and contortion, lying all asprawl, or piled up one on top of another, or sleeping pleasantly in dreamless dissolution against the red sides of stricken horses. And many were the pale, blood-besmeared faces of Princes and chiefs my white-faced ladies turned up to the starlight, and many were the sodden yellow curls they lifted with icy fingers from the dead faces of thanes and franklins, until in an hour the Norman girl, who had gone a little apart from us, suddenly stood still, and then up to the clear, black vault of heaven there went such a clear, piercing shriek as hushed even the very midnight sorrows of the battle-field itself.

The King was found!

And Editha the handmaiden, too, made her find presently, for there, over the dead Prince's feet, their left hands still clasping each as when they had died, were her father and her two stalwart brothers.

Never did silenter courtiers than we six sit at a monarch's feet until the day should break; and then we who lived covered the comely faces with the hems of their Saxon tunics, and were away as fast as we could go to the Norman camp, that the poor Princess-girl might beg a trophy of her victorious father.

We entered the camp without harm, but had to stand by until the Conqueror should leave his tent and enter the rough shelter that had already been erected for him. Here, while we waited, a young knight, guessing Editha's sex through her long cloak, roughly pulled down the kerchief she was holding across her face. Whereupon I struck him so heavily with my fist that, for a minute, he reeled back against the horse he was leading, and then out came his falchion, and out came mine, and we fell upon each other most heartily.

But before a dozen passes had been made the bystanders separated us, and at the same moment the Normans set up a

shout, and the brand-new English tyrant strode out of his tent, and, encircled by a glittering throng, entered the open audience-hall. Adeliza dropped her white veil as he sat himself down, and called to him, and ran to the foot of his chair, and wept and knelt, so that even the stern son of Robert the Devil was moved, and took her to him, and stroked her hair, and soothed and called her, in Norman-French, his pretty daughter, and promised her the first boon she could think of.

And that boon was the body of Harold *Infelix*.

Turn back the pages of history, and you will see that she had her wish, and Waltham Abbey its kingly patron.¹

Meanwhile, a knight led the weeping Princess away to her father's tent, but when I and Editha would have followed two iron-coated rogues crossed their halberds in our path.

'Not so fast there, my bulky champion!' called William the Bastard to me. 'What is this I heard about your striking a Norman for glancing at yonder silly Saxon wench? By St. Denis! your girls will have to learn to be more lenient! Whence come you? What was your father's name?'

'I hardly know,' I said, without thinking.

'Ah! a too common ignorance nowadays!' sneered the Conqueror, turning to his laughing knights.

Whereon wrathfully I replied: 'At least, my father never mistook, under cover of the night, a serving-wench for a Princess!'

The shaft took the soldier in a very tender spot, and his naturally sallow countenance blanched slowly to a hideous yellow as a smile went round the steel circle of his martial courtiers at my too telling answer. Yet even then I could not but do his iron will justice for the stern resolution with which the passion was restrained in that cold and cruel face, and when he turned and spoke in the ear of his marshal standing near there was no tremor of anger or compassion in the inflexible voice with which he ordered me to be taken outside and hanged 'to the nearest tree that will bear him' in ten minutes.

'As for the Saxon wench—— Here, Des Ormeux'—turning to a grim villain in steel harness at his side—'this girl has a good fief, they say: she and it are yours for the asking!'

¹ Exact historians say it was Harold's mother who found his body upon the field of battle, and offered William its weight in gold for it. But our narrator ought to know the truth better than any of them.

'My mighty liege,' said the Norman, dropping on one knee, 'never was a gift more generously given. I will hold the land to your eternal service, and make the maid free of my tent to-day, and to-morrow we will look up a priest for the easing of her conscience.'

Loudly the assembled soldiers laughed as Des Ormeux pounced upon the shrieking Editha and bore her out of one door, while, in spite of my fierce struggles to get at him, I was hustled into the open from another.

They dragged me into a green avenue between the huts of the invader's camp while they went for a rope to hang me with. And as I stood thus loosely guarded and waiting among them, down the Norman ravisher came pacing towards us on his war-horse, bound towards his tent, with my white Saxon flower fast gripped in front of him.

Oh, but he was proud to think himself possessed of a slice of fair English soil so easily, and to have his courtship made so simple for him, and he looked this way and that, with an accursed grin upon his face, no more heeding the tears and struggles of his victim than the falcon cares for the stricken pigeon's throes. When they came opposite to us Editha saw me and threw out her hands and shrieked to me, and, when I turned away my eyes and did not move, surely it seemed as though her heart would have broken.

Three more paces the war-horse made, and then, with the spring of a leopard thirsting for blood, I was alongside of him, another bound and I was on the crupper behind, and there, quicker than thought, quicker than the lightning strikes down the pine-tree, I had lifted the Norman's steel shoulder-plate, and stabbed him with my long, keen dagger so fiercely in the back that the point came out under his mid-rib, and the red blood spurted to his horse's ears. Quicker, too, than it takes to tell I had gripped the maiden from the spoiler's dying hands, and, pushing his bloody body from the saddle, had thrown my own legs over the crescent peak, and before the gaping scullion soldiers comprehended my bold stroke for freedom I had turned the horse's head and was thundering through the camp towards the free green woods beyond.

And we reached them safely; a rascal or two let fly their cross-bows at us as we fled by, and I heard the bolts hum merrily past my ears, but they did no harm; and there was mounting and galloping and shouting, but the mailed Normans

were wonderfully slow in their stirrups! I laughed to see them scrambling and struggling into their seats, two or three men to every warrior who got safely up, and we soon left them far behind. Down into the dip we rode, my good horse spurning in his stride the still fresh bodies of yesterday's fighters, and spinning the empty helmets, and clattering through all the broken litter of the bitter contest, until we swept up the inland slopes into the stunted birch and hazels, and then—turning for a moment to shake my fist at the nearest of the distant Normans—I headed into the leafy shelter, and was speedily free from all chance of pursuit.

Then, and not before, was there time to take a glance at my beautiful prize, lying so gentle and light upon my breast. Alas! every tint of colour had gone from her fair features, and she lay there in my arms, fainting and pulseless. I loosened her neckscarf. 'So!' I said, 'fair Saxon blossom, this is destiny, and you and I are henceforth to be joined together by the wondrous links of fate'—and, stooping down as we paced through the pleasant green and white flicker of the silent wood, I indorsed the immutable will of chance with a kiss upon her forehead.

Presently she recovered, and all that day we rode forward through the endless vistas of the southern woods by bridle tracks and swine paths, until at nightfall, far from other shelters, we halted among the rocks and hollows of a little eminence. No doubt my gentle comrade would have preferred a more peopled habitation, but there was none in all that mighty wilderness, so she, like a wise girl, submitted without complaint to that which she could not avoid.

There was naught much to tell you of this evening, but it lives for ever in my memory for one particular which consorted strangely with the thoughts the flight with and rescue of Editha had aroused. I had found her a roomy hollow in the rocks, and there had cut with my dagger and made a bed of rushes, built a fire, and got her some roots to eat, and when darkness fell we talked for a time by the cheerful blaze.

Without surprise I heard that though true Saxon in name and face there was some British blood in her veins—a fact, indeed, of which I had been certain without her assurance. Then she went on to tell, with tearful pauses, of the home and broad lands of which she was now lady paramount, as well as of the

gallant kinsman lying out yonder dead in the night dew, and wept and sighed in gentle melancholy, yet without the wild, inconsolable grief latter times have taught to women, until presently those tearful blue eyes grew heavier and heavier, and the shapely chin dropped in grief and weariness upon her white breast, and Edith of Voewood slept in the hands of the stranger.

Then I went out and looked at the blackness of the night. Over the sombre forest the shadowy pall of the evening was spread, and a thousand stars gleamed brightly on every hand. Very still and strange was that unbroken fastness after the red turmoil of yesterday, with nothing disturbing the silence but the cry of an owl to its mate across the coppices, the tinkle of a falling streamlet, and now and then the long, hungry howling of a wolf, or, nearer by, the sharp barking of the foxes. I fed my horse, then went in and pulled the fire together, and fell a-ruminating, my chin on my hands, upon a hundred episodes of happiness and fear.

'Oh, strange eternal powers who set the goings and comings of humanity, what is the meaning of this wild riddle you are reading me?' I said presently aloud to myself. 'Oh! Hapi and Amenti, dark goddesses of the Egyptians—oh! Atropos, Lachesis, Clotho, fatal sisters whom the Romans dread—Mista, Skogula, Zerneck, of these dark Saxon shadows—why am I thus chosen for this uncertain immortality, when will this long drama, this changeful history of my being, end?'

As I muttered thus to myself I glanced at the white girl sleeping in the ruddy blaze, and saw her chest heave, and then—strange to tell, stranger to hear—with a sound like the whisper of a distant sea her lips parted, and there came unmistakably the words—

'Never!'

Perhaps she was but dreaming of that amorous Norman's fierce proposals, and so again I mused.

'Is it possible some unfinished spell of that red high priestess of the Druids plays this sport with me? Is it possible Blodwen's abiding affection—stronger than time and changes—accompanies me from age to age in these her sweet ambassadors for ever crossing my path? Tell me, you comely sleeper, tell me your embassy, which is it that lasts longest, life or love?'

Slowly again, to my surprise, those lips were parted, and across the silent cavern came, beyond mistake or question, the word—'Love!'

At this very echo of my thoughts I stared hard at her who answered so appropriately, but there could be no doubt Editha was asleep with an unusually deep and perfect forgetfulness, and when I had assured myself of this it was only possible for me to suppose those whispered words were some delusion, the echo of my questioning.

Again I brooded, and then presently looked up, and there—by Thor and Odin! 'twas as I write it—between me and the bare earth and tangled rootlets of the cavern side, over against the fitful sparkle of the fire, was a thin impalpable form that oscillated gently to the draughts creeping along the floor, and grew taller and taller, and took mortal air and shape, and rose out of nebulous indistinctness into a fine ethereal substance, and was clothed and visaged by the concentration of its impalpable material, and there at last, smiling and gentle, in the flicker of the camp-fire, the grey shadow of my British Princess stood before me!

That man was never brave who has not feared, and then for a moment I feared, leaping to my feet and staggering back against the wall under the terrible sweetness of those eyes that burnt into my being with a relentless fire that I could not have shunned if I would, and would not if I could. For some time I was thus motionless and fascinated, and then the gentle shadow, who had been regarding me intently, appeared to perceive the cause of my enthrallment, and lifting a shapely arm of lavender-coloured essence for a minute veiled the terrible bewitchment of her face. Shrewd, observant shadow! As she did so I was myself again—my blood welled into my empty veins, my heart knocked fiercely at my ribs, and when Blodwen lowered her hand there seemed to me endless enchantment but nothing dreadful in the glance of kindly wonder with which her eyes met mine.

Surely it was as strange an encounter as ever there had been—the little rocky recess all ruddy and shadowy in the dancing flames; the silent white Saxon girl there on the heaped-up rushes, her breast heaving like a summer sea with a long, smooth undulation; and I against the stones, one hand on my dagger and the other outspread fearful on the wall, scarce knowing whether I were brave or not, while over

against the eddying smoke—calm, passive, happy, immutable, was that winsome presence, shining in our dusky shelter with a tender violet light, such as was never kindled by mortal means.

When I found voice to speak I poured forth my longings and pent-up spirit in many a reckless question, but to all of them the Princess made no answer. Then I spread my arms and thought to grasp her, and ever as they nearly closed upon her she moved backwards, now here and now there, mocking my foolish hope and passing impalpable over the floor, always gentle and compassionate, until the uselessness of the pursuit at last dawned upon me, and I stood irresolute.

I little doubt that immaterial immortal would have mustered courage or strength to speak to me presently, but the sleeping girl sighed heavily at this moment and seemed so ill at ease that, without a thought, I turned to look at her. When my eyes sought the opposite side of the fire again the presence was not half herself: under my very glance she was being absorbed once more by the dusky air. To let her go like that was all against my will, and, leaping to those printless feet, 'Princess! Wife!' I called, 'stay another moment!' and as I said it I swept my arms round the last vestige of her airy kirtle, and drew into my bosom an armful of empty air!

She had gone, and not a sign was left—not a palm's breadth of that lovely sheen shone against the wall as I arose ashamed from my knee and noticed Editha was awaking.

'My kind protector,' said that damsel, 'I have been feeling so strange—not dreaming quite, but feeling as though someone were borrowing existence of me, yet leaving in my body the blood and pulse of life. Now how can this be? I must surely have been very tired yesterday.'

'No doubt you were, fair franklin,' I answered. 'Yesterday was such a day as well excuses your weariness. Sleep again, and when the sun rises in an hour you shall rise with it as fresh as any of the little birds that already preen themselves.' So she slept—and presently I too.

All the next day we rode on through endless glades and briery paths towards Editha's home, and as we went, I afoot and she meekly perched upon our mighty Norman charger, I wooed her with a brevity which the times excused, and poured

my nimble lover wit into ears accustomed only to the sluggish flattery of woodland thanes and princely swineherds. And first she blushed and would not listen, and then she sighed and switched the low wet boughs of oak and hazel as we passed along, and then she let me say my say with downcast, averted eyes, and a sweet reluctance which told me I might stoutly push the siege.

As we went we picked up now and then a straggling soldier or two from the fight behind us, and now and then a petty chieftain joined us, until presently we wound through the bracken towards Voewood, a very goodly train.

Editha had got a palfrey and I my horse again; but as she neared her home the thought of its desolation weighed heavier and heavier upon her tender nature. She would not eat and would not speak, and at last took her to crying, and so cried until we saw, aglint through the oak-stems, a very fair homestead and ample, with broad lands around, and kine and deer about it, and all that could make it fair and pleasant. This was her Voewood; and when the servants came running to meet us (knowing nothing of the fight or its results, and thinking we were their master and his sons come again) with waving caps and shouts of pleasure, it was too much for the overwrought girl. She threw up her white hands, and, with a cry of pain and grief, slipped fainting from her palfrey before us all.

Then might you have seen a score of saddles featly emptied to the service of the heiress! Down jumped Offa the Dane, whose unchanged doublet was still red to his chin with mud and Norman gore. Down jumped Edred and Egbert, those blue-eyed brothers who had left their lands by the northern sea a month ago to follow Harold's luckless banner; Torquil the grim, and Wulfhere of the white beard, sprang to the ground: and Clywin the fair Welsh princeling, and his shadow, Idwal ap Cynan, the harper-warrior, vaulted to their feet—spent and battle-weary as they were, with many another. But, lighter and quicker than any of them, Phra the Phœnician had leapt to earth, and stood there astride of the senseless girl, his hand upon his dagger-hilt, and scowling round that soldier circle wrathful to think that any other but he should touch her!

Then he took her up, as if it were a mother with a sleeping babe, and the serfs uncapped and stood back on either hand,

and the grim warriors fell in behind, and so Editha came home, her loose arms hanging down and her long bright hair all adrift over the broad shoulders of the strangest, most many-adventured soldier in that motley band.

CHAPTER VI

WHEN I come to look back upon that Saxon period, spent in the green shades of my sweet franklin's homestead, it seems, perhaps, that never was there a time so peaceful before in the experience of this passion-tossed existence! We hunted and we hawked, we feasted and we lay abask in the sunshine of a jolly, idle life all these luxurious months, drinking scorn and confusion amid our nightly flagons to remote care and (as it seemed) remoter Normans.

But first to tell you how I won the right to lord it over these merry Saxon churls and dissolute thanes. Editha had hardly come to her home and dried, in a day or two, her weeping eyes, when all the noble vagrants from yonder battle were up in arms to woo her. Never was maid so sued! From morning till night there was no rest or peace. From the uppermost bower looking over the fair English glades, down into the thickets of nut and hazel, the air reeked of love and petitions. The mighty Dane, like a sick bear, slept upon her curtained threshold and growled amorousness into her timid ear before the sun was up. The Welsh Prince wooed her all her breakfast-time, and his tawny harper spent many a golden morning in outlining his noble patron's genealogy. In faith—ap Tudor, ap Griffith, ap Morgan, ap Huge, and I know not how many others, it seemed all had a hand in the making of that paragon—but Editha blushed and said she feared one Saxon girl was all too few for so many. They besought her up and down, night and morning, full and empty, to wed them. The English Princelings dogged her footsteps when she went afield, and Torquil and Wulfhere, those bandaged lovers, were ready for her with sighs and plaintive proposals when she came flitting, frightened, and fearful home through the bracken.

How could this end but in one way for the defenceless

girl? She was sued so much and sued so hot that one day she came creeping like a hunted animal to the turret nook where I sat brooding my fortunes, and, timorous and shy, begged me to help her. I stood up and touched her yellow dishevelled hair, and told her there was but one way—and Editha knew it as well as anyone—and had made her choice and slipped into my arms and was happy.

That was as noisy a wedding as ever had been in Voewood. Editha freed a hundred serfs, and all day long the noise of files on their iron collars echoed through her halls. She fed at the door every miscreant or beggar who could crawl or hobble there, and remitted her taxes to a score of poorer villains.

In the hall such noisy revellers as the rejected suitors surely never were seen. They began that wedding feast in the morning, and it was not finished by night. To me, who had so lately supped amid the costly detail, the magnificent and cultivated license of a patrician Roman table, these Saxon rioters seemed scrambling, hungry dogs. Where Electra would taunt her haughty courtiers over loaded tables which the art of three empires had furnished, firing her cruel, witty arrows of spite and arrogance from her rose-strewn couches, these rough, uncivil woodland Peers but wallowed in their ceaseless flow of muddy ale, gorged themselves to sleep with the gross flesh of their acorn-fed swine, and sang such songs and told such tales as made even me, indifferent, to scowl upon them and wonder that their kinswoman and her hand-maids could sit and seem unwotting of their gross, obscene, and noisy revels.

And late that night blood was nearly spilt upon the oaken floor of Voewood. The thanes had fairly pocketed their disappointment, but now, deep in drink and stuffed with food and courage, they began to eye me and my thin-hid scorn askance, and then presently, like the mutter of a quick-coming storm, came the whisper, 'Why should she fall to the stranger? Why? Why?' It flew round the tables like wild-fire, and half-emptied beakers were set down, and untasted food stopped on its way to the mouth, and then—all on a sudden, the drunken chiefs were on foot advancing to the upper table, where I sat by Editha's right hand, their daggers agleam in the torchlight shining upon their red and angry faces as they came tumbling and shouting towards us, 'Death

to the black-haired stranger! Voewood for a Saxon! Why should he win her?’

’Tis not my fashion to let the foeman come far to seek me, and I was up in an instant—overturning the table with all its wines and meats—and, whipping out my sword, I leapt into the middle of the rushy space before them.

’Why?’ I shouted. ’Why? you drunken, Norman-beaten dogs! Why? Because, by Thor and Odin! by all the bones of Hengist and his brother! I can throw a straighter javelin, and whirl a heavier sword, and sit a fiercer steed than any of you. Why? Because my heart is stronger than any that ever beat under your dirty scullion doublets. Why? Because I scorn, and spit upon, and deride you!’

It was braggart boasting, but I noticed the Saxons liked their talk of that complexion. And in this case it was successful. The princes stood hesitating and staring as I towered before them, fiery and disdainful, in the red gleaming banquet lights; until presently the youngest there burst into a merry laugh to see them all thus at bay, chewing the hilts of their angry daggers, and each one waiting for his neighbour to prove himself the braver, by dying first upon my weapon. That laugh had hardly reached the ruddy oaken rafters overhead when it was joined by a score of others, and in a moment those wilful Saxon lordlings were all laughing and jerking back their steels, and scrambling into their supper-places as if they had not broken their fast since morning, and I were their mother’s son.

Deep were their flagons that night, after the women had stolen away, and Idwal ap Howell filled the hall with wild Welsh harping that stirred my soul like a battle-call; for it was in my dear British tongue, and full of the colour, light, and the life that had illuminated the first page of my long pilgrimage. And the Saxon gleemen, not to be outdone, each sang the song that pleased him best; and the Welshman strove to drown them with his harping; and the thanes sang, all at once, whatever songs were noisiest and most licentious. Mighty was the fire that roared up the open hearthplace; deep was the breathing of vanquished warriors from under the tables; red was the spilt wine upon the floor—when presently they put me upon a tressel, and, bearing me round the hall in discordant triumph, finally bore me away to the inner corridors, and left me at a portal where I never yet had entered!

There is but little to say of that quiet Saxon rest that befell me in pleasant Voewood. Between each line I pen you must suppose an episode of pleasure. In the springtime, when the woods were shot with a carpet of blue and yellow flowers, we lay a-basking in the sunny angles or rode out to count our swine and fallow deer. In the summer, when all Editha's mighty woodlands were like fair endless colonnades, we basked amid the flickering shadows and watched the sunny sheen upon the treetops, to the orchestra of little birds. And autumn, that touched the vassals' corn-clearings with yellow, saw my proud Norman charger grow fat and gross with new grain. September rains and mists rusted my silent weapon into its sheath; even winter, that heard the woodman's axe upon the forest trees, and saw bird and beast and men and kine draw in to the gentle bounty of my white-handed lady, was but a long inglorious holiday of another sort.

Many and many a time, i' those merry months, did this Phœnician laugh to his mirror to see how fitly he could wear upon his Eastern-British-Roman body the Danish-Saxon-English tunic! It was all of fine linen the franklin's own fair fingers had spun, and pointed and tasselled and particolour, and his legs were cross-gartered to his knees, and his little luncheon-dagger hung by his jewelled belt, and a fillet of pure English gold bound down the long black locks that fell upon his shoulders. Every morning Editha combed them out with her silver comb, and double-peaked his beard, kissing and saying it was the best in all Voewood. He had more servants than necessities in those times, and almost his only grievance was a lack of wants.

The Normans for long had left us wholly alone, partly through the usurper cunning which prompted our new tyrant to deal gently with those who had stood in arms against him, but principally in our case since the strong tide of invasion had swept northward beyond us, and Voewood slept unharmed, unnoticed among its green solitudes—a Saxon homestead as it had been since Hengist's white horse first flaunted upon an English breeze and the seven kingdoms sprang from the ashes of old Roman Britain.

So we lived light-hearted from day to day, forgetting all about the battle by Senlac, and drinking, as I have said, in our evening wassails confusion and scorn of the invaders who seemed so distant. It was a good time, and I have little to

note of it. Many were the big boars which died upon my eager spear down in the morasses to the southward, and I came to love my casts of tiercelets and my hounds as though I had been born to a woodman's cape and had watched the fens for hernshaws and followed the slot of wounded deers from my youth upwards.

All these things led me into many a wild adventure and many a desperate strait; but one of them stands out from the rest upon the crowded pages of my memory. I had, one day when Editha was with me, mounted as she would be upon her palfrey, slipped the dogs upon a stag an arrow of mine had wounded in the foreleg, and, excited by the chase and reluctant as ever to turn back from an unaccomplished purpose, we followed far into the unknown distances, and all beyond our reckonings. I had let fly that shaft at midday, and at sundown the stag was still afoot, the dogs close behind him, and I, indomitable, muddy, and torn from head to foot, but with all the hunter instinct hot within me, was pressing on by my Saxon's bridle rein. Endless, rough, and tangled miles had we run and scrambled in that lengthy chase, and neither of us had noticed the way, or how angry the sun was setting in the west.

Thus it came about that when the noble hart at length stood at bay in the lichened coverts under a bushy crag, there was hardly breath in me to cheer the weary dogs upon him, and hardly light enough to aim the swift thrust of my subduing javelin which laid him dead and bleeding at our feet. Yes, and before I could cut a hunter's supper from that glossy haunch the dome of the sky closed down from east to west, and the first heavy drops of the evening rain came pattering upon the leaves overhead. Thor! how black it grew as the wind began to whistle through the branches and the murky clouds to fly across the face of the sombre heaven, while neither east nor west could any limit be seen to the interminable vastnesses of the endless woodlands! In vain was it we struggled for a time back upon our footsteps, and then even those were lost; and, as the sky in the east burnt an angry yellow for a moment before the remorseless night set in, it gave us just light to see we were hopelessly mazed in the labyrinths of the huge and lonely forest.

It was thus we turned to take such shelter as might offer, and that gleam shone for a moment pallid, yellow, and ghastly

upon a cluster of grey stones standing on a grassy mound a quarter of a mile away. Thither we struggled through the black mazes of the storm, the headlong rain whistling through the misty thickets like flights of innumerable arrows, the angry wind lashing the treetops into bitter complaining, and waving abroad (in the sodden dismal twilight) all the long beards of goblin lichens hanging in ghostly tapestry across our path that dreary October evening.

Reeling and plunging to the shelter through a black world of tangled witnesses, with that mocking gleam behind shining like a window of the nether world, and overhead a gaunt, hurrying array of cloudy forms, we were presently upon the coppice outskirts, and there I stopped as though I had grown to the ground.

I stopped before that great gaunt amphitheatre of grey stones and stared and stared before me as though I were bereft of sense. I rubbed my eyes and pointed with trembling silent finger, and looked again and again, while the Saxon girl crouched to my side, and my hounds whined and shivered at my feet, for there, incredible! monstrous!—yellow and shining in the pallid derision of the twilight, stern, hoary, ruinous, mocking—overthrown and piled one upon another, clasped about their feet by the knotted fingers of the woodland growth, swathed in the rocking mists which gave a horrid life to their cruel, infernal deadness, were the stones, the very stones of that Druid altar-place upon which I was sacrificed nearly a thousand years before!

Here was a pretty welcome! Here was a cheerful harbourage! What man ever born of a woman who would not have been dazed and dumbfounded at this sudden confronting—this extraordinary reminiscence of the long-forgotten? It overwhelmed for the moment even me—me, Phra the Phœnician, to whom the red harvest-fields of war are pleasant places, who have dallied with the infinite, and have been a melancholy coadjutor of Time itself. Even me, who never sought to live, yet live endlessly by my very negligence—who have received from the gods that gift of existence that others ask for unanswered.

I might have stood there as stolid and grim as any one of those ancient monoliths all through the storm, but for the dear one by my side. Her nestling presence roused me, and, gulping down the last of my astonishment, and seeing no

respice in the yellow eye of the night over my shoulder, I took the hand that lay in mine with such gentle trust and, with a strange feeling of awe, led her into the magic circle of the old religion.

The very altar of my dispatch was still there in the centre, but time and forest creatures had worn out from under that mighty slab a little chamber, roofed with that vast flagstone and sided by its three supports—a space perhaps no bigger than the cabin of my first trading felucca, yet into this we crept, with the reluctant hounds behind us, while the tempest thundered round, and, loth to lose us, sought here and there, piping in strange keys among those time-worn relics of cruelty, and singing uncouth choruses down every crevice of our wild retreat.

Pleasure and Pain are sisters, and the little needs of life must be fulfilled in every hour. I comforted my comrade, piling for her a rough couch of the broken litter upon the floor, stuffing up the crannies as well as might be with damp sods, and then making her a fire. This latter I effected with some charcoal and burnt ends of wood that lay upon an old shepherd's hearth in the centre of the chamber, and we kept it going with a little store of wood which the same absent wanderer had gathered in one corner but had failed to use. More; not only did we mend our circumstances by a ruddy blaze that danced fantastically upon our rugged walls and set our reeking clothes steaming in its flicker, but I rolled a stone to the opposite side of the hearth for Editha, and found another for myself, and soon those venison steaks were hissing most invitingly upon the glowing embers, and filling every nook and corner of the Druid slaughter-place with the suggestive fragrance of our supper.

Manners were rude and ready in that time. We supped as well and conveniently that night, carving the meat with the little weapons at our girdles, and eating with our fingers, as though we sat in state at the high thane's table of distant Voewood and looked down the great rushy hall upon three hundred feeding serfs and bondsmen. And Editha laughed and chattered—secure in my protection—and I echoed her merriment, while now and then my thoughts would wander, and I heard again in the tempest's whistling the scream of the hungry kites who had seen me die, and in the lashing of the branches the clamour and the beating of the British tribes.

men who many a long lifetime before had shouted around this very place to drown my dying yells.

The good food and the warmth and a long day's work soon brought my fair mistress's head upon her hand, and presently she was lying upon the withered leaves in the corner, a fair white flower shut up for the night-time. So I finished the steak and divided the remnants between the dogs, and lay back very well contented. But here only commences the strangest part of that evening!

I had warmed my cross-gartered, buskined Saxon legs by the blaze for the best part of an hour, thinking over all the strange episodes of my coming to these ancient isles, and seeing again, on the blank hither wall, this very circle all aglow with the splendid colour of its barbarous purpose, the mighty concourse of the Britons set in the greenery of their reverend oaks—the onset of the Roman, the flash and glitter of their close-packed ranks, and the gallant Sempronius—alas! that so good a youth should be reduced to dust—and thus, I suppose, I dozed.

And then it seemed all on a sudden a mighty gust of wind swept down upon the flat roof overhead, shaking even that ponderous stone—those fierce and brawny hounds of mine howled most fearfully—crouching behind with bristling hair and shaking limbs—and, looking up, there—strange, incredible as you will pronounce it—seated beyond the fire on the stone the Saxon had so lately left, drawing her wild, rain-wet British tresses through her supple fingers—calm, indifferent, happy—gazing upon me with the gentle wonder I had seen before, was Blodwen, once again herself!

Need it be said how wild and wonderful that winsome apparition seemed in that uncouth place, how the hot flush of wonder burnt upon my swart and weathered cheeks as I sat there and glared through the leaping flame at that pallid outline? Absently she went on with her rhythmical combing, bewitching me with her unearthly grace and the tender substance of her immaterial outline, and as I glowered with never a ready syllable upon my idle tongue, or any emotion but wonder in the heart beating tumultuously under my hunter tunic, the dogs lay moaning behind me, and the wild fantastic uproar of the tempest outside forced through the clefts of our retreat the rain-streaks that sparkled and hissed in the fire-heap.

That time I did not fear, and presently the Princess looked up and said, in a faint, distant voice, that was like the sound of the breeze among seashore pine-trees—

‘Well done, my Phœnician! Your courage gives me strength.’ And as she spoke the words seemed gradually clearer and stronger, until presently they came sweeter to me than the murmur of a sunny river—gentler than the whispers of the ripe corn and the south wind.

‘Shade!’ I said. ‘Wonderful, immaterial, immortal, whence came you?’

‘Whence did I come?’ she answered, with the pretty reflection of a smile upon her face. ‘Out of the storm, O son of Anak!—out of the wild, wet night-wind!’

‘And why, and why—to stir me to my inmost soul, and then to leave me?’

‘Phœnician,’ she said, ‘I have not left you since we parted. I have been the unseen companion of your goings—I have been the shadowless watcher by your sleep. Mine was the unfelt hand that bore your chin up when you swam with the Christian slave-girl—mine was the arm that has turned, invisibly, a hundred javelins from you—and to-night I am come, by leave of circumstance, thus to see you.’

‘I should have thought,’ I said, becoming now better at my ease, ‘that one like you might come or go in scorn of circumstance.’

‘Wherein, my dear master, you argue with more simplicity than knowledge. There are needs and necessities to the very verge of the spheres.’

But when I questioned what these were, asking the secret of her wayward visits, she looked at the sleeping Editha, and said I could not understand.

‘Yes, by Wodin’s self! but I think I can. Yon fair-cheeked girl helps you. There are a hundred turns and touches in your ways and manners that speak of her, and shew whence you got that borrowed life.’

‘You are astute, my Saxon thane, and I will not utterly refute you.’

‘Then, if you can do this, how was it, Blodwen, you never came when I was Roman?’

‘In truth, I often tried,’ she said, with something like a sigh, ‘but Numidea was not good to fit my subtle needs, and the other one, Electra, was all beyond me.’ And here that

versatile shadow threw herself into an attitude, and there before me was the Roman lady, so sweet, so enticing, that my heart yearned for her—ah! for the queenly Electra!—all in a moment. But before I could stretch out my arms the airy form had whisked her ethereal draperies toga-wise across her breast, and had risen, and there, towering to the low roof, flashing down scorn and hatred on me, quaking at her feet, shone the very semblance of Electra as I saw her last in the queenly glamour of her vengeance.

‘Yes,’ said Blodwen, resuming her own form with perfect calmness before I, astounded, could catch my breath, and stroking out the tangles of her long red hair, ‘there was no doing anything with her, and so, Phœnician, I could not get translated to your material eyes.’

All this was very wonderful, yet presently we were chatting as though there were naught to marvel at. Many were the things we spoke of, many were the wonders that she hinted at, and as she went my curiosity blazed up apace.

‘And, fair Princess,’ I said presently, ‘turner of javelins, favourer of mortals, is it then within the power of such as yourself to rule the destiny of us material ones?’

‘Not so; else, Phœnician, you were not here!’

This made me a little uncomfortable, but, nothing daunted, I looked the strangest visitor that ever paid a midnight visit full in the face, and persisted, ‘Tell me, then, you bright reflection of her I loved, how seems this tinsel show of life upon its over side? Is it destiny or man that is master? How looks the flow of circumstances to you?—to us, you will remember, it is vague, inexplicable.’

‘You ask me more than I can say,’ she answered, ‘but so far I will go—you, material, live substantially, and before you lies unchecked the illimitable spaces of existence. Of all these you are certain heir.’

‘Speak on!’ I cried, for now and then her voice and attention flagged. ‘And is there any rule or sequence in this life of ours—is it for you to guide or mend our happenings?’

‘No, Phœnician! You are yourselves the true forgers of the chains that bind you, and that initial ‘prenticeship you serve there on your world is ruled by the aggregate of your actions. I tell you, Tyrian,’ she exclaimed, with something as much like warmth as could come from such a hazy air-stirred body—‘I tell you nothing was ever said or done but was quite

immortal: all your little goings and comings, all your deeds and misdeeds, all the myriad leaves of spoken things that have ever come upon the forests of speech, all the rain-drops of action that have gone to make the boundless ocean of human history, are on record. You shake your head, and cannot understand? Perhaps I should not wonder at it.'

'And have all these things left a record upon the great books of life, and is it given to the beings of the air to refer to them, even as yonder hermit turns back his scrolls of history and finds secreted on his yellow vellums the things of long ago?'

'It is so in some kind. The actions of that life of yours leave spirit-prints behind them from the most infinitesimal to the largest. Now, see! I have but to wish, and there again is all the moving pantomime around you of that unhappy day when you well-nigh died upon this spot,' and the chieftainess leaped to her feet and swept her arm around and looked into the void and smiled and nodded as though all the wild spectacle she spoke of were enacting under her very eyes. 'Surely, you see it! Look at the priests and the people, and there the running foreigners and that tall youth at their head—why, O trader in oils and dies! it is not the remembrance of the thing, it is, I swear it, the thing itself——'

But never a line or colour could I perceive, only the curling smoke overhead looped and hung like tapestries upon the grey lichened walls, and the black night-time through the crevices. And, discovering this, Blodwen suddenly stopped and looked upon me with vexed compassion. 'I am sorry, I am no good teacher to so outrun my pupil. Ask me henceforth what simple questions you will, and they shall be answered to the best I can.'

And so presently I went on, 'If those things which have been are thus to you—and it does not seem impossible—how is it with those other things of to-day, or still unborn of the future? How far can you more favoured ones foresee or guide those things to which we, unhappy, but submit?'

'The strong tide of circumstance, Phœnician, is not to be turned by such hands as these'—and she held her pallid wrists towards the blaze, until I saw the ruddy gleam flash back from the rough gold bosses of her ancient bracelets. 'There are laws outside your comprehension which are not framed for your narrow understanding. We obey these as

much as you, but we perceive with infinitely clearer vision the inevitable logic of fate, the true sequence of events, and thus it is sometimes within our power to amend and guide the details of that brief episode which you call your life.'

'Do you say that priceless span, my comrades, yonder sleeping girl, and all the others set so high a value on is but "an episode"?''

'Yes—a halting step upon a wondrous journey, half a gradation upon the mighty spirals of existence!'

'And time?' I asked, full of a wonder that scarce found leisure to comprehend one word of hers before it asked another question. 'Is there time with you? Even I, reflective now and then upon this long journey of mine, have thought that time must be a myth, an impossibility to larger experience.'

'Of what do you speak, my merchant? I do not remember the word

'Oh, yes; but you must. Is there period and change yonder? Is Time—Time, the great braggart and bully of life, also potent with you?'

'Ah! now I do recall your meaning; but, my Tyrian, we left our hour-glasses and our calendars behind us when we came away! There is, perhaps, time yonder to some extent, but no mortal eyes, not mine even, can tell the teaching of that prodigious dial that records the hours of universes and of spaces.'

I bent my head and thought, for I dimly perceived in all this a meaning appearing through its incomprehensibility. Much else did we talk through the livelong night, whereof all I may not tell, and something might but weary you. At one time I asked her of the little one I had never seen, and then she, reflective, questioned whether I would wish to see him. 'As gladly,' was my reply, 'as one looks for the sun in spring-time.' At this the comely chieftainess seemed to fall amusing, and even while she did so an eddy in the curling smoke of the low red fire swang gently into consistency there by her bare shoulder, and brightened and grew into mortal likeness, and in a moment, by the summons of his mother's will, from where I knew not, and how I could not guess, a fair, young, ruddy boy was fashioned and stood there leaning upon the gentle breast that had so often rocked him, and gazing upon me with a quiet wonder that seemed to say, 'How came you here?' But the little one had not the substance of

the other, and after a moment, during which I felt somehow that no slight effort was being made to maintain him, he paled, and then the same waft of air that had conspired to his creation shredded him out again into the fine thin webs of disappearing haze.

Comely shadow! Dear British mistress! Great was thy condescension, passing strange thy conversation, wonderful thy knowledge, perplexing, mysterious thy professèd ignorance! And then, when the morning was nigh, she bade me speak a word of comfort to the restless-sleeping Editha, and when I had done so I turned again—and the cave was empty! I ran out into the open air and whispered 'Blodwen!' and then louder 'Blodwen!' and all those grey, uncouth, sinful old monoliths, standing there in the half-light up to their waists in white mist, took up my word and muttered out of their time-worn hollows one to another, 'Blodwen, Blodwen!' but never again for many a long year did she answer to that call.

CHAPTER VII

In the days that followed it seemed the cruse of contentment would never run dry, and I, foolish I, thought angry destiny had misled me, and that these green Saxon glades were to witness the final ending of my story. Vain hope! Illusive expectation! The hand of fate was even then raised to strike!

In that pleasant harbourage, outside the ken of ambition, and beyond the limits of avarice, surrounded by almost impenetrable mazes of forest land, life was delightful indeed. The sun shone yellow and big in those early days upon our oak-crowned hillocks—sometimes I doubt if it is ever so warm and ruddy now—and December storms told mightily in praise of the great Yule fires wherewith we defied the winter cold. In the summer time, when the sunny Saxon orchards sheltered the herds of kine in their flickering shadows, and the great droves of black swine lay a-basking among the ferns on the distant hangers, we lived more out of doors than in. Editha then would bring out under the oaks the little ruddy-cheeked Gurth, and set him upon my knee, that I might cut him reed

whistles or bows and arrows, while the flaxen-haired Agitha played about her mother, tuning her pretty prattle to the merry clatter of the distaff and the wheel.

In the winter the blaze that went leaping and crackling from our hearthstone shone golden upon the hair of those little ones as they sat wide-eyed by me, and saw among the ruddy embers the white horse of Hengist and the banner of his brother winning these fertile vales for a noble Saxon realm. Never was there a better Saxon than I! And when I told of Harold, and softened to those tender ears the story of his dying, the bright drops of sympathy stood in my small maiden's eyes, while Gurth's flashed hatred of the false Norman and scorn of foreign tyrants. Under such circumstances it will readily be understood that I ought to have had little wish to draw weapons again or bestride the good charger growing so gross and sleek in his stall all this long peace time.

And yet the silken meshes of felicity were irksome against all reason, and I would grow weary of so much good fortune, finding my pretty deckings and raiment heavier—more burdensome wear—than ever was martial harness. My fair Saxon wife noticed these moods, and strove to mend them. She would take me out to the hawking, were I never so gloomy, and then I would envy the wild haggards of the rocks who got their living from day to day in the free mid air, and asked no favour of either gods or men. Or, perhaps, she would make revelries upon the level green before her homestead, and thither would come all the fools and pedlars, all the bear-baiters, somersaulters, and wrestlers of the shire. But I was not to be pleased so, and I slew the bear in single combat, and tossed, vindictive, the somersaulters over the hucksters' stalls, and broke the ribs in the wrestlers' sides—till none would play with me, and all the people murmured. Then, of a night, Editha got the best gleemen in Mercia to sing to me, and when they sang of peace, and sheep and orchards, or each praised his leman's moonlike eyes and slender middles, I would not listen. Nor was it better when they tuned their strings to martial ditties, for that doubled my malady, since then their rhyming stirred my soul to new unrest, making worse that which they sought to cure.

I sometimes think it was all this to-do which brought Voewood under Norman notice. But, perhaps, it was the slow and steady advance of the invaders' power percolating

like a rising tide into all the recesses of the land which drew us into the fatal circle of the despoilers, and not my waywardness. Be this as it may, the result was the same.

Over to the northward, a score of miles away, where the great road ran east, we heard from wandering strollers the Normans were passing daily. Then, later, there came in the news-budget of a Flemish pedlar tidings that the hungry foreigners had licked up all the fat meadows around the nearest town, had hung its aldermen over the walls, and built a tower and dungeon (after their wont) in the middle of it. Yes! and these messengers of ill omen said there were left no men of note or Saxon blood to uphold the English cause—there was no proper speech in England but the Norman—there was no way of wearing a tunic but the Norman—nothing now to swear by but by Our Lady of Tours and Holy St. Bridget—all Saxon wives were in danger of kissing—and all Saxon abbots were become barefooted monks!

Never was a country turned inside out so soon or quietly; and as I looked over our wide, fair meadows, and upon my sweet girl and her flaxen little ones, and thought how already for her I had risked my life, I could not help wondering how soon I might have to venture it again.

On apace came the outer conquest into our inner peace. Towns and burghs went down, and the hungry flames of lust and avarice fed upon what they destroyed. All the vales and hills the swords of Hengist and Horsa had won, and baptised with foemen's blood, in the mighty names of old Norsemen and Valhalla, were being christened anew to suit a mincing, latter tongue. Thane and franklin uncapped them at the roadside to these steel-bound swarms of ruthless spoilers, and nothing was sacred, neither deed nor covenant, neither having nor holding, which ran counter to the wishes of the western scourges of our English weakness.

When I thought of all this I was extraordinarily ill at ease, and, before I could settle upon how best to meet the danger, it came upon us, and we were overwhelmed. Briefly, it was thus. About twelve years after the battle where Harold had died, the Norman leader had, we heard, taken it into his head to poll us like cattle, to find the sum and total of our feus and lands, our serfs and orchards, and even of our very selves! Now, few of us Saxons but felt this was a certain scheme to tax and oppress us even more severely than the people had been oppressed in

the time of St. Dunstan. Besides this, our free spirits rose in scorn of being counted and weighed and mulcted by plebeian emissaries of the usurper, so we murmured loud and long.

And those thanes who complained the bitterest were hanged by the derisive Normans on their own kitchen beams—on the very same hooks where they cured their mighty sides of pork—while those who complied but falsely with the assessor's commands were robbed of wife and heritage, children and lands, and shackled with the brass collar of serfdom, or turned out to beg their living on the wayside and sue the charity of their own dependants. Whether we would thus be hanged or outcast, or whether we would humble us to this hateful need, writing ourselves and our serfs down in the great 'Doom's Day' book, all had to choose.

For my part, after much debating, and for the sake of those who looked to me, I had determined to do what was required—and then, if it might be, to bring all the Saxon gentlemen together—to raise these English shires upon the Normans, and with fire and sword revoke our abominable indenture of thralldom. But, alas! my hasty temper and my inability to stomach an affront in any guise undid my good resolutions.

Well, this mighty book was being compiled far and wide, we heard, in every shire: there were some men of good standing base enough to countenance it, and, taking the name of the King's justiciaries, they got together shorn monks—shaveling rascals who did the writing and computing—with reeves hungry for their masters' woodlands, and many other lean forsworn villains. This jury of miscreants went round from hall to hall, from manor to manor, with their scrips and pens and parchment, until all the land was being gathered into the avaricious Norman's tax roll.

They cast their greedy eyes at last on sunny, sleepy Voewood, though, indeed, I had implored every deity, old or new, I could recall that they might overlook it; and one day their hireling train of two score pikemen came ambling down the glades with a fat Abbot—a Norman rascal—at their head, and pulled up at our doorway.

'Hullo, there!' says the monk. 'Whose house is this?'

'Mine,' I said gruffly, with a secret fancy that there would be some heads broken before the census was completed.

'And who are you?'

'The Master of Voewood.'

‘What else?’

‘Nothing else!’

‘Well, you are not over-civil, anyhow, my Saxon churl,’ said the man of scrolls and goose-quills.

‘Frankly,’ I answered, ‘Sir Monk, the smaller civility you look for from me to-day the less likely you are to be disappointed. Out with that infernal catechism of yours, and have done, and move your black shadows from my porch.’

At this the clerk shrugged his shoulders—no doubt he did not look to be a very welcome guest—and coughed and spit, and then unfurled in our free sunshine a great roll of questions, and forthwith proceeded to expound them in bastard Latin, smacking of mouldy cathedral cells and cloister pedantry.

‘Now, mark me, Sir Voewood, and afterwards answer truly in everything. Here, first, I will read you the declaration of your neighbour, the worthy thane Sewin, in order that you may see how the matter should go, and then afterwards I will question you yourself,’ and, taking a parchment from a janior, he began: ‘Here is what Sewin told us: *Rex tenet in Dominio Sohurst; de firma Regis Edwardi fuit. Tunc se defendebat pro 17 Hidis; nihil geldaverunt. Terra est 16 Carucata; in Dominio sunt 2æ Carucata, et 24 Villani, et 10 Bordarij cum 20 Carucis. Ibi Ecclesia quam Willelmus tenet de Rege cum dimidia Hida in Elemosina. Silva 40 Porcorum et ipsa est in parco Regis—*’

But hardly had my friend got so far as this in displaying the domesticity of Sewin the thane, when there broke a loud uproar from the rear of Voewood, and the tripping Latin came to a sudden halt as there emerged in sight a rabble of Saxon peasants and Norman prickers freely exchanging buffets. In the midst of them was our bailiff, a very stalwart fellow, hauling along and beating as he came a luckless soldier in the foreign garb just then so detestable to our eyes.

‘Why,’ I said, ‘what may all this be about? What has the fellow done, Sven, that your Saxon cudgel makes such friends with his Norman cape?’

‘What? Why, the graceless yonker, not content with bursting open the buttery door and setting all these scullion men-at-arms drinking my lady’s ale and rioting among her stores, must needs harry the maidens, scaring them out of their wits, and putting the whole place in an uproar! As I am an honest man, there has been more good ale spilt this half-hour,

more pottery broken, more linen torn, more roasts upset, more maids set screaming, than since the Danes last came round this way and pillaged us from roof to cellar!

'Why, you fat Saxon porker!' cried the leader of the troops, pushing to the front, 'what are you good for but for pillage? Drunken serf! An it were not for the politic heart of yonder King, I and mine would make you and yours sigh again for your Danish ravishers, looking back from our mastery to their red fury with sickly longing! Out on you! Unhand the youth, or by St. Bridget there will be a fat carcase for your crows to peck at!' and he put his hand upon his dagger.

Thereon I stepped between them, and, touching my jewelled belt, said: 'Fair Sir, I think the youth has had no less than his deserts, and as for the Voewood crows they like Norman carrion even better than Saxon flesh.'

The soldier frowned, as well he might, at my retort, but before we could draw, as assuredly we would have done, the monk pushed in between us, and the athelings of the commission, who had orders to carry out their work with peace and dispatch as long as that were possible, quieted their unruly rabble, and presently a muttering, surly order was restored between the glowering crowds.

'Now,' said the scribe propitiatingly, anxious to get through with his task, 'you have heard how amiably Sewin answered. Of you I will ask a question or two in Saxon, since, likely enough, you do not know the blessed Latin.' (By the soul of Hengist, though, I knew it before the stones of that confessor's ancient monastery were hewn from their native rock!) 'Answer truly, and all shall be well with you. First, then, how much land hast thou?'

But I could not stand it. My spleen was roused against these braggart bullies, and, throwing discretion to the wind, I burst out, 'Just so much as serves to keep me and mine in summer and winter!'

'And how many ploughs?'

'So many as need to till our cornlands.'

'Rude boar!' said the monk, backing off into the group of his friends, and frowning from that vantage in his turn. 'How many serfs acknowledge your surly leadership?'

'Just so many,' I said, boiling over, 'as can work the ploughs and reap the corn, and keep the land from greedy

foreign clutches! There, put up your scroll and begone. I will not answer you! I will not say how many pigeons there are in our dovecotes—how many fowls roost upon their perches—how many earthen pots we have, or how many maids to scrub them! Get you back to the Conqueror: tell him I deride and laugh at him for the second time. Say I have lived a longish life, and I never yet saw the light of that day when I profited by humility. Say I, the swart stranger who stabbed his ruffian courtier and galloped away with the white maid, Editha of Voewood—I, who plucked that flower from the very saddle-bow of his favourite, and thundered derisive through his first camp there on the eastern downs—say, even I will find a way to keep and wear her, in scorn of all that he can do! Out with you—begone!

And they went, for I was clearly in no mood to be dallied with, while behind me the serfs and vassals were now mustering strongly, an angry array armed with such weapons as they could snatch up in their haste, and wanting but a word or look to fall upon the little band of assessors and slay them as they stood. Thus we won that hour—and many a long day had we to regret the victory.

My luck was against me that time. I hoped, so far as there was any hope or reason in my thoughtless anger, to have had a space to rouse the neighbouring thanes and their vassals upon these our tyrants, and I had dreamt, so combustible was the country just then, somehow perhaps the flame would have spread far and wide. I saw that abominable thing, Rebellion, for once linked hand in hand with her sweet rival, Patriotism, I saw the red flames of vengeance in the quarrel I had made my own sweeping through the land and lapping up with its hundred tongues every evidence of the spoilers! Yes! and even I had fancied that, an there were no true Saxon Princes for our English throne, there was still Editha, my wife; an if there were no swords left to fence a throne so filled, yet there was the sword of Phra the Phœnician! Vain fantasy! The faces of the Fates were averted.

Those hateful inquisitors had not gone many hours' journey northward, when, as ill-luck would have it, they fell in with a Norman Captain, Godfrey de Boville, and two hundred men-at-arms, marching to garrison a western city. To these they told their tale, and, ever ready for pillage and bloodshed, the

band halted, and then turned into the woodlands where we had our lair.

The sun was low that afternoon when an affrighted herdsman came running in to me with the news that he knew not how many soldiers were in the glades beyond. And before he could get his breath or quite tell his hasty message their pricklers came out of the wood—the gallant Norman array (whose glitter has since grown dearer to me than the shine of a mistress's eyes) rode from under our oak-trees, the banners and bannerets fluttered upon the evening wind—their trumpets brayed until our very rafters echoed to that warlike sound—the level twilight rays flashed back from those serried ranks and the steel panoply of the warriors in as goodly a martial show as ever, to that day, I had seen.

What need I tell you of the negotiations which followed while this silver cloud, charged with ruin and cruelty, hung on the dusky velvet side of the twilight hill above us? What need be said of how I swore between my teeth at the chance which had brought this swarm hither in a day rather than in the week I had hoped for, or how my heart burned with smothered anger and pride when we had to tamely answer their haughty summons to unconditional surrender?

Yet by one saving clause they did not attack us at once. Only to me was it clear how utterly impossible was it with the few rugged serfs at my command to defend even for one single onset that great straggling house against their overwhelming force. To them our strength was quite unknown; this and the gathering darkness tempted the Norman to put off the attack until the daylight came again, and the respite was our saving. It was not a saving upon which I wish to dwell long, for 'twas no more glorious than the retreat of a wolf from his hiding-place when the shepherds fire the brake behind him.

All along the edge of the hill their watch-fires presently twinkled out, and as Editha and Sven the Strong came to me in gloomy conference upon the turret we could see the soldiers pass now and again before the blaze, we could hear their laughter and the snatches of their drinking-song, the hoarse cry of the wardens, and the champing and whinny of the chargers picketed under the starlight in lines upon our free Saxon turf. And for Sven and all his good comrade hinds we knew to-morrow would bring the riveting of new and heavier colgars than any they had worn as yet. For me and my

contumacy, though I feared it not, there could be nought but the swift absolution of a Norman sword; while for her—for her, that gentle, stately lady to whose pale sweetness my rough, unworthy pen can do no sort of justice—there was nameless degradation and half a wandering bully's tent.

The serf suggested with his rugged northern valour, we should set light to the hall and, with the women and children in our midst, sally out and cut a way to freedom, and I knew the path he would choose would have been through the hostile camp. But his lady suggested better. She proposed both hind and bondsmen should steal away in the darkness, and, since valour here was hopeless, disperse over the countryside, and there, secure in their humbleness, await our future returning. We, on the other hand, would follow them through the friendly shadows that lay deep and nigh to the house on the unguarded side, and then turn us to a monastery some few miles away, where, if we could reach it, in Sanctuary and the care of one of the few remaining Saxon abbots, we might bide our chance, or at least make terms with our conquerors.

So it was settled, and soon I had all those kind, shaggy villains in the dining-hall standing there uncapped upon the rushes in the torchlight, and listening in melancholy silence to the plan, and then presently, with the dispatch our situation needed, they were slipping in twos and threes out of the little rearward portal and slinking off to the thickets.

Presently our turn came, and as I stood gloomy and stern in that voiceless, empty hall that was wont to be so bright and noisy, fingering my itching dagger and scowling out of the lattice upon the red gleam in the night air hanging over the Norman camp-fires, there came the fall of my wife's feet upon the stairway. In either hand she had a babe, swaddled close up against the night air, and naught but their bright wonderbrimming eyes showing as she hugged them tight against her sides. For them, for them alone, the frown gave way, and I stooped to that escape. We crept away, and Editha's heart was torn at leaving thus the hall where she had been born and reared, and when, presently, in the shadows of the crowded oaks, she found all her slaves and bondsmen in a knot to wish her farewell, the tears that had been brooding long overflowed unrestrainedly.

Even I, who had dwelt among them but a space on my way from the further world of history towards the unknown

future, could not but be moved by their uncouth love and loyalty. There were men there who had stood in arms with her father when the cruel Danes had ravished these valleys for a score of miles inland, and some who had grown with her in the goodly love and faith of thane and servitor as long as she herself had lived. These rugged fellows wept like children, called me father, *klafod*, 'bread bestower,' and pressed upon her in silent sorrow, kissing her hands and the hem of her robe, and taking the little ones from her arms, and pressing their rude unshaven faces to their rosebud cheeks until I feared that Gurth or Agitha might cry out, or some wail from that secret scene of sorrow would catch the ears of our watchful foemen.

So, as gently as might be, I parted the weeping mistress and her bondsmen, and set her upon a good horse Sven had stolen from the paddock, and springing into the saddle of my own strong charger, gave my broad jewelled belt to the Saxon that he might divide it among his comrades, and, taking a long tough spear from his faithful hand, turned northward with Editha upon our dangerous journey.

We stole along as quietly as might be for some distance in safety, riding where the moss was deepest and the shadows thick, and then, just when we were at the nearest to the Norman camp in the curve we were making towards the monastery beyond, those ill-conditioned invaders set up their evening trumpet-call. As the shrill notes came down into the dim starlight glade, strong, clear, and martial in the evening quiet, they thrilled that gallant old charger I had borrowed from the camp at Hastings down to his inmost warlike fibre. He recognised the familiar sound—mayhap it was the very trumpet-call which had been fodder and stable to him for years—and, with ears pricked forward and feet that beat the dewy turf in union to his pleasure, he whinnied loud and long!

Nothing it availed me to smite my hand upon my breast at this deadly betrayal, or lay a warning finger upon his brave, unwitting, velvet nozzle—luckless, accursed horse, the mischief was done! But yet, I will not abuse him, for the grass grows green over his strong, sleek limbs, and right well that night he amended his error! Hardly had his neigh gone into the stillness when the chargers in the camp answered it, and in a moment the men-at-arms and squires by the nearest fire were

all on foot, and in another they had espied us and set up a shout that woke the ready camp in a moment.

There was small time to think. I clapped my hand upon Editha's bridle rein and gave my own a shake, and away we went across the chequered moonlight glade. But so close had we been that a bow-string or two hummed in the Norman tents, and before we were fairly started I heard the rustle of the shafts in the leaves overhead. It was more than arrows we had to dread, and, turning my head for a moment ere we plunged again into dark vistas of the forest road, there, sure enough, was the pursuit streaming out after us, and gallant squires and knights tumbling into their saddles and shouting and cheering as they came galloping and glittering down behind us—a very pretty show, but a dangerous one.

By the souls of St. Dunstan and his forty monks! but I could have enjoyed that midnight ride had it not been for the pale, brave rider at my side, and the little ones that lay fearfully a-nestling on our saddle-bows. For hours the swift, keen gallop of our horses swallowed the unseen ground in tireless rhythm—all through the night field and coppice and hanger swept by us as we passed from glade to glade and woodland to woodland—now 'twas a lonely forester's hut that shone for a moment in ghostly whiteness between the tree-stems with the nightshine on its lifeless face, and anon we sped through droves of Saxon swine, sleeping upon the roadway under their oak-trees, round a muffled swineherd. And the great forest stags stayed the fraying of their antlers against the tree-trunks in the dark coppices as we flew by, and the startled wolf yelped and snarled upon our path as our fleeting shadows o'ertook him; and then, there, ever behind, low, remorseless, stern, came the murmuring hoof-beats of our pursuers, now rising and now falling upon the light breath of the night-wind, but ever, as our panting steeds strode shorter and shorter, coming nearer and nearer, clearer and clearer.

Had this sombre race, whereof Death held the stakes, continued so as it began, straight on end, I do not think we could have got away. But when we had ridden many an hour, and the heavy streaks of white foam were marking Editha's horse with dreadful suggestion, and his breath was coming hot and husky through his wide red nostrils, for a moment or two the sound of the pursuers stopped. Blessed respite! They had missed the woodland road—but for all too short a space. We

had hardly made good four or five hundred yards of advantage when, terribly near to us, sounded the call of one of their horsemen, and soon all the others were in his footsteps again. This one, he who now led the pursuers by, perhaps, a quarter of a mile, gained on us stride by stride, until I could stand the thud of his horsehoofs on the turf behind no more. 'Here!' I said fiercely to Editha, 'take Gurth,' and put him with his sister in her arms, then, bidding them ride slowly forward, turned my good charger and paced him slowly back towards the oncoming knight, with stern anger smouldering in my heart.

There was a smooth, wide bit of grassy road between us in that centre, midnight Saxon forest. And never a gleam of light fell upon that ancient thoroughfare; never the faintest, thin white finger of a star pierced the black canopy of boughs overhead; it was as black as the kennel of Cerberus, and as I sat my panting war-horse I could not see my own hand stretched out before me—yet there, in that grim blackness, I met the Norman lance to lance, and sent his spirit whirling into the outer space!

I let him come within two hundred yards, then suddenly rose in my stirrups and, shouting Harold's warcry, since I did not deign to fall upon him unawares, 'Out! Out! England! England!' awaited his answer. It came in a moment, strange and inhuman in the black stillness, 'Rou! Ha Rou! Notre Dame!' and then—muttering between my tight-set teeth that surely that road was the road to hell for one of us—I bent my head down almost to my horse's ears, drove the spurs into him, and, gripping my long keen spear, thundered back upon my unseen foeman. With a shock that startled the browsing hinds a mile away, we were together. The Norman spear broke into splinters athwart my body—but mine, more truly held, struck him fair and full—I felt him like a great dead weight upon it, I felt his saddle-girths burst and fly, and then, as my own strong haft bent like a willow wand and snapped close by my hand, that midnight rider and his visionary steed went crashing to the ground. Bitterly I laughed as I turned my horse northwards once more, and from a black cavern-mouth on the hillside an owl echoed my grim merriment with ghastly glee.

Well, the night was all but done, yet were we not out of the toils. A little further on, Editha's floundering steed gave

out, and, just as we saw the pale turrets of the monastery shining in the open a mile ahead of us, the horse rolled over dead upon the grass and bracken.

'Quick, quick!' I said, 'daughter of Hardicanute,' and the good Saxon girl had passed the little ones to the pummel and put her own foot upon my toe and sprang on to my saddle crupper sooner than it takes to tell. Ah! and the nearer we came to our goal the closer seemed to be the throb and beat of the pursuing hoofs behind. And many an anxious time did I turn my head to watch the rogues closing with us, now ever and anon in sight, and many a word of encouragement did I whisper to the gallant charger whose tireless courage was standing us in such good case.

Noble beast! right well had he atoned his mistake that evening, and in a few minutes more we left the greenwood, and now he swept us over the Abbot's fat meadows, where the white morning mist was lying ghostly in wreaths and wisps upon the tall wet grass, and then we staggered into the foss and spurned the short turf, and so past the chequered cloisters, and pulled up finally at a low postern door I had espied as we approached the nearest wall of the noble Saxon monastery. Surely never was a traveller in such a hurry to be admitted as I, and I beat upon that iron-studded door with the knob of my dagger in a way which must have been heard in every cell of that sacred pile.

'My friend,' said a reverend head which soon appeared at a little window above, 'is this not unseemly haste at such an hour, and my Lord Abbot not yet risen to matins?'

'For the love of Heaven, father,' I said, 'come down and let us in!' for by this time the Normans were not a bow-shot away, and it still looked as if we might fall into their hands.

'Why,' said the unwotting monk, 'no doubt the hospitality of St. Olaf's walls was never yet refused to weary strangers, but you must go round to the lodge and rouse the porter there—truly he sleeps a little heavy, but no doubt he will admit you eventually.'

'Sir Priest,' I shouted in my rage and fear as the good old fellow went meandering on, 'our need is past all nicety of etiquette! Here is Editha of Voewood, the niece of your holy Abbot himself, and yonder are they who would harry and take her. Come down, come down, or by the Holy Rood our blood will for ever stain your ungenerous lintel!'

By this time the horsemen were breasting the smooth green glacis that led up to the monastery walls—half a dozen of them had outlived that wild race—the reins were upon their smoking chargers' necks, their reeking spurs red and ruddy with their haste, the spattered clay and loam of many a woodland rivulet chequering their horses to the shoulders, and each rider as he came shouting and clapping his hands upon the foam-speckled neck of these panting steeds that strained with thundering feet to the last hundred yards of green sward and the prize beyond.

Nearer and nearer they came, and my fair, tall Saxon wife put down her little ones by the opening of the door and covered them with her skirt as she turned her pale, white, tearless face to the primrose flush of the morning. And I—with bitterness and despair in my heart—unsheathed my Saxon sword and cast the scabbard fiercely to the ground, and stood out before them—my bare and heaving breast a fair target for those glistening oncoming Norman lances!

And then—just when that game was all but lost—there came the sweet patter of sandalled feet within, bolt by bolt was drawn back; willing hands were stretched out; the mother and her babes were dragged from the steps—even my charger was swallowed by the friendly shelter, and I myself was pulled back lastly—the postern slammed to, and, as the great locks turned again, and the iron bars fell into their stony sockets, we heard the Norman chargers' hoofs ringing on the flagstones, and the angry spear-heads rattling on the outer studs of that friendly oaken doorway.

Thus was the gentle franklin saved; but little did I think in saving her how long I was to lose her. I had but stabled my noble beast down by the Abbot's own palfrey, and fed and watered him with loving gratitude, and then had gone to Editha and my own supper (waited on by many a wondering, kindly one of these corded, russet Brothers), when that strange fate of mine overtook me once again. I know not how it was, but all on a sudden the world melted away into a shadowy fantasy, my head sank upon the supper-board, and there—between the goodly Abbot and the fair Saxon lady—I fell into a pleasant, dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER VIII

It was with indescribable sensations of mingled pain and satisfaction that life dawned again in my mind and body after the drowsy ending of the last chapter. To me the process was robbed of wonder—no idea crossed my mind but that I had slept an ordinary sleep; but to you, knowing the strange fate to which I am liable, will at once occur suspicion and expectation. Both these feelings will be gratified, yet I must tell my story, in my simple fashion, as it occurred.

This time, then, wakefulness came upon me in a prolonged grey and crimson vision; and for a long spell—now I think of it closely—probably for days, I was wrestling to unravel a strange web of light and gloom, in which all sorts of dreamy colours shone alternate in a misty blending upon the blank field of my mind. These colours were now and again swallowed up by an episode of deep obscurity, and the longer I studied them in an unwitting, listless way the more pronounced and definite they became, until at last they were no more a tinted haze of uncertain tone, but a chequered plan, silently passing over my shut eyelids at slow, measured intervals. Well, upon an afternoon—which, you will understand, I shall not readily forget—my eyes were suddenly opened, and, with a deep sigh, like one who wakes after a good night's repose, existence came back upon me, and, all motionless and dull, but very consciously alive and observant, I was myself again.

My first clear knowledge on that strange occasion was of the strains of a merle singing somewhere near; and, as those seraphic notes thrilled into the dry, unused channels of my hearing, the melody went through me to my utmost fibre. Next I felt, as a strong tonic elixir, a draught of cool spring air, full of the taste of sunshine and rich with the scent of a grateful earth, blowing down upon me and dissipating, with its sweet breath, the last mists of my sleepfulness. While these soft ministrations of the good nurse Nature put my blood into circulation again, filling me with a gentle vegetable pleasure, my newly opened eyes were astounded at the richness and variety of their early discoverings.

To the inexperience of my long forgetfulness everything

around was quaint and grotesque! Everything, too, was grey, and crimson, and green! As I stared and speculated, with the rapid artlessness of a baby novice, the new world into which I was thus born slowly took form and shape. It opened out into unknown depths, into aisles and corridors, into a wooden firmament overhead, chequered with clouds of timber-work and endless mazes (to my poor untutored mind) of groins and buttresses. Long grey walls—the same that had been the groundwork of my fancy—opened on either side, a great bare sweep of pavement was below them, and a hundred windows letting in the comely daylight above, but best of all was that long one by me which the crimson sun smote strongly upon its varied surface, and, gleaming through the gorgeous patchwork of a dozen parables in coloured glasses fell on the ground below in pools of many-coloured brightness. As I, inertly, watched these shifting beams, I perceived in them the cause of those gay mosaics with which the outer light had amused my sleeping fancies!

All these things in time appeared distinct enough to me, and tempted a trial of whether my physical condition equalled the apparent soundness of my senses. I had hardly had leisure as yet to wonder how I had come into this strange position, or to remember—so strong were the demands of surrounding circumstances on my attention—the last remote pages of my adventures—remote, I now began to entertain a certain consciousness, they were—I was so fully taken up with the matter of the moment, that it never occurred to me to speculate beyond, but the pressing question was in what sort of a body were those sparks of sight and sense burning.

It was pretty clear I was in a church, and a greater one than I had ever entered before. My position, I could tell, spoke of funeral rites, or rather the stiff comfort of one of those marble effigies with which sculptors have from the earliest times decorated tombs. And yet I was not entombed, nor did I think I was marble, or even the plaster of more frugal monumenters. My eyes served little purpose in the deepening light, while as yet I had not moved a muscle. As I thought and speculated, the dreadful fancy came across me that, if I were not stone, possibly I was the other extreme—a thin tissue of dry dust held together by the leniency of long silence and repose, and perhaps—dreadful consideration!—the sensations of life and pleasure now felt were threading those thin

wasted tissues, as I have seen the red sparks reluctantly wander in the black folds of a charred scroll, and finally drop out one by one for pure lack of fuel. Was I such a scroll? The idea was not to be borne, and, pitting my will against the stiffness of I knew not what interval, I slowly lifted my right arm and held it forth at length.

My chief sentiment at the moment was wonderment at the limb thus held out in the dim cathedral twilight, my next was a glow of triumph at this achievement, and then, as something of the stress of my will was taken off and the arm flew back with a jerk to its exact place by my side, a flood of pain rushed into it, and with the pain came slowly at first, but quickly deepening and broadening, a remembrance of my previous sleeps and those other awakenings of mine attended by just such thrills.

I will not weary you with repetitions or recount the throes that I endured in attaining flexibility. I have, by Heaven's mercy, a determination within me of which no one is fit to speak but he who knows the extent and number of its conquests. A dozen times, so keen were these griefs, I was tempted to relinquish the struggle, and as many times I triumphed, the unquenched fire of my mind but burning the brighter for each opposition.

At last, when the painted shadows had crept up the opposite wall inch by inch and lost themselves in the upper colonnades, and the gloom around me had deepened into blackness, I was victorious, and weak, and faint, and tingling; but, respiration and suppleness, I lay back and slept like a child.

This rest did me good. When I opened my eyes again it was with no special surprise (for the capacity of wonder is very volatile) that I saw the chancel where I lay had been lighted up, and that a portly Abbot was standing near, clad in brown fustian, corded round his ample middle, and picking his teeth with a little splinter of wood as he paced up and down muttering to himself something, of which I only caught such occasional fragments as 'fat capons,' 'spoilt roasts' (with a sniff in the direction of the side door of the abbey), and a malison on 'unseemly hours' (with a glance at an empty confessional near me), until he presently halted opposite—whereon I immediately shut my eyes—and regarded me with dull complacency.

As he did so an acolyte, a pale, grave recluse on whose

face vigils and abnegation had already set the lines of age, stepped out from the shadow, and, standing just behind his superior, also gazed upon me with silent attention.

'That blessed saint, Ambrose,' said the fat Abbot, pointing at me with his toothpick, apparently for want of something better to speak about, 'is nearly as good to us as the miraculous cruse was to the woman of Sarepta: what this holy foundation would do just now, when all men's minds are turned to war, without the pence we draw from pilgrims who come to kneel to him, I cannot think!'

'Indeed, sir,' said the sad-eyed youth, 'the good influence of that holy man knows no limit: it is as strong in death as no doubt it was in life. 'Twas only this morning that by leave of our Prior I brought out the great missals, and there found something, but not much, that concerned him.'

'Recite it, brother,' quoth the Abbot with a yawn, 'and if you know anything of him beyond the pilgrim pence he draws you know more than I do.'

'Nay, my Lord, 'tis but little I learnt. All the entries save the first in our journals are of slight value, for they but record from year to year how this sum and that were spent in due keeping and care of the sleeping wonder, and how many pilgrims visited this shrine, and by how much Mother Church benefited by their dutiful generosity.'

'And the first entry? What said it?'

'All too briefly, sir, it recorded in a faded passage that when the saintly Baldwin—may God assoil him!' quoth the friar, crossing himself—'when Baldwin, the first Norman Bishop in your Holiness's place, came here, he found yon martyr laid on a mean and paltry shelf among the brothers' cells. All were gone who could tell his life and history, but your predecessor, says the scroll, judging by the outward marvel of his suspended life, was certain of that wondrous body's holy beatitude, and, reflecting much, had him meetly robed and washed, and placed him here. 'Twas a good deed,' sighed the studious boy.

'Ah! and it has told to the advantage of the monastery,' responded his senior, and he came close up and bent low over me, so that I heard him mutter, 'Strange old relic! I wonder how it feels to go so long as that—if, indeed, he lives—without food. It was a clever thought of my predecessor to convert the old mummy-bundle of swaddles into a Norman saint!'

Baldwin was almost too good a man for the cloisters : with so much shrewdness, he should have been a courtier !

'Oh !' I thought, 'that is the way I came here, is it, my fat friend ?' and I lay as still as any of my comrade monuments while the old Abbot bent over me, chuckling to himself a bibulous chuckle, and pressing his short thick thumb into my sides as though he was sampling a plump pigeon or a gosling at a village fair.

'By the forty saints that Augustine sent to this benighted island, he takes his fasting wonderfully well ! He is firm in gammon and brisket—and, by that saintly band, he has even a touch of colour in his cheeks, unless these flickering lights play my eyes a trick !' whereupon his Reverence regarded me with lively admiration, little witting it was more than a breathless marvel, a senseless body, he was thus addressing.

In a moment he turned again, 'Thou didst not tell me the date of this old fellow's—Heaven forgive me !—of this blessed martyr's sleep. How long ago said the chronicles since this wondrous trance began ?'

'My Lord, I computed the matter, and here, by that veracious, unquestionable record, he has lain three hundred years and more !'

At this extraordinary statement the portly Abbot whistled as though he were on a country green, and I, so startling, so incredulous was it, involuntarily turned my head towards them, and gathered my breath to cast back that audacious lie. But neither movement nor sign was seen, for at that very moment the quiet novice laid a finger upon the monk's full sleeve and whispered hurriedly, 'Father !—the Earl—the Earl !' and both looked down the chancel.

At the bottom the door swung open, giving a brief sight of the pale-blue evening beyond, and there entered a tall and martial figure who advanced in warlike harness to the altar steps, and, placing down the helm decked with plumes that danced black and visionary in the dim cresset light, he fell upon one knee.

'Pax vobiscum, my son !' murmured the Abbot, extending his hands in blessing.

'Et vobis,' answered the gallant, 'da mihi, domine reverendissime, misericordiam vestram !' And at the sound of their voices I raised me to my elbow, for the young warlike Earl, as he bent him there, was sheathed and armed in a way

that I, though familiar with many camps, had never seen before.

Over his fine gold hauberk was a wondrous tabard, a magnificent emblazoned surtout, and, as he knelt, the light of the waxen altar tapers twinkled upon his steel vestments, they touched his yellow curls and sparkled upon the jewelled links of the chain he had about his neck; they gleamed from breast-plate and from belt; they illuminated the thick-sown pearls and sapphires of his sword-hilt, and glanced back in subdued radiance, as befitted that holy place, from gauntlets and gorget, from warlike furniture and lordly gems, down to the great rowels of the golden spurs that decked his knightly heels.

The acolyte had shrunk into the shadows, and the Earl had had his blessing, when the Abbot drew him into the recess where I lay in the moonbeams, that he might speak him the more privately—that Churchman little guessing what a good listener the stern, cold saint, so trim and prone upon his marble shrine, could be!

‘Ah, noble Codrington,’ quoth the monk, ‘truly we will to the confessional at once, since thou art in so much haste, and thou shalt certainly travel the lighter for leaving thy load of transgressions to the holy forgiveness of Mother Church; but first, tell me true, dost thou really sail for France to-night?’

‘Holy father, at this very moment our vessels are waiting to be gone, and all my good companions chafe and vex them for this my absence!’

‘What! and dost thou start for hostile shores and bloody feuds with half thy tithes and tolls unpaid to us? Noble Earl, wert thou to meet with any mischance yonder—which heaven prevent!—and didst thou stand ill with our exchequer in this particular, there were no hope for thee! I tell thee thou wert as surely damned if thou diedst owing this holy foundation aught of the poor contributions it asks of those to whom it ministers as if thy life were one long count of wickedness! I will not listen—I will not shrive thee until thou hast comported thyself duly in this most important particular!’

‘Good father, thy warmth is unnecessary,’ replied the Earl. ‘My worldly matters are set straight, and my steward has orders to pay thee in full all that may be owing between us; ’twas spiritual settlement I came to seek.’

‘Oh!’ quoth his Reverence, in an altered tone. ‘Then thou art free at once to follow the promptings of thy noble

Instinct, and serve thy King and country as thou listest. I fear this will be a bloody war you go to.'

'Tis like to be,' said the soldier, brightening up and speaking out boldly on a subject he loved, his fine eyes flashing with martial fire—'already the yellow sun of Picardy flaunts on Edward's royal lilies!'

'Ah,' put in the monk, 'and no doubt ripens many a butt of noble malmsey.'

'Already the red soil of Flanders is redder by the red blood of our gallant chivalry!'

'Yet even then not half so red, good Earl, as the ripe brew of Burgundy—a jolly mellow brew that has stood in the back part of the cellar, secure in the loving forbearance of twenty masters. Talk of renown—talk of thy leman—talk of honour and the breaking of spears—what are all these to such a vat of beaded pleasures? I tell thee, Codrington, not even the fabled pool wherein the rhymers say the cursed Paynim looks to foretaste the delights of his sinful heaven reflects more joy than such a cobwebbed tub! Would that I had more of them!' added the bibulous old priest after a pause, and sighing deeply. As he did so an idea occurred to him, for he exclaimed, 'Look thee, my gallant boy! Thou art bound whither all this noble stuff doth come from, and 'tis quite possible in the rough and tumble of bloody strife thou may'st be at the turning inside out of many a fat roost and many a well-stocked cellar. Now, if this be so, and thou wilt remember me when thou seest the gallant drink about to be squandered on the loose gullets of base, scullion troopers, why then 'tis a bargain, and, in paternal acknowledgment of this thy filial duty, I will hear thy confession now, and thy penance, I promise, shall not be such as will inconvenience thine active life.'

The knight bent his head, somewhat coldly I thought, and then they turned and went over to the oriel confessional, where the moonlight was throwing from the window above a pallid pearly transcript of the Mother and her sweet Nazarene Babe, all in silver and opal tints, upon the sacred woodwork, and as the priest's black shadow blotted the tender picture out I heard him say—

'But mind, it must be good and ripe—'tis that vintage with the two white crosses down by the vent that I like best—an thou sendest me any sour Calais layman-tipple, thou art

a forsworn heretic, with all thy sin afresh upon thee—so discriminate,' and the worthy Churchman entered to shrive and forgive, and as the casement closed upon him the sweet, silent, indifferent shadows from above blossomed again upon the doorway.

Dreamy and drowsy I lay back and thought and wondered, for how long I know not, but for long—until the dim aisles had grown midnight-silent and the moon had set, and then an owl hooted on the ledges outside, and at that sound, with a start and a sigh, I awoke once more.

'Fools!' I muttered, thinking over what I had heard with dreamy insequence—'fools, liars, to set such a date upon this rest of mine! Drunken churls! I will go at once to my fair Saxon, to my sweet nestlings—that is, if they be not yet to bed—and to-morrow I will give that meagre acolyte such a lesson in the misreading of his missal-margins as shall last him till Doomsday. By St. Dunstan! he shall play no more pranks with me—and yet, and yet, my heart misgives me—my soul is loaded with foreboding, my spirit is sick within me. Where have I come to? Who am I? Gods! Hapi, Amenti of the golden Egyptian past, Skogula, Mista of the Saxon hills and woods, grant that this be not some new mischance—some other horrible lapse!' and I sat up there on the white stone, and bowed my head and dangled my apostolic heels against my own commemorative marbles below, while gusts of alternate dread and indignation swept through the leafless thickets of remembrance.

Presently these meditations were disturbed by some very different outward sensations. There came stealing over the consecrated pavements of that holy pile the sound of singing, and it did not savour of angelic harmony: it was rough, and jolly, and warbled and tripped about the columns and altar steps in most unseemly sprightliness. 'Surely never did St. Gregory pen such a rousing chorus as that,' I thought to myself, as, with ears pricked, I listened to the dulcet harmonies. And along with the music came such a merry odour as made me thirsty to smell of it. 'Twas not incense—'twas much more like cinnamon and nutmegs—and never did censer—never did myrrh and galbanum smell so much of burnt sack and roasted crab-apples as that unctuous, appetising taint.

I got down at once off my slab, and, being mighty hungry, as I then discovered, I followed up that trail like a sleuth-hound

on a slot. It was not reverent, it did not suit my saintship, but down the steps I went hot and hungry, and passed the reredos and crossed the apse, and round the pulpit, and over the curricula, and through the aisles, and by many a shrine where the tapers dimly burnt I pressed, and so, with the scent breast high, I flitted through an open archway into the chequered cloisters. Then, tripping heedlessly over the lettered slabs that kept down the dust of many a roystering abbas, I—the latest hungry one of the countless hungry children of time—followed down that jolly trail, my apostolic linens tucked under my arm, jewelled mitre on a head more accustomed to soldier wear, and golden crook carried, alas! like a hunter lance ‘at trail’ in my other hand, till I brought the quest to bay. At the end of the cloisters was a door set ajar, and along by the jamb a mellow streak of yellow light was streaming out, rich with those odours I had smelt and laden with laughter and the sound of wine-soaked voices noisy over the end, it might be, of what seemed a goodly supper. I advanced to the light, listened a moment, and then in my imperious way pushed wide the panel and entered.

It was the refectory of the monastery, and a right noble hall wherein ostentation and piety struggled for dominion. Overhead the high peaked ceiling was a maze of cunningly wrought and carved woodwork, dark with time and harmonised with the assimilating touches of age. Round by the ample walls right and left ran a corridor into the dim far distance; and crucifix and golden ewer, cunning saintly image, and noble-branching silver candlesticks, gleamed in the dusk against the ebony and polish of balustrade and panelling. Under the heavy glow of all these things the Brothers’ bare wooden table extended in long demure lines; but wooden platter and black leathern mugs were now all deserted and empty.

It was from the upper end came the light and jollity. Here a wider table was placed across the breadth of the hall, and upon it all was sumptuous magnificence—holy poverty here had capitulated to priestly arrogance. Silver and gold, and rare glasses from cunning Italian moulds, enriched about with shining enamels wherein were limned many an ancient heathen fancy, shone and sparkled on that monkish board. On either side, in mighty candelabra, bequeathed by superstition and fear, there twinkled a hundred waxen candles, and up to the flames of these steamed, as I looked, many a costly

dish uncovered, and many a mellow brew beaded and shining to the very brim of those jewelled horns and beakers that were chief accessories to that pleasant spread.

They who sat here seemed, if a layman might judge, right well able to do justice to these things. Half a dozen of them, jolly, rosy priors and prelates, were round that supper table, rubicund with wine and feeding, and in the high carved chair, coif thrown back from head, his round ruddy face aflush with liquor, his fat red hand asprawl about his flagon, and his small eyes glazed and stupid in his drunkenness, sat my friend the latest Abbot of St. Olaf's fane.

He had been singing, and, as I entered, the last distich died away upon his lips, his round, close-cropped head, o'erwhelmed with the wine he loved so much, sank down upon the table, the red vintage ran from the over-turned beaker in a crimson streak, and while his boon comrades laughed long and loud his holiness slept unmindful. It was at this very moment that I entered, and stood there in my ghostly linen, stern and pale with fasting, and frowning grimly upon those godless revellers. Jove! it was a sight to see them blanch—to see the terror leap from eye to eye as each in turn caught sight of me—to see their jolly jaws drop down, and watch the sickly pallor sweeping like icy wind across their countenances. So grim and silent did we face each other in that stern moment that not a finger moved—not a pulse, I think, there beat in all their bodies, and in that mighty hall not a sound was heard save the drip, drip of the Abbot's malmsey upon the floor and his own husky snoring as he lay asleep amid the costly litter of his swinish meal.

Stern, inflexible, there by the black backing of the portal I frowned upon them—I, whom they only deemed of as a saint dead three hundred years before—I, whom lifeless they knew so well, now stood vengeful upon their threshold, scowling scorn and contempt from eyes where no life should have been—can you doubt but they were sick at heart, with pallid cheeks answering to coward consciences? For long we remained so, and then, with a wild yell of terror they were all on foot, and, like homing bats by a cavern mouth, were scrambling and struggling into the gloom of the opposite doorway. I let them escape, then, stalking over to the archway, thrust the wicket to upon the heels of the last flyer, and glad to be so rid of them, shot the bolt into the socket and barred that entry.

Then I went back to my friend the Abbot, and stood, reflective, behind him, wondering whether it were not a duty to humanity to rid it of such a knave even as he slept there. But while I stood at his elbow contemplating him, the unwonted silence told upon his dormant faculties, and presently the heavy head was raised, and, after an inarticulate murmur or two, he smiled imbecilely, and, picking up the thread of his revelry, hiccuped out: 'The chorus, good brothers!—the chorus—and all together!'—

Die we must, but let us die drinking at an inn.
Hold the winecup to our lips sparkling from the bin!
So, when angels flutter down to take us from our sin,
'Ah! God have mercy on these sots!' the cherubs will begin.

'Why, you rogues!' he said, as his drunken melody found no echo in the great hall—'why, you sleepy villains! am I a strolling troubadour that I should sing thus alone to you?' And then, as his bleared and dazzled eyes wandered round the empty places, the spilt wine and overturned trestles, he smiled again with drunken cunning. 'Ah!' he muttered; 'then they must be all under the tables! I thought that last round of sack would finish them! Hallo! there! Ambrose! De Vœux! Jervaulx! Jolly comrades!—sleepy dogs! Come forth! Fie on ye!—to call yourselves good monks, and yet to leave thy simple, kindly Prior thus to himself!' and he pulled up the table linen and peered below. Sorely was the Churchman perplexed to see nothing; and first he glared up among the oaken rafters, as though by chance his fellows had flown thither, and then he stared at the empty places, and so his gaze wandered round, until, in a minute or two, it had made the complete circle of the place, and finally rested on me, standing, immovable, a pace from his elbow.

At first he stared upon me with vapid amusement, and then with stupid wonder. But 'twas not more than a second or two before the truth dawned upon that hazy intellect, and then I saw the thick short hands tighten upon the carving of his priestly throne, I saw the wine flush pale upon his cheeks, and the drunken light in his eyes give place to the glare of terror and consternation. Just as they had done before him, but with infinite more intensity, he blanched and withered before my unrelenting gaze, he turned in a moment before my grim, imperious frown, from a jolly, rubicund old bibber, rosy

and quarrelsome with his supper, into a cadaverous, sober-minded confessor, lantern-jawed and yellow—and then with a hideous cry he was on foot and flying for the doorway by which his friends had gone! But I had need of that good confessor, and ere he could stagger a yard the golden apostolic crook was about the ankle of the errant sheep, and the Prior of St. Olaf's rolled over headlong upon the floor.

I sat down to supper, and as I helped myself to venison pastie and malmsey I heard the beads running through the recumbent Abbot's fingers quicker than water runs from a spout after a summer thunder shower. 'Misericordia, Domine, nobis!' murmured the old sinner, and I let him grovel and pray in his abject panic for a time, then bade him rise. Now, the fierceness of this command was somewhat marred, because my mouth was very full just then of pastie crust, and the accents appeared to carry less consternation into my friend's heart than I had intended. The paternoster began to run with more method and coherence, and, soon finding he was not yet halfway to that nether abyss he had seen opening before him, he plucked up a little heart of grace. Besides, the avenger was at supper, and making mighty inroads into the provender the Abbot loved so well: this took off the rough edge of terror, and was in itself so curious a phenomenon that little by little, with the utmost circumspection, the monk raised his head and looked at me. I kept my baleful eyes turned away, and busied me with my loaded platter—which, by the way, was far the most interesting item of the two—and so by degrees he gained confidence, and came into a sitting position, and gazed at the hungry saint, so active with the victuals, wonder and awe playing across his countenance. 'I see, Sir Priest,' I said, 'you have a good cook yonder in the buttery,' but the Abbot was as yet too dazed to answer, so I went on to put him more at his ease (for I designed to ask him some questions later on), 'now, where I come from, the great fault of the cooks is, they appreciate none of your Norman niceties—they broil and roast for ever, as though everyone had a hunter appetite, and thus I have often been weary of their eternal messes of pork and kine.'

'Holy saints!' quoth the Abbot. 'I did not dream you had any cooks at all.'

'No cooks! Thou fat wine-vat, what, didst thou think we ate our viands raw?'

'Heaven forbid!' the Abbot gasped. 'But, truly, your sanctity's experiences astound me! 'Tis all against the canons. And if they be thus, as you say, at their trenchers, may I ask, in all humbleness and humility, how your blessed friends are at their flagons?'

'Ah! Sir, good fellows enough my jolly comrades, but caring little for thy red and purple vintages, liking better the merry ale that autumn sends, and the honeyed mead, yet in their way as merry roysterers for the most part as though they were all Norman Abbots,' I said, glancing askance at him.

By this time the Prior was on his feet, as sober as could be, but apparently infinitely surprised and perplexed at what he saw and heard. He cogitated, and then he diffidently asked: 'An it were not too presumptive, might I ask if your saintship knows the blessed Oswald?'

'Not I.'

'Nor yet the holy Sewall de Montaign?' he queried with a sigh—'once head of these halls and cells.'

'Never heard of him in my life.'

'Nor yet of Grindal? or Gerard of Bayeux? or the saintly Anselm, my predecessor in that chair you fill?' groaned the jolly confessor.

'I tell you, priest, I know none of them—never heard their names or aught of them till now.'

'Alas! alas!' quoth the monk, 'then if none of these have won to heaven, if none of these are known to thee so newly thence, there can be but small hope for me!' And his fat round chin sank upon his ample chest, and he heaved a sigh that set the candles all a-flickering halfway down the table.

'Why, priest, what art thou talking of?—Paradise and long-dead saints? 'Twas of the Saxons—Harold's Saxons—my jolly comrades and allies in arms when last in life, I spoke.'

'Ho! ho! Was that so? Why, I thought thou wert talking of things celestial all this while, though, in truth, thy speech sorted astounding ill with all I had heard before!'

'I think, Father,' I responded, 'there is more burnt sack under thy ample girdle than wit beneath thy cowl. But never mind, we will not quarrel. Sit down, fill yon tankard (for dryness will not, I fancy, improve thy eloquence), and tell me soberly something of this nap of mine.'

'Ah, but, Sir, I was never very good at such studious work,'

the monk replied, seating himself with uneasy obedience: 'il I might but fetch in our Clerk—though, in truth, I cannot imagine why and whither he has gone—he is one who has by heart the things thou wouldst know.'

'Stir a foot, priest,' I said, with feigned anger, 'and thou art but a dead Abbot! Tell me so much as your muddled brain can recall. Now, when I supped here before that yellow-skinned Norman William sat upon the English throne——'

'Saints in Paradise! what, he who routed Harold, and founded yonder abbey of Battle—impossible!'

'What, dost thou bandy thy "impossible" with me? Slave, if thou cast again but one atom of doubt, one single iota of thy heretic criticism here, thou shalt go thyself to perdition and seek Sewall de Monteign and Gerard of Bayeux,' and I laid my hand upon my crook.

'Misericordia! misericordia!' stammered the Abbot. 'I meant no ill whatever, but the extent of thy Holiness's astounding abstinence overwhelmed me.'

'Why, then to your story. But I am foolish to ask. You cannot, you dare not, tell me again that lie of thy acolyte, that three hundred years have passed since then. Look up, say 'twas false, and that single word shall unburden here,' and I struck my breast, 'a soul of a load of dread and fear heavier than ever was lifted by priestly absolution before.'

But still he hung his face, and I heard him mutter that fifty white-boned Abbots lay in the cloisters, heel to head, and the first one was a kinsman of William's, and the last was his own predecessor.

'Then, if thou darest not answer this question, who reigns above us now? Has the Norman star set, as I once hoped it might, behind the red cloud of rebellion? or does it still shine to the shame of all Saxons?'

'Sir Saint,' answered the monk, with a little touch of the courage and pride of his race gleaming for a moment through his drunken humility, 'rebellion never scared the Norman power—so much I know for certain; and Saxon and Norman are one by the grace of God, linked in brotherhood under the noble Edward. Expurgate thy divergences; erase "invaders and invaded" from thy memory, and drink as I drink—if, indeed, all this be news to thee—for the first time to "England and to English!"'

'Waes hael, Sir Monk—"England and the English!"'

'Drink hael, good saint!' he answered, giving me the right acceptance of my flagon challenge, 'and I do hereby receive thee most paternally into the national fold! Nevertheless, thou art the most perplexing martyr that ever honoured this holy fane'—and he raised the great silver cup to his lips and took a mighty pull. Then he gazed reflectively for a moment into the capacious measure, as though the pageantry of history were passing across the shining bottom in fantastic sequence, and looked up and said—'Most wonderful—most wonderful! Why, then, you know nothing of William the Red?'

'The William I knew was red enough in the hands.'

'Ah! but this other one who followed him was red on the head as well, and an Anselm was Archbishop while he reigned.'

'Well, and who came next in thy preposterous tale?'

'Henry Plantagenet—unless all this sack confuses my memory—I have told thee, good saint, I am better at mass and breviar than at missals and scroll.'

'And better, no doubt, than either at thy cellar score-book, priest! But what befell your Henry?'

'Frankly, I am not very certain; but he died eventually.'

'Tis the wont of kings no less than of lesser folk. Pass me yon bread platter, and fill thy flagon. So much history, I see, makes thee husky and sad!'

'Well, then came Stephen de Blois, the son of Adeliza, who was daughter to the Conqueror.'

'Forsworn priest!' I exclaimed at that familiar name, leaping to my feet and swinging the great gold flail into the air, 'that is a falser lie than any yet. The noble Adeliza was troth to Harold, and had no children; unsay it, or——' and here the crook poised ominously over the shrieking Abbot's head.

'I lied! I lied!' yelled the monk, cowering under the swing of my weapon like a partridge beneath a falcon's circlings, and then, as the crook was thrown down on the table again, he added; "'Twas Adela, I meant; but what it should matter to thee whether it were Adeliza or Adela passes my comprehension,' and the monk smoothed out his ruffled feathers.

'Proceed! It is not for thee to question. Wrought Stephen anything more notable to thy mind than Henry?'

‘Well, Sir, I recall, now thou putttest me to it, that he laid rough hands upon the sacred persons of our Bishops once or twice, yet he was much indebted to them. Didst ever draw sword in a good quarrel, Sir Saint?’

‘Didst every put thy fingers into a venison pastie, Sir Priest? Because, if thou hast, as often, and oftener, have I done according to thy supposition.’

‘Why, then, I wonder you lay still upon yonder white marble slab while all the northern Bishops were up in arms for Stephen, and on bloody Northallerton Moor broke the power of the cruel Northmen for ever. That day, Sir, the sacred flags of St. Cuthbert of Durham, St. Peter of York, St. John of Beverley, St. Wilfred of Ripon, not to mention the holy Thurstan’s ruddy pennon, led the van of battle. ’Tis all set out in a pretty scroll that we have over the priory fire-place, else, as you will doubtless guess, I had never remembered so much of detail.’

‘Anyhow, it is well recalled. Who came next?’

‘Another Henry, and he made the saintly Thomas Becket Archbishop in the year of Grace 1162, and afterwards the holy prelate was gathered to bliss.’

‘Thy history is mostly exits and entries, but perhaps it is none the less accurate for all that. And now thou wilt say this Henry was no more lasting than his kinsman—he too died.’

‘Completely and wholly, Sir, so that the burly Richard Cœur de Lion reigned in his stead; and then came John, who was at best but a vaward vassal of St. Peter’s Chair.’

‘Down with him, jolly Abbot! And mount another on the shaky throne of thy fantastic narrative. I am weary of the succession already, and since we have come so far away from where I thought we were I care for no great niceties of detail. Put thy Sovereigns to the amble, make them trot across the stage of thy hazy recollection, or thou wilt be asleep before thou canst stall and stable half of them.’

‘Well, then, a Henry came after John, and an Edward followed him—then another of the name—and then a third—that noble Edward in whose sway the realm now is, and in whom (save some certain exactions of rent and taxes) Mother Church perceives a glorious and a warlike son. But it is a long muster roll from the time of thy Norman monarch to this year of grace 1846.’

'A long roll!' I muttered to myself, turning away from my empty plate—'horrible, immense, and vast! Good Lord! what shadows are these men who come and go like this! Wonderful and dreadful! that all those tinselled puppets of history—those throbbing epitomes of passion and godlike hopes—should have budded, and decayed, and passed out into the void, finding only their being, to my mind, in the shallow vehicle of this base Churchman's wine-vault breath. Dreadful, quaint, abominable! to think that all these flickering human things have paced across the sunny white screen of life—like the coloured fantasies yonder stained windows threw upon my sleeping eyes—and yet I only but wake hungry and empty, unchanged, unmindful, careless!—Priest!' I said aloud, so sudden and fiercely that the monk leapt to his feet with a startled cry from the drunken sleep into which he had fallen—'priest! dost fear the fires of thy purgatory?'

'Ah, glorious miracle! but—but surely thou wouldst not——'

'Why, then, answer me truly, swear by that great crucified form there shining in the taper light above thy throne, swear by Him to whom thou nightly offerest the hyssop incense of thy beastly excesses—swear, I say!'

'I do—I do!' exclaimed St. Olaf's priest in extravagant terror, as I towered before him with all my old Phrygian fire emphasised by the sanctity of my extraordinary repute. 'I swear!' he said; but, seeing me hesitate, he added, 'What wouldst thou of thy poor, unworthy servant?'

'Twas not so easy to answer him, and I hung my head for a moment; then said: 'When I died—in the Norman time, thou rememberest—there was a woman here, and two sunny little ones, blue in the eyes and comely to look upon—There, shut thy stupid mouth, and look not so astounded! I tell thee they were here—here, in St. Olaf's Hall—here, at this very high table between me and St. Olaf's Abbot—three tender flowers, old man, set in the black framing of a hundred of thy corded wondering brotherhood. Now, tell me—tell me the very simple truth—is there such a woman here, tall and fair, and melancholy gracious? Are there such babes in thy cloisters or cells?'

'It is against the canons of our order.'

'A malison on thee and thy order! Is there, then, no effigy in yon chancel, no tablet, no record of her—I mean of that noble lady and those comely little ones?'

‘I know of none, Sir Saint.’

‘Think again. She was a franklin, she had wide lands; she revered thy Church, and in her grief, being woman, she would turn devout. Surely she built some shrine, or made thee a portico, or blazoned a window to shame rough Fate with the evidence of her gentleness?’

‘There is none such in St. Olaf’s. But, now thou speakest of shrines, I do remember one some hours’ ride from here; unroofed and rotten, but, nevertheless, such as you suggest, and in it there is a cenotaph, and a woman laid out straight. She is cracked across the middle and mossy, and there be two small kneeling figures by her head, but I never looked nicely to determine whether they were blessed cherubin or but common children. The shepherds who keep their flocks there and shelter from the showers under the crumbling walls call the place Voewood.’

‘Enough, priest,’ I said, as I paced hither and thither across the hall in gloomy grief, and then taking my hasty resolution I turned to him sternly—‘Make what capital thou list of to-night’s adventure, but remember the next time thou seest a saint may Heaven pity thee if thou art not in better sort—turn thy face to the wall!’

The frightened Abbot obeyed; I shed in a white heap upon the floor my saintly vestments, my mitre and crook on top, and then, stepping lightly down the hall, mounted upon a bench, unfastened and threw open a lattice, and, placing my foot upon the sill, sprang out into the night and open world again!

I walked and ran until the day came, southwards constantly, now and again asking my way of an astonished hind, but for the most part guided by some strange instinct, and before the following noon I was at my old Saxon homestead.

But could it be Voewood? Not a vestige of a house anywhere in that wide grassy glade where Voewood stood, not a sign of life, not a sound to break the stillness! Near by there ran a little brook, and against it, just as the monk had said, were the four grey walls of a lonely roofless shrine. Over the shrine, on the very spot where Voewood stood—alas! alas!—was a long grassy knoll, crowned with hawthorns and little flowers shining in the sunlight. I went into the ruined chapel, and there, stained and lichened and broken, in the thorny embrace of the brambles, lay the marble figure of my sweet

Saxon wife, and by the pillow—green-velveted with the tapestry of nature—knelt her little ones on either side. I dropped upon my knee and buried my face in her crumbling bosom and wept. What mattered the eclipse while I slept of all those kingly planets that had shone in the English firmament compared to the setting of this one white star of mine? I rushed outside to the mound that hid the forgotten foundations of my home, and, as the passion swept up and engulfed my heart, I buried my head in my arms and hurled myself upon the ground and cursed that tender green moss that should have been so hard—cursed that golden English sunlight that suited so ill with my sorrows—and cursed again and again in my bitterness those lying blossoms overhead that showered down their petals on me, saying it was spring, when it was the blackest winter of desolation, the night-time of my disappointment.

CHAPTER IX

I am not of a nature to be long overwhelmed. All that night and far into next day I lay upon Voewood, alternately sleeping and bewailing the chance which tossed me to and fro upon the restless ocean of time, and then I arose. I threw my arms round each in turn of those dear, callous ones in the chapel, and pushed back the brambles from them, and wept a little, and told myself the pleasure-store of life was now surely spent to the very last coin—then, with a mighty effort, tore myself away. Again and again, while the smooth swell of the grassy mound under which the foundations of the long-destroyed Saxon homestead with the little chapel by the rivulet were in sight, I turned and turned, loth and sad. But no sooner had the leafy screen hid them than I set off and ran whither I knew not, nor cared—indeed, I was so terribly drawn by that spot—so close in the meshes of its association, so thrall'd by the presence of the dust of all I had had to lose or live for, that I feared, if the best haste were not made, I should neither haste nor fly from that terribly sweet hillock of lamentations for ever.

What could it matter where my wandering feet were turned? All the world was void and vapid, east and west alike indifferent, to one so homeless, and thus I stalked on

through glades and coppices for hours and days, with my chin upon my chest, and feeling marvellously cheap and lonely. But enough of this. Never yet did I crave sympathy of any man : why should I seem to seek it of you—sceptical and remote ?

There were those who appeared at that time to take compassion on me unasked, and I remember the countrywomen at whose cottage doors I hesitated a moment—yearning with pent-up affection over their curly-headed little ones—added to the draught of water I begged such food as their slender stores provided. One of these gave me a solid green forester's cape and jerkin ; another put shoes of leather upon my feet ; and a third robbed her husband's pegs to find me headwear, and so through the gifts of their unspoken good-will I came by degrees into the raiment of the time.

But nothing seemed to hide the inexpressible strangeness I began to carry about with me. No sorry apparel, no woodman's cap drawn down over my brows, no rustic clogs upon my wandering feet, masked me for a moment from the awe and wonder of these good English people. None of them dared ask me a question, how I came or where I went, but everywhere it was the same. They had but to look upon me, and up they rose, and in silence, and, drawn involuntarily by that stern history of mine they knew naught of, they ministered to me according to their means. The women dropped their courtesies, and—unasked, unasking—fed the grim and ragged stranger from their cleanest platter, the men stood by and uncapped them to my threadbare russet, and whole groups would watch spell-bound upon the village mounds as I paced moodily away.

In course of time my grief began to mend, so that it was presently possible to take a calmer view of the situation, and to bend my thoughts upon what it were best to do next. Though I love the greenwood, and am never so happy as when solitary, yet my nature was not made, alas ! for sylvan idleness. I felt I had the greatest admiration and brotherhood with those who are recluse and shun the noisy struggles of the world ; yet had I always been a leader of men, I now remembered, as all the pages of my past history came one by one before me and I meditated upon them day and night. No, I was not made to walk these woods alone, and, if another argument were wanting, it were found in the fact that I

was here exposed to every weather, hungry and shelterless ! I could not be for ever begging from door to door, eternally throwing my awe-inspiring shadow across the lintels of these gentle-mannered woodland folk, and my tastes, though never gluttonous, rebelled most strongly against the perpetual dietary of herbs and roots and limpid brooks.

Reflecting on these things one day, as I lay friendless and ragged in the knotty elbow of a great oak's earth-bare roots, after some weeks of homeless wandering, I fell asleep, and dreamed all the fair shining landscape were a tented field, and all the rustling rushes down by the neighbouring streamlet's banks were the serried spears of a great concourse of soldiers defiling by, the sparkle of the sunlight on the ripples seeming like the play of rays upon their many warlike trappings, the yellow flags and water-flowers making no poor likeness of dancing banners and bannerets.

'Twas a simple dream, such as came of an empty stomach and a full head, yet somehow I woke from that sleep with more of my old pulse of pleasure and life beating in my veins than had been there for a long time. And with the wish for another spell of bright existence, spent in the merry soldier mood that suited me so well, came the means to attain it.

In the first stage of these wanderings, while still fresh from the cloister shrine, I had paid but the very smallest heed to my attire and its details. I was clad in clean, sufficient wraps, so much was certain, with a linen belt about me, and sandals upon my feet ; yet even this was really more than I noticed with any closeness. But as I ran and walked, and my flesh grew hot and nervous with the fever of my sorrow, a constant chafing of my feet and hands annoyed me. I had stopped by a woodside river bank, and there discovered with wrathful irritation that upon my bare apostolic toes and upon my sanctified thumbs—those soldier thumbs still flat and strong with years of pressing sword-hilts and bridle-reins—there were glistening in holy splendour such a set of gorgeous gems as had rarely been taken for a scramble through the woods before ! There were beryls and sapphires and pearls, and ruddy great rubies from the castans of Paynim chiefs slain by long-dead Crusaders, and onyx and emerald from Cyprus and the remotest East set in rude red gold by the rough artificers of rearward ages, and all these put upon me, no doubt, after the manner in which at that time credulous

piety was wont to bedeck the shrine and images of saints and martyrs. I was indeed at that moment the wealthiest beggar who ever sat forlorn and friendless on a grassy lode. But what was all this glistening store to me, desolate and remorseful, with but one remembrance in my heart, with but one pitiful sight before my eyes? I pulled the shining gems angrily from my swollen fingers and toes and hurled them one by one, those princely toys, into the muddy margin of the stream, and there, in that rude setting, ablazing, red, and green, and white, and hot and cool, with their wonderful scintillations they mocked me. They mocked me as I sat there with my chin in my palms, and twinkled and shone among the sludge and scum so merrily to the flickering sunshine, that presently I laughed a little at those cheerful trinkets that could shine so bravely in the contumacy of chance, and after a time I picked up one and rinsed it and held it out in the sunshine, and found it very fair—so fair, indeed, that a glimmer of listless avarice was kindled within me, and later on I broke a hawthorn spray and groped among the sedge and mire and hooked out thus, in better mood, the greater part of my strange inheritance.

Then, here I was, upon this other bank, waking up after my dream, and, turning over the better to watch the fair landscape stretching below, my waistcloth came unbound, and out upon the sand amid the oak roots rolled those ambient, glistening rings again. At first I was surprised to see such jewels in such a place, staring in dull wonderment while I strove to imagine whence they came, but soon I remembered piece by piece their adventure as has been told to you, and now, with the warm blood in my veins again, I did not throw them by, but lay back against the oak and chuckled to myself as my ambitious heart fluttered with pleasure under my draughty rags, and crossed my legs, and weighed upon my finger-tips, and inventoried, and valued, all in the old merchant spirit, those friendly treasures.

How unchanging are the passions of humanity! I tossed those radiant playthings up in the sunlight and caught them, I counted and recounted them, I tore shreds from my clothing and cleaned and polished each in turn, I started up angry and suspicious as a kite's wheeling shadow fell athwart my hoard. Forgotten was hunger and houselessness—I no longer mourned so keenly the emptiness of the world or the brevity of friend-

ships: I, to whom these treasures should have been so light, overlooked nearly all my griefs in them, and was as happy for the moment in this unexpected richness as a child.

And then, after an hour or so of cheerful avarice, I sat up sage and reflective, and, having swathed and wrapped my store safely next my heart, I must needs climb the first grassy knoll showing above the woodlands and search the horizon for some place wherein a beginning might be made of spending it. Nothing was to be seen thence but a goodly valley spread out at a distance, and there my steps were turned—for men, like streams, ever converge upon the lowlands.

Now that I had the heart to fall into beaten tracks, coming out of the sheltering thicket byways for the first time since quitting the mounds over the ashes of Voewood, I observed more of the new people and times among whom fate had thus thrown me. And truly it was a very strange meeting with these folk, who were they whom I had known when last I walked these woods, and yet were not. I would stare at them in perplexity, marvelling at the wondrous blend of nations I saw in face and hair and eyes. Their very clothes were novel to me, and unaccountable, while their speech seemed now the oddest union of many tongues—all foreign, yet upon these English lips most truly native—and wondrous to listen to. I would pass a sturdy yokel leading out his teams to ploughing, and when I spoke to him it made my ears tingle to hear how antique Roman went hand in hand with ancient British, and good Norman was linked upon his lips with better Saxon! That polyglot youth, knowing no tongue but one, was most scholarly in his ignorance. To him 'twas English that he spoke; but to me, who had lived through the making of that noble speech, who knew each separate individual quantity that made that admirable whole, his jargon was most wonderful!

Nor was I yet fully reconciled to the unity of these new people and their mutual kinsmanship. I could not remember all feuds were ended. When down the path would come a more than usually dusky wayfarer—a trooper, perhaps, with leather jerkin, shield on back, and sword by side—I would note his swart complexion and dark black hair, and then 'twas 'Ho! ho! a Norman villain straying from his band!' And back I would step among the shadows, and, gripping the staff that was my only weapon, scowl on him while he whistled by, half mindful, in my forgetfulness, to help the Saxon cause

by rapping the fellow over his head. On the other hand, if one chanced upon me who had the flaxen hair and pleasant eyes of those who once were called my comrades—if he wore the rustic waistless smock, as many did still, of hind or churl—why, then, I was mighty glad to see that Saxon, and crossed over, friendly, to his pathway, bespeaking him in the pure tongue of his forefathers, asked him of garth and homestead, and how fared his thane and heretoga—all of which, it grieved me afterwards to notice, perplexed him greatly.

Not only in these ways was there much for me to learn, but, with speech and fashions, modes and means of life had changed. At one time I met a strange piebald creature, all tags and tassels, white and red, with a hundred little bells upon him, a cap with peaks hanging down like asses' ears, and a staff, with more bells, tucked away under his arm. He was plodding along dejected, so I called to him civilly.

'Why, friend! Who are you?'

'I am a fool, Sir!'

'Never mind,' I replied cheerfully, 'there is the less likelihood of your ever treading this earth companionless.'

'Why, that is true enough,' he said, 'for it was too much wisdom that sent me thus solitary afield,' and he went on to tell me how he had been ejected that morning from a neighbouring castle. 'I had belauded and admired my master for years—therein I had many friends, yet was a fool. Yesterday we quarrelled about some trifle—I called him beast and tyrant, and therein, being just and truthful, I lost my place and comrades over the first wise thing I said for years!—it is a most sorry, disorderly world.'¹

This strange individual, it seemed, lived by folly, and, though I had often noticed that wit was not a fat profession, I could not help regarding him with wonder. He was, under his veneer of shallowness, a most gentle and observant jester. Long study in the arts of pleasing had given him a very delicate discrimination of moods and men. He could fit a merriment to the capacity of any man's mind with extraordinary acumen. He had stores of ill-assorted learning in the empty galleries of his head, and wherewithal a kindly gentle heart, a whimsical companionship for sad-eyed humanity which made him haste to laugh at everything through fear of crying over it. We

¹ The Phœnician must have failed to recognise in the new finery of the time the latest representative of a brotherhood that had long existed.

were companions before we had gone a mile, and many were the things I learnt of him. When our way parted I pressed one of my rings into his hand. 'Good-bye, fool!' I said.

'Good-bye, friend!' he called. 'You are the first wise man with whom I ever felt akin'; and indeed, as his poor buffoon's coat went shining up the path, I felt bereft and lonely again for a spell.

Then I found another craftsman of this curious time. A little way farther on, near by to a lordly house standing in wide stretches of meadow and park lands, a most plaintive sound came from a thicket lying open to the sun. Such a dismal moaning enlisted my compassion, for here, I thought, is some luckless wight just dying or, at least, in bitterest extremity of sorrow: so I approached, stepping lightly round the blossoming thicket—peering this way and that, and now down on my hands and knees to look under the bushes, and now on tiptoe, craning my neck that I might see over, and so, presently, I found the source of the sighs and moans. It was a young man of most dainty proportions, with soft, fine-combed hair upon his pretty sloping shoulders, his sleeves so long they trailed upon the moss, his shoes laced with golden threads and toed and tasselled in monstrous fashion. A most delicate perfume came from him: his clothes were greener than grass in springtime, turned back, and puffed with damask. In his hand he had a scroll whereon now and again he looked, and groaned in most plaintive sort.

'Why, man,' I asked, 'what ails you? Why that dreadful moaning? What are you, and what is yon scroll?' So absorbed was he, however, it was only when I had walked all round him to spy the wound, if it might be, that he suffered from, and finally stood directly in his sunshine, repeating the question, that he looked up.

'Interrupter of inspiration! Hast thou asked what I am, and what this is?'

'Yes; and more than once.'

'Fie! not to see! I am a minstrel—a bard; my Lord's favourite poet up at yonder castle, and this is an ode to his mistress's eyebrows. I was in travail of a rhyme when thy black shadow fell upon the page.'

'Give me the leaf! Why, it is the sickliest stuff that ever did dishonour to virgin paper! There, take it back,' I said, 'angry to find so many fools abroad, and listen to me! You

may be a poet, for I have no experience of them, but as I am a man thou art not a bard! You a bard! You the likeness and descendant of Howell ap Griffith and an hundred other Saxon gleemen! You one of the guild of Gryffith ap Conan—you a scop or a skald!—why, boy, they could write better stuff than thou canst though they had been drunk for half a day! You a stirrer of passions—you a minstrel—you a tightener of the strong sinews of warrior hearts!—fie! for shame upon your silly trivial sonnets, your particoloured suits and sweet insipid vapourings! Out, I say! Get home to thy lady's footstool, or, by Thor and Odin, I will give thee a beating out of pure respect for noble rhyming!

The poet did not wait to argue. I was angry and rough, and the rudest-clad champion that ever swung a flail in the cause of the muses. So he took to his heels, and as I watched that pretty butterfly aiming across the sunny meadows for his master's portals, and stopping not for hedge or ditch, 'By Hoth,' I said, laughing scornfully, 'we might have been friends if he could but have writ as well as he can run!'

Then I went on again, and had not gone far, when down the road there came ambling on a mule a crafty-looking Churchman, with big wallets hanging at his saddle-bows, a portentous rosary round his neck, and bare unwashed feet hanging stirrupless by his palfrey's side.

'Now here's another tradesman,' I muttered to myself, 'of this most perplexing age. Heaven grant his wares are superior to the last ones! Good morning, Father!'

'Good morning, Son! Art going into the town to take up arms for Christ and His servant Edward?'

'Yes,' I answered, 'I am bound to the town, but I have not yet chosen a master.'

'Then you are all the more sure to go to the fighting, for everyone, just now, who has no other calling, is apprentice to arms.'

'It will not be the first time I have taken that honourable indenture.'

'No, I guess not,' said the shrewd Friar, eyeing me under his pent-house eyebrows, 'for thou art a stout and wiry-looking fellow, and may I never read anything better than my breviary again if I cannot construe in your face a good and varied knowledge of camps and cities. But there was something else I had to say to you.' ['Here comes the point of

the narrative,' I thought to myself.] 'Now, so trim a soldier as you, and one wherewithal so reflective, would surely not willingly go where hostile swords are waving and cruel French spears are thicker than yonder tall-bladed grass, unshriven—with all thy sins upon thy back?'

'Why then, monk, I must stay at home. Is that what you would say?'

'Nay, not at all. There is a middle way. But soft! Hast any money with thee?'

'Enough to get a loaf of bread and a cup of ale.'

'Oh!' said the secret pardoner (for his calling was then under ban and fine), a little disappointedly, 'that is somewhat small, but yet, nevertheless,' he muttered partly to himself, 'these are poor times, and when all plump partridges are abroad Mother Church's falcons must necessarily fly at smaller game. Look here! good youth. Forego thy mortal appetites, defer thy bread and ale, and for that money saved thereby I will sell thee one of these priceless parchments here in my wallet—scrolls, young man, hot from the holy footstool of our blessed father in Rome, and carrying complete unction and absolution to the soul of their possessor! Think, youth! is not eternal redemption worth a cup of muddy ale? Fie to hesitate! Line thy bosom with this blessed scroll, and go to war cleaner-hearted than a new-born babe. There! I will not be exacting. For one of those silver groats I fancy I see tied in thy girdle I will give thee absolute admittance into the blessed company of saints and martyrs. I tell thee, man, for half a zecchin I will make thee comrade of Christ and endow thee with eternity! Is it a bargain?'

Silent and disdainful, I, who had seen a dozen hierarchies rise and set in the various peopled skies of the world, took the parchment from him and turned away and read it. It was, as he said—more shame on human intellect!—a full pardon of the possessor's sins wrote out in bad Norman Latin, and bearing the sign and benediction of St. Peter's chair. I read it from top to bottom, then twisted its red tapes round it again and threw it back to that purveyor of absolutions. Yes; and I turned upon that reverend traveller and scorned and scouted him and his contemptible baggage. I told him I had met two sad fools since noon, but he was worse than either. I scoffed him, just as my bitter mood suggested, until I had spent both breath and invention, then turned contemptuous, and left

him at bay, mumbling inarticulate maledictions upon my biting tongue.

No more of these shallow panderers fell in my path to vex and irritate me, and before the white evening star was shining through the brilliant tapestry of the sunset over the meadowlands in the west I had drawn near to and entered the strong, shadowy, moated walls of my first English city.

CHAPTER X

I TOOK lodgings that evening with some rough soldiers who kept guard over the town gate, and slept as soundly by their watch-fire as though my country clothes were purple, and a stony bench in an angle of the walls were a princely couch. But when the morning came I determined to better my condition.

With this object in view, one of the smallest of my rings was selected, and, with this conveniently hidden, I went down into the town to search for a jeweller's. A strange town indeed it struck me as being. Narrow and many were the streets, and paved with stones; timber and plaster jutting out overhead so as to lessen the fair, free sky to a narrow strip, and greatly to compress my country spirit. At every lattice window, so amply provided with glass as I had never known before, they were hanging out linen at that early hour to air; and the 'prentice lads came yawning and stretching to their masters' shutter booths, and every now and then down the quaint streets of that curious city which had sprung—peopled with a new race—from the earth during the long night of my sleep, there rumbled a country tumbril loaded with rustic things, whereat the women came out to chaffer and buy of the smocked cartsman who spoke the glib English so novel to my ear, and laughed and gossiped with them. The early ware I noticed in his cart was still damp and sparkling with the morning dew, so close upon the dawn had he come in, and there in the town where the deep street shadows still lay undisturbed, now and then a Jew, still ashamed, it seemed, to meet any of those sleepy Christian eyes, would steal by to an early bargain, wrapped to his chin in his gabardine—I knew that garment a thousand years ago—and fearfully slinking, in

that intolerant time, from house to house and shadow to shadow.

Now and then as I sauntered along in a city of novelties, a couple of revellers in extraordinary various clothes, their toes longer than their sleeves, their velvet caps quaintly peaked, and slashed doublets showing gay vests below, came reeling and singing up the back ways, making the half-waked dogs dozing in the gutters snarl and snap at them, and disturbing the morning meal of the crows rooting in the litter-heaps.

As the sun came up, and the fresh, white light of that fair Plantagenet morning crept down the faces of the eastward walls, the city woke to its daily business. A page came tripping over the cobbles with a message in his belt, the good wives were astir in all the houses, and the 'prentices fell to work manfully on booth and bars as merchant and mendicant, early gallant and basketed maid, began the day in earnest.

All these things I saw from under the broad rim of my rustic hat—my ragged, sorrel-green cloak thrown over my shoulder and across my face, and, so disguised, silent, observant—now recognising something of that yesterday that was so long ago, and anon sad and dubious, I went on until I found what I sought for, and came into a smooth, broad street, where the jewellers had their stalls. I chose one of those who seemed in a fair way of business, and entered.

'Are you the master here?' I asked of a grey-bearded merchant who was searching for the spectacles he had put away overnight.

'My neighbours say so,' he answered gruffly.

'Then I would trade with you.'

Whereon—having found and adjusted his great hornglasses—he eyed me superciliously from head to foot; then said, in a tone of derision—

'As you wish, friend countryman. But will you trade in pearl and sapphire, or diamond pins and brooches, perhaps—or is it only for broken victuals of my last night's supper?'

'Keep thy victuals for thy lean and hungry lads! I will trade with you in pearl and sapphire.' And thereon, from under my mouldy rags, I brought a lordly ring that danced and sparkled in the clear sunlight stealing through the mullioned windows of his booth, and threw quivering rainbow hues upon the white walls of the little den, dazzling the

blinking, delighted old man in front of me. 'How much for that?' I asked, throwing it down in front of him.

It was a better gem than he had seen for many a day, and, having turned it over loving and wistful, he whispered to me (for he thought I had surely stolen it) one sixteenth of its value! Thereon I laughed at him, and threw down my cap, and took the ring, and gave him such a lecture on gems and jewels—all out of my old Phrygian merchant knowledge—so praised and belauded the shine and water of each single shining point in that golden circlet, that presently I had sold it to him for near its value!

Then I bought a leather wallet and put the money in, and traded again lower down the street with another ring. And then again at good prices—for competition was close among these goldsmiths, and none liked me to sell the beautiful things I showed them one by one to their rivals—I sold two more.

'Surely! surely! good youth,' questioned one merchant to me, 'these trinkets were made for some master Abbot's thumb, or some blessed saint.'

'And surely again, my friend,' I answered, 'you have just seen them drawn from a layman's finger.'

'Well, well,' he said, 'I will give you your price,' and then, as he turned away to pack them, he muttered to himself, 'A stout cudgel seems a good profession nowadays! If it were not through fear yon Flemish rascal over the road might take the gem, I at least would never deal with such an obvious footpad.'

By this time I was rich, and my wallet-purse hung low and heavy at my girdle, so away I went to where some tailors lived, and accosted the best of them. Here the cross-legged sewers who sat on the sill among shreds of hundred-coloured stuffs and the bent white-fingered embroiderers stopped their work and gaped to hear the ragged, wayworn loafer, whose broad shadow darkened their doorway, ask for silks and satins, yepres and velvet. One youthful churl, under the master's eyes, unbonneted, and in mock civility asked me whether I would have my surtout of crimson or silver—whether my jupons should be strung with seedling pearls, or just plain sewn with golden thread and lace. He said, that harmless scoffer, he knew a fine pattern a noble lord had lately worn, of ~~me~~ never and silver, which would very neatly suit me—

but I, disdainful, not putting my hand to my loaded pouch as another might have done, only let the ragged homespun fall from across my face, and, taking the cap from my raven hair and grim, weather-beaten face, turned upon them.

The laughter died away in that little den as I did so, the embroiderer's needle stuck halfway through its golden fabric, the workers stared upon me open-mouthed. The cutter's shears shut with a snap upon the rustling webs, and then forgot to open, while 'prentice lads stood, all with yardwands in their hand, most strangely spellbound by my presence. The conquest was complete without a word, and no one moved, until presently down shuffled the master tailor from his dusky corner, and, waving back his foolish boys, bowed low with sudden reverence as he asked with many epithets of respect in how he might serve me.

'Thanks,' I said, 'my friend. What I need is only this—that you should express upon me some of these tardy but courteous commendations. Translate me from these rags to the livery of gentility. Express in good stuffs upon me some of that "nobility" your quick perception has now discovered—in brief, suit me at once as a not too fantastic knight of your time is clad; and have no doubt about my paying.' Whereon I quickened his willingness by a sight of my broad pieces.

Well, they had just such vests and tunics and hose as I needed, and these, according to the fashion, being laced behind and drawn in at the middle by a loose sword-belt, fitted me without special making. My vest was of the finest doeskin, scalloped round the edge, bound with golden tissue, and worked all up the front with the same in leaves and flowers. My hose were as green as rushes, and my shoes pointed and upturned halfway to my knees. On my shoulders hung a loose cloak of green velvet of the same hue as my hose, lined and puffed with the finest grass-green satin that ever came in merchant bales from over seas. Over my right arm it was held by a gold-and-emerald brooch—a 'morse' that worthy clothier termed it—bigger than my palm, and this tunic hung to my small-laced middle. My maunch-sleeves were lined by ermine, and hung to my ankles a yard and more in length. On my head, my cap, again, was all of ermine and velvet, bound with strings of seed-pearls. That same kindly hosier got me a pretty playtime dagger of gold and sapphire for my hip, and green-satin gloves, sewn thick upon the back with golden

threads. This, he said, was a fair and knightly vestment, such as became a goodly soldier when he did not wear his harness, but with naught about it of the courtly sumptuousness which so hard and warlike-seeming a lord as I no doubt despised.

From hence I went by many a cobble pavement to where the noisy sound of hammers and anvils filled the narrow streets. And mighty busy I discovered the armour-smiths. There was such a riveting and hammering, such a fitting and filing and brazing going on, that it seemed as though every man in the town were about to don steel and leather. There were long-legged pages in garb of rainbow hue hurrying about with orders to the armourers or carrying home their masters' finished helms or warlike gear; there were squires and men-at-arms idly watching at the forge doors the pulsing hammers weld rivets and chains; and ever and anon a man-at-arms would come pushing through these groups with sheaves of broken arrows to be ground, or an armful of pikes to be rehandled, casting them down upon the cumbered floor; or perhaps it was a squire came along the way leading over the cobbles a stately war-horse to the shoeing.

In truth, it was a sight to please a soldier's eyes, and right pleasant was it to me to hear the proud neighing of the chargers, the laughing and the talk, the busy whirr of grindstone on sword and axes, the clangour of the hammers as the hot white spearheads went to the noisy anvil, while forges beat in unison to the singing of the smiths. Ah! and I walked slowly down those streets, wondering and watching with vast pleasure in the busy scene, though every now and then it came over me how solitary I was—I, the one impassive in this turmoil, to whom the very stake they prepared to fight for was unknown!

A little way off were the booths where stores of Milan armour was for sale. To them I went, and was shown piles and stacks of harness such as never man saw before, all of steel and golden inlay, covering every point of a warrior, and so rich and cumbersome that it was only with great hesitation I submitted my free Phrygian limbs to such a steel case-menting. But I was a gentleman now, whereof to witness came my gorgeous apparel, backing the grim authority of my face, and the bargaining was easy enough. Scogula and Mista! but those swart, olive-skinned, hook-nosed Jewish

apprentices screwed me up and braced me down into that suit of Milan steel until I could scarcely breathe—their black-eyed master all the time belauding the sit and comfort of it.

'Gads! Sir,' quoth he, 'many's the hauberk I have seen laced on knightly shoulders, but by the mail from the back of the Gittite, who fell in Shochoh, I never saw a coat of links sit closer or truer than that!' and then again, 'There's a gorget for you, Sir! Why, if Ahab had but possessed such a one, as I am a miserable poor merchant and your Valour's very humble servant, even the blessed arrows of Israel would have glanced off harmlessly from his ungodly body!' And the cunning, sanctimonious old Jew went fawning and smiling round while his helpers pent me up in my glittering hide until I was steel-and-gold inlay from head to heel.

'By Abraham! noble Sir, those greaves become your legs!—Pull them in a little more at the ankles, Isaac!—And here's a tabard, Sir, of crimson velvet and emblazoned borderings a prince might gladly wear!'

Then they put a helm upon me with a visor and beaver, through which I frowned, as ill at ease as a young goshawk with his first hood, and girded me with a broad belt chosen from many, and a good English broadsword, the dagger 'misericordia' at my other hip, and knightly spurs (they gave me that rank without question) upon my heels, so that I was completely armed at last, after the fantastic style of the time, and fit to take my place again in the red ranks of my old profession.

I will not weary you with many details of the process whereby I adapted myself to the times. From that armourer's shop I went—leaving my mail to be a little altered—to a hostelry in the centre square of the town, and there I fed and rested. There, too, I chose a long-legged squire from among those who hung about every street corner, and he turned out a most accomplished knave. I never knew a villain who could lie so sweetly in his master's service as that particoloured, curly-headed henchman. He fetched my armour back the next day, cheating the armourer at one end of the errand and me at the other. He got me a charger—filling the grey-stoned yard with capering palfreys that I might make my choice—and over the price of my selection he cozened the dealers and hoodwinked me. He was the most accomplished youth in his station that ever thrust a vagrom leg into green-and-canary tights, or put

a cock's feather into a borrowed cap. He would sit among the wallflowers on the inn-yard wall and pipe French ditties till every lattice window round had its idle sewing-maid. He would swear, out in the market-place, when he lost at dice or skittles, until the bronzed troopers looking on blushed under their tawny hides at his supreme expurlatives. There was not such a lad within the town walls for strut, for brag, or bully, yet when he came in to render the service due to me he ministered like a soft white-fingered damsel. He combed my long black hair, anointing and washing it with wondrous scents, whereof he sold me phials at usurious interest; he whispered into my sullen, unnoticing ear a constant stream of limpid, sparkling scandal; he cleaned my armour till it shone like a brook in May time, and stole my golden lace and a dozen of the sterling links from my dagger chain. He knew the wittiest, most delicately licentious songs that ever were writ by a minstrel, and he could cook such dishes as might have made a dying anchorite sit up and feast.

Strange, incomprehensible! that wayward youth went forth one day on his own affairs, and met in the yard two sturdy loafers who spoke of me, and calling me penniless, unknown, infamous—and French, perhaps—for they doubted I was good English—whereon that gallant youth of mine fell on them and fought them—there right under my window—and beat them both, and flogged their dusty jackets all across the market-place to the tune of their bellowings, and all this for his master's honour! Then, having done so much, he proceeded with his private errand, which was to change, for his own advantage at a mean Fleming's shop, those pure golden spurs of mine, secreted in his bosom, into a pair of common brass ones.

For five days I had lain in that town in magnificent idleness, and had spent nearly all my rings and money, when, one day, as I sat moody and alone by the porch of the inn drinking in the sun, my idle valour rusting for service, and looking over the market square with its weather-worn central fountain, its cobble stones mortared together with green moss and quaint surroundings, there came cantering in and over to my rest-house three goodly knights in complete armour with squires behind them—their pennons fluttering in the wind, tall white feathers streaming from their helms, and their swords and maces rattling at the saddle bows to the merriest

of tunes. They pulled up by the open lattice, and, throwing their broad bridles to the ready squires, came clattering up, dusty and thirsty, past where I lay, my inglorious silken legs outstretched upon the window bench, and the sunlight all ashine upon the gorgeous raiment that irked me so.

They were as jolly fellows as one could wish to see, and they tossed up their beavers and called for wine and poured it down their throats with a pleasure pleasant enough to watch. Then—for they could not unlace themselves—in came their lads and fell to upon them and unscrewed and lifted off the great helmets, and piece by piece all the glittering armour, and piling it on the benches—the knights the while sighing with relief as each plate and buckle was relaxed—and so they got them at last down to their quilted vests, and then the gallants sat to table and fell to laughing and talking until their dinner came.

From what I gathered, they were on their way to war, and war upon that fair, fertile country yonder over the narrow seas. Jove! how they did revile the Frenchman and drain their beakers to a merry meeting with him, until ever as they chattered the feeling grew within me that here was the chance I was waiting for—I would join them—and, since it was the will of the Incomprehensible, draw my sword once more in the cause of this fair, many-mastered island.

Nor was there long to wait for an excuse. They began talking of King Edward's forces presently, and how that every man who could spin a sword or sit a war-horse was needed for the coming onset, and how more especially leaders were wanting for the host gathering, so they said, away by the coast. Whereon at once I arose and went over, sitting down at their table, and told them that I had some knowledge of war, and though just then I lacked a quarrel I would willingly espouse their cause if they would put me in the way of it.

In my interest and sympathy I had forgot they had not known I was so close, and now the effect which my sudden appearance always had on strangers made them all stare at me as though I were a being of another world—as, indeed, I was—of many other worlds. And yet the comely, stalwart, raven-tressed, silk-swathed fellow who sat there before them at the white-scrubbed board, marking their fearful wonder with regretful indifference, was solid and real, and presently the eldest of them swallowed his surprise and spoke out

courteously for all, saying they would be glad enough to help my wishes, and then—warming with good fellowship as the first effect of my entry wore off—he added they were that afternoon bound for the rendezvous (as he termed it) at a near castle; ‘and if I could wear harness as fitly as I could wear silk, and had a squire and a horse,’ they would willingly take me along with them. So it was settled, and in a great bumper they drank to me and I to them, and thus informally was I admitted into the ranks of English chivalry.

We ate and drank and laughed for an hour or two, and then settled with our host and got into our armour. This to them was customary enough, nor was it now so difficult a thing to me, for I had donned and doffed my gorgeous steel casings, by way of practice, so often in seclusion that, when it came to the actual test, assisted with the nimble fingers of that varlet of mine, I was in panoply from head to heel, helmeted and spurred, before the best of them. Ah! and I was not so old yet but that I could delight in what, after all, was a noble vestment! And as I looked round upon my knightly comrades draining the last drops of their flagons while their squires braced down their shining plates, and girt their steel hips with noble brands, the while I knew in my heart that if they were strong and stalwart I was stronger and more stalwart—that if they carried proud hearts and faces shining there, under their nodding plumes, of gentle birth and handsome soldierliness—no less did I: knowing all this, I say, and feeling peer to these comely peers, I had a flush of pride and contentment again in my strangely varied lot. Then the grooms brought round our gay-ribboned horses to the cobbles in front, where, mounting, we presently set out, as goodly a four as ever went clanking down a sunny market-place, while the maids waved white handkerchiefs from the overhanging lattices and townsmen and ‘prentices uncapped them to our dancing pennons.

We rode some half-score miles through a fertile country towards the west, now cantering over green undulations, and anon picking a way through woodland coppices, where the chequered light played daintily upon our polished furniture, and the spear-points rustling ever and anon against the green boughs overhead.

‘What of this good knight to whose keep we are going?’ asked one of my companions presently. ‘He is reputed rich,

and, what is convenient in these penurious times, blessed only with daughters.'

'Why!' responded the fellow at his elbow, who set no small store by a head of curly chestnut hair and a handsome face below it, 'if that is so, in truth I am not at all sure but that I will respectfully bespeak one of those fair maids. I am half convinced I was not born to die on some scoundrel Frenchman's rusty toasting-iron. 'Tis a cursed perilous expedition this of ours, and I never thought so highly of the advantages of a peaceful and Christian life as I have this last day or two. Now, which of these admirable maids dost thou think most accessible, good Delafosse?' he asked, turning to the horseman who acted as our guide by right of previous knowledge here.

'Well,' quoth that youth, after a moment's hesitation, 'I must frankly tell you, Ralph, that I doubt if there are any two maids within a score of miles of us who have been tried so often by such as you and proved more intractable. The knight, their father, is a rough old fellow, as rich as though he were an abbot, hale and frank with everyone. You may come or go about his halls, and (for they have no mother) lay what siege you like to his girls, nor will he say a word. So far so well, and many a pretty gallant asks no better opportunity. But, because you begin thus propitious, it does not follow either fair citadel is yours! No! these virgin walls have stood unmoved a hundred assaults, and as much escalading as only a country swarming with poor desperate youths can any way explain.'

'St. Denis!' exclaimed the other, 'all this but fans the spark of my desire.'

'Oh, desire by all means. If wishes would bring down well-lined maidenhoods, those were a mighty scarce commodity. But, soberly, does thy comprehensive valour intend to siege both these heiresses at once, or will one of them suffice?'

'One, gentle Delafosse, and, when my exulting pennon flutters triumphant from that captured turret, I will in gratitude help thee to mount the other. Diference them, beguile this all too tedious way with an account of their peculiar graces. Which maid dost thou think I might the most aptly sue?'

'Well, you may try, of course, but remember I hold out no

hope, neither of the elder nor the younger. That one, the first, is as magnificent a shrew as ever laughed an honest lover to scorn. She is as black and comely as any daughter of Zion. 'Tis to her near every Knight yields at first glance; but—gads!—it does them little good! She has a heart like the nether millstone; and, as for pride, she is prouder than Lucifer! I know not what game it may be this swart Circe sees upon the skyline—some say 'tis even for that bold boy the young Prince himself, now gone with his father to France, she waits; and some others say she will look no lower than a Duke backed by the wealth of the grand Soldan himself. But whoever it be, he has not yet come.'

'By the bones of St. Thomas à-Becket,' the young Knight laughed, 'I have a mind that that Knight and I may cross the drawbridge together! Canst tell me, out of good comradeship, any weak place in this damsel's harness?'

'There is none I know of. She is proof at every point. Indeed, I am nigh reluctant to let one like you, whose heart has ripened in the sun of experience so much faster than his head, engage upon such a dangerous venture. They say one gallant was so stung by the calm scorn with which she mocked his offer that he went home and hung himself to a cellar beam; and another, blind in desperate love, leapt from her father's walls, and fell in the courtyard, a horrid, shapeless mass! Young De Vipon, as you know, stabbed himself at her feet, and 'tis told the maid's wrath was all because his spurting heart's-blood soiled her wimple a day before it was due to go to wash! How thrives thy inclination?'

'Oh! well enough: 'twould take more than this to spoil my appetite! But, nevertheless, let us hear something of the other sister. This elder is obviously a proud minx, who has set her heart on lordly game, and will not marry because her suitors seem too mean. How is it with the other girl?'

'Why,' said Delafosse, 'it is even more hopeless with her. She will not marry, for the cold sufficient reason that her suitors be all men!'

'A most abominable offence.'

'Ah! so she thinks it. Such a tender, shy, and modest maid there is not in the boast of the county. While the elder will hear you out, arms crossed on pulseless bosom, cold, disdainful eyes fixed with haughty stare to yours, the other will not stop to listen—no, not so much as to the first inkling of

your passion! Breathe so little as half a sigh, or tint your speech with a rosy glint of dawning love, and she is away, lighter than thistledown on the upland breeze. I know of but two men—loose, worldly fellows both of them—who cornered her, and they came from her presence looking so crestfallen, so abashed at their hopes, so melancholy to think on their gross manliness as it had appeared against the white celibacy of that maid, that even some previous suitors sorrowed for them. This is, I think, the safer venture, but even the least hopeful.'

'Is the maid all fallow like that? Has she no human faults to set against so much sterile virtue?'

'Of her faults I cannot speak, but you must not hold her altogether insipid and shallow. She is less approachable than her sister, and contemns and fears our kind, yet she is straight and tall in person, and, I have heard from a foster-brother of hers, can sit a fiery charger, new from stall, like a groom or horse boy, she is the best shot with a crossbow of any on the castle green, and in the women's hall as merry a romp, as ready for fun or mischief, as any village girl that ever kept a twilight tryst on a Saturday evening.'

'Gads! a most pleasant description. I will keep tryst with this one for a certainty, not only Saturdays, but six other days out of the week. The black jade may wait for her princeling for a hundred years as far as I am concerned. How far is it to the castle—I am hot impatience itself?'

'Nor need your patience cool! Look!' said Delafosse, and as he spoke we turned a bend in the woodland road, and there, a mile before us, flashing back the level sun from towers and walls that seemed of burnished copper, was the noble pile we sought.

Certes! when we came up to it, it was a fine place indeed, cunningly built with fosses round about, long barbican walls within them, turreted and towered, and below these again were other walls so shrewdly designed for defence as to move any soldier's heart with wonder and delight. But if the walls did please me, the great keep within, towering high into the sky with endless buttresses, and towers, and casements, grim, massive, and stately, rearing its proud circumference, embattled and serrated far beyond the reach of rude assault or desperate onset, filled me with pride and awe. I scarce could take my eyes from those red walls shining so molten in the setting sun,

yet round about the country lay very fair to look at. All beyond that noble pile the land dropped away—on two sides by sheer cliffs to the shining river underneath—and on the others in gentle, grassy undulations, dotted with great trees, whereunder lay, encamped by tent and watchfire, the rear of King Edward's army, and then on again into the pleasant distance that lay stretched away in hill and valley towards the yellow west.

All over that wide campaign were scattered the villages of serfs and vassals who grew corn for the lordly owner in peace-time, and followed his banner in battle. And in that knightly stronghold up above there were, I found when I came to know it better, many kinsmen and women who sheltered under my Lord's liberality. Dowagers dwelt in the wings, and young squires of good name—a jolly, noisy, unruly crew—harboured down in the great vaulted chambers by the sally-port. There were kinsmen of the left-hand degree in the warder's lodge by the gates, and poor wearers of the same noble escutcheon up among the jackdaws and breezes of the highest battlements. And so generous was the Knight's bounty, so ample the sweep of his castellated walls and labyrinthine the mazes of the palace keep they encircled, so abundant the income of his tithes and tenure, dues and fees, that all these folk found living and harbourage with him; and not only did it not irk that Lord, but only to his steward and hall porter was it known how many guests there were, or when a man came or went, or how many hundred horses stood in the stalls, or how many score of vassals fed in the great kitchen.

On Sundays, after mass, the smooth green in the centre of the castle would be thronged with men and maids in all their finery; while the quintains spun merrily under the mock onsets of the young knights, and dame and gallant trode the stony battlements, and down among the wide shadow of the cedar-trees on the slope ('twas a Crusader who brought the saplings from Palestine) vassal and yeoman idled and made love or frolicked with their merry little ones. Over all that gallant show my Lord's great blazon snapped and flaunted in the wind upon the highest donjon; and in the halls beneath the lords and ladies sat in the deep-seated windows, and laughed and sang and jested in the mullion-tinted sunshine with all the courtly extravagance of their brilliant day.

Ah! by old Isis! at that time the world, it seemed to me,

was less complex, and the rules of life were simpler. Kingcraft had found its mould and fashion in the courageous Edward, and the first duty of a noble was then nobility: the Knights swore by their untarnished chivalry, and the vassals by their loyalty. Yes! and it was priestly then to fear God and hell, and every woman was, or would be, lovely! So ran the simple creed of those who sang or taught, while near everyone believed them.

But you who live in a time when there is no belief but that of Incredulence, when the creative skill and forethought of the great primeval Cause is open to the criticism and cavil of every base human atom it has brought about—you know better—you know how vain their dream was, how foolish their fidelity, how simple their simplicity, how contemptible their courage, and how mean by the side of your love of mediocrity their worship of ideals and heroes! By the bright Theban flames to which my fathers swore! by the grim shadow of Osiris which dogged the track of my old Phœnician bark! I was soon more English than any of them.

But while I thus tell you the thoughts that came of experience, I keep you waiting at the castle-gate. They admitted us by drawbridge and portcullised arch into the centre space, and there we dismounted. Then down the steps, to greet guests of such good degree, came the gallant, grizzled old Lord himself in his quilted under-armor vest. We made obeisance, and in a few words the host very courteously welcomed his guests, leading us in state (after we had given our helmets to the pages at the door) into the great hall of his castle, where we found a throng of ladies and gallants in every variety of dress filling those lofty walls with life and colour.

In truth, it was a noble hall, the walls bedecked with antlers or spoils of woodcraft, with heads and horns and bows and bills, and tapestry; and the ceiling wonderfully wrought with carved beams as far down that ample corridor as one could see. The floor of oak was dark with wear, yet as smooth and reflective to many-coloured petticoats and rainbow-tinted shoes as the Parian marble of some fair Roman villa. And on the other side there were fifty windows deep-set in the wall, with gay stainings on them of parable and escutcheon; while on the benches, fingering ribboned mandolins, whispering gentle murmurs under the tinselled lawn of fair ladies' ker-

chiefs, or sauntering to and fro across the great chamber's ample length, were all these good and gentle folk, bedecked and tasselled and ribboned in a way that made that changing scene a very fairy show of colour.

Strange, indeed, was it for me to walk among the glittering throng, all prattling that merry medley they called their native English, and to remember all I could remember, to recall Briton, Roman, Norseman, Norman, Saxon, and to know each and all of those varied peoples were gone—gone for ever—gone beyond a hope or chance of finding—and yet, again, to know that each and every one of those nations, whose strong life in turn had given colour to my life, was here—here before me, consummated in this people—oh, 'twas strange, and almost past belief! And ever as I went among them in fairer silks and ermines than any, yet underneath that rustling show I laughed to know that I was nothing but the old Phœnician merchant, nothing but Electra's petted paramour, the strong, unruly Saxon Thane!

And if I thought thus of them, in sooth, they thought no less strangely of me! Ever, as my good host led me here and there from group to group, the laughter died away on cherry lips, and minstrel fingers went all a-wandering down their music strings as one and all broke off in mid pleasure to stare in mute perplexity and wonder at me. From group to group we went, my host at each making me known to many a glittering lord and lady, and to each of those courtly presences I made in return that good Saxon bow, which subsequently I found instable fashion had made exceeding rustic.

Presently in this way we came to a gay knot of men collected round two fair women, the one of them seated in a great velvet chair, holding court as I could guess by word and action over the bright constellations that played about her, the other within the circle, yet not of it, standing a little apart and turned from us as we approached. Alianora, the first of these noble damsels, was the elder daughter of the master of the house, and the second, Isobel, was his younger child. The first of these was a queen of beauty, and from that first moment when I stood in front of her, and came under the cold, proud shine of those black eyes, I loved her! Jove! I felt the hot fire of love leap through my veins on the instant as I bowed me there at her footstool and forgot everything else from the moment, merging all the world against the

inaccessible heart of that beautiful girl. Indeed, she was one who well might play the Queen among men. Her hair was black as night, and, after the fashion of the time, worked up to either side of her head into a golden filigree crown, beaded with shining pearls, extraordinary regal. Black were her eyes as any sloe, and her smooth calm face was wonderful and goddess-like in the perfect outline and colour. Never a blush of shame or fear, never a sign of inward feeling, stirred that haughty damsel's mood. By Venus! I wonder why we loved her so. To whisper gentle things into her ear was but like dropping a stone into some deep well—the ripples on the dark, sullen water were not more cold, silent, intangible than her responsive smile. She was too proud even to frown, that disdainful English peeress, but, instead, at slight or negligence she would turn those unwavering eyes of hers upon the luckless wight and look upon him so that there was not a knight, though of twenty fights, there was not a gallant, though never so experienced in gentle tourney with ladies' eyes, who durst meet them. To this maid I knelt—and rose in love against all my better instinct—wildly, recklessly enamoured of her shining Circean queenliness—ah! so enthralled was I by the black Alianora that my host had to pluck me by the sleeve ere he whispered to me, 'Another daughter, sir stranger! Divide your homage,' and he led me to the younger girl.

Now, if the elder sister had won me at first sight, my feelings were still more wonderful to the other. If the elder had the placid sovereignty of the evening star, Isobel was like the planet of the morning. From head to heel she was in white. Upon her forehead her fair brown hair was strained back under a coverchief and wimple as colourless as the hawthorn flowers. This same fair linen, in the newest fashion of demurity, came down her cheeks and under her chin, framing her face in oval, in pretty mockery of the steel coif of an armed knight. Her dress below was of the whitest, softest stuff, with long hanging sleeves, a wondrous slender middle drawn in by a silk and silver cestus belt made like a warrior's sword-wear, and a skirt that descended in pretty folds to her feet and lay atwining about them in comely ampleness. She was as supple as a willow wand, and tall and straight, and her face—when in a moment she turned it on me—was wondrous pleasant to look at—the very opposite of her sister's—all pink and white, and honestly ashine with demure fun and merri-

ment, the which constantly twinkled in her downcast eyes, and kept the pretty corners of her mouth a-twitching with covert, ill-suppressed, unruly smiles. A fair and tender young girl indeed, made for love and gentleness!

Unhappy Isobel!—luckless victim of an accursed fate! Wretched, perverse Phœnician! Ill-omened Alianora! Between us three sprang up two fatal passions. Read on, and you shall see.

CHAPTER XI

Now, when that fair young English girl, at her father's voice, turned to acknowledge my presence—thinking it was some other new knight of the many who came there every hour, she lifted her eyes to mine—and then, all on a sudden, without rhyme or reason, she started back and blanched whiter than her own wimple, and then flushed again, equally unaccountably, and fell a-trembling and staring at me in a wondrous fashion. She came a step forward, as though she would greet some long-looked-for friend, and then withdrew—and half held out her hand, and took it back, the while the colour came and went upon her cheeks in quick flushes, and, stirred by some strange emotion, her bosom rose and fell under the golden cestus and the lawn with the stress of her feelings. The sudden storm, however invoked, shook that sweet fabric most mightily. There, in that very minute, it seemed—there, in that merry, careless place in sight of me, but a gaudy gallant a little more thoughtful-looking, perhaps, than those she often saw, yet, all the same, naught but a stranger gallant, unknown and nameless to her—moved by some affinity within us, just as the alchemist's magic touch converts between two breaths one elixir in his crucibles to another, so, before my eyes, I saw in that fair girl's pallid face love flush through her veins and light her heart and eyes with a responding blush.

And I—I the unhappy, I the sorrow bestower, as I saw her first, what of all things in this wide world should I think of—what should leap up in my mind as I perked my gilded scabbard and bowed low to the polished oaken floor in my glittering Plantagenet finery—what vision should come to me in that latter-day hall, among those mandolin-fingering courtiers,

before that costly raimented maiden, the fair heiress of a thousand years of care and gentle living, that girl leaning frightened and shy upon the arm of her strong father like a soft white mist-cloud in the shadow of a mountain—what thought, what idea, but a swift revision of Blodwen, my wild, ruddy, untutored British wife!

All those gaudy butterflies of the new day, that stately home and that fair flower herself, shrank into nothing; and as the white lightning leaps through the dull void of midnight, and shows for one dazzling second some long-remembered country, ashine in every leaf and detail, to the startled pilgrim, and then is gone with all the ghostly mirage of its passage, so in that surprising moment, so full of import, Blodwen rose to my mind against all reason and likelihood—Blodwen the Briton, the ruddy-haired—Blodwen radiant with her gentle motherhood—Blodwen who could scream so fiercely to her clansmen in the forefront of conflict, and drive her bloody chariot through the red mud of battle with wounded foemen writhing under her remorseless wheels more blithely than a latter-day maid would trip through the spangled meadow grass of springtime—Blodwen rose before me!

Oh! 'twas wild, 'twas foolish, past explaining, nonsense: and, angry with myself and that white maid who stood and hung her head before me, I stroked my hand across my face to rid me of the fancy, and, gathering myself together, made my bow, murmuring something fiercely civil, and turned my back upon her to seek another group.

Yes; but if you think I conquered that fancy, you are wrong. For days and days it haunted me, even though I laughed it to scorn, and, what made the matter more difficult, more perplexing, was that I had not guessed in error—the unhappy Isobel had loved me from first sight, and, against every precedent her nature would have warranted, grew daily deeper in the toils. And I, who never yet had turned from the eyes of suppliant maid, watched her colour shift and fly as I came or went, and strode gloomy, unmindful through all her pretty artifices of maiden tenderness, burning the meanwhile with love for her disdainful sister. It was a strange medley, and in one phase or another pursued me all the time I was in that noble keep. When I was not wooing I was being wooed. Alas! and all the coldness I got from that black-browed lady with the goddess carriage and the faultless

skin I passed on to the poor, enamoured girl who dogged my idle footsteps for a word.

Thus, on one day we had a tournament. All round the great castle, under the oaks, were pitched the tents of the troopers, while the pennons and bannerets of knights and barons, as we saw them from the turret top, shone in the sunlight like a field of flowers. The soldier-yeomen had their sports and contests on the greensward, and we went down to watch them. Thor! but I never saw such bronzed and stalwart fellows, or witnessed anything like the truth and straightness of those stinging flights of shafts the archers sent against their butts! Then the next day, following the sports of the common people, in the tilt-yard inside the barbican, we held a tourney, a mock battle and a breaking of spears, a very gorgeous show indeed, and near as exciting as an honest *mêlée* itself.

So tuneful in my ears proved the shivering of lances and the clatter of swords on the steel panoply of the knights, that, though at first I held aloof, stern and gloomy with my futile passion, yet presently I itched to take a spear, and, since those sparkling riders liked the fun so much, to let them try whether my right hand had lost the cunning it learnt before their fathers were conceived. And as I thought so, standing among the chief ones in that brilliant tourney ring, up came the white rose and tempted me to break a lance, and sighed so softly and brushed against me with her scented draperies, and tried with feeble self-command to meet my eyes and could not, and was so obviously wishful that I should ride a course or two, and so prettily in love, that I was near relenting of my coldness.

I did unbend so much as to consent to mount. A page fetched my armour and my mighty black charger draped in crimson-blazoned velvet and ribboned from head to tail, and then I went to the rear of the lists and put on the steel.

'Thanks, good squire!' I said to the youth who thrust my pointed toes into the stirrups when I was on my horse. 'Now give me up my gauntlets and post me in my principles.'

'Fie, Sir, not to know,' quoth he, 'the worship of weapons and the honour of fair ladies!'

'Thanks. That is not difficult to remember; and as to my practice?'

'Ah! there you confuse him,' put in a jester standing by. 'No good knight likes to be bound too closely as to that.'

As I rode round the lists, a white hand from under the sister's dais—to whom belonging I well could guess—threw me a flower, the which fell under my sleek charger's hoofs and was stamped into the trodden mould. And then the trumpet sounded. 'Avant!' called the glittering marshal—and we met in mid career.

Seven strong knights did I jerk from their high-peaked saddles that morning, and won a lady's golden head-ring, and rode round about the circus with it on my lance-point. When I came under where Isobel sat, I saw her fair cheeks redder than my ribbons with maiden expectation; but, as I passed without a sign, they grew whiter than her lawn. And then I reined up and deposited that circlet at the footstool of her sister. The proud, cold maid accepted the homage as was her duty, but scarcely deigned to lower her eyes to the level of my helmet-plumes while her father put it on her forehead.

A merry time we had in that courtly place waiting for the signal to start; and much did I learn and note—soon the favourite gallant in that goodly company, the acknowledged strongest spearman in the lists, the best teller of strange stories by an evening fire! But never an inch of way could I make with the impenetrable girl on whom my wayward heart was set, while the other—the younger—made her sweet self the pointing stock of high and low, she was so blindly, so obviously in love.

One day it came to a climax. We met by chance in a glade of black shadows among the cedar branches, I and that damsel in white, and, finding I would not woo her, she set to work and wooed me—so sweet, so strong, so passionate, that to this day I cannot think how I withstood it. Yes, and that fair, slim maid, renowned through all the district for her gentle reticence, when I would not answer love with love, and glance for glance, fired up with white-hot passion, threw hesitance to the wind, and besought and knelt to me, and asked no more than to be my slave, so sweet, so reckless in her passion, that it was not the high-born English lady who knelt there, but rather it seemed to me my dear, fiery, untutored British Princess! Fool I was not to see it then, witless after so much not to guess the tameless spirit, the intruder soul that poor girl at my feet held unwitting in her bosom!

She came to me, as I have said, all in a gust of feeling unlike herself, and, when I would not say that which she longed to hear, she wrung her hands, and then down she came upon her knees and clipped me round my jewelled belt and confessed her love for me in such a headlong rush of tearful eloquence I durst not write it.

‘Lady,’ I said, lifting the supple girl to her feet, ‘I grieve, but it is useless. Forget! forgive! I cannot answer as you would.’

‘Ah, but,’ she answered, rushing again to the onset, sighing as now the hot, strange love that burnt within her, and now her sweet native spirit strove for mastery—(‘surely, I think, I am possessed), I will not take “No” for an answer. I am consumed (oh! fie to say it) for thee. I am not first in thy dear affection—why, then, I will be second. Not second! then I will be the hundredth from thy heart! My light, my life and fate, I cannot live without thee. Oh! as you were born by your mother’s consummated love, as thou hast ever felt compunction for a white-cheeked maid, have pity on me! I tell thee I will follow thee to the ends of the earth (Lord! how my tongue runs on!) For one moiety of that affection perhaps a happier woman has I will serve thee through life. Thou hast no wife, ’tis said, to hinder; thou art a soldier, and a score of them, ere I was touched with this strange infection, have sued hopeless for but a chance of that which is proffered thee so freely. Truth! they have told me I was fair, and tall, with a complexion that ridiculed the water-lilies on the moat, and hair, one said, was like ripe corn with a harvest sun upon it (it makes me blush’—I heard her whisper to herself—‘to apprise myself like this), and yet you stand averse and sullen, with eyes turned from me, and deaf ears! Am I a sight so dreadful to you?’

‘Maid!’ I cried, shutting out her suppliant beauty from my heart—overfull, as I thought it, of that other one, her sister—‘no man could look at you and not be moved. The wayward Immortals have given you more sweetness than near any other woman I ever saw—“a sight so dreadful to me?”—why, you are fairer than an early morning in May when the new sun gets up over the wet-flowered hawthorns! And for this very reason, for pity on us both, stand up, and dry your tears! Believe me, dear maid, where I go you cannot come. **You tread the rough soldier’s path! Why, those pretty velvet**

buskins would wear out i' the first march. And turn those dainty hands to the rough craft of war, to scouring harness and grooming chargers—oh! that were miserable indeed; those cherry lips are worse suited than you know for the chance fare of camp and watchfire, and these round arms would soon find a sword was heavier than a bodkin—there, again forget, forgive—and, perhaps, when I come back——'

But why should I further follow that sad love-scene under the broad-spreading cedars? Let it be sufficient for you that I soothed her as well as might be, and stanch'd her tears, and modified my coolness, taking her pretty hands and whispering to as dainty and greedy an ear as ever was opened to hear, perhaps, a little more of lover friendliness than I truly meant, and so we parted.

Now see the shield turned. That very afternoon did the other sister unbend a point with cruel suavity, and set me joyous by promising to meet me at nightfall, whereat, as you will readily understand, every other event of the day faded into nothingness. At the appointed hour, just as the white mist floated in thin fine wisps from the shadowed moat on the eastward of the castle wall, and the red setting sun was throwing the strong black shadows of cedar branches upon the copper-gleaming windows and walls of the side that faced him, I rose, and, making some jesting excuse, slipped away from my noisy comrades in the hall into the shadows of the corridors. Yes! and, though you may smile, he who thought this Phœnician had plumbed the well of mortal love to the very depth, had learnt all there was to learn, and left nothing that could stir him so much as a heart-beat in this fair field of adventure, was now tripping through the ruddy and black dusk, anxious and alert, his pulses beating a quicker measure than his feet, the native boldness of his nature all overlaid with new-born diffidence, fingering his silken points as he went, and conning pretty speeches, now hoping in his lover hesitance the tryst would not be kept, and then anon spurning himself for being so laggard and faint-hearted, and thus progressing in moods and minds as many as the gentle shadows checkering his path from many an oriel window and many a fluted case-ment, he came at length within sight of the deep-set window looking down over the pale-shining water and the heavy woods beyond, where his own love-tale was to be told.

And there, as I plucked back the last tapestry that barred my passage and stood still for a moment on the threshold—there before me, sitting on the tressels under the mullions, in the twilight, was the figure of my fair and haughty English girl.

She had her face turned away from the evening glow, her ample white cap, peaked and laced with gold on either crescent point, further threw into shadow the features I knew so well, while the fine shapely hands lay hidden in the folds of the ample dress which shone and glimmered in the dusk against the oak panellings of that ancient lobby in misty uncertainty. Gentle dame! My heart bounded with expectant triumph to see how pensive and downcast was her look—how still she sat, and how, methought, the white linen and the golden ceinture above her heart rose and fell even in that silent place with the tumult of maidenly passion within. My heart opened to her, I say, as though I were an enamoured shepherd about to pour a brand-new virgin love into the frightened ears of some timid country maid, and within my veins, as the heavy arras fell from my hands behind me, there surged up the molten stream of Eastern love! I waited neither to see nor hear else, but strode swiftly over the floor and cast myself down there at her feet upon one knee—gods! how it makes me smart to think of it!—I who had never bent a knee before in supplication to earth or heaven, and poured out before her the offering of my passion. Hot and swiftly I wooed her, saying I scarce know what, loosening my heart before that silent shrine, laying bare the keen strong throb of life and yearning that pulsed within me, persuading, entreating, cajoling, until both breath and fancy failed. And never under all that stream of love had the damsel given one sign, one single indication of existence.

Then on I went again, deeming the maid held herself not yet wooed enough, disporting myself before her, and pleading the simplicity of my love, saying how that, if it brought no great riches with it, yet was it the treasure of a truthful heart. Did she sigh to widen her father's broad lands? I swore by Osiris I would do it for her love better than any petty lordling could. Did she desire to shine, honoured above all women, where spears were broken or feasts were spread? Think of yon littered lists, I cried, and told her there was not a champion in all the world I feared—none who should not come humbled

to her footstool ; while, as for honour and recognition—Jove ! I would pluck them from the King himself, even as I had plucked them from his betters. Yet never a sign that fair girl gave.

Full of wonder and surprise, I waited for a moment for some sign or show, if not of answering fire, at least of reason ; and then, as I checked in full course my passionate pleadings, that wretched thing before me burst, not into the tears I expected of maidenly capitulation, nor into the proud anger of offended virgins, but into a silly, plebeian simper, which began in ludicrous smothered merriment under the folds of the lawn she held across her face, and ended, amid what appeared contending feelings, in a rustic outburst of sobs and exclamations.

I was on my feet in an instant, all my wild love-making dammed back upon my heart by suspicion and surprise, and as I frowned fiercely at that dim-seen form under the distorting shadow of the windows, it rose—to nothing like Alianora's height—and stepped out where the evening light better illumined us. And there that poor traitress tore off in anger and remorse the lace and linen of a well-born English maiden, and stood revealed before me the humblest, the meanest-seeming, and the most despised kitchen wench of any that served in that baronial hall !

You will guess what my feelings were as this indignity I had been put to rushed upon me, how in my wounded pride I crossed my arms savagely upon my breast, and turned away from that poor, simpering, rustic fool, and clenched my teeth, and swore fierce oaths against that cruel girl who, in her pride and insolence, had played me this sorry trick. Wild and bitter were the gusts of passion that swept through my heart, and all the more unruly since it was by and for a woman I had fallen, and there was none for me to take vengeance on.

In a few minutes I turned to the wretched tool of a vixen mistress. 'Hast any explanation of this ?' I sternly asked, pointing to the disordered finery that lay glimmering upon the floor.

The unhappy kitchenmaid nodded behind her tears and the thick red hands wherewith she was streaking two wet, round cheeks with alternate hues of grief and dinginess, and put a hand into her bosom and handed me a folded missive. I tore it open and read, in prettily scrawled old Norman French, that cruel message :—

This is to tell that nameless knight who has nothing to distinguish him but presumption, that although the daughter of an English peer must ever treat his suit with the contempt it deserves, yet will she go so far as to select him from among her father's vassals one to whom she thinks he might very fitly unburden his soul of its load of 'love and fealty.'

Such was the missive, one surely penned by as ungentle a hand as ever ministered to a woman's heart. I tore it into a hundred fragments, and then grimly pointed my traducer to the narrow wicket in the remote wall leading down by a hundred stony stairs to the scullion places whence she had come. She turned and went a little way towards it, then came sobbing back, and burst out into grief anew, and 'Alas! alas! Sir,' she cried, 'this is the very worst task that ever I was put to! Shame upon Lady Alianora, and double shame upon me for doing her behests. I am sorry, Sir! indeed I am! Until you began that wonderful tale I thought 'twas but a merry game; but, oh, Sir! to see you there upon your knee, to see your eyes burning in the dark with true love for my false mistress—why, Sir, it would have drawn tears from the hardest stone in the mill down yonder. And ever as your talk went on just now, I kept saying to myself, Sure! but it must be a big heart which works a tongue like that; and when you had done, Sir, ah! before you were halfway through, though I could not stop you, yet I loathed my errand. I am sorry, Sir, indeed I am! I cannot go until I be forgiven!'

'There, there, silly girl,' I said, my wrath quenched by her red eyes and humble amendment, 'you are fully absolved.'

She kissed my hands and dried her eyes, and swept together, with woman swiftness, the tattered things in which she had masqueraded, and then, as she was about to leave, I called her back.

'Stay one moment, damsel! How much had you for thus betraying me?'

'Two sequins, Sir,' she answered with simplicity.

'Why, then, here's three others to say naught about this evening's doings in the servants' hall. You understand? There, go! and no more tears or thanks,' and, as the curtain fell upon her, I could not help muttering to myself, 'What! two sequins to undo you, Phra, and three to mend it? Why, Phœnician, thou hast not been so cheap for thirteen hundred years!'

CHAPTER XII

GRIM and angry, all that night I chewed the bitter cud of my rejection, and before the new day was an hour old determined life was no longer worth the living in that place. I determined to leave those walls at once, to leave all my songs unsung, my trysts unkept, to leave all my jolly comrades, the tilt-yards and banquets. But I could not do this so secret as I would. The very paying off of my score down in the buttery, the dismissing of my attendants, each with largess, the seriousness I could not but give to my morning salutation of some of those I should never see again, betrayed me. And thus a whisper, first down in the vaulted guard-room, and then a rumour, and anon a widening murmur, the news was spread, until surely the very jackdaws on the battlements were saying to themselves, 'Phra is going! Phra!—Phra is going!'

Yes! and the tidings spread to that fair floor of a hundred corridors, where the Norman-arched windows looked down four score feet upon the river winding amid its shining morning meadows, bringing a sigh to more than one silken pillow. It reached the unhappy, red-eyed Isobel, and presently she tripped down the twining stone staircase, the loose folds of her skirt thrown over her arm to free her pretty feet, and in her hand a scrap of writing, a 'cartel' she called it, seeming newly opened.

She came to the sunny empty corridor where I stood alone, and touched me on the arm as I watched from a lattice my charger being armed and saddled in the courtyard underneath, and when I turned held out her hand to me in frank and simple fashion. How could I refuse the proffer of so fair a friendship? and, pulling my velvet cap from my head, I put her white fingers to my lips. And was it true, she asked with a sigh, I was really going that morning, and so suddenly? Only too true, I answered, and, saving her presence, not so sudden as my inclination prompted. Much I saw she wished to question the why and wherefore, but of this, as of nothing touching her stern sister, would I tell her.

So presently she came to her point, and, fingering that scroll she had, very downcast and blushful, said, 'You are a

good knight, Sir Stranger, and strong and experienced in arms.'

'Your Ladyship's description wakes my ambition to deserve your words.'

'And generous, I have noticed, and as indulgent to page and squire of tender years as you are the contrary to stronger folk.'

'And if this were so, Madam,' I asked, 'what then?'

'Oh! only,' she said, wondrous shy and frightened, 'that I have here a cartel from a friend of mine, a youth of noble family, who has heard of thee, and would go to the wars in your company—as your comrade, I mean: that is, if you would take him.'

'Why, damsel, the wars are free to everyone; but I am in no mood just now to tutor a young gallant in slitting Frenchmen's throats!'

'But this one, Sir, very particularly wishes to travel with you, of whose prowess he is so convinced. He has, alas! quarrelled with those at whose side he should most naturally ride—he will be no trouble; for my sake you must take him. And,' said the cunning girl, standing on tiptoe to be the nearer to my ear, 'he is rich, though friendless by a rash love—he will gladly see to both your horses and disburse your passage over to France, even for the honour of remembering that he did it.'

Now, this touched me very nearly. One by one my rings had gone, and that morning, after paying scores and largess, in truth I had found my wallet completely empty once again! If this youth had money, even though it were but sufficient to buy corn for our chargers on the way, and pay the ferry over to yonder fair field of adventure, why, there was no denying he would be a very convenient travelling companion, and it would go hard but that I could teach him something in return. Thinking this, I lifted my eyes, and found those of Isobel watching the workings of my face with pretty cunning.

'In truth, maid, if thy friend has so much gold as would safely land us with King Edward in Flanders, why, I must confess that just at present that does greatly commend him to me. What sort of a man is he?'

This question seemed to overwhelm the lady, who blushed and hung her head like a poppy that has stood a week's drought.

‘In truth, Sir,’ she murmured, ‘I do not know.’

‘Not know! Why, but you said he was your friend!’

‘Oh! so I did. And, now I come to think of it, he is a tall youth—about my size and make.’

‘Gads! but he will be a shapely, if somewhat sapling gallant,’ I laughed, letting my eye roam over the supple maiden figure before me.

‘But though he be so slim,’ the girl hastened to add, as if she feared she had been indiscreet, ‘you will find the youth a rare good horseman, and clever in many things. He can cook (if thou art ever belated) like a Frenchman, and can read missals to thee, and write like a monk—thy comrade, Sir knight, will be one in a thousand—he can sing like a mavis on a fir-top.’

‘I like not these singing knights, fair maid: their verses are both too smooth for soldier ears, and too licentious for maidens.’

‘Ah! but my friend,’ quoth Isobel, with a blush, ‘never sang an ungentle song in his life; you will find him a most civil, most simple-spoken companion.’

‘Well, then, I will have him—no doubt we shall grow as close together as boon companions should.’

‘Would that you might grow so close together as I could wish!’ said the English girl, with a sigh I did not understand.

‘And now, how am I to know this friend,’ I asked, ‘this slim and gentle youth? What is his name, and what his face?’

‘I had near forgotten that; and it was like a woman, for they say they ever keep the most important matter to the last! This boy, for good reasons that I know but may not mention, has sworn a vow, after the fashion of the chivalry he delights in, not to show his face, not to wear his honourable name, until some happier times shall come for him. He is in love—like many another—and does conceive his heart to be most desperately consumed thereby. Wherefore he has taken the name of Flamaucœur, and bears upon his shield a device to that effect. This alone will point him out to you, over and above the dropped visor, which no earthly power will make him lift until this war and quest of his be over. But you will know him, I feel in my heart, without consideration. Sir knight, you will know this youth when you meet him, some-

thing in my innermost heart does tell me, even as I should know one that I loved or that loved me behind twenty thicknesses of steel. And now, good-bye until we meet again !

The fair maid gave me her hand as though to part, and then hesitated a moment. Presently she mustered up courage and said :—

‘Thou bear’st me no ill-will for yonder wild meeting of ours ?’

‘Maiden, it is forgotten !’

‘Well, let it be so. I do not know what possessed me. I was hurried down the stream of feeling like a leaf on a tide. ’Twas I that met thee there by the cedars, and yet it was not me. Something so wild and fierce, such a hot intruder spirit burnt within this poor circumference, that I think I was damnate and bewitched. Thou dost most clearly understand that this hot fit is over now.’

‘I clearly understand !’

‘And that I love thee no longer,’ quoth the lady, with a sigh, ‘or, at least, not near so much ?’

‘Madam, so I conceive it. Be at ease : it is sacred between us two, and I will forget.’

‘Thanks ! a thousand thanks, even for the relief that cold forgetfulness does give me. And now again, Good-bye. Be gentle to Flamaucœur, and—and,’ burst out the poor girl, as her control forsook her—‘if there is an eye in the whole of wide heaven, oh, may it watch thee ! if ever prayers of mine can pierce to the seat of the Eternal, oh, may they profit thee ! Gods ! that my wishes were iron bars for thy dear body, and my salt tears could but rivet them ! Good-bye ! good-bye !’ and, kissing my hands in a fierce outburst of weeping, that fair white girl turned and fled, and disappeared through the tapestries that screened the Norman archways.

Before nightfall I was down by the English coast and many a long league from the castle. Thoughtful and alone, my partings made, I had paced out from its gloomy archway, the gay feathers on my helmet-top near brushing the iron teeth of the portcullis lowering above, and my charger’s hoofs falling as hollow on the echoing drawbridge as my heart beat empty to the sounds of happy life behind me. Away south went the pathway, trodden day after day by contingents of gallant troops from that knightly stronghold. Jove ! one

might have followed it at midnight: those jolly bands had made a trail through copse and green wood, through hamlet and through heather, like the track of a storm-wind. They had beaten down grass and herbage, they had robbed orchards and spinneys, and here their wayside fires were still a-smouldering, and there waved rags upon the bushes, and broken shreds and baggage. Now and then, as I paced along, I saw in the hamlets the folk still looking southward, and standing gossiping on the week's wonders, the boys meanwhile careering in mock onset with broken spear-shafts or discarded trappings. Oh! 'twas easy enough to know which way my friends had gone!

So plain was the track, and so well did my good horse acknowledge it, that there was little for me to do but sit and chew the bitter cud of fancy. All through the hot afternoon, all through the bright sunshine and shining green bracken, did we saunter, back towards the grey sea I knew so well, back towards that void beginning of my wanderings, and as my sad thoughts turned to when I last had sat a charger in such woods as these, to my fair Saxon homestead, Editha, the abbey and its Abbot, my donning English mail and breaking spears for a smile from yon cold Peeress, with much more of like nature, went idly flitting through my head. But hardly a thought among all that motley crowd was there for Isobel or her tears, and my promised meeting with her playmate.

Thus it happened that as evening fell and found me still some two miles from where our troops lay camped along the shore, waiting to-morrow's ferrying across to France, I rode down the steep bank of a small river to a ford, and slowly waded through. There be episodes of action that live in our minds, and incidents of repose that recur with no less force. So, then—that placid evening stream has come before me again and again—in the hot tumult of onset and mêlée, in court and camp, in the cold of winter and in summer's warmth, I have ridden that ford once more. I have gone down sad and thoughtful as I did, my loose reins on my charger's arching neck, watching the purple shine of the water where it fretted and broke in the evening light against his fetlocks; again and again I have listened to the soft lisp of the stream as he drank of that limpid trough, and I have seen in its cool fresh mirror my own tall image, my waving crimson plumes, and the one white star of the evening above, reflected upon it. **And yet, if these things of a remote yesterday are fresh in my**

mind, even more so is my meeting with the slim gallant whose figure rose before me as I emerged from the ford.

As my good English charger bore me up from the hollow, on the brow of the opposite rise was a mounted figure standing out clear and motionless against the yellow glow of the sunset. At first I thought it would be some wandering spearman bound on a like errand with myself, for more than one or two such had passed that day. But something in the steadfast interest of that silent horseman roused my curiosity even before I was near enough to see the colour of his armour or the device upon his shield. Up we scrambled up that sandy heathery scar, the strong sinews of my war-horse playing like steel cordage under my thighs as he lifted me and my armour up the gravelly path, and then, as we topped the rise and came into the evening breeze, that strange warrior advanced and held out a hand.

Never in all my experience had I known a knight extend the palm of friendship to another so demure and downcast. 'Truth!' I thought to myself, 'this friend of Isobel's is, in fact, as she said, the most modest-mannered soldier who ever took a place in the rough game of war!' But I was pledged to like him, and therefore, in the most hearty manner possible, as we came up knee to knee, I slapped my heavy hand into his extended fingers and welcomed him loudly as a long-looked-for comrade. And in truth he was a very pretty fellow, whose gentle presence grew upon me after that first meeting each hour we lived together. He seemed, as far as I could judge, no more than five-and-twenty years of age, yet even that was but a guess, for his armour was complete from top to toe, his visor was down, and there was, indeed, naught to judge by but a certain slightness of limb and suppleness that spoke of no more mature years. In height this gallant was very passable enough, and his helmet, with its nodding plumes, added some grace and inches to his stature, while his pale-grey mail was beautifully fashioned and moulded, and spoke through every close joint and cunning finished link of a young but well-proportioned soldier.

The arms this warrior carried were better suited to his strength than to that of the man who rode beside him. His lance was long and of polished inlay, while mine beside it was like the spear of Goliath to a fisher's hazel wand. His dagger was better for cutting the love-knot on a budget of sonnets

than for disburdening foemen's spirits of their mortal shackles. His cross-hilted sword was so light it made me sigh to look at it. On his shield was a heart wrapped in flames, most cunningly painted, and expressive enough in those days, when every man took a pride in being as vulnerable to women as he was unapproachable among men.

But who am I that I should judge that gentle knight by myself—by me, whose sinews countless fights have but matured, who have been blessed by the gods with bulk and strength above other mortals? Why should I measure his brand-new lance, gleaming in the pride of virgin polish, against the stern long spear I carried; or that dainty brand of his, that mayhap his tender maid had belted on him for the first time some hours before, with such a broad blade as long use had made lighter to my hand than a lady's distaff?

Before we had paced a mile, Flamaucœur had proved himself the sprightliest companion who ever enlivened a dull road with wit and laughter. At first 'twas I that spoke, for he had not one word in all the world to say—he was so shy. But when I twitted him for this, and laughed, and asked him of his lady-love, and how she had stood the parting—how many tears there had been, and whether they all were hers; and whose heart was that upon his shield, his own or the damsel's; and so on, in bantering playfulness, I got down to the metal of that silent boy. He winced beneath my laughter for a little time, and fidgeted upon his saddle, and then the gentle blood in his veins answered, as I hoped it would, and he turned and gave me better than I offered. Such a pretty fellow in wordy fence I never saw: his tongue was like a woman's, it was so hard to silence. When I thought I had him at disadvantage on a jest, he burked the point of my telling argument, and struck me below my guard; when I would have pinned him to some keen inquiry regarding that which he did not wish to tell, he turned questioner with swift adroitness, and made—quicker than it takes to write—his inquisitor the humble answerer to his playful malice. He was better at that fence than I, there could be no doubt, and very speedily his nimble tongue, which sounded so strange and pleasant in the hollow of his helmet, had completely mastered mine. So, with a laugh, I did acknowledge to the conquest.

Whereon that generous youth was pleased I saw, and laid

aside his coyness, and chattered like a mill-stream among the gravels on an idle Sunday. He turned out both shrewd and witty, with a head stuffed full of romance and legend, just such as one might have who had spent a young life listening to troubadours and minstrels. And I liked him none the less because he trimmed the gross fables of that time to such a decent shape. He told me one or two that I had heard before, although he knew it not. And as I had heard them from the licentious lips of courtly minstrels they are not fit to write or tell, but my worthy wayfarer clipped and purged them so adroitly, and turned them out so fair and seemly, all with such a nice unconsciousness, I scarce could recognise them. He was a most gentle-natured youth, and there was something in his presence, something in the half-frankness he put forth, and something in that there was strange about him which greatly drew me. Now you would think, to listen to him, he was all a babbling stream as shallow as could be, and then, anon, a turn of sad wisdom or a sigh set you wondering, as when that same stream runs deep into the shadows, and you hear it fret and fume with gathering strength far away in unknown depths of mother Earth. A most enticing, a most perplexing comrade.

Beguiling the way in this fashion, and liking my new ally better and better as we went, we came a little after nightfall on a wet and windy evening to the hamlet near the sea where the rearguard of the English troops were collected for ferrying over to France. Here we halted and sought food and shelter, but neither were to be had for the asking. That little street of English dwellings was crowded with hungry troopers. They were camping by their gleaming watch-fires all along the grassy ways, so full was every lodgment, while every yellow window of the dim gabled alehouse in the midst shone into the wet, dark night, and every room within was replete with stamping, clanking, noisy gallants. Their chargers filled the yard and were picketed a furlong down the muddy road, that sloped to the murmuring unseen sea, and there was not space, it seemed, for one single other horse or rider in the whole friendly village.

But the insidious Flamaucœur found a way and place. He sought out the master of the inn himself, and, unheeding of his curt refusals, made request so cunning and used his money-pouch so liberal that that strong and surly yeoman,

with much to do, found us a loft to sleep in, which was a bedroom better than the wayside, though still but a rough one. Then Flamaucœur waylaid the buxom, hurrying housewife, and, on an evening when many a good gentleman was going supperless to bed, got us a loaf of white bread and a wooden bowl of milk, the which we presently shared most comrade-like, my friend lifting his visor so much as might suffice to eat, but yet not enough to show his face. He waylaid a lad, and, for a coin or two and a little of his sweet-voiced cajoling, got our steeds watered and sheltered, though many another lordly, sleek-limbed beast stood all night unwashed, unminded. A most persuasive youth was Flamaucœur!

And then, our frugal supper made and our horses seen to, we went to bed. Diffident, ingenious young knight! He made my couch (while I was not by) long and narrow—no bigger than for one—of all the soft things he could lay his hand on—as though, forsooth, I were some tender flower—and for himself hardly spread a horsecloth on the bare floor!

Now, when I came up and found this done, without a word I sent the boy to go and see what the night was like, and if the moon yet showed, or if it rained, and, when he went forthwith, pulled that couch to bits, respreading it so it was broad enough for two good comrades side by side. Ah! And when Flamaucœur came back, I rated him soundly, telling him that, though it was set in the laws of arms that a young knight should show due deference to an older, yet all that comrades had of hard or soft was equally dividable, both board and bed, and good luck and misfortune. And he was amenable, though still a little strange, and unbuckled his armour by our dim rushlight, and then—poor, tired youth!—with that iron mask upon his head, in his quilted underwear, threw himself upon the couch, and slept almost before he could straighten out those shapely limbs of his.

And I presently lay down by his side and slept, while all through my dreams went surging the wildest fancies of tilt and tourney and lady's love. And now I heard in the uproar of the restless village street and the neighing of the chargers at their pickets the noise of battle and of onset. And ther I thought I had, on some unknown field, five thousand spearmen overset against an hundred times as many; and while my heart bounded proudly in answer to that disadvantage, and I rode up and down our glittering ranks speaking words of

strength and courage to those scanty heroes, waving my shining sword in the sun that shone for victory on us and curbing my fretting charger's restless valour, methought, somehow, the words dried up upon my lips, and the proud murmur of my firm-set veterans turned to a low moaning wail, and a grey mist of tears put out the sun, and black grief drank up the warriors; and while I wrestled with that melancholy, Blodwen, my Princess, was sitting by my side, cooling my hot forehead with her calm immortal hand, and calling me, with smiling accent, 'dull, unwitful, easily be-guiled,' and all the time that young gallant by me lay limp, supine, asleep, and soulless.

So passed the chequered fancies of the night, and the earliest dawn found us up, in arms, and ready for sterner things.

Again I had to owe to Flamaucœur's ready wit and liberal purse precedence for our needs above all the requirements of the many good knights who would have crossed with the haste they could, but had, perforce, to wait. It was he who got us a vessel sufficient for our needs when the fisher folk were swearing there was not a ship to be hired for twenty miles up or down the coast. In this we embarked with our horses, and one or two other gentlemen we knew, and in a few hours' sailing the English shore went down and the sunny cliffs of Normandy rose ahead of us.

Will you doubt but that I stood thoughtful and silent as the green and silver waves were shivered by our dancing prow, and that strange, familiar land rose up before us? I, that British I, who had seen Cæsar's galleys, heavy with Umbrian and Etrurian, put out from that very shore: I, who had stood on the green cliffs of Harold's kingdom and shaken a Saxon javelin towards that home of Norman tyranny: I, this knightly, steel-bound I, stood and watched that country grow upon us, with thoughts locked in my heart there were none to listen to and none to share.

Oh! it was passing strange, and I did not rouse me until our iron keel went gently grinding up the Norman gravel, and our vessel was beached upon the hostile shore.

CHAPTER XIII

STRANGE, eventful, and bloody, were the incidents that followed. King Edward, burning for glory, had landed in Normandy a little time before, had knighted on these yellow beaches that gallant boy his son, and with the young Prince and some fourteen thousand English troops, ten thousand wild Welshmen, and six thousand Irish, pillaging and destroying as he went, he had marched straight into the heart of unready France. With that handful of men he had burnt all the ships in Hogue, Barfleur, and Cherbourg; he had stormed Montebourg, Carentan, St. Lo, and Valognes, sending a thousand sails laden with booty back to England, and now, day by day, he was pressing southward through his fair rebellious territories, deriding the French King in his own country, and taking tithe and taxes in rough fashion with fire and sword.

Nor had we who came late far to seek for the Sovereign. His whereabouts was well enough to be told by the rolling smoke that drifted heavily to leeward of his marching columns and the broad trail of desolation through the smiling country that marked his stern progress. To travel that sad road was to see naked War stripped of all her excusing pageantry, to see grey desolation and lean sorrow following in the gay train of victory.

Gods! it was a sad path. Here, as we rode along, would lie the still smouldering ashes of a burnt village, black and grey in the smiling August sunshine. In such a hamlet, perhaps, across a threshold, his mouth agape and staring eyes fixed on the unmoved heavens, would lie a peasant herdsman, his right hand still grasping the humble weapon wherewith he had sought to protect his home, and the black wound in his breast showing whence his spirit had fled indignant to the dim Place of Explanations.

Neither women nor babes were exempt from that fierce ruin. Once we passed a white and silent mother lying dead in mid-path, and the babe, still clasped in her stiff arms, was ruddy and hungry, and beat with tiny hands to wake her and crowed angry at its failure, and whimpered so pitiful and small, and was so unwotting of the merry game of war and all it

meant, that the laughter and talk died away upon the lips of those with me as, one by one, we paced slowly past that melancholy thing.

At another time, I remember, we came to where a little maid of some three tender years was sitting weaving flowers on the black pile of a ruined cottage, that, though her small mind did not grasp it, hid the charred bodies of all her people. She twined those white-and-yellow daisies with fair smooth hands, and was so sunny in the face and trustful-eyed I could not leave her to marauding Irish spears, or the cruel wolfdogs who would come for her at sunset. I turned my impatient charger into the black ruin, and, maugre that little maid's consent, plucked her from the ashes, and rode with her upon my saddle-bow until we met an honest-seeming peasant woman. To her I gave the waif, with a silver crown for patrimony.

Out in the open the broad stream of war had spread itself. The yellow harvests were trodden under foot, and hedge and fence were broken. The plough stood halfway through the furrow, and the reaper was dead with the sickle in his hand. Here, as we rode, went up to heaven the smoke of coppice and homestead; and there, from the rocks hanging over our path, luckless maids and widowed matrons would hail and spit upon us in their wild grief, cursing us in going, in coming, in peace and in war, while they loaded the frightened echoes with their shrieks and wailings.

Now and then, on grass and roadside, were dark patches of new-dried blood, and by them, maybe, lay country cloaks and caps and weapons. There we knew men had fallen singly, and had long lain wounded or dead, until their friends had taken them to grave or shelter. Out in the open again, where skirmishes had happened and bill and bow or spear had met their like, the dead lay thicker. Gods! how drear those fair French fields did lie in the autumn moonlight, with their scattered dead in twos and threes and knots and clusters! There were some who sprawled upon the ground — still clutching in their dread white fingers the grass and earth torn up in the moment of their agony. And here was he who scowled with dead white eyes on the pale starlight, one hand on his broken hilt and the other fast gripped upon the spear that pinned him to the earth. Near him was a fair boy, dead, with the shriek still seeming upon his livid lips, and the horrid

rent in his bosom that had let out his soul looming black in the gloom. Yonder a tall trooper still stared out grimly after the English, and smiled in death with a clothyard shaft buried to the feather in his heart. Some there were of these horrid dead who still lay in grapple as they had fallen—the stalwart Saxon and the bronzed Gaul with iron fingers on each other's throats, smiling their black hatred into each other's bloodless white faces. Others, again, lay about whose arms were fixed in air, seeming still to implore with bloody fingers compassion from the placid sky.

One man I saw had died stroking the thin, pain-streaked muzzle of his wounded charger—his friend, mayhap, for years in camp and march. Indeed, among many sorrowful things of that midnight field, the dead and dying horses were not least. It moved me to compassion to hear their pain-fraught whinnies on every hand, and to see them lying so stiff and stark in the bloody hollows their hoofs had scooped through hours of untempered anguish. What could I do for all those many? But before one I stopped, and regarded him with stern compassion many a minute. He was a splendid black horse, of magnificent size and strength; and not even the coat of blood and mud with which his sweating sides were covered could hide, here and there, the care that had but lately groomed and tended him. He lay dying on a great sheet of his own red blood, and as I looked I saw his tasselled main had been plaited not long before by some soft skilful fingers, and at every point was a bow of ribbon, such as might well have been taken from a lady's hair to honour the war-horse of a favourite knight. That great beast was moaning there, in the stillness, thinking himself forgotten, but when I came and stood over him he made a shift to lift his shapely head, and looked at me entreatingly, with black hanging tongue and thirst-fiery eyes, the while his doomed sides heaved and his hot dry breath came hissing forth upon the quiet air. Well I knew what he asked for, and, turning aside, I found a trooper's empty helmet, and, filling it from the willowed brook that ran at the bottom of the slope, came back and knelt by that good horse, and took his head upon my knee and let him drink. Jove! how glad he was! Forgot for the moment was the battle and his wounds, forgotten was neglect and the long hours of pain and sorrow! The limpid water went gurgling down his thirsty throat, and every happy gasp he gave spoke

of that transient pleasure. And then, as the last bright drops flashed in the moonlight about his velvet nozzle, I laid one hand across his eyes and with the other drew my keen dagger—and, with gentle remorselessness, plunged it to the hilt into his broad neck, and with a single shiver the great war-horse died!

In truth, 'twas a melancholy place. On the midnight wind came the wail of women seeking for their kindred, and the howl and fighting of hungry dogs at ghastly meals, the smell of blood and war—of smouldering huts and black ruins! A stern pastime, this, and it is as well the soldier goes back upon his tracks so seldom!

We passed two days through such sights as I have noted, meeting many a heavy convoy of spoil on its way to the coast, and not a few of our own wounded wending back, luckless and sad, to England; and then on the following evening we came upon the English rear, and were shortly afterwards part and parcel of as desperate and glorious an enterprise as any that was ever entered in the red chronicles of war. From the coast right up to the white walls of the fair capital itself, King Edward's stern orders were to pillage and kill and spoil the country, so that there should be left no sustenance for an enemy behind. I have told you how the cruel Irish mercenaries and the loose soldiers of a baser sort accomplished the command. Our English archers and the light-armed Welsh, who scoured the front, were mild in their methods compared to them. They mayhap disturbed the quiet of some rustic villages, and in thirsty frolics broached the kegs of red vintage in captured inns, robbed hen-roosts, and kissed matrons and set maids screaming, but they, unlike the others, had some touch of ruth within their rugged bosoms. But, as for keeps and castles, we stormed and sacked them as we went, and he alone was rogue and rascal who was last into the breach. Our wild kerns and escaladers rioting in those lordly halls, many a sight of cruel pillage did I see, and many a time watched the red flame bursting from the embrasures and windows of these fair baronial homes, and could not stay it. The Frenchmen in these cases, such of them as were not away with the army we hoped to find, fought brave and stubborn, and we piled their dead bodies up in their own court-yards. Many a comely dame and damsel did I watch wringing white hands above these ghastly heaps, and tearing loose

locks of raven hair in piteous appeal to unmoved skies, the while the yellow flames of their comely halls went roaring from floor to floor, and in mockery of their sobs, crashing to eaves and staircases mingled with the yells of the defenders and the shouting of the pillage.

I fear long ages begin to sap my fibre! There was a time when I would have sat my war-horse in the courtyard and could have watched the red blood streaming down the gutters and listened to the shrieking as cold amid the ruin as any Viking on a hostile conquered strand. But, somehow, with this steel panoply of mine I had put on softer moods; I am degenerate by the pretty theories of what they called their chivalry.

Far be it from me to say the English army was all one pack of bloodhounds. War is ever a rough game, the country was foreign, and the adventure we were on was bold and desperate, therefore these things were done, and chiefly by the unruly regiments, and the scullion Irish who followed in our rear, led by knights of ill-repute, or none. These hung like carrion crows about our flanks and rear, and, after each fight, stole armour from dead warriors bolder hands had slain, and burnt, and thieved from high and low, and butchered, like the beasts of prey they were.

On one occasion, I remember, a skirmish befell shortly after we joined the main army, and a French noble, in their charge, was unhorsed upon our front by an English archer. Now, I happened to be the only mounted man just there, and as this silver shining prize staggered to his feet, and went scampering back towards his friends with all his rich sheathing safe upon his back, his gold chains rattling on his iron bosom, and his jewelled belt sparkling as he fled, a savage old English swashbuckler, whose horse was hamstrung—Sir John Elkington they called him—fairly wrung his hands.

‘After him, Sir Knight,’ screamed that unchivalrous ruffian to me, ‘after him, in the name of hell! If thou rid’st hard he cannot get away, *and run thy spear in under his gorget so as not to spoil his armour*—’tis worth, at least, a hundred shillings.’

I never made a muscle, did not even deign to look down at that cruel churl. Whereon the grizzly old boar-hound clapped his hand upon his dagger and turned on me—ah! by the light of heaven, he did.

‘What! not going, you lazy braggart!’ he shouted, beside himself with rage—‘not going, for such a prize? Beast—scullion—coward!’

‘Coward!’ Had I lived more than a thousand years in a soldier-saddle to be cowarded by such a hoary whelp of butchery—such a damnable old taint on the honourable trade of arms? I spun my charger round, and with my gloved left hand seized that bully by his ragged beard, and perked him here and there; lifted him fairly off his feet; stretched his corded, knotted throttle till his breath came thick and hard; jerked and pulled and twisted him—then cast the ruffian loose, and, drawing my square iron foot from my burnished stirrup, spurned him here and there, and kicked and pommelled him, and so at last drove him howling down the hill, all forgetful for the moment of prize and pillage!

These lawless soldiers were the disgrace of our camp, they did so rant and roar if all went well and when the battle was fairly won whereto they had not entered, they were so coward and cruel among the prisoners or helpless that we would gladly have been rid of them if we could.

But, after the manner of the time, the war was open to all: behind the flower of English chivalry who rode round the Sovereign’s standard, and the gallant bill and bow-men who wore his livery and took his pay, observing the decencies of war, came hustling and crowding after us a host of rude mercenaries, a horde of ragged adventurers, who knew nothing of honour or chivalry, and had no canons but to plunder, ravish, and destroy.

They made a trade of every villany just outside the camp, where, with scoundrel hawkers who followed behind us like lean vultures, they dealt in dead men’s goods, bought maids and matrons, and sold armour or plunder under our marshal’s very eyes.

One day, I remember, I and my shadow Flamaucœur were riding home after scouting some miles along the French lines without adventure, when, entering our camp by the pickets farthest removed from the Royal quarter, we saw a crowd of Irish kerns behind the wood where the King had stocked his baggage, all laughing round some common object. Now, these Irish were the most turbulent and dissolute fighters in the army. Such shock-headed, fiery ruffians never before called themselves Christian soldiers. They and the Welsh

were for ever at feud ; but, whereas the Welshmen were brave and submissive to their chiefs, keen in war, tender of honour, fond of wine-cups and minstrels—gallant, free soldiers, indeed, just as I had known their kin a thousand years before ; these savage kerns, on the other hand, were remorseless villains, rude and wild in camp, and cutthroat rascals, without compunction, when a fight was over. In ordinary circumstances we should have ridden by these noisy rogues, for they cared not a jot for anyone less than the Camp Marshal with a string of billmen behind him, and feuds between knights of King Edward's table and these shock-haired kerns were unseemly. But on this occasion, over the hustling ring of rough soldiers, as we sat high-perched upon our Flemish chargers, we saw a woman's form, and craned our necks and turned a little from our course to watch what new devilry they were up to.

There, in the midst of that lawless gang of ruffian soldiers, their bronzed and grinning faces hedging a space in with a leering, compassionless wall, was a fair French girl, all wild and torn with misadventure, her smooth cheeks unwashed and scarred with tears, her black hair wild and tangled on her back, her skirt and bodice rent and muddy, fear and shame and anger flying alternate over the white field of her comely face, while her wistful eyes kept wandering here and there amid that grinning crowd for a look of compunction or a chance of rescue. The poor maid was standing upon an over-turned box such as was used to carry cross-bow bolts in, her hands tied hard together in front, her captor by her side, and as we came near unnoticed he put her up for sale.

'By Congal of the Bloody Fingers,' said that cruel kern in answer to the laughing questions of his comrades, interlarding his speech with many fiery and horrid oaths, the which I spare you—'I found this accursed little witch this morning hiding among the rubbish of yonder cottage our boys pulled to pieces in the valley ; and, as I could not light on better ware, I dragged her here. But may I roast for ever if I will have anything more to do with her. She is a tigress, a little she-devil. I have thrashed and beat and kicked her, but I cannot get the spirit out. Let some other fellow try, and may Heaven wither him if he turns her loose near me again ! Now then, what will the best of you give ? She is a little travel-stained, perhaps—that comes of our march hither, and our subsequent disagreements—but all right

otherwise, and, an someone could cure her of her spitfire nature and make her amenable to reason, she would be an ornament to any tent. Now you, Borghil, for instance—it was you, I think, who split the mother's skull this morning—give me a bid for the daughter: you are not often bashful in such a case as this.'

'A penny then!' sang out Borghil of the Red Beard; 'and, with maids as cheap as they be hereabouts, she's dear at that,' and, while the laughter and jest went round, those rude islanders bid point by point for the unhappy girl who writhed and crouched before them. What could I do? Well I knew the vows my golden spurs put upon me, and the policy my borrowed knighthood warranted—and yet, she was not of gentle birth—'twas but the fortune of war. If men risked lives in that stern game, why should not maids risk something too? King Edward hated turmoil in the camp, and here on desperate venture, far in a hostile country, my soldier instinct rose against kindling such a blaze as would have burst out among these lawless hot-tempered kerns, had I but drawn my sword a foot from its scabbard. And, thinking thus, I sat there with bent head scowling behind my visor-bars, and turning my eyes now to my ready hilt that shone so convenient at my thigh, and anon to the tall Normandy maid, so fair, so pitiful, and in such sorry straits.

While I sat thus uncertain, the girl's price had gone up to fivepence, and, there being no one to give more, she was about to be handed over to an evil-looking fellow with a scar destroying one eye, and dividing his nose with a hideous yellow seam that went across his face from temple to chin. This gross mercenary had almost told the five coins into the blood-smudged hand of the other Irishman, and the bargain was near complete, when, to my surprise, Flamaucœur, who had been watching behind me, pushed his charger boldly to the front, and cried out in that smooth voice of his, 'Wait a spell, my friends! I think the maid is worth another coin or two!' and he plunged his hand into the wallet that hung beside his dagger.

This interruption surprised everyone, and for a moment there was a hush in the circle. Then he of the one eye, with a very wicked scowl, produced and bid another penny, the which Flamaucœur immediately capped by yet another. Each put down two more, and then the Celt came to the bottom of

his store, and, with a monstrous oath, swept back his money, and, commending the maid and Flamaucœur to the bottom-most pit of hell, backed off amid his laughing friends.

Not a wit disconcerted, my peaceful gallant rode up to the grim purveyor of that melancholy chattel, and having paid the silver, with a calm indifference which it shocked me much to see, unwound a few feet of the halter-rope depending from his Fleming's crupper. The loose end of this the man wound round and tied upon the twisted withies wherewith the maid's white wrists were fastened.

Such an escape from the difficulty had never occurred to my slower mind, and now, when my lad turned towards the quarter where his tent lay, and, apparently mighty content with himself, stepped his charger out with the unhappy girl trailing along at his side, his lightness greatly pained me. Nor was I pleased by the laughter and gibes of English squires and knights who met us.

'Hullo! you valorous two,' called out a mounted captain, 'whose hen-roosts have you been robbing?' And then another said, 'Faith! they've been recruiting,' and again, ''Tis a new page they've got to buckle them up and smooth their soldier pillows.' All this was hard to bear, and I saw that even Flamaucœur hung his head a little and presently rode along by byways less frequented. At one time he turned to me most innocent-like and said—

'Such a friend as this is just what I have been needing ever since I left the English shore.'

'Indeed!' I answered, sardonically, 'I do confess I am more surprised than perhaps I should be. It is as charming a handmaid as any knight could wish. Shall you send one of those long raven tresses home to thy absent lady with thy next budget of sighs and true-love tokens?'

But Flamaucœur shook his head, and said I misunderstood him bitterly. He was going on to say he meant to free the maid 'to-morrow or the next day,' when we turned a corner in our martial village street, and pulled up at our own tent doors.

Now, that Breton girl had submitted so far to be dragged along in a manner of lethargy born of her sick heart and misery, but when we stayed our chargers the very pause aroused her. She drew her poor frightened wits together and glared first at us, and then at our knightly pennons fluttering over

the white lintels of our lodgment; then, jumping to some dreadful, sad conclusion, she fired up as fierce and sudden as a trapped tigress when the last outlet is closed upon her. She stamped and raged, and twisted her fair white arms until the rough withies on her wrists cut deep into the tender flesh and the red blood went twining down to her torn and open bodice; she screamed, and writhed, and struggled against the glossy side of that gentle and mighty war-horse, who looked back wondering on her and sniffed her flagrant sorrow with wide velvet nostrils—no more moved than a grey crag by the beating of a summer sea—and then she turned on us.

Gads! she swore at us in such mellow Bisque as might have made a hardened trooper envious! Cursed us and our chivalry, called us forsworn knights, stains upon manhood, dogs and vampires!—then dropped upon her knee, and there suppliant, locked her swollen and bloody hands, and, with the hot white tears sparkling in her red and weary eyes, knelt to us, and in the wild tearful grief of her people, 'for the honour of our mothers, and for the sake of the bright distant maid we loved,' begged mercy and freedom.

And all through that storm of wild, sweet grief that callous libertine, Flamaucœur, made no show of freeing her. He sat his prick-eared, wondering charger, stared at the maid, and fingered his dagger-chain as though perplexed and doubtful. The hot torrent of that poor girl's misery seemed to daze and tie his tongue: he made no sign of commiseration and no movement, until at last I could stand it no longer. Wheeling round my war-horse, so that I could shake my mailed fist in the face of that sapling villain—

'By the light of day!' I burst out, half in wrath and half in amused bewilderment, 'this goes too far. Why, Flamaucœur, can you not see this is a maid in a hundred, and one who well deserves to keep that which she asks for? Jove! man, if you must have a handmaiden, why, the country swarms with forlorn ones who will gladly compound with fate by accepting the protection of thy tent. But this one!—come!—let my friendship go in pawn against her, and free the maid. If you must have something more solid—still, set her free, unharmed, and I will give thee a helmetful of pennies—that is to say, on the first time that I own so many.'

But Flamaucœur laughed more scornfully than he often

did, and, muttering that we were 'all fools together,' turned from me to the wild thing at his side.

'Look here,' he said, 'you mad girl. Come into my tent and I will explain everything. You shall be all unharmed, I vow it, and free to leave me if you will not stop—this is all mad folly, though out here I cannot tell you why.'

'I will not trust you,' she screamed, in arms again, straining at those horrid red wrists of hers and glaring on us—'Mother of Christ!' she shouted, turning to a knot of squires and captains who had gathered around us—'for the dear Light of Heaven some of you free my wretched spirit with your maces, here—here—some friendly spear for this friendless bosom—one dagger-thrust to rid me from these cursed tyrants, and I will take the memory of my slayer straight to the seat of mercy and mix it for ever with my grateful prayers. Oh, in Christian charity unsheath a weapon!'

I saw that slim soldier Flamaucœur groan within his helmet at this, then down he bent. 'Mad, mad girl!' I heard him say, and then followed a whisper which was lost between his hollow helmet and his prisoner's ear. Whatever it was, the effect was instantaneous and wonderful.

'Impossible!' burst out the French girl, starting away as far as the cords would let her, and eyeing her captor with surprise and amazement.

''Tis truth, I swear it.'

'Oh, impossible!—thou a ——'

'Hush, hush,' cried Flamaucœur, putting his hand upon the girl's mouth, and speaking again to her in his soft low voice, and as he did so her eyes ran over him, the fear and wonder slowly melted away, and then, presently, with a delighted smile at length shining behind her undried tears, she clasped and kissed his hand with a vast show of delight as uncontrolled as her grief had been, and when he had freed her and descended from his charger, to our amazement, led rather than followed that knight most willing to his tent, and there let fall the flap behind them.

'Now that,' said the King's jester, who had come up while this matter was passing—'that is what I call a truly persuasive tongue. I would give half my silver bells to know what magic that gentleman has that will get reason so quickly into an angry woman's head.'

‘If you knew that,’ quoth a stern old knight through the steel bars of his morion, ‘you might live a happy life, although you knew nothing else.’

‘Poor De Burgh!’ whispered a soldier near me. ‘He speaks with knowledge, for men say he owns a vixen, and is more honoured and feared here by the proud Frenchman than at his own fireside.’

‘Perhaps,’ suggested another to the laughing group, ‘he of the burning heart whispered that he had a double Indulgence in his tent. Women will go anywhere and do anything when it is the Church which leads them by the nose.’

‘Or perhaps,’ put in another, looking at the last speaker—‘perhaps he hinted that if the maid escaped from his hated clutches she would fall into thine, St. Caen, and she chose the lesser evil. It were an argument that would well warrant so sudden a conversion!’

‘Well! Well!’ quoth the fool, ‘we will not quarrel over the remembrance of the meat which another dog has carried off. Good-bye, fair Sirs, and may God give you all as efficient tongues as Sir Flamaucœur’s when next you are bowered with your distant ladies!’ and laughing and jesting among themselves the soldiers strolled away, leaving me to seek my solitary tent in no good frame of mind.

CHAPTER XIV

SUCH sights and scenes as these will show the chivalrous army with whom I served in but an indifferent light. And ill it would beseem me, who remember this time with pride, and the gloomy pleasure of my latter life, to stain the fair fame of English chivalry or to discredit with the foul life of its outer remnant our gallant army or that Royal person who shone in the white light of his day, the bravest knight and the gentlest king of any then living.

This sovereign was, above everything, a soldier. He observed all that passed in his camp with extraordinary acumen. It was my chance, soon after we joined the army, to catch his eye by some small deed of prowess in a *mêlée* near his standard, and that shrewd Sovereign called me to him, and asked my name and fame—the which I answered plausibly

enough, for my tongue was never tied by the cold sterility of truth—and then, pointing to where there lay on his shield a famous dead English captain of mercenaries, asked me if I would do duty for that soldier. I knew the troops he had led. They were grizzled veterans, rough old dogs every one of them, who had rode their close-packed chargers, shoulder to shoulder, through the thick tangles of a hundred fights. I had seen them alone, those stern old fellows, put down their lances and, altogether, like the band of close-united brothers that they were, go thundering over the dusty French campagnas, and, to the music that they loved so well, of ringing bits and hollow-sounding scabbards, of steel martingale and harness—delighting in the dreadful odds—charge ten times their number, and burst through the reeling enemy, and override and trample him down, and mow great swathes from his seething ranks, and revel in that thunderous carnage, as if the red dust of the *mêlée* were the sweetest air that had ever fanned their aged beards!

‘Ah! Prince!’ I said, speaking out boldly as that remembrance came before me, ‘by Thor! if those good fellows will take so young a one as I for leader, in place of a better, I will gladly let it be a compact.’

‘They will have you readily enough,’ replied the King, ‘even if it were not mine by right to name their captain, according to their rules.’ And, mounting the grey palfrey, he rode in camp, the better to spare his roan war-horse, he took me to where the troops were ranged up after the charge that had cost them their leader, and gave them over to me.

Thus was I provided with a lordly following, and the King’s gratitude for my poor service expressed; but still I appeared strangely to haunt the Sovereign’s memory. He looked back at me once or twice as though I were something most uncommon, and not long afterwards he would have me sup with him.

It happened as we fell back from the farthest limit of our raid, burning and plundering as we went along the Somme. One evening a fair French chateau on a hill, bending down by grassy slopes to the slow stream below, had fallen to our assault. In truth, that fair pile had found us rude visitors’ Twice in the storm the red flames had burst out of its broad upper corridors, and twice had been subdued. Its doors and gateways were beaten in, its casements burst and empty, the moat

about it was full of dead men, the ivy hung in unsightly tatters from its turrets, and on the smooth grass glacis copingstone and battlement—hurled on us by the besieged as we swarmed to the ladders—lay in crumbling ruins. Yet it was, as I say, a stately place, even in its new-made desolation; and I was standing at the close of a long dusty autumn day by my tent door, watching the yellow harvest moon come over the low French hills, and shedding as it rose a pale light over the English camp and that lordly place a little set back from it, when down through the twilight came a page who wore on sleeve and tunic-breast the royal cognisance. Was I, he questioned, the stranger knight new come from England, and, that being answered, he gave his message: 'King Edward would be glad if that knight would take his evening meal with him?'

I went—how could I else?—and there in the great torn and disordered hall of the castle we had taken was a broad table spread and already laid with rough magnificence. Page and squire were hurrying here and there in that stately pillared chamber, spreading on the tables white linens that contrasted most strangely with the black, new-made smoke-stains on the ceiling; piling on them gold and silver basins and ewers and plates bent and broken, just as our men-at-arms had saved them from pillaged crypts or rifled treasure-cells. Others were fixing a hundred gleaming torches to the notched, scarred columns of that banquet-place, and while one would be wiping half-dried blood of French peer and peasant from floor and doorway, or sprinkling rushes or sawdust on those gory patches, another was decanting redder burgundy—the which babbled most pleasantly to thirsty soldier ears as it passed in gushing streams from the cellar skins to supper flagon! It was an episode full of quaint contradictions!

But it was not at the feast I looked—not at the gallant table already flashing back the gleaming crimson lights from its stored magnificence. There, round that hall, in groups and twos and threes, chatting while they waited, laughing and talking over the incidents of the day, were some hundred warlike English nobles. And amid them, the most renowned warrior where all were famous, the tallest and most resolute-looking in a circle of heroes, stood the King. His quick, restless eye saw me enter, and he came towards me, slighting my reverence, and taking my hand like one good soldier welcoming another. He led me round that glittering throng, making me known to

prince and captain, and knight and noble, and ever as we went a hush fell upon those gallant groups. May be 'twas all the King's presence, but I doubt it. It was not on him all eyes were fixed so hard, it was not for him those stern soldiers were silent a spell and then fell to whisper and wondering among themselves as we passed down the pillared corridor—ah! nor was it all on account of that familiar, kingly host that the page-boys in gaping wonder upset the red wine, and the glamoured sewers forgot to set down their loaded dishes as they stood staring after us! No matter! I was getting accustomed to this silent awe, and little regarded it. It was but the homage, I thought, their late-born essences paid unwitting to my older soul.

Well! we talked and laughed a spell, seeming to wait for something, the while the meat grew cold, and then the arras over the great arch at the bottom of the hall lifted, and with hasty strides, like those late to a banquet, came in two knights. The first was black from top to toe—black was his dancing plume, black was his gleaming armour, black were his gloves and gyves, and never one touch of colour on him but the new golden spurs upon his heels and the broad jewel belt that held his cross-handled sword.

As this dusky champion entered, a smile of pleasure shone over the King's grave face. He ran to him and took his hand, the while he put his other affectionately on his shoulder.

'My dear boy!' he said, forgetting monarch in father, 'I have been thinking of thee for an hour. You are working too hard; you must be weary. Are there no tough captains in my host that you must be in the saddle early and late, and do a hundred of the duties of those beneath you, trying with that young hand of yours each new-set stake of our evening palisades, sampling the rude soldiers' supper-rations, seeing the troop go down to water, and counting and conning the lay of the Frenchman's twinkling watch-fire? My dear hungry lad, you are over-zealous—you will make me grieve for that new knighthood I have put upon you!'¹

'Oh, 'tis all right, father! I am but trying to infuse a little shame of their idle ways into this silken company of thine. But I do confess I am as hungry as well can be—hast saved a drink of wine and a loaf for me?'

¹ The Black Prince, then sixteen years old, was knighted on the Normandy beach, where the expedition landed.

'Saved a loaf for thee, my handsome boy! Why, thou shouldst have a loaf though it were the last in France, and though the broad stream of England's treasure were run dry to buy it. We have waited—we have not e'en uncovered.'

'Why, then, father, I will set the example. Here! some of you squires, discover me; I have been plated much to long!' and the ready pages ran forward, and with willing fingers rid the young prince of his raven harness. They unbuckled and unriveted him, until he stood before us in the close-fitting quilted black silk that he wore beneath, and I thought, as I stood back a little way and watched, that never had I seen a body at once so strong and supple. Then he ran his hands through his curly black hair, and took his place midway down the table; the King sat at the head; and when the chaplain had muttered a Latin grace we fell to work.

It was a merry meal in that ample hall, still littered under the arches with the broken rubbish of the morning's fight. The courteous English King sat smiling under the stranger canopy, and overhead—rocking in the breeze that came from broken casements—were the tattered flags our dead foeman's hands had won in many wars. Our table shone with heaped splendour shot out from the spoil-carts at the door; the King's seneschal blazed behind his chair in cloth of gold; while honest rough troopers in weather-stained leather and rusty trappings (pressed on the moment to do squires' duty) waited upon us, and ministered, after the fashion of their stalwart inexperience, to our needs. Amid all those strange surroundings we talked of wine, and love, and chivalry; we laughed and drank, tossing off our beakers of red burgundy to the health of that soldier Sovereign under the daïs, and drank deep bumpers to the grey to-morrow that was crimsoning the eastern windows ere we had done. Indeed, we did that night as soldiers do who live in pawn to chance, and snatch hasty pleasures from the brink of the unknown while the close foeman's watch-fires shine upon their faces, and each fore-thinks, as the full cups circle, how well he may take his next meal in Paradise. Of all the courtly badinage and warrior-mirth that ran round the loaded table while plates were emptied and tankards turned, but one thing lives in my mind. Truth, 'twas a strange chance, a most quaint conjunction, that brought that tale about, and put me there to hear it!

I have said that when the Black Prince entered the banquet hall there came another knight behind him, a strong, tall young soldier in glittering mail, something in whose presence set me wondering how or where we two had met before. Ere I could remember who this knight might be, the King and Prince were speaking as I have set down, and then the trumpets blew and we fell to meat and wine with soldier appetites, and the unknown warrior was forgotten, until—when the feast was well begun, looking over the rim of a circling silver goblet of malmsey I was lifting, at a youth who had just taken the empty place upon my right—there—Jove! how it made me start!—unhelmeted, unharnessed, lightly nodding to his comrades and all unwotting of his wondrous neighbourhood, was that same Lord Codrington, that curly-headed gallant who had leant against me in the white moonlight of St. Olaf's cloisters when I was a blessed relic, a silent, mitred, listening, long-dead miracle!

Gods! you may guess how I did glare at him over the sculptured rim of that great beaker, the while the red wine stood stagnant at my lips—and then how my breath did halt and flag as presently he turned slow and calm upon me, and there—a foot apart—the living and the dead were face to face, and front to front! I scarce durst breathe as he took the heavy pledge-cup from my hand—would he know me? would he leap from his seat with a yell of fear and wonder, and there, from some distant vantage-point among the shadowy pillars, with trembling finger impeach me to that startled table? Hoth! I saw in my mind's eye those superstitious warriors tumbling from their places, the while I alone sat gloomy and remorseful at the littered tressels, and huddling and crowding to the shadows—as they would not for a thousand Frenchmen—while that brave boy with chattering teeth and white fingers clutched upon the kingly arm did, incoherent, tell my tale, and with husky whisper say how 'twas no soldier of flesh and blood who sat there alone at the long white table, under the taper lights, self-damned by his solitude! I waited to see all this, and then that soldier, nothing wotting, glanced heedlessly over me—he wiped his lips with his napkin, and took a long draught of the wine within the cup. Then smiling as he handed it on, and turning lightly round as he laughed, 'A very good tankard indeed, Sir Stranger—such a one as is some solace for eight hours in a Flemish

saddle! But there was just a little too much nutmeg in the brew this time—didst thou not think so?’

I murmured some faint agreement, and sat back into my place, watching the great beaker circle round the table, while my thoughts idly hovered upon what might have chanced had I been known, and how I might have vantaged or lost by recognition. Well! the chance had passed, and I would not take it back. And yet, surely fate was sporting with me! The cup had scarcely made the circle and been drained to the last few drops among the novices at the farther end, when I was again in that very same peril!

‘You are new from England, Lord Worryingham,’ the young Earl said across me to a knight upon my other hand: ‘is there late news of interest to tell us?’

‘Hardly one sentence. All the news we had was stale reports of what you here have done. Men’s minds and eyes have been all upon you, and each homeward courier has been rifled of his budget at every port and village on his way by a hundred hungry speculators, as sharply as though he were a rich wanderer beset by footpads on a lonely heath. The common people are wild to hear of a great victory, and will think of nothing else. There is not one other voice in England—saving, perhaps, that some sleek city merchants do complain of new assessments, and certain reverent abbots, ’tis said, of the havoc you have played with this year’s vintage.’

‘Yes,’ answered the Earl with a laugh, ‘one can well believe that last. Sanctity, I have had late cause to know, is thirsty work. Why, the very Abbot of St. Olaf’s himself, usually esteemed a right reverend prelate, did charge me at my last confessional to send him hence some vats of malmsey! No doubt he shrewdly foresaw this dearth that we are making.’

‘What!’ exclaimed the other Knight, staring across me. ‘Hast thou actually confessed to that bulky saint? Mon Dieu! but you are in luck! Why, Lord Earl, thou hast disburdened thyself to the wonder of the age—to the most favoured son of Mother Church—the associate of beatified beings—and the particularly selected of the Apostles! Dost not know the wonder that has happened to St. Olaf’s?’

‘Not a whit. It was ordinary and peaceful when I was there a few weeks back.’

‘Then, by my spurs, there is some news for you! You remember that wondrous thing they had, that sleeping image

that men swore was an actual living man, and the holy brothers, who, no doubt, were right, declared was a blessed saint that died three hundred years ago? You too must know him, Sir,' he said, turning to me, and looking me full in the face: 'you must know him, if you ever were at St. Olaf's.'

'Yes,' I answered, calmly returning his gaze. 'I have been at St. Olaf's at one time or another, and I doubt if any man living knows that form you speak of better than I do myself.'

'And I,' put in the devout young Earl, 'know him too. A holy and very wondrous body! Surely God's beneficence still shields him in his sleep?'

'Shields him! Why, Codrington, he has been translated; removed just as he was to celestial places; 'tis on the very word of the Abbot himself we have it, and, where good men meet and talk in England, no other tale can compete for a moment with this one.'

'Out with it, bold Worryingham! Surely such a thing has not happened since the time of Elijah.'

''Tis simple enough, and I had it from one who had it from the Abbot's lips. That saintly recluse had spent a long day in fast and vigils amid the cloisters of his ancient abbey—so he said—and when the evening came had knelt after his wont an hour at the shrine, lost in holy thought and pious exercise. Nothing new or strange appeared about the Wonder. It lay as it had ever lain, silent, in the cathedral twilight, and the good man, full of gentle thoughts and celestial speculations, if we may take his word for it—and God forbid I should do otherwise!—the holy father even bent over him in fraternal love and reverence the while, he says, the beads ran through his fingers as Ave and Paternoster were told to the sleeping martyr's credit by scores and hundreds. Not a sign of life was on the dead man's face. He slept and smiled up at the vaulted roof just as he had done year in and out beyond all memory, and therefore, as was natural, the Abbot thought he would sleep on while two stones of the cathedral stood one upon another.

'He left him, and, pacing down the aisles, wended to the refectory, where the brothers had near done their evening meal, and there, still in holy meditation, sat him down to break that crust of dry bread and drink that cup of limpid water which (he told my friend) was his invariable supper.'

'Hast thou ever seen the reverend father, good Worryng-ham?' queried a young knight across the table as the story-teller stopped for a moment to drink from the flagon by his elbow.

'Yes, I have seen him once or twice.'

'Why, so have I,' laughed the young soldier—'and, by all the Saints in Paradise, I do not believe he sups on husks and water.'

'Believe or not as you will, it is a matter between thyself and conscience. The Abbot spoke, and I have repeated just what he said.'

'On with the story, Lord Earl,' laughed another: 'we are all open-mouthed to hear what came next, and even if his Reverence—in holy abstraction, of course—doth sometime dip fingers into a venison pasty by mistake for a bread trencher, or gets hold of the wine-vessel instead of the water-beaker—'tis nothing to us. Suppose the reverent meal was ended—as Jerome says it should be—in humble gladness, what came then?'

'What came then?' cried Worryngham. 'Why, the monks were all away—the tapers burnt low—the Abbot sat there by himself, his praying hands crossed before him—when wide the chancery door was flung, and there, in his grave-clothes white and tall, was the saint himself!'

Every head was turned as the English knight thus told his story, and, while the younger soldiers smiled disdainfully, good Codrington at my side crossed himself again and again, and I saw his soldier lips trembling as prayer and verse came quick across them.

'Ah! the saint was on foot without a doubt, and it might have chilled all the breath in a common man to see him stand there alive, and witful, who had so long been dead and mindless, to meet the light of those sockets where the eyes had so long been dull! But 'tis a blessed thing to be an abbot!—to have a heart whiter than one's mother's milk, and a soul of limpid clearness. That holy friar, without one touch of mortal fear—it is his very own asseveration—rose and welcomed his noble guest, and sat him i' the daïs, and knelt before him, and adored, and, bold in goodness, waited to be cursed or canonised—withered by a glance of those eyes no man could safely look on, or hoist straight to St. Peter's chair, just as chance should have it.'

'Wonderful and marvellous!' gasped Codrington. 'I would have given all my lands to have knelt at the bottom of that hall whose top was sanctified by such a presence.'

'And I,' cried another knight, 'would have given this dinted suit of Milan that I sit in, and a tattered tent somewhere on yonder dark hillside (the which is all I own of this world), to have been ten miles away when that same thing happened. Surely it was most dread and grim, and may Heaven protect all ordinary men if the fashion spreads with saints!'

'They will not trouble you, no doubt, good comrade. This one rose in no stern spirit to rebuke, but as the pale commissioner of Heaven to reward virtue and bless merit. Ill would it beseem me to tell, or you, common, gross soldiers of the world, to listen to what passed between those two. 'Twere rank sacrilege to mock the new-risen's words by retailing them over a camp-table, even though the table be that of the King himself; and who are we, rough, unruly sons of Mother Church, that we should submit to repetition the converse of a prelate with one we scarce dare name!' Whereon Worryngham drank silently from his goblet, and half a dozen knights crossed themselves devoutly.

'And there is another reason why I should be silent,' he continued. 'The Abbot will not tell what passed between them. Only so much as this: he gives out with modest hesitance that his holy living and great attainment had gone straighter to Heaven than the smoke of Abel's altar-fire, and thus, on these counts and others, he had been specially selected for Divine favours, and his ancient Church for miracle. The priest, so the Wonder vowed, must be made a cardinal, and have next reversion of the Papal chair. Meanwhile pilgrims were to hold the wonder-shrine of St. Olaf's no less holy tenantless than tenanted, to be devout, and above all things liberal, and pray for the constant intercession of that Messenger who could no longer stay. Whereon, quoth the Abbot, a wondrous light did daze the watcher's sight—unheard, unseen of other men, the walls and roof fell wide apart—and then and there, amid a wondrous hum of voices and countless shooting stars, that Presence mounted to the sky, and the Abbot fell fainting on the floor!'

'Truly a strange story, and like to make St. Olaf's coffers fuller than King Edward's are.'

‘And to do sterling service to the reverend Prior! What think you, Sir?’ said one, turning to me who had kept silent all through this strange medley of fact and cunning fiction. ‘Is it not a tale that greatly redounds to the holy father’s credit, and like to do him material service?’

‘No doubt,’ I answered, ‘it will serve the purpose for which ’twas told. But whether the adventure be truly narrated or not only the Abbot and he who supped with him can know.’

‘Ah!’ they laughed, ‘and, by Our Lady! you may depend upon it the priest will stick to his version through thick and thin.’

‘And by all oaths rolled in one,’ I fiercely cried, striking my fist upon the table till the foeman’s silver leapt (for the lying Abbot’s story had moved my wrath), ‘by Thor and Odin, by cruel Osiris, by the bones of Hengist and his brother, that saint will never contradict him!’

Shortly after we rose, and each on his rough pallet sought the rest a long day’s work had made so grateful.

Yes! we sought it, but to one, at least, it would not come for long! Hour after hour I paced in meditation about my tent with folded arms and bent head, thinking of all that had been or might have been, and, after that supper of suggestions, the last few weeks rose up strongly before me. Again and again all that I had seen and done in that crowded interval swept by my eyes, but the one thing that stayed while all others faded, the one ever-present shadow among so many, was the remembrance of the fair, unhappy girl Isobel. Full of rougher thoughts, I have not once spoken of her, yet, since we landed on this shore, her winning presence had grown on me every day I lived, and now to-night, here, close on the eve, as we knew it, of a desperate battle, wherefrom no man could see the outcome, the very darkness all about me, after the flickering banquet lights, was full of Isobel. I laughed and frowned by turn to myself in my lonely walk that evening, to find how the slighted girl was growing upon me. Was I a silly squire at a trysting-place, decked out with love-knots and tokens, a green gallant in a summer wood, full of sighs and sonnets, to be so witched by the bare memory of a foolish white wench who had fallen enamoured of my swart countenance? It was idle nonsense; I would not yield. I put it

behind me, and thought of to-morrow—the good King and my jolly comrades—and then there again was the outline of Isobel's fair face in the yellow rift of the evening sky; there were Isobel's clear eyes fixed, gentle and reproachful, on me, and the glimmer of her white draperies amid the shifting shadow of the tent, and even the evening wind outside was whispering as it came sighing over the wild grass lands—'Isobel!' Ah! and there was something more behind all that thought of Isobel. There were eyes that looked from Isobel's shadowy face, wherever in my fancy I saw it, that filled me with a strange unrest, and a whisper behind the whispers of that maiden voice that was hers and yet was not—a fine thin music that played upon the fibres of my heart; a presence behind a haunting presence; a meaning behind a meaning that stirred me with the strangest fancies. And before another night was over I understood them!

Well, in fact and in deed, I was in love like many another good soldier, and long did I strive to find a specific for the gentle malady, but when this might not be—why, I laughed! the thing itself must needs be borne; 'twas a common complaint, and no great harm; when the war was over, I would get back to England, and, if the maid were still of the same way of thinking—had I not stood a good many knocks and buffets in the world?—a little ease would do me good. Ah! a very fair maid—a fair maid, indeed! And her dower some of the fattest land you could find in a dozen shires!

Thus, schooling myself to think a due entertainment of the malady were better than a churlish cure, I presently decided to write to the lady; for, I argued, if to-morrow ends as we hope it may, why, the letter will be a good word for a homeward travelling hero crowned with new-plucked bays; and if to-morrow sees me stiff and stark, down in yon black valley, among to-morrow's silent ones, still 'twill be a meet parting, and I owe the maid a word or two of gentleness. I determined, therefore, to write to her at once a scroll, not of love—for I was not ripe for that—but of compassion—of just those feelings that one has to another when the spark of love trembles to the kindling but is not yet ablaze. And because I did not know my own mind to any certainty, and because that youth Flamaucœur was both shrewd and witty—as ready-witted and as nimble, indeed, with tongue and pen as though he were a woman—I determined it should be he who shoul'

indite that epistle and ease my conscience of this duty which had grown to be so near a pleasure.

I sent forthwith for Flamaucœur, and he came at once, as was his wont, sheathed in comely steel from neck to heel, his close-shut helm upon his head, but all weaponless as usual, save for a toy dagger at his side.

'Good friend,' I said, 'you carry neither sword nor mace. That is not wise in such a camp as this, and while the Frenchman's watchfires smoke upon the eastern sky. But, never mind, I will arm thee myself for the moment. Here'—passing him the things a writer needs—'here is a little weapon wherewith they say much mischief has been done at one time or another in the world, and some sore wounds taken and given; wield it now for me in kinder sort, and write me the prettiest epistle thou canst—not too full of harebrained love or the nonsense that minstrels deal in—but friendly, suave and gentle, courteous to my lady-love!'

'To whom?' gasped Flamaucœur, stepping back a pace.

'Par Dieu, boy!' I laughed. 'I spoke plain enough! Why, thou consumed dog in the manger, while thy own heart is confessedly in condition of eternal combustion, may not another knight even warm himself by a spark of love without your glowering at him so between the bars of thine iron muzzle? Come! Why should not I love a maid as well as you—ah! and write to her a farewell on the eve of battle?'

'Oh! write to whom you will, but I cannot—will not—help you;' and the youth, who knew nothing of my affections, and to whom I had never spoken of a woman before, walked away to the tent door and lifted the flap, looked out over the dim French hills, seeming marvellous perturbed.

Poor lad, I thought to myself, how soft he is! My love reminds him of his own, and hence he fears to touch a lover pen. And yet he must. He can write twice as ingenious, shrewd as I, and no one else could do this letter half so well. 'Come, Flamaucœur! indeed, you must help me. If you are so sorry over your own reflections, why, the more reason for lending me thy help. We are companions in this pretty grief, and should render to each the help due between true brothers in misfortune. I do assure you I have near broken a maiden heart back in England.'

'Perhaps she was unworthy of thy love—why should you write?'

'Unworthy! Gods! She was unhappy, she was unfortunate—but unworthy, never! Why, Flamaucœur, here, as I have been chewing the cud of reflection all these days, I have begun to think she was the whitest, sweetest maid that ever breathed.'

'Some pampered, sickly jade, surely, Sir Knight,' murmured the young man in strange jealous-sounding tones whereof I could not fail to heed the bitterness; 'let her by, she has forgotten thee mayhap, and taken a new love—those pink-and-white ones were ever shallow!'

'Shallow! you wayward boy! By Hoth! had you seen our parting you would not have said so. Why, she wept and clung to me, although no words of love had ever been between us—'

'A jade, a wanton!' sobbed that strange figure there by the shadowy tent-flap, whereon, flaming up, 'God's death!' I shouted, 'yunker, that goes too far! Curb thy infernal tongue, or neither thy greenness nor unweaponed state shall save thee from my sword!'

'And I,' quoth Flamaucœur, stepping out before me—'I deride thy weapon—I will not turn one hair's breadth from it—here! point it here, to this heart, dammed and choked with a cruel affection! Oh! I am wretched and miserable, and eager against all my instincts for to-morrow's horrors!'

Whereat that soft and silly youth turned his gorget back upon me and lent against the tent-pole most dejectedly. And I was grieved for him, and spun my angry brand into the farthest corner, and clapped him on the shoulder, and cheered him as I might, and then, half mindful to renounce my letter, yet asked him once again.

'Come! thou art steadier now. Wilt thou finally write for me to my leman?'

'By every saint in Paradise,' groaned the unhappy Flamaucœur, 'I will not!'

'What! not do me a favour and please thy old friend, Isobel of Oswaldston, at one and the same time?'

'Please whom?' shrieked Flamaucœur, starting like a frightened roe.

'Why, you incomprehensible boy, Isobel of Oswaldston, thy old playmate, Isobel. Surely I had told thee before it was of her I was thus newly enamoured?'

What passed then within that steel casque I did not know,

though now I well can guess, but that slim gallant turned from me, and never a word he spoke. A gentle tremor shook him from head to heel, and I saw the steel plates of his harness quiver with the throes of his pent emotion, while the blue plumes upon his helmet-top shook like aspen-leaves in the first breath of a storm, and over the bars of his cruel visor there rippled a sigh such as surely could only have come from deep down in a human heart.

All this perplexed me very much and made me thoughtful, but before I could fashion my suspicions, Flamaucœur mastered his feelings, and came slowly to the little table, and, saying in a shy, humble voice, wondrously altered, 'I will write to thy maid!' drew off his steel gauntlet and took up the pen. That smooth fine hand of his trembled a little as he spread the paper on the table, and then we began.

OUR CAMP BY THE SOMME.

August 24, 1376.

To the Excellent Lady Isobel of Oswaldston this brings greeting and salutation.

Madam,—May it please you to accept the homage of the humblest soldier who serves with King Edward?

'That,' said Flamaucœur, stopping for a moment to sharpen his pen, 'is not a very amorous beginning.'

'No,' I answered, 'and I have a mind first only to tell her how we fare. You see, good youth, our parting was such she weeps in solitude, I expect, hoping nothing from me, and therefore, I would wish to break my amendment to her gently. Faith! she may be dying of love for aught I know, and the shock of a frank avowal of my new-awakened passion might turn her head.'

'Why yes, Sir Knight,' quoth my comrade, taking a fresh dip of ink, 'or, on the other hand, she may now be footing it to some gay measure on those polished floors we wot of, or playing hide-and-seek among the tapestries with certain merry gallants!'

'Jove! If I thought so!'

'Well, never mind. Get on with thy missive, and I will not interrupt again.'

After leaving your father's castle, Madam, I fell in about nightfall with that excellent youth, Flamaucœur, according to your ladyship's supposition. We crossed the narrow sea; and since, have scarcely had time to dine or sleep, or wipe down our weary chargers, or once to scour our red and rusty armour. We joined King Edward, Madam, just as his Highness unfurled the lions and fleur de lys upon the green slopes of the Seine, and thence, right up to the walls of Paris, we scoured the country. We turned then, Queen of Tournaments, northward, towards Flanders.

At this Flamaucœur lay down his pen for a moment, and, heaving a sigh, exclaimed, 'That "Queen of Tournaments" does not come well from thee, Sir Knight! Thou slighted this very girl once in the lists when the prize was on thy spear-point.'

'Par Dieu! and so I did. I had clean forgotten it! But how, in Heaven's name, came you to know of that, who were not there?'

'Some one told me of it,' replied the boy, looking away from me, as though he were lying.

'Well, cross it out!'

'Not I! The maid already knows, no doubt, the fickleness of men, and this will surprise her no more than to see a weathercock go round when the wind doth change. Proceed!'

Heavy laden with booty, we turned towards Flanders. We gained two days ago the swelling banks of the Somme, and down this sluggish stream, taking what we listed as we went with the red license of our revengeful errand, we have struggled until here, fair lady. But each hour of this adventurous march has seen us closer and more closely beset. The broad stream runs to north of us, the burgher levies of Amiens are mustering thick upon our right and behind, Gods! so close, that now as this is penned the black canopy of the night is all ruddy where his countless watchfires glimmer on the southern sky; behind us comes the pale respondent in this bloody suit that we are trying—Philip, who says that France is his by Salic law, and no rod of it, no foot or inch on this side of the salt sea, ever can or shall be Edward's. And for jurors, Madam, to the assize that will be held so shortly he has gathered from every corner of his vassal realm an hundred

thousand footmen and twenty thousand horse; a score of perjured Princes make his false quarrel doubly false by bearing witness to it, and here, to-morrow at the farthest, we do think, they will arraign us, and put this matter to the sharp adjustment of the sword. Against that great host that threatens us we are but a handful, four thousand men at arms all native to the English shires, ten thousand archers, as many light-armed Welshmen, and four thousand wild Irish.

‘There!’ I said with pride, as Flamaucœur’s busy pen came to a stop—‘There! she will know now how it goes with King Edward’s gallant English.’

‘Why, yes, no doubt she may,’ responded my friend; ‘but maids are more apt to be interested in the particular than in the general. You have addressed her so far like the presiding captain of a warlike council. Is there nothing more to come?’

‘Gads! that’s true enough! I have left out all the love!’

‘Yet that is what her hungry eyes will look for when her fingers untie this silk.’

‘Why, then, take up your pen again and write thus:—

And, Madam, to-morrow’s battle, if it comes, will be no light affair. He who sends this to thee may, ere it reaches thy hand, be numbered among the things that are past. Therefore he would also that all negligence of his were purged by such atonement as he can make, and all crudeness likewise amended. And in particular he offers to thee, whose virtues and condescension late reflection have brought lively to his mind, his most dutiful and appreciative homage. You, who have so good a knowledge of his poor taste, will pardon his ineloquence, but he would say to thee, in fact, that thy gentleness and worth were never so conscious to him as here to-night, when the red gleam of coming battle plays along the evening sky, and, if he wears no token in his helmet in to-morrow’s fray, ’tis because he has none of thine.

‘There, boy! ’tis not what I meant to say—and very halting, yet she will guess its meaning. Dost thou not think so?’

‘Guess its meaning! Oh, dear comrade, she will live again and feed upon it—wake and sleep upon it, and wear

It next her heart, just as I should were I she and you were you.'

'But it is so beggarly and poor expressed,' I said, with pleased humility.

'She will not think so,' cried Flamaucœur. 'If I know aught of maids, she will think it the most blessed vellum that ever was engrossed, she will like its style better than the wretched culprit likes the style of the reprieve the steaming horseman flaunts before him. She'll con each line and letter, and puncture them with tears and kisses—thou hast had small ken of maids, I think, sweet soldier!'

'Well! well! It may be so. Do up the letter, since it will read so well, and put it in the way to be taken by the first messenger who sails for England. Then we will ride round the posts and see how near the Frenchman's watchfires be. And so to sleep, good friend, and may the many-named Powers which sit on high wake us to a happy to-morrow!'

CHAPTER XV

A VOLUME might well be written on what I must compress into this chapter. On the narrow canvas of these few pages must be outlined the crowded incidents of that noble fight above Crecy, whereof your historians know but half the truth, and these same lines, charged with the note of victory, full of the joyful exultation of the *mêlée* and dear delight of hard-fought combat—these lines must, too, record my own illimitable grief.

If while I write you should hear through my poor words aught of the loud sound of conflict, if you catch aught of the meeting of two great hosts led on by kingly captains, if the proud neighing of the war-steeds meet you through these heavy lines and you discern aught of the thunder of charging squadrons, aught of the singing wind that plays above a sea of waving plumes as the chivalry of two great nations rush, like meeting waves, upon each other, so shall you hear, amid all that joyful tumult, one other sound, one piercing shriek, wherefrom not endless scores of seasons have cleared my ears.

Listen, then, to the humming bow-strings on the Crecy slopes—to the stinging hiss of the black rain of English

arrows that kept those heights inviolable—to the rattle of unnumbered spears, breaking like dry November reeds under the wild hog's charging feet, as rank behind rank of English gentlemen rush on the foe! Listen, I say, with me to the thunderous roar of France's baffled host, wrecked by its own mightiness on the sharp edge of English valour, listen to the wild scream of hireling fear as Doria's crossbowmen see the English pikes sweep down upon them; listen to the thunder of proud Alençon sweeping round our lines with every glittering peer in France behind him, himself in gemmy armour—a delusive star of victory, riding, revengeful, on the foremost crest of that wide, sparkling tide! Hear, if you can, all this, and, where my powers fail, lend me the help of your bold English fancy.

It was a hard-fought day indeed! Hotly pursued by the French King, numbering ourselves scarce thirty thousand men, while those behind us were four times as many, we had fallen back down the green banks of the Somme, seeking in vain for a ford by which we might pass to the farther shore. On this morning of which I write so near was Philip and his vast array that our rearguard, as we retreated slowly towards the North, saw the sheen of the spear-tops and the colour on whole fields of banners, scarce a mile behind us. And every soldier knew that, unless we would fight at disadvantage, with the river at our backs, we must cross it before the sun was above our heads. Swiftly our prickers scoured up and down the banks, and many a strong yeoman waded out, only to find the hostile water broad and deep; and thus, all that morning, with the blare of Philip's trumpets in our ears, we hunted about for a passage and could not find it, the while the great glittering host came closing up upon us like a mighty crescent storm-cloud—a vast sombre shadow, limned and edged with golden gleams.

At noon we halted in a hollow, and the King's dark face was as stern as stern could be. And first he turned and scowled like a lion at bay upon the oncoming Frenchmen, and then upon the broad tidal flood that shut us in that trap. Even the young Prince at his right side scarce knew what to say; while the clustering nobles stroked their beards and frowned, and looked now upon the King and now upon the water. The archers sat in idle groups down by the willows,

and the scouts stood idle on the hills. Truth, 'twas a pause such as no soldier likes, but when it was at the worst in came two men-at-arms dragging along a reluctant peasant between them. They hauled him to the Sovereign, and then it was—

‘Please your Mightiness, but this fellow knows a ford, and for a handful of silver says he 'll tell it.’

‘A handful of silver!’ laughed the joyful King. ‘God! let him show us a place where we can cross, and we will smother him with silver! On, good fellow!—the ford! the ford! and come to us to-morrow morning and you shall find him who has been friend to England may laugh henceforth at sulky Fortune!’

Away we went down the sun-burnt, grassy slopes, and ere the sun had gone a hand-breadth to the west of his meridian a little hamlet came in sight upon the farther shore, and, behind it a mile, pleasant ridges trending up to woods and trees. Down by the hamlet the river ran loose and wide, and the ebbing stream (for it was near the sea) had just then laid bare the new-wet, shingly flats, and as we looked upon them, with a shout that went from line to line, we recognised deliverance. So swift had been our coming that when the first dancing English plumes shone on the August hill-tops the women were still out washing clothes upon the stones, and when the English bowmen, all in King Edward’s livery, came brushing through the copses, the kine were standing knee-deep about the shallows, and the little urchins, with noise and frolic, were bathing in the stream that presently ran deep and red with blood. And small maids were weaving chaplets among those meadows where kings and princes soon lay dying, and tumbling in their play about the sunny meads, little wotting of the crop their fields would bear by evening, or the stern harvest to be reaped from them before the moon got up.

We crossed; but an army does not cross like one, and before our rearward troops were over the French vanguard was on the hill-tops we had just quitted, while the tide was flowing in strong again from the outer sea.

‘Now, God be praised for this!’ said King Edward, as he sat his charger and saw the strong salt water come gushing in as the last man toiled through. ‘The kind Heavens smile upon our arms—see! they have given us a breathing space! You, good Sir Andrew Kirkaby, who live by pleasant Sherwood, with a thousand archers stand here among the willow

bushes and keep the ford for those few minutes that it will remain. Then, while Philip watches the gentle sea fill up this famous channel, and waits, as he must wait, upon his opportunity, we will inland, and on yonder hill, by the grace of God and sweet St. George, we will lay a supper-place for him and his!

So spoke the bold King, and turned his war-horse, and, with all his troops—seeming wondrous few by comparison of the dusky swarms gathering behind us—rode north four hundreds yards from Crecy. He pitched upon a gentle ridge sloping down to a little brook, while at top was woody cover for the baggage train, and near by, on the right, a corn-mill on a swell. 'Twas from that granary floor, sitting stern and watchful, his sword upon his knees, his impatient charger armed and ready at the door below, that the King sat and watched the long battle.

Meanwhile, we strengthened the slopes. We dug a trench along the front and sides, and, with the glitter of the close foeman's steel in our eyes, lopped the Crecy thickets. And, working in silence (while the Frenchman's song and laughter came to us on the breeze), set the palisades, and bound them close as a strong fence 'gainst charging squadrons, and piled our spears where they were handy, and put out the archers' arrows in goodly heaps. Jove! we worked as though each man's life depended on it, the Prince among us, sweating at spade and axe, and then—it was near four o'clock on that August afternoon—a hush fell upon both hosts, and we lay about and only spoke in whispers. And you could hear the kine lowing in the valley a mile beyond, and the lapwing calling from the new-shorn stubble, and the whimbrels on the hill-tops, and the river fast emptying once again, now prattling to the distant sea. 'Twas a strange pause, a sullen, heavy silence, no longer than a score of minutes. And then, all in a second, a little page in the yellow fern in front of me leapt to his feet, and, screaming in shrill treble that scared the feeding linnets from the brambles, tossed his velvet cap upon the wind and cried—

'They come! they come, St. George! St. George for merry England!'

And up we all sprang to our feet, and, while the proud shout of defiance ran thundering from end to end of our triple lines, a wondrous sight unfolded before us. The vast array

of France, stretching far to right and left and far behind, was loosed from its roots, and coming on down the slope—a mighty frowning avalanche—upon us, a flowing angry sea, wave behind wave, of chief and mercenary—countless lines of spear and bowmen and endless ranks of men-at-arms behind—an overwhelming flood that hid the country as it marched shot with the lurid gleam of light upon its billows, and crested with the fluttering of endless flags that crowned each of those long lines of cheering foemen.

That tawny fringe there in front a furlong deep and driven on by the host behind like the yellow running spume upon the lip of a flowing tide was Genoese crossbowmen, selling their mean carcasses to manure the good Picardy soil for hireling pay. Far on the left rode the grim Doria, laughing to see the little band set out to meet his serried vassals, and, on the right, Grimaldi's olive face scowled hatred and malice at the hill where the English lay.

There, behind these tawny mercenaries in endless waves of steel, D'Alençon rode, waving his princely bâton, and marshalled as he came rank upon rank of glittering chivalry—a fuming, foamy sea of spears and helmets that flashed and glittered in the sun, and tossed and chafed, impatient of ignoble hesitance, and flowed in stately pride towards us, the white foam-streaks of twenty thousand plumed horsemen showing like breakers on a shallow sea, as that great force, to the blare of trumpet, swept down.

And, as though all these were not enough to smother our desperate valour even with the shadow of their numbers, behind the French chivalry again advanced a winding forest of spearmen stooping to the lie of the ground, and now rising and now falling like water-reeds when the west wind plays among them. Under that innumerable host, that stretched in dust and turmoil two long miles back to where the grey spires of Abbeville were misty on the sky, the rasp of countless feet sounded in the still air like the rain falling on a leafy forest.

Never did such a horde set out before to crush a desperate band of raiders. And, that all the warlike show might not lack its head and consummation, between their rearguard ranks came Philip, the vassa! monarch who held the mighty fiefs that Edward coveted. Lord! how he and his did shine and glint in the sunshine! How their flags did flutter and

their heralds blow as the resplendent group—a deep, strong ring of peers and princes curveting in the flickering shade of a score of mighty blazons—came over the hill crest and rode out to the foremost line of battle and took places there to see the English lion flayed. With a mighty shout—a portentous roar from rear to front which thundered along their van and died away among the host behind—the French heralded the entry of their King upon the field, and, with one fatal accord, the whole vast baying pack broke loose from order and restraint and came at us.

We stood aghast to see them. Fools! Madmen! They swept down to the river—a hundred thousand horse and footmen bent upon one narrow passage—and rushed in, every chief and captain scrambling with his neighbour to be first—troops, squadrons, ranks, all lost in one seething crowd—disordered, unwarlike. And thus—quivering and chaotic, heaving with the stress of its own vast bulk—under a hundred jealous leaders, the great army rushed upon us.

While they struggled thus, out galloped King Edward to our front, bareheaded, his jewelled warden staff held in his mailed fist, and, riding down our ranks, and checking the wanton fire of that grey charger, which curveted and proudly bent his glossy neck in answer to our cheering, proud, calm-eyed, and happy, King Edward spoke—

‘My dear comrades and lieges linked with me in this adventure—you, my gallant English peers, whose shiny bucklers are the bright bulwarks of our throne, whose bold spirits and matchless constancy have made this just quarrel possible—oh! well I know I need not urge you to that valour which is your native breath. Right well I know how true your hearts do beat under their steely panoply; and there is false Philip watching you, and here am I! Yonder, behind us, the grey sea lies, and if we fall or fail it will be no broader for them than ’tis for us. Stand firm to-day, then, dear friends and cousins! Remember, every blow that’s struck is struck for England, every foot you give of this fair hillside presages the giving of an ell of England. Remember, Philip’s hungry hordes, like ragged lurchers in the slip, are lean with waiting for your patrimonies. Remember all this, and stand as strong to-day for me as I and mine shall stand for you. And you, my trusty English yeomen, said the soldier King—‘you whose strong limbs were grown in pleasant England—oh!

show me here the mettle of those same pastures ! God ! when I do turn from yonder hireling sea of shiny steel and mark how square your sturdy valour stands unto it—how your clear English eyes do look unfaltering into that yeasty flood of treachery—why, I would not one single braggart yonder the less for you to lop and drive ; I would not have that broad butt that Philip sets for us to shoot at the narrower by one single coward tunic ! Yonder, I say, ride the lank lusty Frenchmen who thirst to reeve your acres and father to-morrow, if so they may, your waiting wives and children. To it, then, dear comrades—upon them, for King Edward and for fair England's honour ! Strike home upon these braggart bullies who would heir the lion's den even while the lion lives ; strike for St. George and England ! And may the sweet God who gives the fortunes of each day judge now 'tween them and us !'

As the King finished, five thousand English archers went forward in a long grey line, and, getting into shot of the first ranks of the enemy, drew out their long bows from their cowhide cases and set the bowfeet to the ground and bent and strung them ; and then it would have done you good to see the glint of the sunshine on the hail of arrows that swept the hillside and plunged into those seething ranks below. The close-massed foemen writhed and winced under that remorseless storm. The Genoese in front halted and slung their crossbows, and fired whole sheaves of bolts upon us, that fell as stingless as reed javelins on a village green, for a passing rainstorm had wet their bowstrings and the slack sinews scarce sent a bolt inside our fences, while every shaft we sped plunged deep and fatal. Loud laughed the English archers at this, and plied their biting flights of arrows with fierce energy ; and, all in wild confusion, the mercenaries yelled and screamed and pulled their ineffectual weapons, and, stern shut off from advance by the flying rain of good grey shafts, and crushed from behind by the crowding throng, tossed in wild confusion, and broke and fled.

Then did I see a sight to spoil a soldier's dreams. As the coward bowmen fell back, the men-at-arms behind them, wroth to be so long shut off the foe, and pressed in turn by the troops in rear, fell on them, and there, under our eyes, we saw the first rank of Philip's splendid host at war with the second ; we saw the billmen of fair Bascquerard and Bruneval

lop down the olive mercenaries from Roquemaure and the cities of the midland sea; we saw the savage Genoese falcons rip open the gay livery of Lyons and Bayonne, and all the while our shafts rained thick and fast among them, and men fell dead by scores in that hideous turmoil—and none could tell whether 'twas friends or foes that slew them.

A wonderful day, indeed; but hard was the fighting ere it was done. My poor pen fails before all the crowded incident that comes before me, all the splendid episodes of a stirring combat, all the glitter and joy and misery, the proud exultation of that August morning and the black chagrin of its evening. Truth! But you must take as said a hundred times as much as I can tell you, and line continually my bare suggestions with your generous understanding.

Well, though our archers stood the first brunt, the day was not left all to them. Soon the French footmen, thirsting for vengeance, had overridden and trampled down their Genoese allies, and came at us up the slope, driving back our skirmishers as the white squall drives the wheeling seamews before it, and surged against our palisades, and came tossing and glinting down upon our halberdiers. The loud English cheer echoed the wild yelling of the Southerners: bill and pike, and sword and mace and dagger sent up a thunderous roar all down our front, while overhead the pennons gleamed in the dusty sunlight, and the carrion crows wheeled and laughed with hungry pleasure above that surging line. Gods! 'twas a good shock, and the crimson blood went smoking down to the rivulets, and the savage scream of battle went up into the sky as that long front of ours, locked fast in the burnished arms of France, heaved and strove, and bent now this way and now that, like some strong, well-matched wrestlers.

A good shock indeed! A wild tremendous scene of confusion there on the long grass of that autumn hill, with the dark woods behind on the ridge, and, down in front, the babbling river and the smoking houses of the ruined village. So vast was the extent of Philip's array that at times we saw it extend far to right and left of us; and so deep was it, that we who battled amid the thunder of its front could hear a mile back to their rear the angry hum of rage and disappointment as the chaotic troops, in the bitterness of the spreading confusion, struggled blindly to come at us. Their very number was our salvation. That half of the great army which had

safely crossed the stream lay along outside our palisades like some splendid, writhing, helpless monster, and the long swell of their dead-locked masses, the long writhe of their fatal confusion, you could see heaving that glittering tide like the golden pulse of a summer sea pent in a crescent shore. And we were that shore! All along our front the stout, unblenching English yeomen stood to it—the white English tunic was breast to breast with the leathern kirtles of Genoa and Turin. Before the frightful blows of those stalwart pikemen the yellow mail of the gay troopers of Châteauroux and Besançon crackled like dry December leaves; the rugged boar-skins on the wide shoulders of Vosges peasants were less protection 'gainst their fiery thrust than a thickness of lady's lawn. Down they lopped them, one and all, those strong, good English hedgemen, till our bloody foss was full—full of olive mercenaries from Tarascon and Arles—full of writhing Bisc and hideous screaming Genoese. And still we slew them, shoulder to shoulder, foot to foot, and still they swarmed against us, while we piled knight and vassal, serf and master, princeling and slave, all into that ditch in front. The fair young boy and grey-bearded sire, the freeman and the serf, the living and the dead, all went down together, till a broad rampart stretched along our swinging shouting front, and the glittering might of France surged up to that human dam and broke upon it like the futile waves, and went to pieces, and fell back under the curling yellow stormcloud of mid-battle.

Meanwhile, on right and left, the day was fiercely fought. Far upon the one hand the wild Irish kerns were repelling all the efforts of Beaupreau's light footmen, and pulling down the gay horsemen of fair Bourges by the distant Loire. Three times those squadrons were all among them, and three times the wild red sons of Shannon and the dim Atlantic hills fell on them like the wolves of their own rugged glens, and hamstringed the sleek Southern chargers, and lopped the fallen riders, and repelled each desperate foray, making war doubly hideous with their clamour and the bloody scenes of butchery that befell among their prisoners after each onset.

And, on the other crescent of our battle, my dear, tuneful, licentious Welshmen were out upon the slope, driving off with their native ardour one and all that came against them, and, worked up to a fine fury by their chanting minstrels, whose

shrill piping came ever and anon upon the wind, they pressed the Southerners hard, and again and again drove them down the hill—a good, a gallant crew that I have ever liked, with half a dozen vices and a score of virtues! I had charged by them one time in the day, and, cantering back with my troop behind their ranks, I saw a young Welsh chieftain on a rock beside himself with valour and battle. He was leaping and shouting as none but a Welshman could or would, and beating his sword upon his round Cymric shield, the while he yelled to his fighting vassals below a fierce old British battle song. Oh! it was very strange for me, pent in that shining Plantagenet mail, to listen to those wild, hot words of scorn and hatred—I who had heard those words so often when the ancestors of that chanting boy were not begotten—I who had heard those fiery verses sung in the red confusion of forgotten wars—I could not help pulling rein a moment as that song of exultation, full of words and phrases none but I could fully understand, swelled up through the eddying war-dust over the Welshmen's reeling line. I, so strong and young; I, who yet was more ancient than the singer's vaguest traditions—I stopped a moment and listened to him, full of remembrance and sad wonder, while the pæan-dirge of victory and death swelled to the sky over the clamour of the combat. And then—as a mavis drops into the covert when his morning song is done—the Welshman finished, and, mad with the wine of battle, leapt straight into the tossing sea below, and was engulfed and swallowed up like a white spume-flake on the bosom of a wave.

For three long hours the battle raged from east to west, and men fought foot to foot and hand to hand, and 'twas stab and hack and thrust, and the pounding of ownerless horses and the wail of dying men, and the husky cries of captains, and the interminable clash of steel on steel, so that no man could see all the fight at once, save the good King alone, who sat back there at his vantage-point. It was all this, I say; and then, about seven in the afternoon, when the sun was near his setting, it seemed, all in a second, as though the whole west were in a glow, and there was Lord Alençon sweeping down upon our right with the splendid array of Philip's chivalry, their pennons a-dance above and their endless ranks of spears in serried ranks below. There was no time to think, it seemed. A wild shout of fear and wonder went

up from all the English host. Our reserves were turned to meet the new danger; the archers poured their greygoose shafts upon the thundering squadrons; princes and peers and knights were littered on the road that brilliant host was treading—and then they were among the English yeomen with a frightful crash of flesh and blood and horse and steel that drowned all other sound of battle with its cruel import! Jove! What strong stuff the English valour is! Those good Saxon countrymen, sure in the confidence of our great brotherhood, kept their line under that hideous shock as though each fought for a crown, and, shoulder to shoulder and hand to hand, an impenetrable living wall derided the terrors of the golden torrent that burst upon them. Happy King to yield such stuff—thrice-happy country that can rear it! In vain wave upon wave burst upon those hardly islanders, in vain the stern voice of Alençon sent rank after rank of proud lords and courtly gallants upon those rugged English husbandmen—they would not move, and when they would not the Frenchmen hesitated.

'Twas our moment! I had had my leave just then new from the King, and did not need it twice. I saw the great front of French cavalry heaving slow upon our hither face, galled by the arrow-rain that never ceased, and irresolute whether to come on once again or go back, and I turned to the cohort of my dear veterans. I do not know what I said, the voice came thick and husky in my throat, I could but wave my iron mace above my head and point to the Frenchmen. And then all those good grey spears went down as though 'twere one hand that lowered them, and all the chargers moved at once. I led them round the English front, and there, clapping spurs to our ready coursers' flanks, five hundred of us, knit close together, with one heart beating one measure, shot out into array, and, sweeping across the slope, charged boldly ten thousand Frenchmen!

We raced across the Crecy slope, drinking the fierce wine of expectant conflict with every breath, our straining chargers thundering in tumultuous rhythm over the short space between, and, in another minute, we broke upon the foemen. Bravely they met us. They turned when we were two hundred paces distant, and advancing their silken fleur de lys, and pricking up their chargers, weary with pursuit and battle, they came at us as you will see a rock-thwarted wave run angry

back to meet another strong incoming surge. And as those two waves meet, and toss and leap together, and dash their strength into each other, the while the white spume flies away behind them, and, with thunderous arrogance, the stronger bursts through the other and goes streaming on triumphant through all the white boil and litter of the fight, so fell we on those princelings. 'Twas just a blinding crash, the coming together of two great walls of steel! I felt I was being lifted like a dry leaf on the summit of that tremendous conjunction, and I could but ply my mace blindly on those glittering casques that shone all round me, and, I now remember, cracked under its meteor sweep like ripe nuts under an urchin's hammer. So dense were the first moments of that shock of chivalry that e'en our horses fought. I saw my own charger rip open the glossy neck of another that bore a Frenchman; and near by—though I thought naught of it then—a great black Flemish stallion, mad with battle, had a wounded soldier in his teeth, and was worrying and shaking him as a lurcher worries a screaming leveret. So dense was the throng we scarce could ply our weapons, and one dead knight fell right athwart my saddle-bow; and a flying hand, lopped by some mighty blow, still grasping the hilt of a broken blade, struck me on the helm; the warm red blood spurting from a headless trunk half blinded me—and, all the time, overhead the French lilies kept stooping at the English lion, and now one went down and then the other, and the roar of the host went up into the sky, and the dust and turmoil, the savage uproar, the unheard, unpitied shriek of misery and the cruel exultation of the victor, and then—how soon I know not—we were travelling!

Ah! by the great God of battles, we were moving—and forward—the mottled ground was slipping by us—and the French were giving! I rose in my stirrups, and, hoarse as any raven that ever dipped a black wing in the crimson pools of battle, shouted to my veterans. It did not need! I had fought least well of any in that grim company, and now, with one accord, we pushed the foeman hard. We saw the great roan Flanders jennets slide back upon their haunches, and slip and plunge in the purple quagmire we had made, and then—each like a good ship well freighted—lurch and go down, and we stamped beribboned horse and jewelled rider alike into the red frothy marsh under our hoofs. And the fleur de lys sank, and the silver roe of Mayenne, proud

Montereau's azure falcon, and the white crescent of Donzenac went down, and Bernay's yellow cornsheaf and Sarreburg's golden blazon, with many another gaudy pennon, and then, somehow, the foemen broke and dissolved before our heavy, foam-streaked chargers, and, as we gasped the hot breath through our close helmet-bars, there came a clear space before us, with flying horsemen scouring off on every hand.

The day was wellnigh won, and I could see that far to left the English yeomen were driving the scattered clouds of Philip's footmen pell-mell down the hill, and then we went again after his horsemen, who were gathering sullenly upon the lower slopes. Over the grass we scoured like a brown whirlwind, and in a minute were all among the French lordlings. And down they went, horse and foot, riders and banners, crowding and crushing each other in a confusion terrible to behold, now suffering even more from their own chaos than from our lances. Jove! brother trod brother down that day, and comrade lay heaped on living comrade under that red confusion. The pennons—such as had outlived the storm so far—were all entangled sheaves, and sank, whole stocks at once, into the floundering sea below. And kings and princes, hinds and yeomen, gasped and choked and glowered at us, so fast-locked in the deadly wedge that went slowly roaring back before our fiery onsets, they could not move an arm or foot!

The tale is nearly told. Everywhere the English were victorious, and the Frenchmen fell in wild dismay before them. Many a bold attempt they made to turn the tide, and many a desperate sally and gallant stand the fading daylight witnessed. The old King of Bohemia, to whom daylight and night were all as one, with fifty knights, their reins knotted fast together, charged us, and died, one and all, like the good soldiers that they were. And Philip, over yonder, wrung his white hands and pawned his revenue in vows to the unmoved saints; and the soft, braggart peers that crowded round him gnawed their lips and frowned, and looked first at the ruined, smouldering fight, then back—far back—to where, in the south, friendly evening was already holding out to them the dusky cover of the coming night. It was a good day indeed, and may England at her need ever fight so well!

Would that I might in this truthful chronicle have turned to other things while the long roar of exultation goes up from

famous Crecy and the strong wine of well-deserved victory filled my heart! Alas! there is that to tell which mars the tale and dims the shine of conquest.

Already thirty thousand Frenchmen were slain, and the long swathes lay all across the swelling ground like the black rims of weed when the sea goes back. Only here and there the battle still went on, where groups and knots of men were fighting, and I, with my good comrade Flamaucœur, now, at sunset, was in such a *mêlée* on the right. All through the day he had been like a shadow to me—and shame that I have said so little of it! Where I went there he was, flitting in his close grey armour close behind me; quick, watchful, faithful, all through the turmoil and dusty war-mist; escaping, Heaven knows how, a thousand dangers; riding his light war-horse down the bloody lanes of war as he ever rode it, as if they two were one; gentle, retiring, more expert in parrying thrust and blow than in giving—that dear friend of mine, with a heart made stout by consuming love against all its native fears, had followed me.

And now the spent battle went smouldering out, and we there thought 'twas all extinguished, when, all on a sudden—I tell it less briefly than it happened—a desperate band of foemen bore down on us, and, as we joined, my charger took a hurt, and went crashing over, and threw me full into the rank tangle of the under fight. Thereon the yeomen, seeing me fall, set up a cry, and, with a rush, bore the Frenchmen four spear-lengths back, and lifted me, unhurt, from the littered ground. They gave me a sword, and, as I turned, from the foemen's ranks, waving a beamy sword, plumed by a towering crest of nodding feathers and covered by a mighty shield, a gigantic warrior stepped out. Hoth! I can see him now, mad with defeat and shame, striding on foot towards us—a giant in glittering pearly armour, that shone and glittered in the last rays of the level sun against the black backing of the evening sky, as though its wearer had been the Archangel Gabriel himself! It did not need to look upon him twice: 'twas the Lord High Constable of France himself—the best swordsman, the sternest soldier, and the brightest star of chivalry in the whole French firmament. And if that noble peer was hot for fight, no less was I. Stung by my fall, and glorying in such a foeman, I ran to meet him, and there, in a little open space, while our soldiers leant idly on their weapons

and watched, we fought. The first swoop of the great Constable's humming falchion lit slanting on my shield and shore my crest. Then I let out, and the blow fell on his shield, and sent the giant staggering back, and clipped the pretty quarterings of a hundred ancestors from that gilded target. At it again we went, and round and round, raining our thunderous blows upon each other with noise like boulders crashing down a mountain valley. I did not think there was a man within the four seas who could have stood against me so long as that fierce and bulky Frenchman did. For a long time we fought so hard and stubborn that the blood-miry soil was stamped into a circle where we went round and round, raining our blows so strong, quick, and heavy that the air was full of tumult, and glaring at each other over our morion bars, while our burnished scales and links flew from us at every deadly contact, and the hot breath steamed into the air, and the warm, smarting blood crept from between our jointed harness. Yet neither would bate a jot, but, with fiery hearts and heaving breasts and pain-bursting muscles, kept to it, and stamped round and round those grimy, steaming lists, redoubtable, indomitable, and mad with the lust of killing.

And then—Jove! how near spent I was!—the great Constable, on a sudden, threw away his many-quartered shield, and, whirling up his sword with both hands high above his head, aimed a frightful blow at me. No mortal blade or shield or helmet could have withstood that mighty stroke! I did not try, but, as it fell, stepped nimbly back—'twas a good Saxon trick, learnt in the distant time—and then, as the falchion-point buried itself a foot deep in the ground, and the giant staggered forward, I flew at him like a wild cat, and through the close helmet-bars, through teeth and skull and the threefold solid brass behind, thrust my sword so straight and fiercely, the smoking point came two feet out beyond his nape, and, with a lurch and cry, the great peer tottered and fell dead before me.

Now comes that thing to which all other things are little, the fellest gleam of angry steel of all the steel that had shone since noon, the cruellest stab of ten thousand stabs, the bitterest cry of any that had marred the full yellow circle of that August day! I had dropped on one knee by the champion, and, taking his hand, had loosed his visor, and shouted to two monks, who were pattering with bare feet about the field (for,

indeed, I was sorry, if perchance any spark of life remained, so brave a knight should die unshriven to his contentment), and thus was forgotten for the moment the fight, the confronting rows of foemen, and how near I was to those who had seen their great captain fall by my hands. Miserable, accursed oversight! I had not knelt by my fallen enemy a moment, when suddenly my men set up a cry behind me, there was a rush of hoofs, and, ere I could regain my feet or snatch my sword or shield, a great black French rider, like a shadowy fury dropped from the sullen evening sky, his plumes all streaming behind him, his head low down between his horse's ears, and his long blue spear in rest, was thundering in mid career against me not a dozen paces distant. As I am a soldier, and have lived many ages by my sword, that charge must have been fatal. And would that it had been! How can I write it? Even as I started to my feet, before I could lift a brand or offer one light parry to that swift keen point, the horseman was upon me. And as he closed, as that great vengeance-driven tower of steel and flesh loomed above me, there was a scream—a wild scream of fear and love—(and I clap my hands to my ears now, centuries afterwards, to deaden the undying vibrations of that sound)—and Flamauceur had thrown himself 'tween me and the spear-point, had taken it, fenceless, unwarded, full in his side, and I saw the cruel shaft break short off by his mail as those four, both horses and both riders, went headlong to the ground.

Up rose the English with an angry shout, and swept past us, killing the black champion as they went, and driving the French before them far down into the valley. Then ran I to my dear comrade, and knelt and lifted him against my knee. He had swooned, and I groaned in bitterness and fear when I saw the strong red tide that was pulsing from his wound and quilting his bright English armour. With quick, nervous fingers—bursting such rivets as would not yield, all forgetful of his secret, and that I had never seen him unhelmed before—I unloosed his casque, and then gently drew it from his head.

With a cry I dropped the great helm, and wellnigh let e'en my fair burden fall, for there, against my knee, her white, sweet face against my iron bosom, her fair yellow hair, that had been coiled in the emptiness of her helmet, all adrift about us, those dear curled lips that had smiled so tender and indulgent on me, her gentle life ebbing from her at every

throe, was not Flamaucœur, the unknown knight, the foolish and love-sick boy, but that wayward, luckless girl Isobel of Oswaldston herself!

And if I had been sorry for my companion in arms, think how the pent grief and surprise filled my heart, as there, dying gently in my arms, was the fair girl whom, by a tardy, late-born love, new sprung in my empty heart, I had come to look upon as the point of my lonely world, my fair heritage in an empty epoch, for the asking!

Soon she moved a little, and sighed, and looked up straight into my eyes. As she did so the colour burnt for a moment with a pale glow in her cheeks, and I felt the tremor of her body as she knew her secret was a secret no longer. She lay there bleeding and gasping painfully upon my breast, and then she smiled, and pulled my plumed head down to her and whispered—

‘ You are not angry ? ’

Angry? Gods! My heart was heavier than it had been all that day of dint and carnage, and my eyes were dim and my lips were dry with a knowledge of the coming grief as I bent and kissed her. She took the kiss unresisting, as though it were her right, and gasped again—

‘ And you understand now all—everything? Why I ransomed the French maiden? Why I would not write for thee to thy unknown mistress? ’

‘ I know—I know, sweet girl! ’

‘ And you bear no ill-thought of me? ’

‘ The great Heaven you believe in be my witness, sweet Isobel! I love you, and know of nothing else! ’

She lay back upon me, seeming to sleep for a moment or two, then started up and clapped her hands to her ears, as if to shut out the sound of bygone battle that no doubt was still thundering through them, then swooned again, while I bent in sorrow over her and tried in vain to soothe and stanch the great wound that was draining out her gentle life.

She lay so still and white that I thought she were already dead; but presently, with a gasp, her eyes opened, and she looked wistfully to where the western sky was hanging pale over the narrow English sea.

‘ How far to England, dear friend? ’

‘ A few leagues of land and water, sweet maid! ’

‘ Could I reach it, dost thou think? ’ But then, on an

instant, shaking her head, she went on, 'Nay, do not answer; I was foolish to ask. Oh! dearest, dearest sister Alianora! My father—my gentlest father! Oh! tell them, Sir, from me—and beg them to forgive!' And she lay back white upon my shoulder.

She lay, breathing slow, upon me for a spell, then, on a sudden, her fair fingers tightened in my mailed hand, and she signed that she would speak again.

'Remember that I loved thee!' whispered Isobel, and, with those last words, the yellow head fell back upon my shoulder, the blue eyes wavered and sank, and her spirit fled.

Back by the lines of gleeful shouting troops—back by where the laughing English knights, with visors up, were talking of the day's achievements—back by where the proud King, hand in hand with his brave boy, was thanking the stout English yeomen for Crecy and another kingdom—back by where the champing, foamy chargers were picketed in rows—back by the knots of archers, all, like honest workmen, wiping down their unstrung bows—back by groups of sullen prisoners and gaudy heaps of captured pennons, we passed.

In front four good yeomen bore Isobel upon their trestled spears; then came I, bareheaded—I, kinsmanless, to her in all that camp the only kin; and then our drooping chargers, empty-saddled, led by young squires behind, and seeming—good beasts!—to sniff and scent the sorrow of that fair burden on ahead. So we went through the victorious camp to our lodgment, and there they placed Isobel on her bare soldier couch, her feet to the door of her soldier tent, and left us.

CHAPTER XVI

UNWASHED, unfed, my dinted armour on me still—battle-stained and rent—unhelmeted, ungloved, my sword and scabbard cast by my hollow shield in a dark corner of the tent, I watched, tearless and stern, all that night by the bier of the pale white girl who had given so much for me and taken so poor a reward. I, who, so fanciful and wayward, had thought I might safely toy with the sweet tender of her affection—sprung how or why I knew not—and take or leave

it as seemed best to my convenience, brooded, all the long black watch, over that gentle broken vessel that lay there white and still before me, alike indifferent to gifts or giving. And now and then I would start up from the stool I had drawn near to her, and pace, with bent head and folded arms, the narrow space, remembering how warm the rising tide of love had been flowing in my heart for that fair dead thing so short a time before. 'So short a time before!' Why, it was but yesterday that she wrote for me that missive to herself; and I, fool and blind, could not read the light that shone behind those grey visor-bars as she penned the lines, or translate the tremor that shook that sweet scribe's fingers, or recognise the heave of the maiden bosom under its steel and silk! I groaned in shame and grief, and bent over her, thinking how dear things might have been had they been otherwise, and loving her no whit the less because she was so cold, immovable, saying I know not what into her listless ear, and nourishing in loneliness and solitude, all those long hours, the black flower of the love that was alight too late in my heart.

I would not eat or rest, though my dinted armour was heavy as lead upon my spent and weary limbs—though the leather jerkin under that was stiff with blood and sweat, and opened my bleeding wounds each time I moved. I would not be eased of one single smart, I thought—let the cursed seams and gashes sting and bite, and my hot flesh burn beneath them! mayhap 'twould ease the bitter anger of my mind—and I repulsed all those who came with kind or curious eyes to the tent door, and would not hear of ease or consolation. Even the King came down, and, in respect to that which was within, dismounted and stood like a simple knight without, asking if he might see me. But I would not share my sorrow with anyone, and sent the page who brought me word that the King was standing in the porch to tell him so; and, accomplished in courtesy as in war, the victorious monarch bent his head, and mounted, and rode silently back to his own lodging. The gay gallants who had known me came on the whisper of the camp one by one (though all were hungry and weary), and lifted the flap a little, and said something such as they could think of, and peered at me, grimly repellent, in the shadows, and peeped curiously at that fair white soldier lain on the trestles in her knightly gear so straight and trim, and went away without daring to approach more nearly. My

veterans clipped their jolly soldier-songs, though they had well deserved them, and took their suppers silently by the flickering camp-fire. Once they sent him among them that I was known to like the best with food and wine and clean linen, but I would not have it, and the good soldier put them down on one side of the door and went back as gladly as he who retreats skin-whole from the cave where a bear keeps watch and ward. Last of all there came the fall of quieter feet upon the ground, and, in place of the clank of soldier harness, the rattle of the beads of rosaries and cross; and, looking out, there was the King's own chaplain, bareheaded, and three grey friars behind him. I needed ghostly comfort just then as little as I needed temporal, and at first I thought to repulse them surlily; but, reflecting that the maid had ever been devout and held such men as these in high esteem, I suffered them to enter, and stood back while they did by her the ceremonial of their office. They made all smooth and fair about, and lit candles at her feet and gave her a crucifix, and sprinkled water, and knelt, throwing their great black shadows athwart the white shrine of my dear companion, the while they told their beads and the chaplain prayed. When they had done, the priest rose and touched me on the arm.

'Son,' he said, 'the King has given an earl's ransom to be expended in masses for thy leman's soul.'

'Father,' I replied, 'tender the King my thanks for what was well meant and as princely generous as becomes him. But tell him all the prayers thy convent could count from now till the great ending would not bleach this white maid's soul an atom whiter. Earn your ransom if you will, but not here; leave me to my sorrow.'

'I will give your answer, soldier; but these holy brothers—the King wished it—must stay and share your vigil until the morning. It is their profession; their prayerful presence can ward off the spirits of darkness; weariness never sits on their eyes as it sits now on thine. Let them stay with thee; it is only fit.'

'Not for another ransom, priest! I will not brook their confederate tears—I will not wing this fair girl's soul with their hireling prayers—out, good fellows, my mood is wondrous short, and I would not willing do that which to-morrow I might repent of.'

'But, brother——' said one monk, gently.

'Hence—hence! I have no brothers—go! Can you look on me here in this extremity, can you see my hacked and bleeding harness, and the shine of bitter grief in my eyes, and stand pattering there of prayers and sympathy? Out! Out! or by every lying relic in thy cloisters I add some other saints to thy chapter rolls!'

They went, and as the tent-flap dropped behind them and the sound of their sandalled feet died softly away into the gathering night, I turned sorrowful and sad to my watch. I drew a stool to the maiden bier, and sat and took her hand, so white and smooth and cold, and looked at the fair young face that death had made so passionless—that sweet mirror upon which, the last time we had been together in happiness, the rosy light of love was shining and sweet presumption and maiden shame were striving. And as I looked and held her hand the dim tent-walls fell away, and the painted lists rose up before me, and the littered flowers my quick, curveting charger stamped into the earth, and the blare of the heralds' trumpets, the flutter of the ribbons and the gay tires of brave lords and fair ladies all centred round the daïs where those two fair sisters sat. Gods! was that long sigh the night-wind circling about my tent-flap or in truth the sigh of slighted Isobel, as I rode past her chair with the victor's circlet on my spear-point and laid it at the footstool of her sister?

I bent over that fair white corpse, so sick in mind and body that all the real was unreal and all the unreal true. I saw the painted pageantry of her father's hall again and the coloured reflections of the blazoned windows on the polished corridors shine upon our dim and sandy floor, and down the long vistas of my aching memory the groups of men and women moved in a motley harmony of colour—a fair shifting mosaic of pattern and hue and light that radiated and came back ever to those two fair English girls. I heard the rippling laughter on courtly lips, the whispered jest of gallants, and the thoughtless glee of damsels. I heard the hum and smooth praise that circled round the black elder sister's chair, and at my elbow the father, saying, 'My daughter; my daughter Isobel!' and started up, to find myself alone, and that sweet horrid thing there in the low flickering taper-light unmoved, unmovable.

I sat again, and presently the wavering shadows spread out into the likeness of great cedar branches casting their

dusky shelter over the soft sweet-scented ground ; and, as the hushed air swayed to and fro those great velvet screens, Isobel stepped from them, all in white, and ran to me, and stopped, and clapped her hands before her eyes and on her throbbing bosom—then stretched those trembling fingers, beseechingly to me fresh from that sweet companionship—then down upon her knees and clipt me round with her fair white arms and turned back her head and looked upon me with wild, wet, yearning eyes and cheeks that burnt for love and shame. I would not have it ; I laughed with the bitter mockingness of one possessed by another love, and unwound those ivory bonds and pushed the fair maid back, and there against the dusk of leaf and branch she stood and wrung her fingers and beat her breast and spoke so sweet and passionate, that even my icy mood half thawed under the white light of her reckless love, and I let her take my hand and hold and rain hot kisses on it and warm pattering tears, till all the strength was running from me, and I half turned and my fingers closed on hers—but, gods ! how cold they were ! And with a stifled cry I woke again in the little tent, to find my hand fast locked in the icy fingers of the dead.

It was a long weary night, and, sad as was my watch and hectic as the visions which swept through my heavy head, I would not quicken by one willing hour of sleep the sad duties of that grey to-morrow which I knew must come. At times I sat and stared into the yellow tapers, living the brief spell of my last life again—all the episode and change, all the hurry and glitter, and unrest that was for ever my portion—and then, in spite of resolution, I would doze to other visions, outlined more brightly on the black background of oblivion ; and then I started up, my will all at war with tired Nature's sweet insistence, and paced in weary round our canvas cell, solitary but for those teeming thoughts and my own black shadow, which stalked, sullen and slow, ever beside me.

But who can deride the great mother for long ? 'Twas sleep I needed, and she would have it ; and so it came presently upon my heavy eyelids—strong, deep sleep as black and silent as the abyss of the nether world. My head sank upon my arm, my arm upon the foot of the velvet bier, and there, in my mail, under the thin taper-light, worn out with battle and grief, I slept.

I know not how long it was, some hours most likely, but

After a time the strangest feeling took possession of me in that slumber, and a fine ethereal terror, purged of gross material fear, possessed my spirit. I awoke—not with the pleasant drowsiness which marks refreshment, but wide and staring, and my black Phrygian hair, without the cause of sight or sound, stood stiff upon my head, for something was moving in the silent tent!

I glared around, yet nothing could be seen: the lights were low in their sockets, but all else was in order: my piled shield and helmet lay there in the shadows, our warlike implements and gear were all as I had seen them last, no noise or vision broke the blank, and yet—and yet—a coward chill sat on me, for here and there was moving something unseen, unheard, unfelt by outer senses. I rose, and, fearful and yet angry to be cowed by a dreadful nothing, stared into every corner and shadow, but naught was there. Then I lifted a dim taper, and held it over the face of the dead girl and stared amazed! Were it given to mortals to die twice, that girl had! But a short time before and her sweet face had worn the reflection of that dreadful day: there was a pallid fright and pain upon it we could not smooth away, and now some wonderful strange thing had surely happened, and all the unrest was gone, all the pained dissatisfaction and frightened wonder. The maid was still and smooth and happy-looking. Hoth! as I bent over her she looked just as one might look who reads aright some long enigma and finds relief with a sigh from some hard problem. She slept so wondrous still and quiet, and looked so marvellous fair now, and contented, that it purged my fear, and, strong in that fair presence—how could I be else?—I sat, and after a time, though you may wonder at it, I slept again.

I dozed and dozed and dozed, in happy forgetfulness of the present while the black night wore on to morning, and the last faint flushes of the priestly tapers played softly in their sockets; and then again I started up with every nerve within me thrilling, my clenched fists on my knees, and my wide eyes glaring into the mid gloom, for that strange nothing was moving gently once more about us, fanning me, it seemed, with the rhythméd swing of unseen draperies, circling in soft cadenced circles here and there, mute, voiceless, presenceless, and yet so real and tangible to some unknown inner sense that hailed it from within me that I could almost say that

now 'twas here and now 'twas there, and locate it with trembling finger, although, in truth, nothing moved or stirred.

I looked at the maid. She was as she had been; then into every dusky place and corner, but nothing showed; then rose and walked to the tent-flap and lifted it and looked out. Down in the long valley below the sombre shadows were seamed by the winding of the pale river; and all away on the low meadows, piled thick and deep with the black mounds of dead foemen, the pale marsh lights were playing amid the corpses—leaping in ghostly fantasy from rank to rank, and heap to heap, coalescing, separating, shining, vanishing, all in the unbroken twilight silence. And those sombre fields below were tapestried with the thin wisps of white mist that lay in the hollows, and were shredded out into weird shapes and forms over the black bosom of the near-spent night. Up above, far away in the east, where the low hills lay flat in the distance, the lappet fringe of the purple sky was dipped in the pale saffron of the coming sun, and overhead a few white stars were shining, and now and then the swart, almost unseen wings of a raven went gently beating through the star-lit void; and as I watched, I saw him and his brothers check over the Crey ridges and with hungry croak, like black spirits, circle round and drop one after another through the thin white veils of vapour that shrouded prince, chiefs, and vassals, peer and peasant, in those deep long swathes of the black harvest we cut, but left ungarnered, yesterday. Near around me the English camp was all asleep, tired and heavy with the bygone battle, the listless pickets on the misty, distant mounds hung drooping over their piled spears, the metallid chargers' heads were all asag, they were so weary as they stood among the shadows by their untouched fodder, and the damp pennons and bannerets over the knightly porches scarce lifted on the morning air! That air came cool and sad yonder from the English sea, and wandered melancholy down our lifeless, empty canvas streets, lifting the loose tent-flaps, and sighing as it strayed among the sleeping groups, stirring with its unseen feet the white ashes of the dead camp-fires, the only moving presence in all the place—sad, silent, and listless. I dropped the hangings over the chill morning glimmer, the camp of sleeping warriors and dusky valley of the dead, and turned again to my post. I was not asleep now, nor afraid—even though as I entered a draught

of misty outer air entered with me and the last atom of the priestly taper shone fitful and yellow for a moment upon the dead Isobel, and then went out.

I sat down by the maid in the chill dark, and looked sadly on the ground, the while my spirits were as low as you may well guess, and the wind went moaning round and round the tent. But I had not sat a moment—scarcely twenty breathing spaces—when a faint, fine scent of herb-cured wolf-skins came upon the air, and strange shadows began to stand out clear upon the floor. I saw my weapons shining with a pale refulgence, and—by all the gods!—the walls of the tent were a-shimmer with pale lustre! With a half-stifled cry I leapt to my feet, and there—there across the bier—though you tell me I lie a thousand times—there, calm, refulgent, looking gently in the dead girl's face, splendid in her ruddy savage beauty, bending over that white marbled body, so ghostly thin and yet so real, so true in every line and limb, was Blodwen—Blodwen, the British chieftainess—my thousand-years dead wife.

Standing there serene and lovely, with that strange lavender glow about her, was that wonderful and dreadful shade—holding the dead girl's hand and looking at her closely with a face that spoke of neither resentment nor sorrow. I stood and stared at them, every wit within me numb and cold by the suddenness of it, and then the apparition slowly lifted her eyes to mine, and I—the wildest sensations of the strong old love and brand-new fear possessed me. What! do you tell me that affection dies? Why, there in that shadowed tent, so long after, so untimely, so strange and useless—all the old stream of the love I had borne for that beautiful slave-girl, though it had been cold and overlaid by other loves for a thousand years, welled up in my heart on a sudden. I made half a pace towards her, I stretched a trembling, entreating hand, yet drew it back, for I was mortal and I feared; and an ecstasy of pleasure filled my throbbing veins, and my love said, 'On! she was thine once and must be now—down to thy knees and claim her!—what matters anything, if thou hast a lien upon such splendid loveliness!' and my coward flesh hung back cold and would not, and now back and now forward I swayed with these contending feelings, while that fair shadow eyed me with the most impenetrable calm. At last she spoke, with never a

tone in her voice to show she remembered it was near three hundred years since she had spoken before.

'My Phœnician,' she said in soft monotone, looking at the dead Isobel who lay pale in the soft-blue shine about her, 'this was a pity. You are more dull-witted than I thought.'

I bent my head but could not speak, and so she asked—

'Didst really never guess who it was yonder steel armour hid?'

'Not once,' I said, 'O sweetly dreadful!'

'Nor who it was that stirred the white maid to love over there in her home?'

'What!' I gasped. 'Was that you?—was that your face, then, in truth I saw, reflecting in this dead girl's when first I met her?'

'Why, yes, good merchant. And how you could not know it passes all comprehension.'

'And then it was you, dear and dreadful, who moved her? Jove! 'twas you who filled her beating pulses there down by the cedars, it was you who prompted her hot tongue to that passionate wooing? But why—why?'

That shadow looked away for a moment, and then turned upon me one fierce fleeting glance of such strange, concentrated, unquenchable, impatient love that it numbed my tongue and stupefied my senses, and I staggered back, scarce knowing whether I were answered or were not.

Presently she went on. 'Then, again, you are a little forgetful at times, my master—so full of your petty loves and wars it vexes me.'

'Vexes you! That were wonderful indeed; yet, 'tis more wonderful that you submit. One word to me—to come but one moment and stand shining there as now you do—and I should be at your feet, strange, incomparable.'

'It might be so, but that were supposing such moments as these were always possible. Dost not notice, Phœnician, how seldom I have been to thee like this, and yet, remembering that I forget thee not, that mayhap I love thee still, canst thou doubt but that that wayward circumstance fits to my constant wish but seldom?'

'Yet you are immortal; time and space seem nothing; barriers and distance—all those things that shackle men—have no meaning for you. All thy being formed on the structure of a wish, and every earthly law subservient to your

fancy, how is it you can do so much and yet so little, and be at once so dominant and yet so feeble ?'

'I told you, dear friend, before, that with new capacities new laws arise. I near forget how far I once could see—what was the edge of that shallow world you live in—where exactly the confines of your powers and liberty are set. But this I know for certain, that, while with us the possible widens out into splendid vagueness, the impossible still exists.'

'And do you really mean, then, that fate is still the stronger among you?—this fair girl, here, sweet shadow! Oh! with one of those terrible and shining arms crossed there on thy bosom, couldst thou not have guided into happy void that fatal spear that killed? Surely, surely, it were so easy!'

The priestess dropped her fair head, and over her dim-white shoulders, and her pleasant-scented, hazy wolf-skins her ruddy hair, all agleam in that strange refulgence, shone like a cascade of sleeping fire. Then she looked up and replied, in low tones—

'The swimmer swims and the river runs, the wished-for point may be reached or it may not, the river is the stronger.'

Somehow, I felt that my shadowy guest was less pleased than before, so I thought a moment and then said, 'Where is she now?' and glanced at Isobel.

'The novice,' smiled Blodwen, 'is asleep.'

'Oh, wake her!' I cried, 'for one moment, for half a breath, for one moiety of a pulse, and I will never ask thee other questions.'

'Insatiable! incredulous! how far will thy reckless love and wonder go? Must I lay out before thy common eyes all the things of the unknown for you to sample as you did your bags of fig and olive?'

'I loved her before, and I love her still, even as I loved and still love thee. Does she know this?'

'She knows as much as you know little. Look!' and the shadow spread out one violet hand over that silent face.

I looked, and then leapt back with a cry of fear and surprise. The dead girl was truly dead, not a muscle or a finger moved, yet, as at that bidding I turned my eyes upon her there under the tender glowing shadow of that wondrous palm, a faint sweet flush of colourless light rose up within her face, and on it I read, for one fleeting moment, such inexplicable knowledge, such extraordinary felicity, such impenetrable

contentment, that I stood spell-bound, all of a tremble, while that wondrous radiance died away even quicker than it had risen. Gods! 'twas like the shine of the herald dawn on a summer morning, it was like the flush on the water of a coming sunrise—I drew my hand across my face and looked up, expecting the chieftainess would have gone, but she was still there.

'Are you satisfied for the moment, dear trader, or would you catechise me as you did just now yonder by the fire under the altar in the circle?'

'Just now!' I exclaimed, as her words swept back to me the remembrance of the stormy night in the old Saxon days when, with the fair Editha asleep at my knee, that shade had appeared before—'just now! Why, Shadow, that was three hundred years ago!'

'Three hundred what?'

'Three hundred years—full round circles, three hundred varying seasons. Why, Blodwen, forests have been seeded, and grown venerable, and decayed about those stones since we were there!'

'Well, may be they have. I now remember that interval you call a year, and what strange store we set by it, and I dimly recollect,' said the dreamy spirit, 'what wide-asunder episodes those were between the green flush of your forests and the yellow. But now—why, the grains of sand here on thy tent-floor are not set more close together—do not seem more one simple whole to you, than your trivial seasons do to me. Ah! dear merchant, and as you smile to see the ripples of the sea sparkle a moment in frolic chase of one another, and then be gone into the void from whence they came, so do we lie and watch thy petty years shine for a moment on the smooth bosom of the immense.'

Deep, strange, and weird seemed her words to me that night, and much she said more than I have told I could not understand, but sat with bent head and crossed arms full of strange perplexity of feeling, now glancing at the dead soldier-maid my body loved, and then looking at that comely column of blue woman-vapour, that sat so placid on the foot of the bier and spoke so simply of such wondrous things.

For an hour we talked, and then on a sudden Blodwen started to her feet and stood in listening attitude. 'They are coming, Phœnician,' she cried, and pointed to the door

I arose with a strange uneasy feeling and looked out. The grey dawn had spread from sky to sky, and an angry flush was over all the air. The morning wind blew cold and melancholy, and the shrouded mists, like bands of pale spectres, were trooping up the bloody valley before it, but otherwise not a soul was moving, not a sound broke the ghostly stillness. I dropped the awning, and shook my head at the fair priestess, whereon she smiled superior, as one might at a wayward child, and for a minute or two we spoke again together. Then up she got once more, tall and stately, with dilated nostrils and the old proud, expectant look I had seen on her sweet red face so often as we together, hand in hand, and heart to heart, had galloped out to tribal war. 'They come, Phœnician, and I must go,' she whispered, and again she pointed to the tent-door, though never a sound or footfall broke the stillness.

'You shall not, must not go, wife, priestess, Queen!' I cried, throwing myself on my knee at those shadowy feet, and extending my longing arms. 'Oh! you that can awake, put me to sleep—you, that can read to the finish of every half-told tale, relieve me of the long record of my life! Oh, stay and mend my loneliness, or, if you go, let me come too—I ask not how or whither.'

'Not yet,' she said, 'not yet——' And then, while more seemed actually upon her lips, I *did* hear the sound of footfalls outside, and, wondering, I sprang to the curtain and lifted it.

There, outside, standing in the first glint of the yellow sunshine, were some half-dozen of my honest veterans, all with spades and picks and in their leathern doublets.

'You see, Sir,' said the spokesman, sorrowfully, the while he scraped the half-dry clay from off his trenching spade, 'we have come round for our brave young captain—for your good lady, Sir—the first. Presently we shall be very busy, and we thought mayhap you would like this over as soon and quiet as might be.'

They had come for Isobel! I turned back into the tent, wondering what they would think of my strange guest, and she was gone! Not one ray of light was left behind—not one thread of her lavender skirt shone against my black walls—only the cold, pale girl there, stiff and white, with the shine of the dawn upon her dead face; and all my long pain and

vigils told upon me, and, with a cry of pain and grief I could not master, I dropped upon a seat and hid my face upon my arm.

I had had enough of France with that night, and three hours afterwards went straight to the King and told him so, begging him to relieve me from my duty and let me get back to England, there to seek the dead maid's kindred, and find in some new direction forgetfulness of everything about the victorious camp. And to this the King replied, by commending my poor service far too highly, saying some fair kind things out of his smooth courtier tongue about her that was no more, and in good part upbraiding me for bringing, as he supposed I had brought, one so gentle-nurtured so far afield; then he said, 'In faith, good soldier, were to-day but yesterday, and Philip's array still before us, we would not spare you even though our sympathy were yours as fully as 'tis now. But my misguided cousin is away to Paris, and his following are scattered to the four winds—for which God and all the saints be thanked! There is thus less need for thy strong arm and brave presence in our camp, and if you really would—why then, go, and may kind time heal those wounds which, believe me, I do most thoroughly assess.'

I bent and kissed the kindly monarch's hand, and made my thanks, then turned.

'But stay a minute!' he cried after me. 'How soon could you make a start?'

'I have no gear,' I said, 'and all my prisoners have been set free unransomed. I could start here, even as I stand.'

'Soldierly answered,' exclaimed the King: 'a good knight should have no baggage but his weapons, and no attachments but his duty. Now look! I can both relieve you of irksome charges here and excuse with reason both ample and honourable your going. Come to me as soon as you have put by your armour. I will have ready for you a scrip sealed and signed—no messenger has yet gone over to England with the news of our glorious yesterday, and this charge shall be thine. Take the scrip straight to the Queen in England. There, no thanks, away! away! thou wilt be the most popular man in all my realm before the sun goes down, I fear.'

I well knew how honourable was this business that the good King had planned for me, and made my utmost dis-

patch. I gave my tent to one esquire and my spare armour to another. I ran and gripped the many bronzed hands of my tough companions, and told them (alas! unwittingly what a lie that were!) that I would come again; then I bestowed my charger (Jove! how reluctant was the gift!) upon the next in rank below me, and mounted Isobel's light war-horse, and paid my debts, and settled all accounts, and was back at our great captain's tent just as his chaplain was sanding the last lines upon that dispatch which was to startle yonder fair country waiting so expectant across the narrow sea.

They rolled it up in silk and leather and put it in a metal cylinder, and shut the lid and sealed it with the King's own seal, and then he gave it to me.

'Take this,' he said, 'straight to the Queen, and give it into her own hands. Be close and silent, for you will know it were not meet to be robbed of thy news upon the road: but I need not tell you of what becomes a trusty messenger. There! so, strap it in thy girdle, and God speed thee—surely such big news was never packed so small before.'

I left the Royal tent and vaulted into the ready saddle without. One hour, I thought, as the swift steed's head was turned to the westward, may take me to the shore, and two others may set me on foot in England. Then, if they have relays upon the road, three more will see me kneeling at the lady's feet, the while her fingers burst these seals. Lord! how they shall shout this afternoon! how the 'prentices shall toss their caps, and the fat burghers crowd the narrow streets, and every rustic hamlet green ring to the sky with gratitude! Ah! six hours I thought might do the journey; but read, and you shall see how long it took.

Scouring over the low grassy plains as hard as the good horse could gallop, with the grey sea broadening out ahead with every mile we went, full of thoughts of a busy past and uncertain future, I hardly noticed how the wind was freshening. Yet, when we rode down at last by a loose hill road to the beach, strong gusts were piping amid the treetops, and the King's galleys were lurching and rolling together at their anchors by the landing-stage as the short waves came crowding in, one close upon another, under the first pressure of a coming storm.

But, wind or no wind, I would cross; and I spoke to the

captain of the galleys, showing him my pass with its Royal signet, and saying I must have a ship at once, though all the cave of Eblis were let loose upon us. That worthy, weather-beaten fellow held the mandate most respectfully in one hand, while he pulled his grizzled beard with the other and stared out into the north, where, under a black canopy of lowering sky, the sea was seamed with grey and hurrying squalls, then turned to the cluster of sailors who were crowded round us—guessing my imperious errand—to know who would start upon it. And those rough salts swore no man of sanity would venture out—not even for a King's generous bounty—not even to please victorious Edward would they go—no, nor to ease the expectant hearts of twenty thousand wives, or glad the proud eyes of ten score hundred mothers. It was impossible, they said—see how the frothy spray was flying already over the harbour bar, and how shrill the frightened sea-mews were rising high above the land!—no ship would hold together in such a wind as that brewing out over there, no man this side of hell could face it—and yet, and yet, 'Why!' laughed a leathery fellow, slapping his mighty fist into his other palm, 'as I was born by Sareham, and knew the taste of salt spray near as early as I knew my mother's milk, it shall never be said I was frightened by a hollow sky and a Frenchman's wind. I'll be your pilot, Sir.'

'And I will go wherever old Harry dares,' put in a stout young fellow. 'And I.' 'And I.' 'And I,' was chorused on every side, as the brave English seamen caught the bold infection, and in a brief space there, under the lee of the grey harbour jetty, before a motley cheering crowd, all in the blustering wind and rain, I rode my palfrey up the sloping way, and on to the impatient tossing little barque that was to bear the great news to England.

We stabled the good steed safe under the half-deck forward, set the mizzen and cast off the hawser, and soon the little vessel's prow was bursting through the crisp waves at the harbour mouth, her head for home, and behind, dim through the rainy gusts, the white house-fronts of the beach village, and far away the uplands where the English army lay. We reefed and set the sails as we drew from the land, but truly those fellows were right when they hung back from sharing the peril and the glory with me! The strong blue waters of the midland sea whereon I first sailed my merchant barque

were like the ripples of a sheltered pond to the roaring trench and furrows of this narrow northern strait. All day long we fought to westward, and every hour we spent the wind came stronger and more keenly out of the black funnel of the north, and the waves swelled broader and more monstrous. By noon we saw the English shore gleam ghostly white through the flying reek in front; but by then, so fierce was the north-easter howling, that, though we went to windward and off again, doing all that good seamen could, now stealing a spell ahead, and anon losing it amid a blinding squall, we could not near the English port for which we aimed, theré, in the cleft of the dim white cliffs.

After a long time of this, our captain came to me where I leant, watchful, against the mast, and said—

‘The King has made an order, as you will know, all vessels from France are to sail for his town of Dover there, and nowhere else, on pain of a fine that would go near to swamp such as we.’

‘Good skipper,’ I answered, ‘I know the law, but there are exceptions to every rule, which, well taken, only cast the more honour on general stringency. King Edward would have you make that port at all reasonable times; but if you cannot reach it, as you surely cannot now, you are not bound to sail me, his messenger, to Paradise in lieu thereof. I pray you, put down your helm and run, and take the nearest harbour the wind will let us.’ At this the captain turned upon his heel well pleased, and our ship came round, and now, before the gale, sailed perhaps a little easier.

But it scarcely bettered our fortune. A short time before dusk, while we wallowed heavily in the long furrows, my poor palfrey was thrown and broke her fore legs over her trestle bar, and between fear and pain screamed so loud and shrill, it chilled even my stalwart sailors. Then, later on, as we rode the frothy summit of a giant wave, our topmast snapped, and fell among us, and the wild loose ropes writhed and lashed about worse than a hundred biting serpents, and the bellowing sail, like a great bull, jerked and strained for a moment so that I thought that it would unstep the mast itself, and then went all to tatters with a hollow boom, while we, knee-deep in the swirling sea that filled our hollow, deckless ship, gentle and simple, ‘prentice and knight, whipped out our knives and gave over to the hungry ocean all that riven tackle.

It was enough to make the stoutest heart beat low to ride in such a creaking, retching cockle-shell over the hill and dale of that stupendous water. Now, out of the tumble and hiss, down we would go, careering down the glassy side of a mighty green slope, the creamy white water boiling under our low-sunk bows, and there, in mid-hollow, with the tempest howling overhead, we would have for a breathing space a blessed spell of seeming calm. And then, ere we could taste that scant felicity, the reeling floor would swell beneath us, and out of the watery glen, hurtled by some unseen power, we rose again up, up to the spume and spray, to the wild shouting wind that thrilled our humming cordage and lay heavy upon us, while the gleaming turmoil through which we staggered and rushed leapt at our fleeting sides like packs of white sea-wolves, and all the heaving leaden distance of the storm lay spread in turn before us—then down again.

Hour after hour we reeled down the English coast with the wild mid-channel in fury on our left and the dim-seen ram-parts of breakers at the cliff feet on our right. Then, as we went, the light began to fail us. Our weather-beaten steersman's face, which had looked from his place by the tiller so calm and steadfast over the war of wind and sea, became troubled, and long and anxiously he scanned the endless line of surf that shut us from the many little villages and creeks we were passing.

'You see, Sir Knight,' shouted the captain to me, as, wet through, we held fast to the same rope—'tis a question with us whether we find a shelter before the light goes down, or whether we spend a night like this out on the big waters yonder.'

'And does he,' I asked, 'who pilots us know of a near harbour?'

'Ah! there is one somewhere hereabout, but with a perilous bar across the mouth, and the tide serves but poorly for getting over. If we can cross it there is a dry jacket and supper for all this evening, and if we do not, may the saints in Paradise have mercy on us!'

'Try, good fellow, try!' I shouted; 'many a dangerous thing comes easier by the venturing, and I am already a laggard post!' So the word was passed for each man to stand by his place, and through the gloom and storm, the beating spray and the wild pelting rain, just as the wet evening fell, we neared the land.

We swept in from the storm, and soon there was the bar plain enough—a shining thunderous crescent—glimmering pallid under the shadow of the land, a frantic hell of foam and breakers that heaved and broke and surged with an infernal storm-deriding tumult, and tossed the fierce white fountains of its rage mast-high into the air, and swirled and shone and crashed in the gloom, sending the white litter of its turmoil in broad ghostly sheets far into that black still water we could make out beyond under the veil of spume and foam hanging above that boiling cauldron. Straight to it we went through the cold, fierce wind, with the howl of the black night behind us, and the thunder of that shine before. We came to the bar, and I saw the white light on the strained brave faces of my silent friends. I looked aft, and there was the helmsman calm and strong, unflinchingly eyeing the infernal belt before us. I saw all this in a scanty second, and then the white hell was under our bows and towering high above our stern a mighty crested, foam-seamed breaker. With the speed of a javelin thrown by a strong hand, we rushed into the wrack; one blinding moment of fury and turmoil, and then I felt the vessel stagger as she touched the sand; the next instant her sides went all to splinters under my very feet, and the great wave burst over us and rushed thundering on in conscious strength, and not two planks of that ill-fated ship, it seemed, were still together.

Over and over through the swirl and hum I was swept, the dying cries of my ship-fares sounding in my ears like the wail of disembodied spirits—now, for a moment, I was high in the spume and ruck, gasping and striking out as even he who likes his life the least will gasp in like case, and then, with thunderous power, the big wave hurled me down into the depth, down, down, into the inky darkness with all the noises of *Inferno* in my ears, and the great churning waters pressing on me till the honest air seemed leagues above, and my strained, bursting chest was dying for a gasp. Then again, the hideous, playful waters would tear asunder and toss me high into the keen strong air, with the yellow stars dancing above, and the long line of the black coast before my salt tear-filled eyes, and propped me up just so long as I might get half a gasping sigh, and hear the storm beating wildly on the farther side of the bar; then the mocking sea would laugh in savage frolic, and down again. Gods! right into the abyss

of the nether turmoil, fathoms deep, like a strand of worthless sea-wrack, scouring over the yellow sand-beds where never living man went before, all in the cruel fingers of the icy midnight sea, was I tossed here and there.

And when I did not die, when the savage sea, like a great beast of prey, let me live by gasps to spread its enjoyment the more, and tossed and teased me, and shouted so hideous in my ears and weighed me down—why, the last spark of spirit in me burnt up on a sudden, fierce and angry. I set my teeth and struck out hard and strong. Ah! and the sea grew somewhat sleek when I grew resolute, and, after some minutes of this new struggle, rolled more gently and buried me less deep each time in its black foam-ribbed vortex, and, presently, in half an hour perhaps, the thunder of the bar was all behind me instead of round about, the stars were steadier in their places, the dim barrier of the land frowned through the rain direct above, and a few minutes more, wondrous spent and weary, the black water flowing in at my low and swollen lips with every stroke, yet strong in heart and hopeful, I found myself floating up a narrow estuary on a dim, foam-flecked but peaceful tide.

The strong but gentle current swept in with the flowing water under the dark shadows of the land, past what seemed, in the wet night-gloom, like rugged banks of tree and forest, and finally floated me to where, among loose boulders and sand, the tamed water was lapping on a smooth and level beach. I staggered ashore, and sat down as wet and sorry as well could be. Life ran so cold and numb within, it seemed scarce worth the cost spent in keeping. My scrip was still at my side, but my sword was gone, my clothing torn to ribbons, and a more buffeted messenger never eyed askance the scroll that led him into such a plight. Where was I? The great gods who live for ever alone could tell, yet surely scores of miles from where I should be! I got to my feet, reeking with wet and spray, the gusty wind tossing back the black Phrygian locks from off my forehead, and glared around. Sigh, sigh, sigh went the gale in the pines above, while mournful pipings came about the shore like wandering voices, and the sea boomed sullenly out yonder in the darkness! I stared and stared, and then started back a pace and stared again. I turned round on my heel and glowered up the narrow inlet and out to sea; then at the beetling crags above

and the dim-seen mounds inland ; then all on a sudden burst into a scornful laugh—a wild angry laugh that the rocks bandied about on the wet night-air and sent back to me blended with all the fitful sobs and moaning of the wind.

The lonely harbour, that of a thousand harbours I had come to, was the old British beach. It was my Druid priestess's village place that I was standing on !

I laughed long and loud as I, the old trader in wine and olives—I, the felucca captain, with cloth and wine below and a comely red-haired slave on deck—I, again, in other guise, Royal Edward's chosen messenger—as good a knight as ever jerked a victorious brand home into its scabbard—stood there with chattering teeth and shaking knee, mocking fate and strange chance in reckless spirit. I laughed until my mood changed on a sudden, and then, swearing by twenty forgotten hierarchies I would not stand shivering in the rain for any wild pranks that Fate might play me, I staggered off on to the hard ground.

Every trace of my old village had long since gone ; yet, though it were a thousand years ago I knew my way about with a strange certainty. I left the shore, and pushed into the overhanging woods, dark and damp and sombre, and presently I even found a well-known track (for these things never change) ; and, half glad and half afraid—a strange, tattered, dismal prodigal come strangely home—I pushed by dripping branch and shadowy coverts, out into the open grass hills beyond.

Here, on some ghostly tumuli near about, the grey shine of the night showed scattered piles of mighty stones and broken circles that once had been our temples and the burial places for great captains. I turned my steps to one of these on the elbow of a little ridge overlooking the harbour and, perhaps, two hundred paces inland from it, and found a vast lichened slab of stupendous bulk undermined by weather, and all on a slope with a single entrance underneath one end. Did ever man ask lodgment in like circumstances ? It was the burial mound of an old Druid headman, and I laughed a little again to think how well I had known him—grim old Ufner of the Reeking Altars. Hoth ! what a cruel, bloody old priest he was !—never did a man before, I chuckled, combine such piety and savagery together. How that old fellow's cruel small eyes did sparkle with native pleasure as the thick pungent

smoke of the sacrificial fire went roaring up, and the hiss and splutter half drowned the screaming of men and women pent in their wicker cages amid that blaze! Oh! Old Ufner liked the smell of hot new blood, and there was no music to his British ear like the wail of a captive's anguish. And then for me to be pattering round his cell like this in the gusty dark midnight, shivering and alone, patting and feeling the mighty lid of that great crypt, and begging a friendly shelter in my stress and weariness of that ghostly hostelry—it was surely strange indeed.

Twice or thrice I walked round the great coffer—it was near as big as a herdsman's cottage—and then, finding no other crack or cranny, stopped and stooped before the tiny portal at the lower end. I saw as I knelt that that tremendous slab was resting wondrous lightly on a single point of upright stone set just like the trigger of an urchin's mouse-trap, but, nothing daunted, pushing and squeezing, in I crept, and felt with my hands all that I could not see.

The foxes and the weather had long since sent all there was of Ufner to dust. All was bare and smooth, while round the sides were solid deep earth-planted slabs of rock—no one knew better than I how thick they were and heavy!—and on the floor a soft couch of withered leaves and grasses.

Now one more sentence, and the chapter is ended. I had not coiled myself down on those leaves a minute, my weary head had nodded but once upon my arm, my eyelids drooped but twice, when, with a soundless start, undermined by the fierce storm, and moved a fatal hair's-breadth by my passage, the propping key-stone fell in, and all at once my giant roof began to slide. That vast and ponderous stone, that had taken two tribes to move, was slipping slowly down, and as it went, all along where it ground, a line of glowing lambent fire, a smoking hissing band of dust marked its silent irresistible progress—a hissing belt of dust, and glow that shone for a half-moment round the fringe of that stupendous portal—and then, too late as I tottered to my weary knees, and extended a feeble hand towards the entrance, that mighty door came to a rest, that ponderous slab, that scarce a thousand men could move, fell with a hollow click three inches into the mortices of the earth-bound walls, and there in that mighty coffer I was locked—fast, deep, and safe!

I listened. Not a sound, not a breath of the storm without

moved in that strange chamber. I stared about, and not one cranny of light broke the smooth velvet darkness. What mattered it? I was weary and tired—to-morrow I would shout and someone might hear, to-night I would rest; and, Jove! how deep and warm and pleasant was that leafy bed that chance had spread there on the floor for me!

CHAPTER XVII

I CANNOT say, distinctly, what roused me next morning. My faculties were all in a maze, my body cramped and stiff as old leather—no doubt due to the wetting of the previous evening, or my hard couch—while the darkness bewildered and numbed my mind. Yet, indeed, I awoke, and, after all, that was the great thing. I awoke and yawned, and feebly stretched my dry and aching arms—good heavens! how the pain did fly and shoot about them!—and rolled my stiff and rusty eyeballs, and twisted that pulsing neck that seemed in that first moment of returning life like a burning column of metal through which the hot river of my starting blood was surging in a hissing, molten stream. I stretched, and looked and listened as though my faculties were helpless prisoners behind my numb, useless senses; but, peer and crane forward as I would, nothing stirred the black stillness of my strange bed-chamber.

Nothing, did I say? Truly it was nothing for a time, and then I could have sworn, by all the rich repository of gods and saints that the wreck of twenty hierarchies had stranded in my mind, that I heard a real material sound, a click and rattle, like metal striking stone, this being followed immediately by a star of light somewhere in the mid black void in front. Fie! 'twas but a freak of fancy, the stretching of my cramped and aching sinews, but a nucleus of those swimming lights that mocked my still sleepy eyes! I covered them with my hands and groaned to be awake; I strove to make point or sense out of the wild flood of remembrance that ebbed and flooded in thunderous sequence through my head; and then again, obtrusive and clear, came the click! click! of the unseen metal, and the shine of the great white planet that burnt in the black firmament of my prison behind it.

I staggered to my feet, stretching out eager hands in the void space to touch the walls, and tried to move; and, as I did so, my knees gave way beneath me; I made a wild grasp in the darkness, and fell in a loose heap upon the littered dusty floor. Lord! how my joints did ache! how the hot swift throes that monopolised my being shot here and there about my cramped and twitching limbs! I rolled upon the dust-dry earth of that gloomy chamber and cursed my last night's wetting; cursed the salt-sea spray that could breed such fiery torments; and even sent to Hades my errand and my scrip of victory, the which, however, I was cheered to note, in its bronze case now and then, with a movement or a spasm of pain, knocked against my bare ribs as though to upbraid me as a laggard embassy for lying sleeping here while all men waked to know my tidings. I rose again, with rare difficulty but successfully this time, and peered and listened till the dancing colours in my eyes filled the empty air with giddy spinning suns and constellations, and the making tide of wakefulness, flooding the channels of my veins, cheated my ears to fancy some hideous storm was raging up above, and thunderbolts were tearing shrieking furrows down the trembling sides of mountains, and all the rivers of the world (so hideous was that shocking sound) were tumbling headlong in wild confusion into the void middle of the world.

I stuffed my ears and shut my eyes, and turned sick and faint at that infernal tumult. My head spun and throbbed, and my light feet felt the world give under them. I had nearly fallen, when once again, just as my spinning brain was growing numb, and the close thin air of that place failed to answer to the needs of my new vitality, there came that click! click! again, and the blessed white star that followed it. This time that gleam of hope was broad and strong. On either side as it shone, white zigzag rays flew out and stood so writ upon the black tablet of my prison. Ah! and a draught of nectar, of real, divine nectar, of sweet white country air, came in from that celestial puncture!

I leapt to it and knelt, and put my thirsty lips to that refulgence and drank the simple ambient air that came through, as though I were some thirsty pilgrim at a gushing stream. And it revived me, cooling the rising fever of my blood, and numbing, like the sweet sedative it was, the pains, that soon ran less keen and throbbed less strong and, in a few more

minutes, went gently away into the distance under its beneficent touch. Mayhap I fainted or slept for some little time, overwhelmed by the stress of those few waking moments. When I looked up again all was changed. I myself was new and fresh, and felt with every pulse the strong life beating firm and gentle within me; and my prison cell—it was no more a prison!

There was a gap bigger than my fist where the star had been, with great fissures marking the outline of one of the stones that had supported the topmost slab, and through the gap a peep of countryside, of yellow grass, and sapphire sea, of pearly waves lispng in summer playfulness around a golden shore, and overhead a sky of delightful blue.

I was grateful, and understood it all. The storm had gone down during the night and the sun had risen; these were good folk outside, who, by some chance, knew of my sheltering-place and had come early to release me—a happy chance indeed! And it was their strong blows and crowbars working on my massive walls that let in the light, and—none too soon—refreshed me with a draught of outer air. Fool that I was to let an uneasy night and a salt-sea soaking cloud my wit!

I was so pleased at the prospect of speedy release that I was on the point of calling out to cheer my lusty friends at their work and show the prisoner lived. But had I done so this book had never been written! That shout was all but uttered—my mouth was close to the orifice through which came the pleasant gleam of daylight, when voices of men outside speaking one to another fell upon my ear.

‘By St. George,’ I heard one fellow say, ‘and every fiend in hell! they who built this place surely meant it to last to Judgment! Here we have been heaving at it since near daylight and not moved a stone.’

‘Ah! and if you stand gaping there,’ chimed in another, ‘we’ll not have moved one by Tuesday week. On, you log! let’s see something of that strength you brag of—why, even now I saw a shine and twinkle in the opening there. This crib may prove the cradle of our fortunes, may make us richer men than any strutting sheriffs, and recompense us for a dozen disappointments! To it again; and you, Harry, stand ready with the wedges to put them in when we do lift.’

I pricked my ears at this, as you will guess, for there was no mention of me expectant, and only talk of wealth and

recompense. I listened, and heard the sulky workman take again his crowbar. I heard him call for a drink, and the splash of the liquid into the leathern cup sounded wonderfully clear in my silent chamber; then, as though in no hurry to fall on, he asked, 'What of the spoil we have already, mates? A sight of those baubles would greatly lighten our labour, I think.'

'Now, as I had a man for my father,' burst out the first speaker, 'never did I see so small a heart in so big a body! Show him the swag, Harry! rattle it under his greedy nose! and when he has done gloating on it perhaps he'll turn to and do something for a breakfast!'

At this there was a pause and a moving of feet, as though men were collecting round some common object. Then came the tinkle of metals, and, by Jove! I had not yet forgotten so much of merchant cunning in my soldiering but that I recognised the music of gold and silver over the base clink of lesser stuff. They tried, and sampled, and wrung those wares over my head; and presently he who was best among them said—

'A very pretty haul, mates, and, wisely disposed of, enough to furnish us well, both inside and out, for a long time. These circlets here are silver, I take it, and will run into a sweet ingot in the smelting-pot. Yon boss is a brooch, by the pin, and of gold; though surely such a vile fashion was never forged since Shem's hammer last went silent.'

'What, gold, sir!'

'Ah! what else, old bullet-costard? Dost thou think I come round and prise cursed devil-haunted mounds for lumps of clay? The brooch is gold, I say; and the least of these trinkets' (whereon there came a sound like one playing with bracelet and bangle)—'the worst of them white silver. To it, then, good fellows, again! Burst me this stony crypt, and, if it prove such a coffer as I have right to hope, before the day is an hour older, you shall down to yonder town and there get drunk past expectation and your happiest imaginings.'

So, my friends, I mused, 'tis not pure neighbourliness that brings you thus early to my rescue! Never mind; many a good deed has been done in search of a sordid object, and whether you come for me or gold, it shall vantage me alike. I will lend a hand on my side, since it were a pity to keep this big fellow from his breakfast longer than need be.

While they plied spade and lever outside, I scraped below,

and put in, as well as I was able, a stone wedge now and then, whenever their exertions canted the great stone a little to one side or the other. The interest of all this, and because I was never apt in deceit, made me somewhat reckless about showing too soon at the narrow opening, and presently there came a guttural cry above, and a sound as though someone had dropped a tool and sprung back.

'Hullo! stoutheart,' called the captain's voice, 'what now? Is it another swig of the flask you want to swell your shallow courage, or has thy puissant crowbar pierced through to hell?'

'Hell or not,' whined the fellow, 'I do think the fiend himself is in there. I did but stoop on a sudden to peer within, and may I never empty a flagon again but there was something hideous moving in the crypt!—something round and shaggy, that toiled as we toiled, and pushed and growled, and had two flaming yellow eyes——'

'Beast! coward! Oh, that I had brought a man instead of thee! 'Twas gold you saw—bright shining metal—think, thou swine, of all it will buy, and how thou may'st hereafter wallow in thy foul delights! And wilt thou forego the stuff so near? Gods! I would have a wrestle for it though it were with the devil himself! Give me the crowbar.'

Apparently the captain's avarice was of stouter kind than the yeoman's, for soon after this the stone upright began to give, and I saw the moment of my deliverance was near. Now, I argued to myself, these gentlemen outside are obvious rogues, and will much rather crack me on the head than share their booty with such a strange-found claimant, hence I must be watchful. Of the two under-rogues I had small fear, but the captain seemed of bolder mould, and, unless his tongue lied, had some sort of heart within him. So I waited watchful, and before long a more than usually stalwart blow set the stone off its balance. It slipped and leant, then fell headlong outwards with a heavy thud, and, turning over on its side, rolled to the edge of the slope, and there, revolving quicker and more quickly, went rumbling and crashing down through the brambles into the valley a quarter of a mile below. As it fell outwards, a blaze of daylight burst upon my prison, and, with a shout of joy, the foremost of the rogues dashed into my cell. At the same moment, with such an old British battle yell as those monoliths had not heard for a thousand years,

but sorely dazed, I sprang forward. We met in mid career, and the big thief went floundering down. He was up again in a moment, and, yelling in his fear that the devil was certainly there, rushed forth—I close behind him—and infected his timorous comrade, and away they both went towards the woods, racing in step and screaming in tune, as though they had practised it together for half a lifetime. The fellows fled, but their leader stood, white and irresolute, as he well might be, yet made bold by greed; and for a moment we faced each other—he in his greasy townsman finery a strong, sullen thief from bonnet to shoe, and I, grim, gaunt, and ragged, haggard, wild, unshorn, standing there for a moment against the black porch of the old Druid grave-place—and then, wiping the sunshine from my dazzled eyes and stooping low, I ran at him! Many were the ribbons and trinkets I had taken long ago at that game. I ran at him, and threw my arms round his leather-belted middle, and, with a good Saxon twist, tossed his heels fairly into the air and threw him full length over my shoulder. He fell behind me like a tree on the greensward, while his head striking the buttress of a stone stunned him, and he lay there bleeding and insensible.

‘Hoth! good fellow,’ I laughed, bending over him, ‘I am sorry for that headache you will have to-morrow, but before you challenge so freely to the wrestle you should know somewhat more of a foeman’s prowess!’

When I turned to the little heap of spoil the ravishers of the dead had gathered and laid out on a cloth upon the stones, at once my mood softened. There in that curious pile of trinkets were things so ancient and yet so fresh that I heaved a sigh as I bent over them, and a whiff of the old time came back—the jolly wild days when the world was young rose before me as I turned them tenderly one by one. There lay the bronze nobs from a British shield, and there, corroded and thin, the long flat blade that my rugged comrades once could use so well. There was the broken haft of a wheel-scythe from a chief’s battle-car, and, near by, the green and dented harness of a war-horse. Hoth! how it took me back! how it made me hear again in the lap of the soft Plantagenet sea and all the insipid sounds of this degenerate countryside the rattle and hum of the chariots as we raced to war, the sparkle and clatter of the captains galloping through the leafy British woods, and then the shout and the tumult as we

wheeled into line in the open, and, our loose reins on the stallions' necks and our trembling javelins quivering in our ready hands, swept down upon the ranks of the reeling foeman!

There again, in more peaceful wise, was a shoulder-brooch some British maid had worn, and the wristlet and rings of some red-haired Helen of an unfamous Troy. There lay a few links of the neck-chains of a dust-dead warrior, and there, again, the head of his boar-spear. Here was the thin gold circlet he had on his finger, the rude pin of brass that fastened his coloured cloak and the buckle of his sandal. Jove! I could nearly tell the names of the vanished wearers, I knew all these things so well!

But it was no use hanging over the pile like this. The ruffian I had felled was beginning to move, and it served no purpose to remain: therefore—and muttering to myself that I was a nearer heir to the treasure than any among those thieves—I selected some dozen of the fairest, most valuable trinkets, and put them in my wallet. Then, feeling cold—for the fresh morning air was thin and cool here, above the sea—the best coat from the ragged pile the rogues had thrown aside, to be the lighter at their work, was chosen, and, with this on my back, and a stout stave in my hand, I turned to go. But ere I went I took a last look round—as was only natural—at a place that had given me such timely shelter overnight. It was strange, very strange; but my surroundings, as I saw them in the white daylight, matched wondrous poorly with my remembrance of the evening before! The sea, to begin with, seemed much farther off than it had done in the darkness. I have said that when I swam ashore my well-remembered British harbour had, to my eyes, silted up wofully, so that the knoll on which Blodwen's stockades once stood was some way up the valley. But small as the estuary had shrunk last night, I had, it seemed, but poorly estimated its shrinkage. 'Twas lesser than ever this morning, and some kine were grazing among the yellow kingcups on the marshy flats at that very place where I could have sworn I came ashore on the top of a sturdy breaker! The greedy green and golden land was cozening the blue channel sea out of beach and foreshore under my very eyes; the meadow-larks were playing where the white surf should have been, and tall fern and mallow flaunted victorious in the breeze where ancient British keels had never even grated on a

sandy bottom. I could not make it out, and turned to look at the tomb from which I had crept. Here, too, the turmoil of yestere'en and my sick and weary head had cheated me. In the gloom the pile had appeared a bare and lichened heap washed out from its old mound by rains: but, Jove! it seemed it was not so. I rubbed my eyes and pulled my peaked beard and stared about me, for the crypt was a grassy mound again, with one black gap framed by a few rugged stones jutting from the green, as though the slope above it had slipped down at that leveller Nature's prompting, and piled up earth and rubbish against the rocks, had escalated them and marched triumphant up the green glacis, planting her conquering pennons of bracken and bramble, mild daisy and nodding foxglove, on that very arch where, by all the gods! I thought last night the withering lightning would have glanced harmless from a smooth and lichened surface. Well, it only showed how weary I had been; so, shouldering my cudgel, and with a last sigh cast back to that pregnant heap of rusty metal, I turned, and with fair heart, but somewhat shaky limbs, marched off inland to give my wondrous news.

How pleasant and fair the country was, and after those hot scenes of battle, the noise and sheen of which still floated confusedly in my head, how sweetly peaceful! I trod the green, secluded country lanes with wondrous pleasure, remembering the bare French campagnas, and stood stock-still at every gap in the blooming hedges to drink the sweet breath of morning, coming, golden-laden with sunshine and the breath of flowers, over the rippling meadow-grass! In truth, I was more English than I had thought, my step was more elastic to tread these dear domestic leas, and my spirits rose with every mile simply to know I was in England! And I—a tough, stern soldier, with arms still red to the elbow in the horrid dye of war, and on a hasty errand, pulled me a flowering spray from the coppices, and smiled and sang as I went along, now stopping in delighted trance to hear out the nightingale that, from a bramble athwart the thicket path, sang most enrapturedly, and then, forgetful of my haste, standing amazed under the flushed satin of the blooming apples. 'Jove!' I laughed, 'here is a sweeter pavilion than any victor prince doth sleep in! Fie! to fight and bleed as we do yonder, while the sweetness of such a tent as this goes all to waste upon the wind!' and I sat and stared and laughed

until the prick of conscience stirred me and, reluctant, I passed on again. Then over a flowery mead or two, where the banded bees swung in busy fashion at the lilac cuckoo-flowers, and the shining dewdrops were charged with a hundred hues, down to a sunny, babbling brook that sparkled by a yellow ford. There I would stand and watch the silver fingers of the stream toy and tug the great heads of nodding kingcup, watch the flash of the new-come swallow's wing, as he shot through the byways between the mallows, and be so still that e'en the timid water-hen led out her brood across the freckled play of sunshine on the water, and the mute kingfisher came to the broken rail and did not fear me. 'Surely a happy stream,' I thought, 'not to divide two princely neighbours! What a blessed current that can keep its native colour and chatter thus of flowers and sunshine, while yon other torrent runs incarnadine to the sea—a corpse-choked sewer of red ambition!'

Then it was a homestead that, all unseen, I paused by, watching the great sleek kine knee-deep in the scented yellow straw, the spangled cock defiant on the wall, the tender doves a-wooing on the roof-ridge, and presently the swart herdsman, with flail and goad, come out from beneath his roses and stoop and kiss the pouting cherry lips of the sweet babe his comely mate held up to him. 'Jove!' I meditated, 'and here's a goodly kingdom. Oh that I had a realm with no politics in it but such as he has!' and so musing I went along from path to path and hill to hill.

At one time my feet were turned to a way-side rest-house, where a jug of wine was asked for and a loaf of bread, for you will remember that saving a handful of dry biscuit, which I broke in my gauntlet palm and ate between two charges, I had not broken fast since the morning before Crecy. The master of the tavern took up the coin I tendered and eyed it critically. He held it in the sun, and rung it on a stone and spat upon it, then, taking a little dust from the road, rubbed diligently until he came down through the green sea-slime to the metal below. It was true-coined, plump, and full, though certainly a trifle rusty; and this and my grim, commanding figure in his doorway carried the day. He brought me wine and cheese and bread, whereon I sat on a corner of the trestle table munching them outside in the sun under shadow of my broad felt yokel-hat, with the quaint inn sign gently creaking

overhead, and my mouldy sea-stained legs dangling under me.

I was in a good mood, yet thoughtful somehow, for had not the King especially warned me not to part lightly with the precious news wherewith I was freighted? And if so be that I must be reticent in this particular, yet again my heart was surely too full of my victorious errand to let me gossip lightly on trivial matters; thus my bread was broken in abstracted silence, and, when my beaker went now and again into the shade of my hat-brim, I drank mutely and proffered no sign of friendship to those other country wayfarers who stood about the honeysuckled doorway eyeing me askance after the manner I was so used to, and whispering now and then to one another.

I sat and thought how my errand was to be most speedily carried out, for you see I might trudge days and days afoot like this before good luck or my own limbs brought me to the footstool of Edward's Royal wife, and gave me leave to burst that green and rusty case that, with its precious scroll, still dangled at my side. I had no money to buy a horse—the bangles taken from the crypt-thieves would not stand against the value of the boniest palfrey that ever ambled between a tinker's legs—and last night's infernal wetting had made me into the sorriest, most mouldy-looking herald that ever did a kingly bidding. Surely, I thought, as I glanced at my borrowed clay-stained rustic cloak, my cracked and rotten leather doublet, my tarnished hose all frayed and colourless, my shoon, that only held together, methought, by their patching of grey sea-slime and mud, surely no one will lend or loan me anything like this; they will laugh at my knightly gage of honourable return, and scout the faintest whisper of my errand!

Thus ruefully reflecting, I had finished my frugal luncheon, yet still scarce knew what to do, and maybe I had sat dubious like that on the trestle edge for near an hour, when, looking up on a sudden, there was a blooming little maid of some three tender years standing in the sun staring hard upon me, her fair blue eyes a-shine with wonder, and the strands of her golden hair lifting on the breeze like gossamers in June. She had in one rosebud hand a flower of yellow daffodil, and in fault of better introduction proffered it to me. My stern soldier heart was melted by that maid. I took her flower and

put it in my belt, and lifted the little one on my knee, then asked her why she had looked so hard at the stranger.

'Oh!' she said, pointing to where some older children were watching all this from a safe distance, 'Johnnie and Andrew, my brothers, said you were surely the devil, and, as they feared, I came myself to see if it were true.'

'And am I? Is it true?'

'I do not know,' said the little damsel, fixing her clear blue eyes upon mine—'I do not know for certain, but I like you! I am sorry for you, because you are so dirty. If you were cleaner I could love you'—and very cautiously, watching my eyes the while, the pretty babe put out a petal-soft hand and stroked my grim and weathered face.

I could not withstand such gentle blandishment, and forgot all my musings and my haste, and kissed those pink fingers under the shadow of my hat, and laid myself out to win that soft little heart, and won it, so that, when presently the wondering mother came to claim her own, the little maiden burst into such a headlong shower of silver April tears that I had to perjure myself with false promises to come again, and even the gift of my last coin and another kiss or two scarce set me free from the sweet investigator.

But now I was aroused, and stalked down the green country road full of speed and good intention. I would walk to the Royal city, since there were no other way, and these fair shires must have grown expansive since the olden days if I could not see a march or two while the sun was up. Eastward and north I knew the Court should lie, so bent my steps through glades and commons with the midday sun behind my better shoulder. But the journey was to be shorter than seemed likely at the outset. After asking, to no purpose, my road of several rustics, a venerable wayfarer was chanced upon, ambling down a shady gully.

This quaint old fellow sat a rough little steed, one, indeed, of the poorest-looking, most knock-kneed beasts I had ever seen a gentleman of gentle quality astride of. And, in truth, the rider was not better kept. He wore a great widespreading cloak of threadbare stuff, falling from his shoulders to his knees in such ample folds that it half hid the neck and quarters of his steed. Below this mantle, splashed with twenty shades of mud and most quaintly patched, you saw the pricks of rusty iron spurs on old and shabby leather

boots, and just the point of a frayed black leather scabbard peeping under his stirrup-straps. The hat he wore was broad-brimmed and peaked, and looked near as old as did its wearer. Under that shapeless cover was a most strange face. I do not think I ever saw so much and various writ upon so little parchment as shone upon the dry and wrinkled surface of that rider's features. There were cunning and closeness on it, and yet they did not altogether hide the openness of gentle birth and liberal thought. Now you would think to watch those shrewd keen eyes a-glitter there under the penthouse of his shaggy eyebrows, he was some paltry trader with a vision bounded by his weekly till and the infruct of his lying measures, and then anon, at some word or passing fancy, as you came to know him better, 'twas strange to see how eagle-like those optics shone, and with what a clear, bright, prophetic gaze the old fellow would stare, like a steersman through the dim-lit gloom of a stary night, over the wide horizon of the visionary and uncertain! He could look as small and mean about the mouth as a usurer on settling day; and then, when his mood changed, and he fell thoughtful, the gentle melancholy of his face—the goodly soul that spoke behind that changeful mask, the strange dissatisfaction, the incompleteness, the unhappy longing for something unattainable there reflected, made you sad to look upon it!

I overtook this quaint rider as he rode alone, my active feet being more than a match for the shaky limbs of that mean beast he sat upon, and, coming alongside, observed him unnoticed for a minute. Truly as quaint a fellow-traveller as you could meet! His head was sunk, and his grizzled white beard fell over his chest: his eyes were fixed in vacant stare on some vision of the future; and his lips moved tremulously now and again as the thoughts of his mind escaped unheeded from between them. Was he poet? Was he seer? Was it a black past or a red, rosy future the old fellow babbled of? Jove! I was not in very good kind myself, and I fancy I had read now and again, in the wonder of those who saw me, that my face had a tale to tell. But, by the great gods! I was neat and pretty-pied beside this most rusty gentleman; my face was as void as a curd-fed bumpkin's, compared to those eloquently absent eyes, that fine, mean profile, there, in the slouch of the big hat, and those busy lips!

'Good-morning, Sir!' I said; and as the old man looked

up with a start and saw me, a stranger, walking by his side, all the fervour and the fancy died from off his face, the fine features shut upon themselves; and there he was, the meanest, shallowest, most paltry-looking of old rogues that had ever pulled off a cap to his equal!

He returned my first light questionings with a sullen suspicion, which gradually thawed, however, as his keen scrutiny took, apparently, reassuring stock of my face and figure, and we spoke, as fellow-travellers will, for a few moments on the roads, the weather, and the prospect of the skies. Then I asked him, with small expectation of much advantage in his answer, 'which was the best way to Court.'

'There are many ways, my son,' he said. 'You may get there because of extreme virtue, or on the introduction of peculiar wickedness.'

'Ah! but I meant otherwise——'

'Shining wisdom, they say, brings a man to Court—or should. And, God knows, there is no place like Court for folly! If thou art very beautiful thou may come to it, and if thou art as ugly as hell they will have thee for a laughing-stock and nine-days' wonder. Anaximander went to Court because he was so wise, and Anaxippus because he was so foolish; Diphilus because he was so slow in penmanship, and Antimachus because he wrote so much and swift. Ah, friend! many are the ways. Polypemon lived by plunder, and, because he was the cruellest thief that ever stripped a wanderer by green Cephissus, he came under the notice of kings and gods; ay, and Clytius is famous because he was so faithful; and the patriotic Codrus because he bared his bosom to the foe, and Spendius for a hundred treacheries, and——'

'No! no!' I cried, 'no more, Sir, I entreat. I did not mean to play footpad to thy capacious memory, and rob your mind of all these just comparisons, but only to ask, in ordinary material manner, which was the best way to the palace, which the nearest road, the safest footpath for a hasty stranger to our good Queen's footstool. I have a Royal script to deliver to her.'

'What, is it the Queen you want to see? Why, I am bound that road myself, and in a few minutes I will show you the pennons glancing among the trees where they be camped.'

'Where they be camped?' I exclaimed in wonder. 'I

thought that was many a mile from here—in fact, Sir, in the great city itself, and yet you say a few minutes will show us the Royal tents.'

'Oh, what a blessed thing are youthful legs! And were you off to distant Westminster like that, good fellow, "to see the Queen," forsooth, with nothing in thy wallet, and as little in thy head?' And the old man eyed me under his slouching cap with a mixture of derision and strange curiosity.

'I tell you, Sir,' I answered, 'I come on hasty business; I am a messenger of the utmost urgency, and if I am afoot instead of mounted it is more misfortune than inclination. What brings the Queen, if, indeed, we are so near her, thus far afield?'

'Praise Heaven, young man, there is no one who knows less of the goings and comings of her and hers than I do. I hate them,' he said sourly; 'a lying swarm of locusts round that yellow jade they call a Queen—a shallow, cruel, worthless crew who stand in the way of light and learning, and laugh the poor scholar out of face and heart!' And, muttering to himself, my companion relapsed into a moody silence as we breasted the last rise. But on a sudden he looked up with something like a smile wrinkling his withered cheek, and went on: 'But you do not laugh—you have some bowels of compunction within you—you can be as civil to a threadbare cloak as to a silken doublet. Gads! fellow, there is something about thee that moves me very strangely. Art thou of gentle quality?'

'I have been of many qualities in my time, Sir.'

'So I guessed, and something tells me we shall see more of one another. There is a presence about thee that makes me fear—that puts a dread upon me, why I know not. And then, again, I feel drawn to thee by a strong, strange sense, as the Persian says one planet is drawn towards another.'

I let the old fellow ramble on, paying, indeed, but cold notice to his chatter, since all my thoughts were on ahead, and when at last we came out of the hazel dingles, there, sure enough, down in the valley was a white road winding among the trees, and a stately park, a goodly house of many windows, and amid the fair meadows among the branches shone the white gleam of tents, and overhead the flutter of silken tags and gonfalons, and now and then there came the glint of steel and gold from out that goodly show and the blare of trumpets,

and more softly on the afternoon air the shout of busy marshals, the neighing of steeds, and the low murmur of many voices.

Oh, it was a pretty scene to see the tender countryside so fresh and green, and the rolling meadows at our feet dusted thick with gold and silver flowers all blended in a splendid web of tissue under the shining sun. And there the flush of blossom on the orchards streaked the fair valley like a sunset cloud, and here the bronze of budding oaks lay soft in the hollows, while overhead the blue canopy of the sky was one unbroken roof from verge to verge.

We two looked down upon that scene of peace with different feeling for a space, then, making my friendly salutation to the dreamy pedant, 'Here, Sir,' I said, 'I fear we part for ever.'

'Not so,' he said: 'we shall meet once more, and soon.'

'Well! well! Soon or distant, we will meet again in friendship,' and, with a wave of the hand, off I set, delighted to think chance had so favoured me, and all impatient to tell my news. I did not stop to look to left or right, but down the glen I ran into the valley, scaring the frightened sheep and oxen, and stopping not for fence or boundary until the broad road was reached, and all among the groups of gaping countrymen and busy lackeys leading out the steeds to water in the meadows round the Royal camp I slackened my pace. The broad park gates were open, and inside, amid the oak-trees around the great house, gay confusion reigned. There, on one hand, were the fair white tents bright with silk and golden trappings, and, while a hundred sturdy yeomen were busy setting up these cool pavilions, others spread costly rugs about their porches, and displayed within them lordly furniture enough to dazzle such rough soldier eyes as mine. There in long rows beneath the branches were ranked a wondrous show of mighty gilded coaches with empty shafts a-trail, all still dusty from the road, and hurrying grooms were covering these over for the night, while others fed and tended a squadron of sleek fat horses, whose be-ribboned manes and glistening hides so well filled out struck me amazed when I recalled those poor, ragged, muddy chargers whereon we had borne down the hosts of Philip's chivalry two days before. All about the green were groups of gallant gentlemen and ladies, and I overheard, as I brushed by, some of them speaking of a

splendid show to be given that night in the court of the great house near by, and how the proud owner of it, thus honoured by the great Queen's presence, had beggared him and his for many a day in making preparation. It was most probable, for the white-haired seneschal was tearing his snowy locks, entreating, imploring, amid a surging, unruly mass of porters, cooks, and scullions, while heaps of provender, vats of wine, and mighty piles of food for men and horses, littered all the rearward avenues.

But little I looked at all these things. Clad like many another countryman come there to see the show (only a little more ragged and uncouth), I passed the outer wickets, and, skirting the groups of idlers, strode boldly out across the trim inner lawns and breasted the wide sweep of steps that led to the great scutcheoned doorway. All down these steps gilded fellows were lolling in splendid finery, who started up and stared at me, as, nothing noticing their gentle presence, now hot upon my errand, I bounded by. At top were two strong yeomen, gay in crimson and black livery, of most quaint kind, with rampant lions worked in gold upon their breasts, and tall, broad-bladed halberds in their hands. They made a show of barring the way with those mighty weapons; but I came so unexpected, and showed so little hesitation, they faltered. Also, I had pulled off my cap, and better men than they had stepped back in fear and wonder from a glance of that grim, stern face that I thus did show them. Past these, and once inside, I found the Queen was receiving the country-folk, and up the waiting avenue of these good rustic lieges I pushed, brushing through the feeble fence of stewards' marshalling-rods held out to awe, and, nothing noticing a score of curly pages who threw themselves before me, I burst into the presence chamber. Hoth! 'Twas a fine room, like the mid-aisle of a great cathedral, and all around the walls were banners and bannerets, antlers of deer, and goodly shows of weapons, and suits of mail and harness. And this splendid lobby was thronged with courtiers in silks and satins, while ruffs and stocks and mighty collarets, and pearls and gems, and cloth of gold and sarsanet glittered everywhere, and a gentle incense of lovely scents mingled with a murmur of courtly talk went up to the fair carved oaken ceiling. Right ahead of me was a splendid crimson carpet of wondrous pile and softness, and at the far end of that stately way a dais,

and on it, lightly chatting amid a pause in the Royal business—the Queen!

She was not the least what I had looked for. I had pictured Edward's noble dame, the daughter of the knightly house of Hainault, as pale and proud and dark—the fit wife to her warlike husband, and a meet mother to her son. But this one was lank and yellow, comely enough no doubt and tall, with a mighty proud light in her eyes when occasion served, and a right royal bearing, yet still somehow not quite that which I expected. What did it matter? Was it not the Queen, and was not that enough? Gods! What should it count what colour was her hair, since my master found it good enough? And, in truth, but I had something to say would bring the red into those lack-lustre cheeks, or Philippa were unlike all other women. Therefore, with a shout of triumph that shocked the mild courtiers, brandishing my precious script above my head, I leaped forward, and, dashing up that open crimson road, ran straight to the footstool of the Royal lady, and there dropping on one knee—

'Hail! Royal mother,' I cried.

'Thanks!' she said sardonically, as soon as she regained her composure. 'Thanks, gentle maid!'

'Madam,' I cried, 'I come, a herald, charged with splendid news of conquest! But one day since, over in famous France, thy loyal English troops have won such a victory against mighty odds as lends a new lustre even to the broad page of English valour. But one day since, in your noble General's tent——'

But by this time all the throng of courtiers had found their tongues, and some certain quantity of those senses whereof my sudden entry had bereft them. While a few, who caught the meaning of my word and, stopping not to argue, thought it was the news indeed of a victory that glittering Court had long hoped for, broke out into tumultuous cheering—waving scarf and handkerchief, and throwing wide the lattices, that the common folk without might share their noisy joy, those others who stood closer around, and saw my ragged habiliments, could not believe it.

'You a herald!' exclaimed one grizzled veteran in slashed black velvet over pearly satin. 'You a messenger chosen for such an errand! Madam,' he cried, drawing out a long rapier from its velvet case, 'it is some madman, some brain-

sick soldier. I do implore your Grace to let me call the guards.'

'An assassin! an assassin!' cried another. 'Run him through, Lord Fodringham! Give him no chance or parley!'

''Tis past belief!' exclaimed a dainty fellow, all perfumed lace and golden chains. 'Such glad tidings are not trusted to base country curs.'

'A fool!' 'A rogue!' 'A graceless villain!' they shouted. 'Stab him! drag him from the presence! Fie upon the billmen to let such scullions in upon us!' And thick these pretty peers came clustering on me, the while their ladies screamed, and all was stormy tumult.

Up, then, I jumped to my feet, and hot and wrathful, shaking my clenched fist in the faces of those glittering lords, broke out, 'By the bright light of day, Sirs, he who says I have a better here in this hall, lies—lies loud and flatly. Do you think, because I come clad like this, you may safely spend your shallow wit upon me? I tell you all, pretty silken spaniels that you are! you, Fodringham, with the gilded toothpick you miscall a sword! you there, Sir, who reek of musk and valour! and all you others, who keep so discreetly out of arm's reach!—I tell you everyone that, in court or camp, in tilt or tourney, I am your mate! Ah, Sirs, and this rusty country smock, blazoned by miry ways and hasty travel; this muddy tabard here, because 'tis upon a herald's breast, is more honourable wear than any silken surtout that you boast of. Gods, gentlemen! if so there be that anyone here in truth misdoubts it, let me entreat his patience; let me humbly crave the boon that he will hold his mettled valour in curb just so long as I may render that message which I surely have at this Royal footstool, and then, on horse or foot, with mace or sword, I will show him my credentials!' But none of that glittering throng had aught to say. Those bold, silken lordlings pushed back in a wide circle from where I stood, fierce and tall in my muddy rags, and fumbled their golden dagger-knobs, and studied with drooped heads the dainty silk rosettes upon their cork-heeled shoes.

After waiting a moment, to give their valour fair chance of answering, I turned disdainfully from them, and, bending again to fair Queen Philippa, 'Madam,' I said, 'these noisy boys make me forget the smooth reverence that I owe you'

Grace, yet surely the noble daughter of Hainault will forgive a hasty word spoken in defence of soldier honour ? ’

‘ I know nothing, good fellow, ’ replied the Queen, eyeing her discomfited nobles with inward glee, ‘ of thy Hainault, but I like thy outspokenness extremely. By Heaven ! you make me think it was some time since I last saw a man about me. ’

‘ And have I leave to do my mission, noble lady ? ’

‘ Ay, Sir, to it at once ! We care not how you come, or who you are, or for the exact condition of your smock, so that you bring news of victory. ’

‘ But, Madam, ’ put in Fodringham, ‘ it is not safe—he has some desperate purpose—— ’

‘ Silence ! ’ shouted the Queen, springing to her feet and stamping a pretty foot, cased in a dainty pearl-encrusted slipper—‘ silence, I say, Lord Fodringham, and all you other peers who make our presence-chamber like a bear-pit : silence ! or by my father’s heart I will cure him of insolence who speaks again for once and all. ’ And the sallow virago, flushing like an angry yellow sunset, with her fierce grey eyes agleam, and her thin lips stern-set, one white hand clutching the high carved arm of her daïs, and the other set like white ivory on the jewelled handle of her fan, scowled round upon her courtiers.

They knew that proud termagant too well to meet her eye, and having stared them all into meek silence she let the yellow flush die from her cheek, and turning to me she said : ‘ Now, fellow, to thy errand. ’

‘ Then, sovereign lady, ’ I began, ‘ but two days since, in France, the English troops, fair set upon a sunny hillside, were attacked by a vast array of foemen, and thanks to happy chance, to thy princely General’s captainship, and to the incredible valour of thy lieges, they were victorious ! ’

‘ Now may the dear God who rules these things accept my grateful and most humble thanks ! ’ And the proud Queen, with bright moisture in her eye, looked skyward for a moment, and was so moved with true joy and pleasure in her country’s conquest that thereon at once she went up most mightily in my esteem.

‘ Most welcome of all heralds, ’ she went on, ‘ how fared the English leader in that desperate fight ? If aught has

happened to Lord Leicester, it will spoil all else that you can say.' ¹

I did not quite catch the name she mentioned under breath, but I thought it was the Royal mother asking how my noble young master had prospered, so I spoke out at once.

'Madam, he is unhurt and well! It is not for me, a humble knight, to praise that shining star of honour, but he for whom thou art so naturally solicitous' (here the Queen blushed a little and looked down, while there was a scarce-suppressed laugh among the fair damsels behind me), 'he, Madam, has done splendid deeds of valour. Three times, noble Queen, right along the glittering front of France he charged, three times he pierced so deep into that sea of steel that he near lay hands upon their golden lilies in mid-host. The proud Count of Poligny fell before him, and the Lord of Lusigny was overthrown in single combat; Besançon and Arnay went down under his maiden spear; he pulled an ancient crest from the Bohemian eagle in mid-battle. In brief, Madam, a more valorous knight was never buckled into armour: he was the prop and pillar of our host, and to him this victory is as largely due as it is to any.'

'Herald,' said the Queen, with real gratitude and pleasure in her voice again, 'indeed your news is welcome. There was nothing I had rather than such a victory, and because 'tis his, because it will stifle the envious clamour of his enemies, and embolden me to do that which I hope to. Oh! your news fills up to overflowing the measure of my joy and satisfaction!' And the fair lady bent her head and fell into a reverie, like a maid who cogitates upon the prowess of an absent lover.

So far the woman—then the Queen came back, and lifting her shapely head, with its high-piled yellow hair, laced with strings of amethyst and pearl, and well set off by the great stiff-starched ruff behind, she asked—

'And my dear English nobles, and my stout halberdiers and pikemen—God forgive me that I should forget them!—how told the fight upon them? My heart bleeds to think of the odds you say they did withstand.'

'Be comforted, fair Sovereign! The tide of war set strong

¹ The Earl of Leicester, in the spring of 1586, had command of the English forces in Flanders, and news of the great victory which he constantly promised but never achieved was daily expected.

against our enemies, our palisades and trenches were well laid; the keen English arrows carried disaster far afield on their iron points ere the battle joined; the great host of France fell by its own mightiness; and victory, this time at least, shall wring but few tears from English maids or matrons.'

'Heaven be truly thanked for that!'

'Indeed, Madam,'—so I went on—'none of great account fell those few hours since. Lord Harcourt I saw bear him like the bold soldier that he was, and when the battle faded into evening he it was who marshalled our scattered ranks and set the order for the night.'

'Who did you say?'

'Harcourt, lady, thy bold captain. And Codrington, too, was redoubtable, and came safe from the fight. Chandos dealt out death to all who crossed his path, like an avenging fury, yet took no scratch. Hot Lord Walsingham swept like an avalanche in spring through the close-packed Frenchmen, yet lives to tell of it, and old Sir John Fitzherbert, when I left the field—his white beard all athwart his shredded broken armour—was cheering loudly for our victory, the while they lapped him up in linens, for a French axe had shorn his left arm off at the shoulder. All have taken dints, but near all are safe and well.'

''Tis strange,' said the Queen, thoughtfully, ''tis strange I know so few of these. I have a Harcourt, but he is not warlike; and cunning, cruel Walsingham lives in the north, and sits better astride of a dinner-stool than a charger. Codrington and Fitzherbert leading my troops to war! Here, let me see thy script: it may explain.' And she held out her jewelled hand.

Thereon a strange uneasiness possessed me, and seemed to cloud my honest courage. What was it? What had I to fear? I did not know. And yet my strong fingers, that never wearied upon a hilt though the day were ne'er so long, trembled as I slung round my pouch, and my heart set off a-beating with craven fear, as it had never beat before in sack or *mêlée*. It was too foolish; and, a little angry at the blood that ran so slowly in my veins, and the heavy sense of evil that sat on me all of a sudden, I pulled the metal letter-case from my wallet, and burst the seal and pressed the lid. The wallet split from side to side as though the stout leather were

frail paper, and the strong metal crumbled in my fingers like red, rotten touchwood.

I stared at it in amazement. What could it mean? Then shook the thin, rusty fragments from my hand, and, putting on a bold face I did not feel, drew out the parchment from the strangely frail casing, brushed off the dust and litter, and handed it to the Sovereign.

'Lady,' I said in a voice I fain would have made true and clear, 'there is the full account, and though seas have stained it, and rough travel spoiled the casing, as you saw, yet have I made all diligence I could. It was yesterday morning King Edward gave me that, and "Take it," he said, "as fast as foot can go to sweet Queen Philippa, my wife. Say 'twas penned on battlefield, and comes full charged with my dear and best affections." Thus, Madam, have I brought it straight to thee from famous Crecy, and here place it, the warrant of my truth, in Queen Philippa's own hand.' And then I gave her the scroll.

Jove! how yellow and tarnished it did look! The frail silk that bound it was all a fray and colourless; and the King's great seal, that once had been so cherry-red, was bleached to sickly pallor! The Queen took it, and while I held my breath in nameless terror she turned it over and slowly round about, and stared first at me, and then at that fatal thing. She begged a dagger from a courtier at her side, and split the binding, and unfolded that tawny scroll that crackled in her fingers, it was so old and stiff, and read the address and superscription; and then, all on a sudden, while a deathlike silence held the room, she turned her stern, cold eyes, full of wrath and wonder, to me kneeling there, and burst out—

'Why, fellow! what mummerly is all this? Philippa and Crecy? Why, thou incredible fool! *Philippa of Hainault has been dust these twenty generations; and Crecy—thy "famous Crecy"—was fought near three hundred years ago! I am Elizabeth Tudor!*'

Slowly I rose from my feet and stared at her—stared at her in the hush of that wondering room, while a cold chill of fear and consternation crept over my body. Incredible! 'Crecy fought three hundred years ago!'—the hall seemed full of that horrible whisper, and a score of echoes repeated, 'Queen Philippa has been dust these twenty generations, and

Crecy—thy famous Crecy—was fought near three hundred years ago ! ' Oh, impossible—cruel—ridiculous !—and yet—and yet ! There, as I stood, glaring at the Queen with strained, set face, and clenched hands, and heaving breath, gasping, wondering, waiting for something to break that hideous silence or give the lie to that accursed sentence that still floated around on the ambient air, and took new strength from the disdainful light in those clustering courtier eyes, and their mocking, scornful smiles—while I waited I remembered—by all the infernal powers I remembered—my awakening, and all the things I should have noted and had not. I recalled the bitter throes that had wracked my stiff joints in the old British grave as never mortal rheums yet twisted common sinew and muscle. I recalled the long labour of the crypt thieves, and the altered face of rocks and foreshore when my eyes first lit upon them after that long sleep. The very April season that sorted so ill with the August Crecy left behind took new meaning to me now all on an instant ; and my ragged, crumbling raiment, in shreds and tatters, so ruinous as never salt spray yet made a good suit in one mortal evening, the strange garb and speech of those I met, and then this tawny, handsome, yellow lioness on the throne where should have been a pale, black Norman girl. Oh ! hell and fiends ! But she spoke the truth. I had lain three hundred years in Ufner's stones, and with a wild, fierce cry of shame and anger, one long yell of pain and disappointment, I tore the cursed wallet from my neck and hurled it down there savagely at her feet, and turned and fled ! Past the startled courtiers—past the screaming groups of laced and ruffled women—out ! out ! through the long line of feeble wardens ; out between the glistening lowered halberds of the guards, down the white shining steps, an outcast and a scoffing-point, down into the road I ran, under a thousand wondering eyes, as fast as foot could go—not looking where or how, but seeking only the friendly cover of solitude and the fast-coming evening, and then, at length, worn out and spent—so sick in mind and heart I could scarce put one limb before another, I sank down on a grassy bank, a mile out of sight and sound of that fatal camp, and dropped my head into my hands and let the fierce despair and the black, swelling loneliness well up in my choked and aching heart.

CHAPTER XVIII

YOU—happy—across whose tablets a kind fate draws the sponge of oblivion even while you write, who leave the cup half emptied, and the feast half finished; you, from whose thoughts ambition passes in warm meridian glow, who nourish expectation and hope to the very verge of the unknown; you, who leave warm with the sweet wine of living, your dim way lit with the shine of love, your fingers locked in the clasp of friendship; you, to whom all these things gently minister and smooth the path of the inevitable; you, who die but once and die so easily, surely cannot comprehend the full measure of my sufferings!

Oh! it was horrible and sickening to feel the old world reel and spin like this beneath my laggard feet; to see crowns and states and people flit by like idle shadows on a sunny wall; to espouse great quarrels that set men into wide-asunder camps, and to wake and find the quarrel long since over and forgotten; to swear allegiance to a king and love and serve him, and then to find, in the beat of a pulse, that he had gone and was forgotten; to be the bearer of proud news that should kindle joy in a thousand thousand hearts, and then to wake when even the meaning of that news, the very cause and purport of it, was long since past and gone—it was surely bitter!

And for myself—I, who, as you know, link a ready sympathy with any cause, who love and live and hope with a fervour which no experience quenches and no adversity can dim—to be thus cut adrift from all I lived and hoped for, to be cast like this on to the bleak, friendless shore of some age, remote, unknown, unvalued—surely it was a mischance as heavy as any mischance could be!

I had not any friend in all that universe, I said to myself as I lay and thought sad thoughts upon the grassy mound—a friend!—not one kind human heart in this hive of human atoms set store by me—not one had heard I lived—not one cared if I died! There was not in all the world one question of how I fared, one wish that ran in union with any wish of mine—one single link to join me to my kind. And what links could I forge again? How could I set out to hope afresh or

love, or fear or wish for? Hope! gods! had I not hopes yesterday? And what were they now?—a tawdry, silly sheaf of tinselled fancies. And love!—how could I love, remembering the new-dead Isobel?—and fear and desire! neither touched the accursed monotony of my desolation; either would have been a boon from Heaven to break the miserable calm of my despair!

It was thus I reasoned with myself for hours as the gathering darkness settled down; and, poor as I had often been, and comradeless, I do not think, in all a long and varied life, I had ever felt more reft of friends or melancholy lonesome. In vain my mind was racked to piece the evidence of that huge lapse of time which, there was no doubt, had passed since the great battle on the Crecy hills. I could recall as they have been set down every incident of the voyage, my escape, and what had followed the awakening: but the sleep itself was to me even now just one long, soft, dreamless, well-earned slumber from point to point. So absolutely natural had been that wondrous trance that to think on it would make me start up with a cry, and shake my fist to where, in the valley, the lights of Elizabeth's camp were faintly shining among the trees, and half persuade myself that *this* were the dream—that the yellow-haired Princess had somehow mocked me, that Edward indeed still lived, with my jolly comrades, and I might still hope to win renown and smiles amid them, and see those that I knew, and drink red wine from friendly flagons. Then I would remember all the many signs that told the Princess had not fooled me—had but spoke the cruel naked truth—and down I would sink again on the turf under the deepening shadows, and bewail my lot.

Tossed fiercely about like this, time passed unnoticed; the day went out in the west behind the pale amber and green satin curtains of the sunset, and, while I sat and grieved, the yellow stars climbed into the sky, all the sweet silent planets of the night set out upon their unseen pathways and airy paraboles, and behind the thicket that sheltered me the moon got up and threw across the lonely road a tracery of black and silver shadows. The evening air blew strong and cool upon my flushed, hot brow, and lulled the teeming thoughts that crowded there. Soft velvet bats came down, and the faint lisp of their hollow wings brushing by me was kindly and sympathetic. Overhead, the shallows hung out a thousand

golden points to the small people of the twilight, and a faint perfume—an incense of hope—fell on me with the yellow dust of those gentle flowers. If I say these cool influences somewhat respirationed me, you will deride my changing mood. Yet why should I hesitate for that? I *did* grow calmer under the gentle caressing of the evening; it was all so fair and still about me presently, and there was this star that I knew and that; and the night-owl churning overhead was surely the very same bird that had sung above my hunter-couch in the Saxon woodlands; and the lonely trumpet of the heron, flying homeward up the valley, brought back a score of peaceful memories. After all, men might change and go—shallow, small puppets that they were!—but this, at least, was the same old earth about me, and that was something. I would find a sheltered corner and sleep. Mayhap, with to-morrow's dawn the world might look a little brighter!

Just as this wise resolution was on the point of being put in force, the faint sound of horse-hoofs, demurely walking up towards my lurking-place, came down on the night wind, and, retiring a moment into the deep shadows, I had not long to wait before the same shaggy palfrey and the same dreamy old fellow met earlier in the day came pacing along the road. The scholar—for so I guessed him—looked neither to right nor left; his strange thin face was turned full up to the moonlight, and the bright rays shone upon his vacant eyes and long white beard with a strange sepulchral lustre. He was letting the reins hang loose upon his pony's neck, and, as he came near, thinking himself alone, he stretched out his long sinewy hands in front; and it was plain to see his lips worked in the moonlight with unspoken thoughts quicker than an abbot's at unpaid-for-mass. Utterly oblivious to everything around, in the white shine of the great night planet, old, lunatic, and gaunt, he looked, methought, the strangest wayfarer that ever rode down a woodland lane by nightfall. He was indeed so weird and unapproachable in his reverie that, though I had felt a small gleam of pleasure in first recognising something which, if not friend, was at least acquaintance, yet now as he drew nigh, remote and visionary, with glassy eyes fixed on the twinkling stars, and thin white locks lifting about his broad and wrinkled forehead, I hesitated to greet him, and stood back.

But that palfrey he bestrode was more watchful than his

rider. He saw me loom dark among the hazels, and came to so sudden a stop as threw the old man forward upon his ears, and, whatever his fancies may have been, jerked them clean from sky to earth in less time than it takes to write.

The scholar pulled himself together, and, with some show of valour, threw back his wide cloak from his right shoulder, and uncovered on his other side the hilt of a tarnished, rusty sword. Then, peeping and peering all about, he cried, 'Ho! you there in the shadows! Be ye thieves or beggars, know that I have nothing to give and less to lose!'

'And he who stops your way, Sir,' I answered, stepping forward into the clear, 'is exactly in like circumstance.'

'Oh! it is you, friend, is it?' cried the old man, seeming much relieved. 'I thought I had fallen into a nest of foot-pads, or at the least a camp of beggars.'

'Your open declaration, Sir, backed by certain evidences of its obvious truth, ought to have taken you safely through the worst infested thicket hereabouts.'

'No doubt, no doubt; but I am glad it is you and not another—first, because desirable friendships are rarely made by moonlight; and secondly, because you have been in my mind the few hours since we parted.'

'I am honoured in that particular, and your courtesy moves me the more because I was only now thinking there were none upon the face of the earth who were doing so much by me.'

'You are green, young man, and therefore apt to let a passing whim, a shadow of disappointment, lead to hasty generalising. You fared not as you hoped at yonder Court? And the old man bent his keen grey eyes upon me with a searching shrewdness there was no gainsaying.

'No! in faith I fared badly beyond all expectation.'

'And what were you projecting just now when, like the ass of Balaam, this most patient beast saw you in the way and interrupted my reflection so roughly?'

'Why, at that very moment, Sir,' I said, 'I was looking for a likely place to pass the night.'

'What, on the moss? with no better hangings to your couch than these lean, draughty, leafless boughs?'

'Tis an honourable bed, Sir, and I have fared worse when I have been far richer.'

'Oh! what a happy thing it is to be young and full of

choler and folly! Not but that I have done the same myself,' chuckled the old man: 'for thou knowest mandrake must be gathered only at the full moon, and henlock roots are digged i' the dark—many a twilight such as this I spent groping in the murky woods, picking those things that witches love—and not gone home with full wallet until the owls were homing and the pale white stars were waxing sickly in the morning light. Nevertheless, Sir, take an old man's word, and presume not too largely on the immunities of youth.'

'I have no drier bed.'

'No, but I have. Come back with me to-night, and I will lodge you safe and sound until the morning.'

'Thanks for the proffer! Yet this is surely extreme courtesy between two wayfarers so newly met as we are?'

'And do I, Sir,' he cried, holding out his thin and shaky palms there in the pallid light, a gaunt and ragged-looking spectre—a houseless, homeless, visionary vagrant—'do I, Sir, seem some broiling spendthrift—some loose hedge-companion—some shallow-pated swashbuckler—hail-fellow-well-met with one and all? I have not said so much civility as I did just now to anyone this twenty years!'

'The more thanks are due from him in whose favour you make so great and generous exception. Is it distant to your lodgment?'

'But a few miles straight ahead of us.'

'Then I will go with you, for it were churlish to slight so good an offer out of bare waywardness'; and I tightened my belt, and took the ragged ungroomed little steed by the rusty, cord-mended bit, and, with these two strange companions, set out I knew not how or where, and cared but little.

At first that quaint old man seemed more elated than could reasonably be expected at having secured me for a guest. He did not openly avow it, but I was not so young or unread in men but that I could decipher his pleasure in voice and eye, even while he talked on other subjects. How this interest came, what he could hope to get or have of me, however, was well past my comprehension. My dress and rustic garb spoke me his inferior in place and station, while, certes! my rags and tatters made me seem poor even after my humble kind. He was a gentleman, though the sorriest-looking one who ever put a leg across a saddle. And I? I was afoot, a

gloomy, purseless, unweapened loiterer in the shadows. What could he need of me that lent such lustre to his eyes, and caused him to chuckle so hoarsely far down in his lean and withered throat? The morrow no doubt would show, and in the meantime, being still morose and sad, smarting to have unwittingly played the fool so much, and full of grief and sorrow, I responded but dully to his learned talk. Feeling this, and being only slenderly attached to mundane things at best, his mind wandered from me after a mile or two—his eyes grew fixed and expressionless, his hands dropped supine upon the pummel, his chin sank down upon the limp, worn, yellow ruffles on his chest, and senseless, disconnected murmurs ran from his lips, like water dripping from a leaky cask.

I let him babble as he liked, and trudged along in silence, leaving the road to that sagacious beast, who, with drooped head and stolid purpose, went pacing on without a look either to right or left. And you will guess my thoughts were melancholy. Yesterday I was an honoured soldier, the confidant of a proud victorious king, the comrade of a shining band of princely brethren, as good a knight as any that breathed among a host of heroes, the clear-honoured leading star—the bright example to a horde of stalwart veterans—with all the fair wide fields of renown and reputation lying inviting before me!—all the pleasant lethe of struggle and ambition open to my search, and I had strong true friends abroad, and loving ones at home—and now! and now! Oh! I beat my hand upon my bosom, and spent impotent curses on the starlight sky, to think how all was changed—to think how those splendid princely shadows were gone—how all those sweet, rough spearmen who had ridden with me, fetlock deep, through the crimson mire of Crecy had passed out into the void, leaving me here desolate, poor, accursed—this empty hand that trained the spear that had shot princes and paladins to earth under the full gaze of crownèd Christendom, turned to a low horse-boy's duty, my golden mail changed to a hedge-man's muddy smock, on foot, degraded, friendless, and forlorn!

But it was no good grieving. My melancholy served somehow to pass the way, and when, presently, I shook it off again with one fierce, final sigh, and peered about, we were slowly winding down a dark road between high banks into a deeply

wooded glen lying straight ahead. I had noticed now and then, as we came along, a twinkling light or two standing off from the white roadway, amid the deep-black shadows of the evening, and each time had slowed my gloomy stride, thinking this were the place we aimed for. Now it was a shepherd's lonely cot, high-perched amid the open furze and ling, with a faint-red beam of warmth and light coming from the glowing hearth within. 'Ah! here we be!' I thought. 'So Learning is lodged with fleecy Simplicity, and cons his Ovid amid the things the sweet Latin loved, or reads bucolic Horace beneath a herdsman's oak!'

But that glum palfrey did not stop, and his fantastic master made no sign. Then it would be a wayside cottage, all criss-cross-faced with beam of wood, after the new fashion, and overgrown with rose and eglantine. 'Then this is it,' I sighed—'a comely, peaceful harbourage. One could surely lie safer from the winds of blustering fortune in this tiny shell than a small white maggot in a winter-hidden nut.' And I put my hand upon the dim trestle-gate. But stamp—stamp! the steed went on; and the master never took his chin from off his bosom!

Well, we had passed in this way some few small homesteads, and seen the glow-worm lights of a fair, sleeping Tudor village or two shine remote in the starlight valleys, and then we came all at the same solemn pace, the same gloomy silence, into that deep-shadowed dell I spoke of. We dipped down, out of the honest white radiance, between high banks on either hand, so high that bush and scrub were locked in tangles overhead and not a blink of light came through. Down that strange black zigzag we slipped and scrambled, the loose stones rattling beneath our feet, in pitchy darkness, with never a sound to break the stillness but the heavy breathing of the horse, and now and then the gurgle of an unseen streamlet running somewhere in the void. We staggered down this hell-dark pathway for a lonely mile, and then there loomed up from the blackness on my right hand a mouldy, broken terrace wall, all loose and cracked, with fallen coping slabs and pedestals displaced, and hideous, stony, graven monsters here and there glowering in the blackness at us who passed below. Two hundred paces down this wall we went, and then came to an opening. At the same moment the pale moon shone out full overhead and showed me a gate,

a garden, and beyond an empty mansion, so white, so ruinous and ghastly, so marvellously like a dead, expressionless face suddenly gleaming over the black pall of the night, that I tightened my hand upon the snaffle strap I held, and bit my lip, and thanked my fate it was not there I had to sleep.

Yet could I not help staring at that place. The wall turned in on either side to meet those gates. They had once been noble and well wrought and gilded, for here and there the better metal shone in spots amid the wide expanse of rusty iron that formed them, but now they were like the broken fangs, methought, of some old hag more than aught else. The left of these two rotten portals never opened, the nettle and wild creepers were twined thick about its shattered lower bars, while its fellow stood ajar, with one hinge gone, and sagging over, desperately envious, it seemed, of the small footway that wound amid the rank wild herbage past it. And then that garden! Jove! Was ever such a ghostly wilderness, such a tangled labyrinth of decay and neglect born out of the kind fertile bosom of gentle Mother Earth? Never before had I seen black cypresses throw such funereal shadows; never had I known the winter-worn things of summer look so ghoul-like and horrible! But worst of all was the mansion beyond—a straggling pile, with mighty chimney stacks, from whence no pleasant smoke curled up, and silent, grassy courtyards, and lonely flights of broken steps leading to lonely terraces, and a hundred empty windows staring empty-socketed back upon the dead white light that shone so straight and cruel on them. Oh! it was all most forlorn and melancholy, surely an unholy place, steeped deep with the indelible stain of some black story—and I turned me gladly from it!

I turned, and as I did so the horse came to a sudden stop!—stopped calm and resolutely before that ill-omened portal! This woke his master, who stared and looked up. He saw the house and gates in the full stream of the moonlight, and then turned to me.

‘Welcome!’ he cried, ‘right welcome to my home! Ho! ho! you shall sleep snug enough to-night. Look at the shine on ’t. They have lit up to welcome us!’ and he pointed with a long fleshless finger to those ghostly windows! ‘Ho! ho! ho!’ came, like a dead voice, the echo of his laughter out of the blank courtyard depth, and the old man, so strange

and wild, struck his rusty spurs upon the bare sounding ribs of his beast and turned and rode straight through the portal.

For one minute I held back—'twas all so grim and tragic-looking, and I was weak, shaken with grief and fasting, unweaponed and alone—for one minute I held back, and then the red flush of anger burnt hot upon my forehead to think I had been so near to fearing. I tossed back my black Phrygian locks, and with an angry stride—my spirit roused by that moment's weakness—strode sternly across the threshold.

Down the white gravel way we twined, the loose, neglected path gleaming wet with night-dew; we brushed by thickets of dead garden things, such as had once been tall and fair, but now tainted the night-air with their rottenness. We stepped over giant brambles and great fallen hemlocks—little hedge-pigs, so forsaken was it all, trotting down the path before us—and bats flitting about our heads. In one place had been a fountain, and Pan himself standing by it. The fountain was choked with giant dock and cress, wherefrom some frogs croaked with dismal glee, while Pan had fallen and lay in pieces on his face across the way. So we came in a moment or two to the house, and there my guide dismounted and pulled bit and bridle, saddle and saddle-cloth from his pony. That beast turned and stepped back into the shadows of the desolate garden, vanishing with strange suddenness, but whither I could not guess. Then the old man produced a green-rusty key from under his belt, and putting it to the lock of the door at top of that flight of broken steps, which looked as though no foot had trodden them for fifty years, he turned the rusty wards. The grind and wail of those stiff bolts had almost human sadness in it, and then we entered a long, lonely chilly hall. Here my guide felt for flint and steel, and I own I heard the click of the stone and metal, and saw the first sparks spring and die upon the pavement, with reasonable satisfaction.

'Twould have made a good picture, had someone been by to limn it—that ghastly pale face that might have topped a skeleton, so bloodless was it, with sharp keen eyes, a glint in the red glow that came presently upon the tinder, that strange slouch hat, that ragged, sorrel, graveyard cloak, and all about the gleam, glancing off the crumbling finery, the worm-eaten furniture, the broken tile-stones, the empty, voiceless corridors, the doors set half ajar, the great carved banisters

of the stairway that mounted into the black upper emptiness of that deserted hall. And then I myself, there by the porch, watchful and grim, in my sorry rags, the greatest wonder of it all, eyeing with haughty speculation that old fellow, so ancient and yet so young, tottering and venerable under the weight of a poor eighty years, perhaps, while it was three times as much since strong-limbed, supple I had even sat to a meal! It was truly strange, and I waited for anything that might come next with calm resignation—a listless faith in the integrity of chance which put me beyond all those gusty emotions of hope and fear which play through the fledgling hearts of lesser men.

The red train of sparks lit upon the tinder while I glanced around, the old man's breath blew them into a flame, and this he set to a rushlight, then turned that pale flame in my direction as he surveyed his guest from top to toe. I bore the inspection with folded arms, and when he had done he said:—

'Such thews and sinews, son, as show beneath that hempen shirt of yours, such breadth of shoulder and stalwartness can scarcely be nourished on evening dew and sad reflections. Have you eaten lately?'

'In truth, Sir, it was some time ago I last sat to meat,' was my response; 'and, whether it be our walk or the night-air, I could almost fancy your father's father might have shared that meal with me.'

'Well, come, then, to the banquet-hall—the feast is spread, and, for guests, people these shadows with whom you will!' and, taking the rushlight from its socket and hobbling off in front, that strange host of mind led down the corridor to where a great archway led into the main chamber of the house.

It was as desolate and silent as every other place, vast, roomy, blank, and gloomy. All along one side were latticed windows looking out upon that dead garden, and the moonbeams coming through them threw faint reflections of escutcheon and painted glass upon the dusty floor. Here and there the panes were broken, and draughts from these swayed the frayed and tattered hangings with ghostly undulations—ah! and at the top of the room an open door, leading into unknown blackness, kept softly opening and shutting in the current as though, with melancholy monotony, it was giving admittance to unseen, voiceless company.

But nothing said my friend to excuse all this. He led up the long black table, with rows of seats and benches fit to seat an hundred guests, until at the lonely top he found and lit the four branches of a little oil lamp of green mouldy bronze, such as one takes from ancient crypts, and when the four little flames grew up smoky and dim they shone upon a napkin ready laid, a flask, a pitcher, and a plate, flanked by a horn-handled knife and spoon, and an oaken salt-cellar. Then the old carl next went to a cupboard in a niche, and brought out bread on a trencher, a cheese upon a round leaden dish, and a curious flask of old Italian wine. I stared at my host in wonder, for I could have sworn a Saxon hand had trimmed his knife and spoon, his lamp was Etruscan, as truly as I lived, though Heaven only knew how he came by it—and that pitcher—why, Jove! I knew the very Roman pottery marks upon it, the maker's sign and name—the very kiln that glazed it!

He laid a plate for me, and cut the loaf and filled our tankards, and—'Eat!' he said. 'The feast is small, but we have that sauce the wise have told us would make a worse into a banquet.'

'Thanks!' I said. 'I have, in truth, sat to wider spreads, yet this is more than I could, a few short hours since, have reasonably hoped for.' And so I began and broke his bread, and turned about the cheese, and poured the wine, and made a very good repast out of such modest provender. But, as you may guess, between every mouthful I could not help looking up and about me—at the wise-mad features of that quaint old man, now far away and visionary, again lost in thought and fantasy; and then out through the broken mullions into that pallid garden of white spectral things and inky shadows lying so death-like in the moonshine; and so once more my eye would wander to the long sombre hall—the stately high-backed chairs all rickety and moth-eaten, and the door that gently opened now and then to admit the sighing of the night-wind, and nothing more!

Well! I will not weary you with experiences so empty. At last the most spectral meal that ever mortal sat to was over, and the old man roused himself, and, like one who comes reluctantly from deep thought, drained out his goblet to the dregs, and turned it down and swept the crumbs into his plate, and, standing up, said in somewhat friendly tone:

'You will be weary, stranger guest, and mayhap I am to-night but a poor host. If it pleased you, I would show you to a chamber, which, though mayhap somewhat musty, like much else of mine, shall nevertheless be drier than yon couch of yours out there by the hazel thicket.'

'Musty or not, good Sir, I do confess a bed will be welcome. It must be near four hundred years at least—that is to say, it must be very long, my sleepy eyes suggest—since I was lain on one.'

'Come, then!'

'Yet half a minute, Sir, before we go. This garb of mine—I do not deign to advert to its poorness, for my own sake, but it does such small credit to your honour and hospitality. Fortune, in other times, gave me the right to wear the hose and surtout of a gentleman—if you had such a livery by you.'

The scholar thought a space, then bid me stay where I was, and took the rushlight and went down the passage. In a few minutes he was back, with a swayth of faded raiment upon his arm, and threw them down upon the bench.

'There, choose!' he cried. 'It was like a young man, to think of to-morrow's clothing, between supper-time and bed.'

The raiment was as mysterious as everything else here about. It was all odds and ends, and quaint old fashions and tags of finery, the faded panoply of state and pride, the green vest of a forest ranger, the gaberdine of a marshal of the lists, suits for footmen with the devices I had seen upon the ruined gates worked on the front in golden thread, and some few courtly things, such as idle young lords will wear a day or two and then throw by to wear some newer.

Out of the latter I selected a suit that looked as though it would fit me, and, though a little crumpled, was still in reasonable condition. This vestment, after the fashion of the time, consisted of tight hose and much-puffed breeches, a fine silk waistcoat coming far down, and a loose and ample coat upon it, with wide shoulders and long tight sleeves. When I add this suit was of amber velvet, lined and puffed with primrose satin, you will understand that, saving the certain mouldiness about it I have mentioned, it was as good as any reasonable man could desire. I rolled it up, and put it under my arm, then turned to my host with something of a smile at the strangeness of it all.

'A supper, Sir,' I said, 'and shelter; a suit of velvet; and then a bed! Why, surely, this is rare civility between two chance companions met on a country road!'

'Ah!' answered the old man, 'and if you were as old as I am, you would know it is rare, but that such things must, somehow, be paid for,' and he eyed me curiously a moment from under those penthouse eyebrows. 'Is there anything more you lack?' he continued. 'To-night it is yours to ask, and mine to give.'

'Since you put it to me, worthy host,' I responded, 'there is one other thing I need—something a soldier likes, whether it be in court or camp, in peaceful hall like this or on the ridges of dank battle-field—a straight, white comrade that I could keep close to me all day, a dear companion who would lie nigh by my side at night—believe me, I have never been without such.'

'And believe me, young man, I cannot humour you. Fie! if that's your fancy, why did you leave yon wanton camp? Gads! but they would have lined you there civilly enough, but I—— What, do you think I can conjure you a pretty, painted leman for a plaything out of these black shadows all about us?'

Whereat I answered seriously, 'You mistake my meaning, Sir. It was no gentle damsel that I needed, but such a companion as I have ever had—in brief, a weapon, a sword. It was only this I thought of.'

I heard the old man mutter as he turned away—'A curse on young men and their wants—new suits, supper and wine, leman, weapons—oh! it's just the same with all of them,' and he took the taper from the table and signed to me to follow.

He led me down the hall with its bare, cold flag-stones and sombre panelling dimly seen under the feeble gleaming light he carried, and in a few paces my grim host stopped and held that shine aloft. It shone redly on a tarnished trophy of arms, chain-mail, and helmets, whence he bid me choose whatever took my fancy, making the while small effort to hide his contempt for the obvious eagerness and pleasure with which I sampled that dusty hoard. After a minute or two I selected a strong Spanish blade, a little light and playful, perhaps, with golden arabesques all down it, and a pretty fluted hollow for the foeman's blood, and a chased love-knot at the hilt; yet, nevertheless, a good blade, and

serviceable, with an edge as keen as a lover's eye, and a temper as true as ever was got into good steel, I thought, as I sprang it on the tiles, between hammer and anvil. This Toledo blade had a cover of black velvet, bound and hooped with silver bands, and a stout belt of like kind, nicely suiting that livery I carried upon my arm. I bound the sword about me, and, after being so long unweaponed, found it wondrous comfortable and pleasant wear.

'Now then, Sir Host,' I cried, 'lead on! If this chamber of thine were in the porch of paradise or in the nethermost pit of hell, I am equally ready to explore it.'

Up the gloomy stairs we went, now to right and then to left, by corridors and passages, until the road we came was hopelessly mazed to me; and soon my host led to a wider, gloomier avenue of silent doorways than any we had passed.

'Choose!'—he laughed—'choose you a bed! Better men than you have lodged—and died—within these cheerful chambers.' And that wild old man, with furrowed face and mad, sparkling eyes, seeming in that small round globe of light like some spectral remnant of the fortunes of his lonely house, opened door after door for me to note the grim black solitudes within. In every chamber hung the same staring portraits on the wall, cold, proud, dead eyes fixed hard upon you wherever you might look! on every rotten cornice were tattered hangings, half shrouding those dim cobwebbed windows that gazed so wistfully out upon the moonlit garden; and dusky panel doors and cupboard casements that gently creaked and moved upon the sighing draught till you could swear ghostly fingers played upon the latches; the same stern black furniture, crumbling and decayed, was in each set straight against the walls; the same cenotaph four-posted bedsteads with ruined tapestries and mouldy coverlets—'Choose,' he laughed, with a horrid goblin laughter that rattled down the empty corridors—'my house is roomy, though the guests be few and silent.'

But, in truth, there was little to choose where all was so alike. Therefore, and not to seem the least bit moved by all this dreadfulness, I threw down my borrowed clothes and rapier upon the settle in one of the first rooms we hopped upon, and said: 'Here, then, good host—and thanks for courteous harbourage! What time doth sound réveille—what time, I mean, doth thy household wake?'

‘My household, stranger, sleeps on for ever. They will not wake for any mortal sunrise, and I spend the long night-hours in work and vigil’—and he looked at me with the gloomy fanaticism of an absent mind—‘yet *you* must wake again,’ he went on after a minute. ‘I have something to ask thee to-morrow, perhaps something to show’—

‘Why, then, until we meet again, Good-night and pleasant vigils, since it is to them you go.’

‘Good-night, young man, and sober sleep! Remember this is no place to dream of tilts and tourneys, of lost causes or light leman love;’ and, muttering to himself as he shuffled down the bare dusty floors, I heard him pass away from corridor to corridor, and flight to flight, until even that faint sound was swallowed by the cavernous silence of the sepulchral mansion, and night and impenetrable stillness fell on those empty stairways and gaunt voiceless rooms.

CHAPTER XIX

I SLEPT all that night a deep unbroken slumber, waking with the first glimpse of morning, calm and refreshed, but very sleepily perplexed at my surroundings. It was only after long cogitations that the thread of my coming hither took form and shape. When at last I had examined myself in my antecedents, and reduced them to the melancholy present, I got up and looked from the window. A fair tract of country lay outside, deep-wooded and undulating, with pastoral meadows in between the hangers, and beyond, in the open, that streamlet whose prattle had been heard the night before lay spread into a broad rushy tarn overgrown with green weeds and water things, and then running on through the flat soft meadows of this hollow where the house was built wound into the far distance, where it joined something that shone in the low white light like the gleam of a broader river. It was not a cheerful morning, for it had rained much, and the chilly mist hung low and still about these sombre-wooded thickets, and the long grass between them; the sleepy rooks in the nests upon the bare treetops were later to wing than usual, cawing melancholy from the sodden boughs as though loth to leave them; and down below nothing sang or moved

but the dark black merle fluttering along the covert side, and the mavis tuning a plaintive and uncertain note from off the wet fir-tops.

When I had stared my full and learnt little from the outlook, I donned those clothes that I had borrowed, and they were a happy choice. They fitted me like a lady's glove, and, as I laced and hooked and belted them before a yellow mirror let into the black panel of my chamber door, I could not but feel they looked a goodly fashion for one of my make and build. I had not seemed so stalwart and so sleek, so straight in limb and broad in shoulder, since I was a Saxon thane. Then I belted on that pretty sword round my nicely tapering middle, and ran my fingers through my black Eastern locks, arranging them trimly inside my high-standing frill, and took another look or two into the glass, and then with a derisive smile—a little scornful at the secret pleasure those fine feathers gave me—I went forth.

Surely never did mortal mason build such a house before! The deepest, densest forest path that ever my hunter's foot had trodden was simple to those mazes of curly stairs and dim passages and wooden alleys that led by tedious ways to nothing, and creaking, rotten steps that beguiled the wanderer by sinuous repetitions from desolate wing to wing and flight to flight. And all the time that I wrestled with those labyrinthine mazes in the struggle to reach latitudes I knew, not a sign could I see of my host, not a whisper could I catch of human voice or familiar sound in that dusty, desolate wilderness. Such an impenetrable stagnation hung over that empty habitation that the crow of a distant cock or the yelp of a village cur would have been a blessed interruption, but neither broke the vault-like, solemn stillness. From room to room I went, opening countless doors at random, all leading into spacious, mouldy chambers, bare and tenantless, feeling my way by damp, neglected wall and dangerous broken floorings to endless cobwebbed windows, unbarring wooden casements and letting in the watery light that only made the inner desolation more ghostly conspicuous, but nothing human could I find, nor any prospect but that same one I had seen before of damp woodlands and marshy water-meadows out beyond.

Perhaps for half an hour had I adventured thus hopelessly, lost in the dusty bowels of that stupendous building;

and then—just as I was near despairing of an exit and meditating a leap from a casement on to the stony terraces below—opening one final door, that might well have been but a household cupboard for the storing of linen and raiment, there, at my feet, was the great main staircase leading, by many a turn and staging, to the central hall below! I put, with the point of my sword, a cross upon the outside of that cupboard-door, so that I might know it again if need be, and then descended.

Had you seen me coming down those Tudor steps in that Tudor finery—my hand upon the hilt of my long steel rapier perked behind me, my great ruffe and my curled moustache, my strong soldier limbs squeezed into those sweet-fitting satin hose and sleeves, so stern and grim, so lonely and silent in the white glimmer of the morning shine that came from distant lattice and painted oriel—you well might have thought me scarcely flesh and blood—some old Tudor ancestor of that old Tudor hall stepped from a painter's canvas just as he was in life, and come with beatless feet to see what cheer his gross descendants made of it where he had once lived so noisy and so jolly.

Down the steps I came, and into the banquet-hall, empty and deserted like all else, and so sauntered to the table head where I had supped the evening before. Not one trace of humankind had I seen since the night, and yet—that little thing quite startled me—the supper had been cleared away, another napkin spread, another plate, put out with fruit and bread, and a large beaker of good new milk stood by to flank them. I stared hard at that simple-seeming meal, and could not comprehend it. I was near sure the old man had not set it—yet, if he had, why was there but one plate, one place, one chair, one beaker? Was it meant for me or him? What fingers had pulled that fruit, or drawn that milk still warm from its source? I would wait, I thought, and strolled off to the windows, and down them all slowly in turn, then back again, to idly hum a favourite tune we had sung yesterday at Crecy. But still nothing came or stirred. Then I went into the hall and examined that trophy of weapons and tried them all, and then unbarred the great door and went out upon the terrace, there to dangle my satin legs over the balustrades during a long interval of gloomy speculation; but not a leaf was moving, not a sign or whisper could I see of that strange

old fellow who had brought me hitherto, and now did his duty by his guest so quaintly.

At last I went back to the dining-place, and regarded that mysterious meal with fixed attention. 'Now this, I thought, is surely spread for me, and if it is not then it should be. The master of a house may get him food how and when he likes; but the guest's share is put ready to his hand. I have waited a long hour and more, the sun is high, surely that learned pedant could not mean to belay his courtesy by starving a stranger visitor! No, it were certainly affectation to wait longer: at the worst there must be more where these good things came from.' And being hungry, and having thus appeased my conscience, I clapped my sword upon the table and fell to work, and in a short space had made a light though sufficient meal, and cleared everything eatable completely from the table.

I was the better for it, yet this strange solitude began to weigh upon me. But a few hours since—surely it was no more—I had been in a busy camp, bright with all the panoply of war, active, bustling; and here—why, the white mists seemed creeping through me, it was so damp and melancholy, the tawny mildew of these walls seemed settling down upon my spirit. Jove! I felt, by comparison of what I had been and was, already touched with the clammy rottenness of this place, and slowly turning into a piece of crumbling lumber, such as lay about on every hand—a tarnished, faded monument to a life that was bygone. Oh! I could not stand the house, and, taking my cap and sword, strolled down the garden, full of pensive thoughts, morose, uncaring, and so out into the woods beyond, and over hill and dale, a long walk that set the stagnant blood flowing in my sleepy veins, and did me tonic good.

Leaving the hall where so strange a night had been spent, I strode out strongly over hill and dale for mile after mile, without a thought of where the path might lead. I stalked on all day, and came back in the evening; yet the only thing worthy of note upon that round was a familiarity of scene, a certain feeling of old acquaintance with plain and valley, which possessed me when I had gone to the farthest limit of the walk. At one hilltop I stopped and looked over a wide, gently swelling plain of verdure, with a grassy knoll or two in sight, and woods and new wheat-fields shining emerald in

the April sunlight, while far away the long clouds were lying steady over the dim shine of a distant sea. I thought to myself, 'Surely I have seen all this before. Yonder knoll, standing tall among the lesser ones—why does it appeal so to me? And that distant flash of water there among the misty woodlands a few miles to westward of it? Jove! I could, somehow, have sworn there had been a river there even before I saw the shine. Some sense within me knows each swell and hollow of this fair country here, and yet I know it not. They were not my Saxon glades that spread out beneath me, and the distant stream swept round no such steep as that castled mount wherefrom I had set out for Crecy. I could not justify that spark of vague remembrance, and long I sat and wondered how or when in a wide life I had seen that valley, but fruitlessly. Yet fancy did not err, though it was not for many days I knew it.

Then, after a time, I turned homewards. Homeward, was it? Well, it was as much thitherward as any way I knew, though, indeed, I marvelled as I went why my feet should turn so naturally back to that gloomy mansion peopled only by shadows and the smell of sad suggestions. Perhaps my mind just then was too inert to seek new roads, and accepted the easiest, after the manner of weak things, as the inevitable. Be this as it may, I went back that wet, misty afternoon, alone with my melancholy listlessness through the damp dripping woods and coppices, where the dead ferns looked red as blood in the evening glow. I was so heedless I lost my way once or twice, and, when at length the dead front of the old house glimmered out of the mist ahead, the early night was setting in, and that lank, dejected garden, those ruined terraces, and hundred staring, empty windows frowning down on the grave-green courtyard stones seemed more forsaken, more mournful-looking even than it had the night before.

I found the front door ajar, exactly as it was left, and, groping about, presently discovered the tinder and steel. I made a light, and laughed a little bitterly to think how much indeed I was at home; then, in bravado and mockery, unsheathed my sword and went from room to room, in the gathering dusk, stalking sullen and watchful, with the gleam of light held above my head, down each clammy corridor and vault-like chamber; rapped with my hilt on casement and panels, and, listening to the gloomy echo that rumbled down

that ghoulish palace, I pricked with my rapier-point each swelling, rotten curtain; I punctured every ghostly, swinging arras, and stabbed the black shadows in a score of dim recesses. But nothing I found until, in one of these, my sword-point struck something soft and yielding, and sank in. Jove! it startled me! 'Twas wondrous like a true, good stab through flesh and bone; and my fingers tightened upon the pommel, and I sent the blade home through that yielding, unseen 'something,' and a span deep into the rotten wall beyond; then looked to see what I had got. Faugh! 'twas but a woman's dress left on a rusty nail, a splendid raiment once—such as a noble girl might wear, and a princess give—padded and quilted wondrously, with yards of stitching down the front, wherefrom rude hands had torn gold filagree and pearl embroideries, and where the wearer's heart had beat those rough fingers had left a faded rose still tied there by a love-knot on a strand of amber silk—a lovely gown once on a time, no doubt, but now my sword had run it through and through from back to bosom. Lord! how it smelt of dead rose, and must, and moth! I shook it angrily from my weapon, and left it there upon the rotten boards, and went on with my quest.

But neither high nor low, nor far nor near, was there to be found the smallest trace of my host or any living mortal. At last, weary and wet, and oppressed with those vast echoing solitudes, I went back to the great hall—passed all the untouched litter I had made in the morning—and so to the banquet-place. I walked up the long black tables set solemn with double rows of empty chairs, and lit the lamp that stood at top. It burnt up brightly in a minute—and there beneath I saw the morning meal had been removed, the supper napkin neatly laid, and bread, wine, and cheese laid out afresh for one!

So unexpected was that neat array, so quaint, so out of keeping with the desolate mansion, that I laughed aloud, then paused, for down in the great vaulty interior of that house the echo took my laughter up, and the lone merriment sounded wicked and infernal in those soulless corridors. Well! there was supper, while I was tired and hungry I would not be baulked of it though all hell were laughing outside. In the vast empty grate I made a merry fire with some old broken chairs, a jolly, roaring blaze that curled about the mighty

iron dogs as though glad to warm the chilly hearth again, and went flaming and twisting up the spacious chimney in right gallant kind. Then I lifted the stopper of the wine-jar, and, finding it full of a good Rhenish vintage, set to work to mull it. I fetched a steel gorget from the trophy in the hall, poured the liquor therein, and put it by the blaze to warm. And to make the drink the more complete I spit an apple on my rapier point and toasted the pippin by the embers, thus making a wassail bowl of most superior sort.

I ate, and drank, and supped very pleasantly that evening, while the strong wind whistled among the chimney-stacks and rattled with unearthly persistence upon the casements, or opened and shut, now soft, now fiercely, a score of creaking distant doors. The spluttering rain came down upon the fire by which I sat in my quaint finery, warming my Tudor legs by that Tudor blaze; the tall spectral things of the garden beyond the curtainless windows nodded and bent before the storm; loose strands of ivy beat gently upon the panes like the wet long fingers of ghostly vagrants imploring admission; the water fell with measured beat upon the empty courtyard stones from broken gargoyle and spout, like the fall of gently pattering feet, and the strangest sobbing noises came from the hollow wainscoting of that strange old dwelling-place. But do you think I feared?—I, who had lived so long and known so much—I, who four times had seen the substantial world dissolve into nothing, and had awoke to find a new earth, born from the dusty ashes of the past—I, who had stocked four times the void air with all I loved—I, for whom the shadowy fields of the unknown were so thickly habited—I, to whom the teeming material world again was so unpeopled, so visionary, and desolate? I mocked the wild gossip of the storm, and grimly wove the infernal whispers of that place into the thread of my fancies.

Hour by hour I sat and thought—thought of all the rosy pictures of the past, of all the bright beams of love I had seen shine for me in maiden eyes, all the wild glitter and delight of twenty fiery combats, all the joy and success, all the sorrow and pleasure, of my wondrous life; and thus thought and thought until I wore out even the storm, that went sighing away over the distant woodlands, and the fire, that died down to a handful of white ashes, and the wine-pot, that ran dry and empty with the last flames in the grate; and

then I took my sword and the taper, and, leaving the care of to-morrow to the coming sunrise, went up the solemn staircase and threw myself upon the first dim couch in the first black chamber that I met with.

I threw myself upon a bed dressed as I was, but could not sleep as soon as I wished. Instead, a heavy drowsiness possessed me, and now I would dream for a minute or two, and then start up and listen as some distant door was opened, or to the quaint gusts that roamed about those corridors and seemed now and then to hold whispered conclaves outside my door. It was like a child, I knew, to be so restless; but yet he who lives near to the unknown grows by nature watchful. It did not seem possible I had fathomed all the mystery there was in that gloomy mansion, and so I dozed, and waked, and wondered, waiting in spite of myself for something more, all in the deep shadow of my rotten bed-hangings; now speculating upon my host, and why he tenanted such a life-forsaken cavern, and ate and drank from ancient crockery, and had store of mouldy finery and rusty weapons; and then idly guessing who had last slept on this creaking, sombre bed, and why the pillows smelt so much of mouldiness and mildew; or again listening to the wail of the expiring wind among the chimneys overhead, and the dismal sodden drip of water falling somewhere. Perhaps I had amused myself like that an hour, and it was as near as might be midnight: the low, white moon was just a-glimpse over the sighing tree-tops in the wilderness outside. I had been dozing lightly, when, on a sudden, my soldier ear distinctly caught a footfall in the passage without, and, starting up upon my elbow in the black shadow of the bed, I gripped the hilt of the sword that lay along under the pillows and held my breath, as slowly the door was opened wide, and, before my astounded eyes, a tall, dark figure entered!

It was all done so quietly that, beyond the first footfall and the soft click of the lifting latch, I do not think a sound broke the heavy stillness that, between two pauses of the wind, reigned throughout the empty house. Very gently that dusky shadow by my portal shut the door behind, and it might have been only the outer air that entered with him, or something in that presence itself, but a cold, damp breath of air pervaded all the room as the latch fell back.

I did not fear, and yet my heart set off a-thumping against

my ribs, and my fingers tightened upon the fretted hilt of my Toledo blade, as that thing came slowly forward from the door, and, big and tall, and so far indistinct, stalked slowly to the bed-foot, touching the posts like one who, in an uncertain light, reassures him by the feel of well-known landmarks, and so went round towards the latticed window. I did not stir, but held my breath and stared hard at that black form, that, all unconscious of my presence, slowly sauntered to the light and took form and shape. In a minute it was by the lattice, and, to my stern, wondering awe, there, in the pale white moonshine, looking down into the desolate garden beyond with melancholy steadfastness, was the figure of a tall black Spanish gallant. In that white radiance, against the ebony setting of the room, he was limned with extraordinary clearness. Indeed, he was a great silver column now of stencilled brightness against the black void beyond, and I could see every point and detail in his dress and features as though it were broad daylight. He was—or must I say, he had been?—a tall, slim man, long-jointed and sparse after the manner of his nation, and to-night he wore something like the fashion of the time—black hose and shoes, a black-seeming waistcoat, a loose outdoor hood above it, a slouch cap, a white ruffle, and a broad black-leather belt with a dagger dangling from it. So much was ordinary about him, but—Jove!—his face in that uncertain twilight was frightful! It was cadaverous beyond expression, and tawny and mean, and all the shadows on it were black and strong; and out of that dreary parchment mask, making its lifelessness the more deadly by their glitter, shone two restless, sunken eyes. He kept those yellow orbs turned upon the garden, and then presently put up a hand and began stroking his small pointed beard, still seeming lost in thought, and next, stretching out a finger—and, Hoth! what a wicked-looking talon it did seem!—the shape began drawing signs upon the mistiness of the diamond panes. At the same time he began to mutter, and there was something quaintly gruesome about those disconnected syllables in the midnight stillness; yet, though I leant forward and peered and listened, nothing could I learn of what he wrote or said. He fascinated me. I forgot to speak or act, and could only regard with dumb wonder that outlined figure in the moonlight and the long-dead face so dreadfully ashine with life. So bewitched was I that had that vision turned and spoken I should have made

the best shift to answer that were possible ; there was some tie, I felt, between him and me more than showed upon the surface of this chance meeting of ours—something which even as I write I feel is not yet quite explained, though I and that shadow now know each other well. But, instead of speaking, that presence, man or spirit, from the outer spaces, left off his scratching on the window, and, with a shrug of his Spanish shoulders and a malediction in guttural Bisque, turned from the window-cell and walked across the room. As he did so I noticed—what had been invisible before—in his left hand a canvas bag, and, by the shape and weight of it, that bag seemed full of money. I watched him as he stalked across the room, watched him disappear into the shadow, and then listened, with every sense alert, to the click of the latch and the creak of the door as he left my chamber by the opposite side to that whereat he entered.

As those faint, ghostly footsteps died away slowly down the corridor, my native sense came back, and, in a trice, I was on foot, dressed as I had lain me down, and, snatching my sword and cloak in a fever of expectation, I ran over to the window and looked upon the writing. It was figures—figures and sums in ancient Moorish Arabesque ; and the long sharp nail-marks of that hideous midnight mathematician were still pencilled clearly on the moonlit dew.

My blood was now coursing finely in my veins, and, hot and eager to see some more of this grim stranger, I strode across the room and stepped out into the passage. At first it seemed that he had gone completely, for all was so still and silent ; but the white light outside was throwing squares of silver brightness from many narrow windows on the dusty floor—and there he was, in a moment, crossing the farthest patch, tall and silvery in that radiance, with his long, slim black legs, his great ruffle, and flapping cloak—looking most wicked. I went forward, making as little noise as might be, and seeing my ghostly friend every now and then, until, when we had traversed perhaps half that deserted mansion, I lost him where three ways divided, and went plunging and tripping forward, striving to be as silent as I could—though why I know not—and making instead at every false step a noise that should have startled even ghostly ears. But I was now well off the trail, and nothing showed or answered. It was black as hell in the shadows, and white as day where the

moonbeams slanted in from the oriels, and through this chilly chequer I went, feeling on by damp old walls and worm-eaten wainscoting; slipping down crumbling stairs that were as rotten as the banisters which went to dust beneath my touch; opening sullen oaken doors and peering down the dreary wastes within; listening, prying, wondering—but nowhere could I find that shadowy form again.

I followed the chase for many minutes, far into a lonely desert wing of the old house, then paused irresolute. What was I to do? I had my cloak upon one hand, and my naked rapier was in the other; but no light, or any means of making one. The vision had gone, and I found, now that the chase had ended, and my blood began to tread a sober measure, it was dank, chilly, and dismal in these black draughty corridors. Worse still, I had lost all count and reckoning of where my bed had been, and, though that were small matter in such a house, yet somehow I felt it were well to reach the vantage-ground of more familiar places wherein to wait the morning. So, as nearly as was possible, I groped back upon my footsteps by tedious ways and empty chambers, low in heart and angry; now stopping to listen to the fitful moaning of the wind or the pattering rain-spots on the glass, or some distant panels creaking in distant chambers; half thinking that, after all, I had been a fool, and cozened by some sleepy fancy. And so I went back, dejected and dispirited, until presently I came to a gloomy arch in a long corridor, tapestried across with heavy hangings. Unthinkingly I lifted them, and there—there, as the curtains parted—thirty paces off, a bright moon-lit doorway gently opened, and into the light stepped what same black-browed foreigner again!

I did what any other would have done, though it was not valiant—stepped back against the niche and drew the tapestry folds about me, and so hidden waited. Down he sauntered leisurely straight for my hiding-place, and as he came there was full time to note every wrinkle and furrow on that sullen, ashy face! Hoth! he might have been a decent gentleman by daylight, but in the nightshine he looked more like a week-dead corpse than aught else, and, with eyes glued to those twinkling eyes of his, and bated breath and irresolute fingers hard-set upon my pummel-hilt, I waited. He came on without a pause or sign to show he knew that he was watched, and, as he crossed the last patch of light, I saw the bag of

gold was gone, and the hand that had carried it was wrapped in a bloody handkerchief. Another minute and we were not a yard apart. What good was valour there, I thought? What good were weapons or courage against the malignity of such an infernal shadow? I held back while he passed, and in a minute it was too late to stop him. Yet, I could follow! And, half ashamed of that moment's weakness, and with my courage budding up again, I started from my hiding-place, and, brandishing my rapier, my cloak curled on my other arm as though I went to meet some famous fencer, I ran after the Spaniard. And now he heard me, and, with one swift look over his shoulder and a startled guttural cry, set off down the passage. From light to light he flashed, and shadow to shadow, I hot after him, my courage rampant now again, and all the bitterness and disappointment of the last few days nerving my heart, until I felt I could exchange a thrust or two with the black arch-fiend himself. 'Twas a brief chase! At the bottom of the corridor stood a solid oak partition—I had him safe enough. I saw him come to that black barrier, and hesitate; whereon I shouted fiercely, and leapt forward, and in another minute I was there where he had been—and the corridor was empty, and the panelled partition was doorless and unmoved, and not a sound broke the stillness of that old house save my own angry cry, that the hollow echoes were bandying about from ghostly room to room, and corridor to empty corridor!

CHAPTER XX

A BRIGHT dazzle of sunshine roused me with the following sunrise. I rubbed my sleepy lids and sat up, vaguely gazing round upon the tarnished hangings, the immovable white faces of the pictures on the wall, and the dusty floor whereon, in the greyness of countless years, was marked just the outlines of last night's feet, and nothing more. However, it was truly a lovely morning, and, moved by that subtle tonic which comes with sunshine, I felt brighter and more confident.

Having dressed, I went down the old staircase again to the breakfast which would certainly be ready, unbarring as I passed the casements and setting wide the great hall door, that the cool breath of that spring morning might sweep away the

mustiness of the old house, even humming a snatch of an old camp song, learnt in Picardy, to myself the while. Thus, I gained the dining-hall in good spirits, and saw, as had been expected, a new meal set with modest food and drink for me, and me alone, but no other sign or trace of human presence.

I sat and ate, vowing as I did so this riddle had gone far enough unanswered, and before that shiny, sparkling world outside (all tears and laughter like a young maid's face) was a few hours older I would know who was my host, who served me thus persistent and invisible, and what might be the service I was looked to to pay for such quaint entertainment. Therefore, as soon as the meal was done, I belted on my sword and straightened down my finery, the which had lost its creases and sat extremely well, and, smoothing the thick mass of my black Eastern hair under my velvet Tudor cap, sallied forth.

There was nothing new about the garden save the sunshine, and, having intently regarded the broad-terraced and mullioned front of the house without learning one single atom more than I knew before, I resolved to force a way round to the rear if it were possible. But this was not so easy. On one hand were thickets of shrub and bramble laced into dense impenetrable barriers, and on the other great yew hedges in solemn ranks, with vast masses of ivy and holly forbidding a passage. But, nothing daunted, I walked down to these yews, and peering about soon perceived a tangled pathway leading into their fastness. It was a narrow little way begrudgingly left between those sullen hedges, thick-grown with dank weeds below, and arched over by neglected growth so that the sun could not shine into these dusky alleys, and the paths were wet and chilly still.

Well, I pushed on, now to right and now to left, amid the tangles of one of those old mazes that gardeners love to grow, and until only the tall smokeless chimney-stacks of the deserted house shone red under the sunshine over the bough-tops in the distance, and then I paused. It was all so strangely quiet, and so lonesome—I had been solitary so long, it seemed doubtful whether anyone was alive in the world but me—why, surely, I was thinking, there were no human beings at least about this shadow-haunted spot. It were idle to seek for them. I would give it up. And just as I was meditating that—had half turned to go, and yet was standing irresolute—

Jove! right from the air in front of me, right out from the black bosom of the shadowy yew and ivies, there burst a wild elfin strain of laughter, a merry bubbling peal, a ringing cascade of fairy merriment, a sparkling avalanche of disembodied mirth, that, like some sweet essence, permeated on an instant all that gloomy place, and thrilled down the damp alleys, and shook the thousand coloured drops of dew from bent and leaf, and vibrated in the misty prismatic sunshine up above, and then was gone, leaving me rooted to the ground with the suddenness of it, and half delighted and half amazed. But only for a moment, and then I leaped forward and saw a turning, and found at bottom of it a gap, and plunged headlong through!

It was a pretty scene I staggered into. In front of me spread the open centre of the maze, a grassy space some twenty paces all about, and lying clear to the sunshine falling warm and strong upon it. In the midst of that fair opening, shut off from wind and outer barrenness, had once been a fountain with a basin, and, though the jet played no longer, yet the white marble pool below it, stained golden and green with moss and weather, held from brim to brim a little lake of sparkling water. And about that fountain, bright in decay, the green ferns were unwinding, while great clumps of gold narcissus hung trembling over their own reflection in the broken basin. Overhead, there was a blossoming almond-tree, a cloud of pale-pink buds wherefrom a constant cheerful hum of bees came forth, and a pale rain of petals fell on to the ground beneath and tinted it like a rosy snow. No other way existed in or out of that delightful circle save where I had entered, but little paths ran here and there among the grass, and industrious love had marked them out with pretty country flowers—pale primroses all damp and cool among the shadows, broad bands of purple violets lining seductive alleys, splendid starlike saffron outshining even the gorgeous sun, and blushing daisies, with varnished kingcups where the fountain ran to waste. It was as pretty a dominion—as sweet an oasis in that dank dark desert beyond—as you could wish to see, and the clear strong breath of flowers, and the warm wine of the sunshine set my blood throbbing deep and swift to a new sense of love and pleasure as I stood there spell-bound on the dewy threshold.

But, fair as earth and sky looked in that magic circle, they

were not all. Kneeling at the broken marble fountain, her dainty sleeves rolled to pearly elbows, the strands of her loose brown hair dipping as she bent over the shining water, with white muslin smock neatly bunched behind her, a milky kerchief knotted across her bosom, and a great country hat of straw by her side, knelt a fair young English girl. She did not see me at once, her face was turned away, and on her other hand she was tending a noble peacock, a splendid fowl indeed—as stately as though he were the Suzerain of all Heaven's chickens—ivory white from bill to spurs, crested with a coronet of living topaz, and with a mighty fan upreared behind him of complete whiteness from quill to fringe, saving the last outer row of gorgeous eyes that shone in gold and purple and amethyst refulgent in that spotless field!—a magnificent bird indeed, and fully wotting of it—and that kneeling maid was dipping water for him in her rosy palm, and the great bird was perched upon the marble rim and dropping his ivory beak into that sweet chalice and lifting his lovely throttle and flashing coronet to the sky ever and anon, while the thrill of the girl's light laughter echoed about the place, and the almond-blossoms showered down on them, and the bees hummed, and the sweet incense of the spring was drawn from the warm, budding earth, flowers glittered, the sun shone, and the sky was blue, as I, the intruder, stood, silent and surprised, before that dainty picture.

In a moment the girl looked up and saw me in my amber suit and ruffle, my rapier and cap, standing there against the black framing of the maze ; and then she did as I had done—stared, and rubbed her eyes, and stared again ! In a moment she seemed to understand I was something more than a fancy, whereat, with a little scream of fear, she sprang to her feet, and, crossing the kerchief closer on her bosom, pulled down her sleeves and backed off towards the almond-tree. But I had that comely apparition fairly at bay, and, after so many hours without company, did not feel a mind to let her go too easily, whether she proved fay or fairy, nymph, naiad, or just plain country flesh and blood.

I pulled off my cap, and, with a sweeping bow, advanced slowly towards her, whereon she screamed again.

'Fair girl,' I said, 'I grieve to interrupt so sweet a picture with my uninvited presence, but, wandering down

these paths, your laughter burst upon the stillness and drew me here.'

'And now, Sir,' quoth that fair material sprite, recovering herself, and with a pretty air, 'you would ask the shortest way to the public road. It lies there to your left, beyond the hollybank you see over by the meadows.'

'Why, not exactly that,' I laughed. 'I have an idle hour or two on hand, and, since you seem to have the same, I would rather rest content with the good fortune which brought me hither than try new paths for lesser pleasures. If you would sit, I think this grassy mound is broad enough for two.'

I meant it well, but the maid was timid, and far from rescue in the wilderness of that maze. The colour mounted to her cheeks until they were pinker than the almond-buds overhead. She looked this way and that, and gave one fleeting glance round the strong, close-set walls of that sunny garden among the yews, then just one other glance at me, that dangerous stranger in silk and satin, standing so gallant, cap in hand, and finally she was away, running like a hind towards the only outlet, the gap by which I had come in. But was I to be robbed of a pretty comrade so? Was the lovely elf of the neglected garden to slip between my fingers without answering one single question of the many I would ask? I spun round upon my heels, and, quick as that maiden's feet were on the turf, mine were quicker. We got to the gap together, and, in another minute, her kirtle fluttering in the breeze, her loose hair adrift, and the flush of fear and exertion on her youthful face, that comely lady was struggling in my grasp.

I held her just so long as she might recognise how strong her bonds were, then set her free. If she had been pink before, that maid was now ruddier than the windflowers in the grass. 'Oh, fie, Sir!' she began, as soon as she could get her breath. 'Oh! fie, and for shame! You wear the raiment of a gentleman, you carry courtly arms, you do not look at least a rough, uncivil rogue, and yet you burst into a privy garden and fright and offend a harmless girl - oh! for shame, Sir! - if gentleness and courtesy are so poor barriers, we shall need to look the better to our hedges—let me by, Sir!' and, gathering her skirts in her hand and tossing back her head with all the haughtiness she could command, that damsel looked me boldly in the eyes.

Fair, foolish girl! she thought to stare me down—I, who had eyed unmoved a thousand sights of dread and wonder—I, who had mocked the stare of cruel tyrants and faced unblanching the worst that heaven or hell could work—what! was I to be out of countenance under the feeble battery of such gentle orbs as those? 'Twas boldly conceived, but it would not do, and in a moment she felt it, and her eyes fell from mine, the colour rushed again from brow to chin, she let her flowered skirt fall from her grip, she turned away for a moment, and there and then burst out a-crying behind her hands as though the world were quite inside out.

Now, to stand the fair open assault of her eyes was one thing, but such sap as this was more than my resolution could abide. 'You do mistake me, maid, indeed,' I cried. 'I swear there is no deed of courtesy or goodwill in all the world I would not do for you.'

'Why then, Sir, do the least and easiest of all—stand from that gap and let me pass.'

'If you insist upon it, even that I must submit to. There!—there is your way free and unhampered!' and I stood back and left the passage clear—'and yet, before you go, fair lady, let me crave of your courtesy one question or two, such as civility might ask, and courtesy very reasonably answer.'

Now that maid had dried her tears, and had been stealing some sundry glances at me under the fringe of her wet lashes while we spoke, and as a result she did not seem quite so wishful to be gone as she had been. She eyed the free gap in the tall wall of yew and holly, and then, demurely, me. The pretty corners of her mouth began to unbend, and while her fingers played among her ribbons, and the colour came and went under her clear country skin, feminine curiosity got the better of timidity, and she hesitated.

'Oh!' she murmured, 'if it were a civil question civilly asked, I could wait for that. What can I tell you?'

'First then, are you of true material substance, not vagrant and spiritual, but, as you certainly look, a healthy plain planed mortal?'

'Had I been else, Sir,' the damsel answered, with a smile, 'I had found a short way out of the trap you saw fit to hold me in.'

'That is true, no doubt, and I accept this initial answer with due thanks. I had not asked it, but lodging so long amid

shadows sets my prejudice against the truth, even of the sweetest substance.'

'And nextly, Sir?'

'Nextly, how came you in this lonely place, with these pretty playthings about you? How came you in my garden here, where I thought nothing but silence and sadness grew?'

'Your garden! What hole in our outer fences gave you that warrant, Sir?' queried the young lady, with a toss of her head. 'How long user of trespass makes that right presumptive? Faith! until you spoke I thought the garden was mine and my father's!' and the young lady, for such I now acknowledge her to be, looked extremely haughty.

'What! Hast thou, then, a father?'

'Yes, Sir. Is it so unusual with our kind that you should be surprised?'

'And who is thy father?'

'A very learned man indeed, Sir; one who hath more wit in his little finger than another brave gentleman will have in all his body. Of nature so courteous that he instinctively would respect the privacy of a neighbour's property and manners, so finished he would never stay a maiden at her morning walk to bandy idle questions with her all out of vanity of black curled hair and a new, mayhap unpaid-for, yellow suit. If you had no more to ask me, Sir, I think I would wish you good day.'

'But stay a minute. It seems to me I might know thy father; and this is the very point and centre of my inquisitiveness.'

'If you did, it were much to your advantage, but I doubt it. He is recluse and grave, not given to chance companions, or, in fact, to friend with any but some one or two.'

'Ah! that may well be so,' I said thoughtlessly, speaking with small consideration and recalling the vision of my ancient host just as it came to me—'a sour, wizened old carl, clad in rusty green, a-straddle of a spavined, ragged palfrey; mean-seeming, morose, and sullen—why, maid, is that thy father?'

'No, Sir!'

'Gads!' I laughed, 'it was discourteously spoken. I should have said, now I come to reflect more closely on it, a reverent gentleman, indeed, white-bearded and sage, with keen eyes shining severe, the portals of a well-filled mind. A

carriage that bespoke good breeding and gentle blood; raiment that disdained the pomp of silly, fickle fashion, and a general air of learning and of mildness.'

'My father, Sir, to the very letter, Master Adam Faulkener, the wisest man, they say, this side of the Trent, and greatly (I know he would have me add) at your service.'

'And you?'

'I am Mistress Elizabeth Faulkener, daughter to that same; and if, indeed, you know my father, then, as my father's friend, I tender you my humble and respectful duty,' and the young lady half mockingly, and half out of gay spirit, picked up her flowered muslin skirt, by two dainty fingers, on either side and made me a long, sweeping curtsy.

A pretty flower indeed, for such a rugged stem!

'But this is only half the matter, fair girl,' I went on, when my responding bow had been duly made. 'If that venerable gentleman indeed be thy father, and this his house and thine, it is more strange than ever. I came here two evenings since by his explicit invitation, but since that time I have not set eyes upon him. High and low have I hunted, I have pricked arras and rapped on hollow panels, trodden yon ghostly corridors at every hour of the day and night, yet for all that time no sight or sound of host or hostess could I get. Now, out of thy generous nature and the civility due to a wondering guest, tell me how was this.'

'Why, Sir! Do you mean to say since two nights past you have been lodged back there?'

'Ah! three days, in yon grim, mouldy mansion.'

'What! there, in that melancholy front of the many windows—and all alone?'

'The very simple, native truth!—alone in yonder tenement of faint sad odours and mournful sighing draughts, alone save for a mind stocked with somewhat melancholy fancies—misled by him, it seemed, who brought me thither—dull, solitary, and damp—why, damsel!'

And, in faith, when I had got so far as that, the maiden sank back upon a grassy heap and hid her face behind her hands, and gave way to a wild, tumultuous fit of laughter, a golden cascade of merriment that fell thick and sparkling from the sunny places of her youthful joyance, as you see the heavy raindrops glint through a bright April sky; a wild, irresistible torrent of frolic glee that wandered round the far-off alleys,

and raised a hundred answering echoes of pleasure in that enchanted garden.

Presently the maid recovered, and, putting down her hands, asked—‘And your meals—how came you by them?’

‘They were laid for me twice each day in the great hall by unseen hands, most punctual and mysterious. ’Twas simple fare, but sufficient to a soldier, and each time I cleared the table and went afield, when I came back it was reset; yet no one could I see—no sound there was to break the stillness——’

Again that lady burst into one of her merry trills, and, when it was over, signed me to sit beside her. I was not loth. She was fair and young and tender—as pretty an Amaryllis as ever a country Corydon did pipe to. So down I sat.

‘Now,’ said she, ‘imprimis, Sir, I do confess we owe you recompense for such scant courtesy; but I gather how it happened. This is, as I have said, my father’s house, and mine; and time was, once, it has been told me, when he had near as many servants as I have flowers here, with friends unending; and all those blank windows, yonder, were full of lights by night and faces in the day. Then this garden was trim—not only here but everywhere—and great carriages ground upon the gravel drive, and the courtyard was full of caparisoned palfreys. That was all just so long ago, Sir, that I remember nothing of it.’

‘I can picture it, damsel,’ I said, as she sighed and hesitated; ‘and how came this difference?’

‘I do not know for certain—I have often wondered why, myself—but my father presently had spent all his money, and perhaps that somehow explained it,’ sighed my fair philosopher. ‘Then, too, he took studious, and let his estate shift for itself, while he poured over great tomes and learned things, and hid himself away from light and pleasure. That might have scared off those gay acquaintances—might it not, Sir?’ queried the lady so unlearned in worldly ways.

‘It were a good receipt, indeed,’ was my answer: ‘none better! To grow poor and wise is high offence with such a gilden throng as you have mentioned. So then the house emptied, and the gates no longer stood wide open; the garden was forsaken, and grass grew on thy steps; owls built in thy corridors—a dismal picture, and sad for thee, but this does not explain the strange entertainment I have had. Where is

your father lodged? And you—how is it we have not met before?’

‘Oh,’ said the damsel, brightening up again, ‘that is easily explained. When his friends left him, my father dismissed all his servants but one—a Spanish steward—and good old Mistress Margery, my nurse (and, saving my father, my only friend), then lodged himself back yonder in the far rear of our great house, and there I have grown up.’

‘Like a fair flower in a neglected spot,’ I hazarded.

‘Ah! and secure from the shallow tongues of silly flatterers, old Margery tells me. Now, my father, as you may have noted, is at times somewhat visionary and absent. It thus may well have happened that, bringing you here a guest, he would by old habit have taken you, as he was so long accustomed, to the great barren front and lodged you so. Once lodged there, it is perfectly within his capacity to have utterly forgot your very existence.’

‘But the meals—for whom were they spread, if not for me?’

‘Why, simply for my father. He has, where he works, a cupboard, wherein is kept brown bread and wine, and, sometimes, when studious studies keep him close, he goes to it and will not look at better or more ordered meals. Then, again, when the fancy takes him, he will have a place put for himself in the great deserted hall, and sups there all alone. Now, this has been his mood of late, and I can only fancy that when you came the whim did change all on a sudden, and thus you inherited each day that which was laid for him, who, too studious, came not, and old slow-witted Margery, finding every time the provender was gone, laid and relaid with patient remembrance of her orders.’

‘A very pretty coil indeed!—and I, no doubt, being sadly wandering afield all day, just missed thy ancient servitor each time.’

‘And had you ever come in upon her heels you would have seen her hobble up one silent corridor and down another, and press a button on a panel, and so pass through a doorway that you would never find alone, from your tenement to ours. Oh, it makes me laugh to think of you pent there! I would have given a round dozen of my whitest hen’s eggs to have been by to see how you did look.’

‘That had been a contingency, fair maid, which had greatly

lightened my captivity,' I answered; and the lady went babbling on in the prettiest, simplest way, half rustic and half courtly in her tones, as might be looked for in one brought up as she had been.

For an hour, perhaps, we lay and basked in the pleasant warmth, while the rheums of melancholy and dampness were slowly drawn from me by the sun and that fair companionship, then she rose, and, shaking a shower of almond petals from her apron, re-knotted her kerchief, and, taking a look at the sky, said it was past midday and time for dinner. If I liked, she would guide me to her father. Up I got, and, side by side with that fair Elizabethan girl, went sauntering through her flowery walks, down past shrubberies and along the warm red old wall of her great empty house, until we came into a quiet way overgrown with giant weeds and smelling sweet of green sheep's parsley and cool fair vegetable odours. Here the maid lifted a latch, and led me through a well-hidden gateway into the sunny rearward courtyard.

It showed as different as could be from the dreary front. The ground was cobble-stones all neatly weeded round a square of close-cut grass. On one side the great back wall of the manor-place towered windowless above us, with red roofs, mighty piles of smokeless chimney-stacks and corbie steps far overhead; and, on the other hand, at an angle to that wall, were lesser buildings to left and right, enclosing the grass plot and shining in the sun, warm, latticed-windowed, quaint-gabled. The third side of the square was open, and sloped down to fair meadows, beyond which came flowering orchards, bounded by a brook. Moreover, there was life here, plain, homely, honest country life. The wild loose-hanging roses and eglantine were swinging in the sunshine over the deep-seated porches of these modest places; the lavender smoke was drifting among the budding branches overhead, proud maternal hens were clucking to their broods about the open doorways; there were blooming flowers growing by one deep-set window,—ah! and fair Mistress Elizabeth's snowy linen was all out on cords across that pretty sunny courtyard. struggling in sparkling, white confusion against the loose caresses of the April wind.

'And look you there,' cried pretty Mistress Faulkener, when she saw it, pointing far down the distant meadows, 'tis there we keep our milk and cows—oh! as you are

courteous, as you would wish to deserve your gentle livery, count those cattle for a minute,' and thereat, while I, obedient, turned my back and mustered the distant beasts grazing knee-deep among the yellow buttercups—she outflung upon those linens, and pulled them down and rolled them up in swathes, and set them on a bench; then tucked back some dishevelled strands of hair behind her ears, and, somewhat out of breath, turned to me again.

'Here,' she said, 'on this side lives old Margery and our steward, black Emanuel Marchena; there, on the other, is my room—that one with the flowers below and open lattices. Next is my father's; below, again, is the room where we do eat; and all that yonder—those many windows alike above, and those steps going down beneath the ground—those half-hidden cobwebbed windows ablink with the level of the turf—that is where my father works.'

'By all the saints, fair girl!' I exclaimed impetuously, as she led me towards that place, 'thy father's workshop is on fire! See the grey smoke curling from the lintel of the doorway, and the broken panes—and yonder I catch a glint of flame! Here, let me burst the door!' and I sprang forward.

But the lady put her hand upon my arm, saying with a somewhat rueful smile, 'No, not so bad as that—there is fire there, but it is servant not master. Come in and you shall see.' She took me down six damp stone steps, then lifted the latch of a massy, weather-beaten, oaken doorway and led me within.

It was a vast, dim, vaulted cellar. The rough black roof of rugged masonry was hung by vistas of such mighty tapestries of grimy cobwebs as never mortal saw before. On the near side the row of little windows, dusty and neglected, let in thin streams of light that only made the general darkness the more visible. All the other wall was rough and bare; beset with great spikes and nails wherefrom depended a thousand forms of ironware, and ancient useless metal things, the broken rusty implements of peace and war. The floor seemed, as I took in every detail of this subterranean chamber, to be bare earth, stamped hard and glossy with constant treading, while here and there in hollows black water stood in pools, and grey ashes from a furnace-fire margined those miry places. It was a gloomy hall, without a doubt, and as my eyes wandered round the shadows they presently discovered the presiding genius.

In the hollow of the great final arch was a cobwebbed, smoke-grimed blacksmith's forge and bellows. The little heap of fuel on it was glowing white, and the curling smoke ascended part up the rugged chimney and part into the chamber. On one side of this forge stood a heavy anvil, and by it, as we entered, a man was toiling on a molten bar of iron, plying his blows so slow and heavy it was melancholy to watch them. That man, it did not need another glance to tell me, was my host! If he had looked gaunt and wild by night, the yellow flicker of the furnace and the pale mockery of daylight which stole through his poor panes did not improve him now. The bright fire of enthusiasm still burnt in his keen old eyes, I saw, but they were red and heavy with long sleeplessness; his ragged, open shirt displayed his lean and hairy chest, stained and smudged with the hue of toil; his arms were bare to the elbow, and his knotted old fingers clutched like the talons of a bird upon the handle of the hammer that he wielded. Grim old fellow! He was near double with weariness and labour; the breath came quick and hectic as he toiled; the painful sweat cut white furrows down his pallid, ash-stained face; and his wild, grey, elfin locks were dank and heavy with the foul fumes of that black hole of his. Yet he stopped not to look to left or to right, but still kept at it, unmindful of aught else—hammer, hammer, hammer! and sigh, sigh, sigh!—with a fine inspired smile of misty, heroic pleasure about his mouth, and the light of prophecy and quenchless courage in his eyes!

It was very strange to watch him, and there was something about the unbroken rhythm of his blows, and the inflexible determination hanging about him, that held me spellbound, waiting I knew not for what, but half thinking to witness that red iron whereinto his soul was being welded spring into something wild and strange and fair—half thinking to witness these sooty walls fall back into the wide arcades of shadowy realm, and that old magician blossom out of his vile rags into some splendid flower of humankind. It was foolish, but it was an unlearned age, and I only a rough soldier. That fair maid by my side, more familiar with these strange sights and sounds roused me from my expectant watching in a minute.

She had come in after me, had paused as I did, and now with pretty filial pity in her face, and outspread hands, she ran to that old man and laid a tender finger upon his yellow

arm, and stayed its measured labour. At this he looked up for the first time since we entered, as dazed and sleepy as one newly waked, and, seeing that he scarce knew her, Elizabeth shook her head at him, and took his grizzled cheeks between her rosy palms, and kissed him first on one side and then on the other, kissed him sweet and tenderly upon his pallid unwashed cheeks, and then, with kind imperiousness, loosed his cramped fingers from the hammer-shaft and threw it away, and led him by gentle force back from his forge and anvil. 'Oh, father!' she said, bustling round him and fastening up his shirt and pulling down his sleeves, and looking in his face with real solicitude, 'indeed I do think you are the worst father that ever any maid did have,' and here was another kiss. 'Oh! how long have you worked down here? Two nights and days on end. Fie, for shame! And how much have you eaten? What? Nothing, nothing all that time? Did ever child have such a parent? Oh! would to Heaven you had less wisdom and more wit—why, if you go on like this, you will be thinner than any of these spiders overhead in springtime—and weary—nay, do not tell me you are not—and, oh! so dirty, alack that I should let a stranger see thee like this!' and, taking her own white kerchief from her apron, that damsel wiped her father's face in love and gentleness, and stroked his gritty beard and smoothed, as well as she was able, his ancient locks, then took him by the hand and pointed to me, standing a little way off in the gloom.

At first the old man gazed at the amber-suited gallant shining in the blackness of his workshop, stolidly, without a trace of recognition, but, when in a minute or two by an effort he drew his wits together, he took me for one of those gay fellows, who, no doubt, had haunted his courtyards and spent his money in brighter times, and taxed me with it. But I laughed at that and shook my head, whereon he mused—'What! art thou, then, young John Eldrid of Beaulieu, come to pay those twenty crowns your father borrowed twelve years since?'

No! I was not John Eldrid, and there were no crowns in my wallet. Then I must be Lord Fossedene's reeve come to complain again of broken fences and cattle straying, or, perhaps, a bailiff for the Queen's dues, and, if that were so, it was little I would get from him.

Thereon his daughter burst out laughing and stroking the

old man's hand. 'Oh, father,' she said gently, 'you were not always thus forgetful. This excellent gentleman I found trespassing among my flowers, and did arrest him; he is your guest, and declares you brought him here two nights since, lodging him in our empty front, where he has subsisted all this time on melancholy and stolen meals. Surely, father, you recall him now?'

The old man was puzzled, but slowly a ray of recollection pierced through the thick mists of forgetfulness. Indeed, he did remember, he muttered, something of the kind, but it was a sturdy, shrewd-looking yeoman, tall, and bronzed under his wide cap, a rustic fellow in country cloth that he had brought along, and not this yellow gentleman. So then I explained how he had resuited me, and jogged his memory gently, lifting it down the trail of our brief acquaintance as a good huntsman lifts a hound over a cold scent, until at last, when we had given him a cup of red wine from his cupboard in the niche, his eyes brightened up, the vacuity faded from his face, and, laughing in turn, he knew me; then, holding out two withered hands in very courteous wise, old Andrew Faulkener welcomed me, and in civil, courtly speech, that seemed strange enough in that grim hole, and from that grizzly, bent, unwashed old fellow, made apology for the neglect and seeming slight which he feared I must have suffered.

We spoke together for some minutes, and then I ventured to ask, 'Was there not something, Master Faulkener, you had to tell or ask of me? I do remember you mentioned such a wish that evening when we parted, and certain circumstances of our short friendship make me curious to know what service it is I have to pay you in return for the hospitality your goodness put upon me.'

'In truth there was something,' Faulkener answered, with a show of embarrassment, 'but it was a service better sought of frieze than silk.'

'Tell it, good Sir, tell it! It were detestable did silk repudiate the debts that honest frieze incurred.'

'Why, then, I will, and chance your displeasure. Sweet Bess, get thee out and see to dinner. This gentleman will dine with me to-day!' And as Mistress Elizabeth picked up her pretty skirts and vanished up the grass-grown steps the old recluse turned to me.

CHAPTER XXI

'Now, look you here, Sir,' the old philosopher began, taking me by a tassel on my satin doublet, and working himself up until his eyes shone with pleasure, as he unfolded his mad visions to me. 'Look you here, Sir! this bare and dingy dungeon that you rightly frown at is a cell more pregnant with ingenuity than ever was the forge of the lame smith of Lemnos. Vulcan! Vulcan never had such teeming fancies as I have harboured in my head for twenty years. Vulcan never coaxed into being such a lovely monster as I have hidden yonder. I tell you, young man,' gasped the old fellow, perspiring with enthusiasm, 'Prometheus was a tawdry charlatan i' his service to mankind, compared with what I will be. He gave us fire, crude, rough, unruly fire!—unstable, dangerous—a bare, naked gift, spoilt even in the giving by incompleteness; but I, Sir—I have tamed what the bold Son of Clymene only touched. Ah, by the blessed gods! I think I have tamed it—fire and water, I have wed them at yon black altar—deadly foes though some do call them, I have made them work together, the one with the other. Oh, Sir, such servants were never yet enlisted by our kind since the great day of Cyclops! And to think these feeble shaking hands whose poor sinews stand from the wasted flesh like ivy strands about a winter tree, have done it,—and this poor head has thought it, persistent and at last successful, through bitter months of toil and anguished disappointment!'

'But, Sir,' I said gently, as the old man checked his incoherent speech for breath—'this monster, Sir, this "lovely monster," what is it?'

'Ah! I was forgetting you did not know. Look, then! and though you had been unfamous all your other life, this moment of precedent knowledge above your fellows shall make you for ever famous.' And the old man, like a devotee walking to a shrine, like a lover with hushed breath and brightly kindling eye stealing to his mistress's hiding-place, led me up to a cavernous recess near the forge, and there lay hands upon a rent and tattered drapery of rough sail-cloth, stained and old, and, making a gesture of silence, pulled it back.

In the dim, weird enchantment of that place, I had been prepared for anything. It was a knightly fashion of the times to be credulous, and that black cobwebbed den, that mad philosopher, so eloquently raving, and all the late circumstance of my arrival fitted me to look for wonders. I had followed him across the grimy floor, pitted with grey pools of furnace-water, through the reek and twining strands of smoke that filled that nether hall; and lastly, when he laid a finger to his lip, and, so reverent and awful, drew back that ancient tattered screen, I frowned a little, stepping back a pace, and drew my ready sword six inches from its scabbard, and watched expectant to see some hideous, horrid, living form chained there—some foul offspring of darkness and accursed ingenuity—some hateful spawn of wizard art and black mother night—some squat, foul, misshapen Caliban—some loathsome thing—I scarce knew what, but strong and sullen and monstrous, for certain! And, instead, the screen ran rattling back, and there before me, in a neat-swept space, and on a platform of oaken planks—glossy in new forged metal, shiny with untarnished filings, gleaming in the pride of burnished brass and rivets—high, bulby, complicated, a maze of pistons and levers and wheels, was a *great machine*.

Somehow, as I saw that ponderous monster, so full of cunning although so lifeless, a tremor of wondering appreciation ran through my mind, that soulless body fascinated me with a prophetic fear and awe which at another time and in another place I should have laughed at.

I put back my sword, smiling to think it had been so nearly drawn, but yet stood expectant, half wondering, half hoping I knew not what, and gazing raptly on that mighty iron carcase perched there like some black incubus, almost fancying all the love and fear and hope that had gone to fashion its steel limbs or iron sinews might indeed have filled it with a soul that should, as I looked, become articulate and manifest beneath my eyes; half hoping, in my ignorance, that indeed the quintessence of human labour, here consummate, might have got on all that plastic, dull material, some wondrous firstling spirit of a new estate, some link between the worlds of substance and of shadow! And if it so fascinated me, that old man, to whom it owed its being, was even more enthralled. He stood before the shrine with locked hands and bent head, apostro-

phising the silent work. 'Oh, child of infinitely painful conception,' he muttered, 'surely—surely you cannot disappoint me now! Near twenty years have I given to you—twenty years of toil and sweat and ungrudging hope. Long, hot summers have I worked upon you, and dank, dull winters, making and unmaking, building and taking down again, contriving, hoping, despairing, living with you by day and dreaming of you through nights of fitful slumber—surely, dear heir of all my hopes, the reward is at hand, the consummation comes!

'See!' he cried, 'how perfect it is! Here in this great round cylinder is room for fire and water. The fire lies all along in that gully-trench that you can note here through this open trap, and those curling pipes take the hot flame up through that void that will be filled with the other element. Now, when water boils the vapour that comes from off the top is choleric and fiery past conception. This has been known for long, and John Homersham tried to utilise it by letting the vapour on the spread digits of a wheel; Farinelli of Angoulême suffered it to escape behind his engine—both ways so wasteful that no mortal furnace could keep up power sufficient to be of useful service. But I have bettered these and many others; nothing is wasted here—the hot gases are stored and stocked as they rise above the boiling liquid until they are as strong as the blustering son of Astræus and Aurora, and then, by turning one single tap, I suffer them to escape down yonder iron way, there to fall upon the head of that piston that with a mighty send gives before them and spins the great wheel above, and comes back on the impetus, and takes another buffet from the labouring vapour, and back it goes again, now this way and now that, twirling with fiery zeal those notched wheels above, and working all those bars and rods and pistons. Not one thing of all this complicated structure but has its purpose; not one rivet in yonder thousands but means a month of patient toilsome thought and labour. Moreover, because it is so strong and heavy, I have put the whole upon that iron carriage, which took me a year to forge, and those solid back wheels are locked with the gear above, and from the axle of that front wheel two chains run up and turn upon a cylinder, so that my sweet one can move at such pace as yet I cannot even think of, and guide himself—in brief, is born and consummate!'

Then, presently, he turned from babbling to his 'child,' and speaking louder, with frenzied gestures, the while he strode up and down before it, went wild upon the wondrous things it should do. 'It will not fail, I know it! My head is fairly mazed when I forecast all that here with this begins as possible. It shall run, Sir,' he cried, turning rapturously to me—'and fly, and walk, and haul, and pull, and hew wood and draw water, and be a giant stronger than a thousand men, and a craftsman in a hundred crafts of such subtilty and gentleness and cunning as no other master craftsman ever was. Down, into ages not yet formed in the void womb of the future, this knowledge I have mastered shall extend, widening as it goes, and men shall no longer strive or suffer; there stands the patient beast on whose broad back another age shall put all its burdens. There is the true winged horse of some other time that shall mock the slow patter of our laggard feet, and knit together the most distant corners of the world within its giant stride. Oh! I can see a happy age, when base material labour shall be over, and men shall lie about and take their fill of restfulness as they have not done since the gates of Eden were shut upon their ancient father's back! I do see, down the long perspectives of the future, such as you achieving all things both by sea and shore, ploughing their fields for unborn peoples and drawing nets, carrying, fetching, far and near, swift, patient, indomitable! Ah! and winging glorious argosies—mighty vessels such as no man dares dream of now; vast, noble bodies inspirited each with such a soul as lies impatient yonder; and those shall plough the green sea waves in scorn of storm and weather, pouring the wealth of far Cathay and Ind into our ready lap, making those things happy necessities which now none but some few may dare to hope for; bringing the spice the Persian picked this morning to our doors to-morrow, bringing the grape and olive unwithered on their stems, bringing fair Eastern stuffs still wet from out their dye-vats——'

'Jove, old man! that moves me. I was a merchant once. Your words do stir my blood down to the most stagnant corner of my veins!'

'—Bringing pearls from Oman still speckled with the green sea-dew upon them, and sapphires from rugged Ural mines still smelling of their fresh native mother earth; bringing, in swift, tireless keels, Novia Zemblian furs and costly feathered

trophies from the South; bringing Biafra's hoards of ivory and Benin's stores of blood-red gold; bringing gems warm from tepid sands of Arracan, and sandal-wood from seagirt Nicobar. Ah! pouring the yellow-scented corn of every fertile flat from Manfalout to ancient Abbasiyeh; pouring the Tartar's millet and the Hindoo's rice into our hungry Western mouths; making those rich who once were poor, and those noble who once were only rich; benefiting both great and little—benefiting both near and far! And I shall have done this—I, poor Master Andrew Faulkener, a man so shabby and so seeming mean, no one of worth or quality would walk i' the same side of the road with him!

So spoke that good fanatic, and as he stopped there came a gentle tap upon the door, and a fair face in the sunlight, and there was Mistress Elizabeth saying, with a merry laugh: 'Father! the cloth is laid, and the meal is spread, and old Margery bids me add that, if to-day's roast is spoiled by waiting, as the last one was, she'll never cook capon for thee again!' and coming down the maid laid a hand of gentle insistence upon her father's sleeve, and led him sighing and often looking back up the green stone steps, I following close behind.

We crossed the sunny courtyard, entering on the farther side the other rambling buttress-wing of that ancient pile. Thence we went by clean white flagstoned passages and open oaken doorways to what was once the long servants' dining-hall. At the near end of the middle table of well-scrubbed boards, so thick and heavy they might have come from the side of some great ship, a clean white slip cloth was laid, with high-backed chairs, one at the head for Adam Faulkener, and two on either side for me and her, and lower down again were put, below the great oaken salt-cellar, two other places. By one of these stood Dame Marjorie, fair Elizabeth's old nurse, an ancient dame in black-velvet cap and spotless ruff and linen, with a comely honest old country face above them, wrinkled and coloured like a rosy pippin that has mellowed through the winter on a kitchen cornice shelf. Such was Dame Marjorie, and, while she curtseyed low with folded hands, I bowed as one of my quality might bow in respect to her ancient faithfulness. At the other chair stood their Spanish steward, black Emanuel Marcena. Yes, and, as you may by this time have guessed, that steward was, in flesh and blood, none other but the midnight visitor who had disturbed

my rest the night before. I could not doubt it. He wore the same clothes, his swarthy, sullen face was only a little more lifelike now in the daylight, and, if more evidence were wanting, one finger of his left hand—that hand that had held the bloody handkerchief—was done up with cobwebs and linen threads. I knew him on the instant, and stopped and stared to see my vagrant shadow so prosaically standing there at his dinner place, picking his yellow teeth and sniffing the ready roast like a hungry dog. And when he saw me he too started, for I also had been dreadful to him. I was the exact counterpart of that amber gallant that had strode out upon his moonlit heels and scared him with a shout, where, no doubt, he fancied no shouters dwelt, and now here we were face to face, guests at the same table, surely it was strange enough to make us stare!

But, over and above the prejudice of our evening meeting, I already distrusted and disliked Emanuel Marcena. Why it was I do not know, but so much is certain, if one may love, no less surely may one hate at first sight, and as our eyes met, hatred was surely born in his, while mine, as like as not, told through their steady stare, of aversion and dislike. He was a sullen, yellow fellow, lean and tall, with black, crafty eyes set near together; a thin nose, shaped like a vulture's beak; a small peaked beard, and black hair closely cropped, a crafty, cunning, cruel, ungenerous-looking fellow, who had somehow, it afterwards turned out, grown rich as his master's fortunes failed. He had come into Faulkener's service when a boy, had flourished while he flourished, and learnt a hundred shifts of cruelty and pride from the gay company who once were proud to call his master comrade, and now, like the black fungus that he was, had swelled with conceit and avarice past all conscionable proportions.

Well, we exchanged grim salutations, and sat, and the meal commenced. But all the while we ate and talked I could not help turning to that crafty steward, and each time I did so I found his keen, restless black eyes wandering fugitive about among us. Now he would glance at me over his porringer, and then a half-unconscious scowl dropped down over those dark Cordovian brows. Then perhaps it was the old man he looked at, and a scarce-hid smile of contempt played about the corners of that Southern's mouth to hear his master babble or answer our talk at random. Lastly, my

sleek Iberian would set his glance on sweet country Bess as she sat at her father's side, and then there burnt under his yellow skin such a flush of passion, such a shine of sickly love and aspiration as needed no interpreting, and made me frown—small as my stake was in that game I saw was playing—as black as inky night. But what did it matter to me who picked that English blossom? Why should she not lie on that mean Spanish bosom for ever if she would—'twas less than nothing to me, who would so soon pass on to other ventures—and yet no man was ever born who was not jealous, and, remembering how we had met, how sweet she was and simple, what native courtesy gilded her country manners, what music there was in her voice, and how black that villain looked beside her, I, in spite of myself, resented the first knowledge of the love he bore as keenly as though I had myself a right to her.

Pious, sanctimonious Emanuel Marcena! He stood up saying his grace for meat long after all of us were seated, and crossed his doublet a score of times ere he fell on the viands like a hungry pike. And he was cruel, too. A little thing may show how big things go. He caught a fly while we waited between two courses, and, thinking himself unwatched, held it a moment nicely between his lean, long fingers, then, drawing a straight fine pin from his sleeve, slowly thrust it through the body of that buzzing thing. He stuck the pin up before him, by his pewter mug, and watched with lowering pleasure his victim gyrate. That amused him much, and when the creature's pain was reduced to numbness he neatly tore one prismatic wing from off its shoulder, and smiled a sour smile to watch how that awoke it. Then, presently, the other wing was wrenched palpitating from the damp and quivering socket, and the victim spun round upon the iron stake that pierced its body. And all this under cover of his dinner-mug, ingenious, light-fingered Emanuel Marcena!

Such was the steward of that curious household. Over against him sat the excellent old country dame, whose mind wandered no further than to speculate upon the price of eggs next market day, or how her bleaching linen fared; above was the wise-mad scholar, bent and visionary; and by him, ruddy in her country beauty, that wild hedge-rose of his. And as I looked from one to other, and thought of what I was and had been, all seemed strange, unreal, fantastic, and I could only

wait with dull patience for what fortune might have next in store.

It was a pleasant, peaceful place, that manor hall! When we had finished our midday meal, and the servitors had gone to their duties, Master Faulkener said a walk in the green fields might do him good—he would go out and take the country air. It was a wise resolve, and he made a show of carrying it through, but he had not crossed the courtyard towards the sunny meadows when he got a sniff of his own smouldering furnace fires. That was too much for him. The scholar's rustic resolution melted, and, glancing fugitively behind, we saw him presently steal away towards his cellar, and then drop down the stairs, and bar the door, and soon the curling smoke and dancing sparks told that wondrous thing of his was growing once again.

Thus I and the maid were left alone, and for a little space we stood silent by the diamond-latticed window, scarce knowing what to say—I looking down upon that virgin bosom, so smoothly heaving under its veil of country lawn, she thinking I know not what, but pulling a leaf or two to pieces from her window vine. And so we stood for a time, until the lady broke the silence by asking if I would wish to see the house and gardens with her? It was a good suggestion and a comely guide, so we set out at once.

She led me first back through her garden again, naming every flower and bush by country names as we went along, and this brought us to the empty house-front, which we entered. She took me from room to room, and dusty corridor to corridor, chatting and laughing all the way, talking of great kinsmen, and noble fickle guests who once had called her father friend—all with such a light, contented heart it sounded more like fairy story than stern material fact. Then that tripping guide showed me the one door I had *not* found, which led through into the rearward house. Here, again, I told her of how I had hunted in vain for such a passage, and she laughed until those ancient corridors resounded to her glee. This door admitted to another region, which we entered, and soon Elizabeth led on down a dusty flight of twilight wooden stairs, until a portal studded with iron barred our way. At this, putting a finger to her mouth in mysterious manner, the damsel asked if I dared enter, to which my answer was that, with sword in hand, and her to watch, I

would not hesitate to prise the gates of hell; so we pulled the heavy sullen bolts, and the door turned slowly on its hinges. There before us was displayed a long dusty corridor, lit by high narrow cobwebbed lattice windows down one side, and dim with moss and stain of wind and weather. From end to end of that soundless vestibule were stacked and piled and hung such mighty stores of various lumber, rare, curious, dreadful, as never surely were brought together before.

It was Andrew Faulkener's museum-room—the place where he put by all the strange shreds of life and death he collected when the scholar's fervour was upon him, and now, as his sweet daughter laid one finger on my arm and softly bid me listen, directly down below and under us we heard him hammering at his forge.

'Oh, Sir,' began that maid, whispering in my ear and sweeping her expressive arm round in the direction of those mounds and shelves, 'did ever child have such a father? This is the one room that is forbidden me, and it is the one room of our hundreds that I take a most fearful pleasure in. I do wrong to show it, and, indeed, I had not brought you here but that something tells me you are good comrade, true and silent both in great and little. Therefore step lightly and speak small: there is nothing in all the world that stirs my father's choler but this—to hear a vagrant foot overhead among his treasures.'

Softly, therefore, as any midnight thieves we trod the dust-carpeted floor, and now here, now there, the damsel led me. Now it was at one oriel recess where stood a black oak table and open chests piled with vellum books, all clasped and bound with gold and iron, that we paused. And I opened some of those great tomes, and read, in Norman-Latin or old Frankish-French, the misty record of those things of long-ago that once had been so new to me. I spelt out how the monkish scribe was stumbling through a passage of that diary that I had seen Cæsar write—saw him repeat, as visionary and incredible, in quaint and crabbed cloister scrawl, the story of the Saxon coming, and how King Harold died. I turned to another book, a little newer, and read, 'mid gorgeous uncials, the story of that remote fight above Crecy, 'when good King Edward, with a scanty band of liegemen, was matched against two hundred thousand French abou ye ville of Crecy, and by the Grace of God withstood them upon an August day'—and

I could have read on and on without stop or pause down those musty memory-rousing pages but for the gentle interrupter at my side, who laughed to see me so engrossed, and shut the covers to, little knowing of the thoughts that I was thinking, and took me on again.

Then she would halt at a pile of splendid stuffs, half heaped upon the floor, half nailed against the wall, the hangings of courtly rooms and thrones; and, as her sympathetic female fingers spread out the folds of all those ruined webs, I read again upon them, in tarnished gold and filigree, in silken stitching and patient, cunning embroidery, more stories of old Kings and Queens I once was comrade to. On again, to piles and racks of weapons of every age and time: all these I knew, and poised the javelin some Saxon hand had borne in war, and shook, like a dry reed, the long Norman spear, and whirled a rusty pirate scimitar above my head until it hummed again an old forgotten tune of blood and lust and pillage, and, with a stifled shriek, the frightened girl covered from me.

Oh! a very curious treasure-house indeed! And here the scholar had laid up skins and furs of animals, and there horns and hoofs and talons. Here, grim, melancholy, great birds were standing as though in life, and crumbling, as they waited, with neglect and age. There, in a twilight corner, glimmered the green glassy eyes of an old Thebeian crocodile, and there the shining ivory jaws of monstrous fishes, with warty hides of toads, and shrivelled forms of small beasts dried in the kiln of long-silent ages, and now black, shrunken, and ghastly. On the walls were pendant enough simples and electrices to stock twenty witches' dens, enough mandrake, hellebore, blue monkshood, purple-tinted nightshade to unpeople half a shire; and along by them were withered twigs and leaves would banish every kind of rheum; samples of wondrous shrubs and roots, all neatly docketed, would cure a wife of scolding or a war-horse of a sprain, would cure an adder's bite, or by the same physic mend a broken limb; ah, and bring you certain luck in peace and war, or light, all out of the same virtue, the fires of love in icy, virgin bosoms.

In that quaint ante-room, dimly illumined by its cobwebbed windows, were astrolabes and hemispheres from the cabin poops of sunken merchantmen; charts whereon great beasts shared with pictured savages whole continents of land, and

dolphins and whales did sport where seas ran out into unknown vagueness. There were models of harmless things of foreign art and commerce, and cruel iron jaws and wheels with bloody spikes or beaks for breaking bones or tearing flesh, and teaching the ways of fair civility to heretics. That old man had got together twenty images of Baal from as many lands, and half a hundred bits of divers saints. Here, tied with the strand of the rope that hanged him, was the skin of a dead felon, and near was the true shirt of a martyr whom the Church had canonised a thousand years before. In some way, too, the scholar had possessed him of a Pharaoh still swaddled with his Memphian robes, and there he was propped up against the wall, that kingly ash with mouth locked tight, whose lightest whisper once had made or marred in every court or camp from dusty Ababdah to green Euphrates, and brows set rigid, whose frown had once cost twenty thousand lives, made twenty thousand wives to widows, and eyes shut fast that seemed still to dream of shadowy empery—of golden afternoons in golden ages—a most ancient, a most curious fellow, and I stared hard at him, feeling wondrous neighbourly.

But I cannot tell all there was in that strange place. From end to end it was stocked with learned lumber; from end to end my sweet guide led me, pointing, whispering, and shuddering, all on tip-toe and in silence; and then, ere I was nearly satisfied, or had sampled one quarter of that dusty treasure-hall, she led me through a little wicket, down twenty stairs, and so once more into the fresh open air.

‘There, Sir,’ she said, ‘now I have laid bare my father’s riches to you. Is it not a wonderful corridor? Oh! what a full place the world must be, if one man can gather so much strange of it!’

I told her that indeed it was and had been full, right back into the illimitable, of those hopes and fancies to which all yonder shreds did hint of; and thus talking, I of infinite experience watching the sweet wonder and vague speculation dawning in those unruffled child-eyes of hers, we sauntered about the gardens and pleasant paths, and spent a sunny afternoon in her ambient fields.

CHAPTER XXII

HE who has not left something sad behind him, and rewoke in the sunshine to feel the golden elixir of health and happiness moving in his veins anew, may take it that he has at least one pleasure yet unspent.

I opened my eyes the next morning in as sweet a frame of contentment as anyone could wish for. They had put me to sleep in a chamber in that same wing of the rearward buildings where slept Elizabeth and her father; thus, when I roused, the yellow sun was pouring in at my lattice, rich with sweet country scents, and the April air was swaying the white curtains, hung by dainty female hands across the diamond panes, with youth and sweetness in every breath. I lay and basked in it, and lazily wondered what all this changing fortune might mean. Where had I got to? Who was I? I turned about and stared upon the smooth white walls of the little room, patterned and tinselled with the dancing sunshine from outside, then gazed at the great carved columns of my four-post bedstead, then to the head, where, in a wide wooden field, were blazoned old Faulkener's arms and cognisance. I turned to all the chairs, dusted so clean and set back true and straight, to the ewer and the basin, full of limpid water from the well that caught the morning shine and threw a dancing constellation of speckled light upon the ceiling; I wondered even at the bare floor, scrubbed until there was no spot upon it, and the snowy furniture of my couch and those downy pillows upon which I presently sank back in luxurious indolence.

Was I indeed that rude rough captain of a grizzled cohort, with sinews of steel and frame impervious to the soft touch of pleasure, who only yesterday had burst through all the glittering phalanxes of France, and cut a way with that arm that lay supine upon the coverlet right down through the thickets of their spears to where the white *fleur de lys* flashed in their mid-most shelter? Could I be that same wanderer who, down the devious ways of chance, had tried a thousand ventures, and slept in palaces and ditches, and drank from the same cup with kings and the same trough with outlaws? I

laughed and stretched, and presently gave over speculating, and rose.

I washed and dressed, and went to the lattice and looked forth. It was as sweet a morning as you could wish for. The tepid sunshine spread over everything, fleecy clouds were floating overhead upon the softest of winds, the sweet new-varnished leaves were glittering in the dew upon every bush, the small birds singing far and near, the kine lowing as they went to grass, the distant cock crowed proudly from his vantage-point among the straw, and everything seemed fair, fresh, and happy in that budding season.

I had not been luxuriating in the sweet leisure many minutes when by below came Mistress Bess, with cheeks like roses, and kerchief whiter than snow, and brown unstranded hair that lifted on the breeze—a very fair vision indeed. That maid tripped across the grass and down the cobble stones, rattling the shiny milk-pan she was carrying until she caught a sight of me, and stopped below my window. Then, saucy, she began: ‘How looks the world from there, Sir? A little too young and chilly for your tenderness? Get back abed, it will presently be June, and then, no doubt, more nicely suited to your valour’s mind.’

‘Nay, but lady,’ I explained, ‘I was enjoying the morning air, and just coming to seek you——’

‘That were a thousand pities,’ she laughed: ‘the sun has not yet been up more than some poor hour or two and the world is not yet nicely warmed; you might have a chill, and that were much to be deplored; besides, a silken suit is rarely needed where work has to be done. Back to thy nest, Sir Prentice! Back to thy nest, and I’ll send old Margery to tuck thee snugly up!’ And the young girl, laughing like a brook in springtime, went on and left me there discomfited.

Nevertheless, I went down and took the plain but wholesome breakfast that they offered me, and afterwards whiled away an hour or so upon the bench in wondering silently what all this meant, where it was drifting to, how it would end, whether it were, indeed, ending or beginning? And then came round the girl again, and, railing me on my melancholy, took me out to see the herds and fields, and was all the time so sweetly insolent, after her nature, and yet so velvet soft, that I was fairly glaucoured by her.

This maid, with the quick woman tongue, that was so

pointed, and could at need hurt so much, and the blue, speaking eyes that were as tender and straightforward as her speech was full of covert thorns, led me out into the orchards. First she took me to where the milk was stored, a roomy open shed, smelling of cool cleanliness, with white benches down the sides and red-flagged floor, and great open pans of crimson ware full of frothy milk. Outside the low straw eaves the swallows were chattering, while the emerald meadows, through the farther doorway, glistened and gleamed in the bright spring sunshine. Here we discovered two country girls at work making curds and cheese and butter; ruddy, buxom damsels with strong round arms bare to the shoulder, with rattling clogs upon their feet, white gowns tucked up, and kerchiefs on their heads. These curtsied as we entered, and rattled the pans about, and sent the strong streams of warm new milk gushing from pail to pan. And then presently, when I had watched a time their busy labour, nothing would suit Mistress Faulkener but I should try! That saucy, laughing girl would have it so! and, glancing at the delighted milkmaids, dragged me to a churn, there bidding me roll a sleeve to the elbow, and take the long handle thus, and thus, and 'put my strength into it,' and show I could do something to earn a luncheon. And I, ever strong and willing, did her bidding, and rolled back my silk and lawn, and bared the thews that had made me dreadful and victorious in a thousand combats, and seized that white straight rod. But, Ho! 'twas not my trade, I had more strength than art, and the first stroke that I made upon the curdling stuff within the white fluid leapt in a glittering fountain to the roof above and drenched the screaming maidens; the second stroke from my stalwart shoulders started two iron hoops binding the strong ash ribs of that churn and made it swirl upon the tiles, while at the third mighty fall the rammer was shivered to the grasp, and the milk escaped and went in twenty meandering rivulets across the floor! At this uprose those fair confederates and drove me forth with boisterous anger, saying I had wasted more value in good milk than most likely all my life so far had earned.

While they put right my amiss I sat upon a mossy wall and wiped dry my hose and doublet. Nor was there long to sit before out came my comely hostess with forgiveness in her smiling eyes. 'Did I now see,' she queried, 'how presump-

tuous it was to meddle with such things as were beyond one's capacity ?'

To which I answered that I truly saw. 'And did I crave forgiveness—would I make amends ?' And to that I said she had but to try me in some venture where my rough, unruly strength might tell, and she should see. So peace was made between us, and on we went again to note how the crimson buds were setting on the sunny, red garden walls ; to explore her sloping orchards, and count the frolic lambs that clustered round the distant folds.

It was her kingdom, and here her knowledge bettered mine. This she soon found out ; and when I showed at fault in the stratagems of husbandry, or tripped in politics of herds or flocks, she would glance at me through her half-shut lids, and demurely ask :

'Are you of good learning, friend ?'

And to that I answered that 'I had so much as might be picked up in a reasonably long life—not scholarly or well polished, but sufficient and readily accessible.'

'I am glad of it,' she said ; 'then you can tell the difference between a codling and a pippin ?'

'Nay, I fear I cannot.'

'Oh ! Nor why one hen will lay white eggs and another brown ?'

'Sweet maid, my wonder never went as far as that !'

'I do greatly doubt you and your wonder ! What would you do if butter would not come upon the churn milk ?'

'Faith ! I would leave it as not worth asking for—a poor, white, laggard stuff no man should meddle with.'

'Heigho ! and what is rosemary good for, and what rue ?'

'By Heaven, I do not know !'

'How soon mayst wean a February lamb, and what wouldst thou wean it on ?'

'Hoth ! I cannot tell !'

'Nor when to cut meadow grass or make ketchup ? Nor how to cure bee-stings or where to look for saffron ? Nor when to plant green barley or pull rushes for winter candles ?'

'Not one of these ; but if you would show me, such a tutor such a pupil never would have had——'

Whereon the lady burst out laughing. 'Oh !' she said, 'you are shallow and ignorant past all conception and'

precedent. Why, the rosiest urchin that ever went afield upon a plough-horse has better stock of learning! I' faith, I shall have to put you to school at the very beginning!'

I let the fair maid mock, for her gentle raillery was all upon her lips, and in her eyes was dawning a light it moved me much to see. We wandered away through pleasant copses, where the yellow catkins and the red were out upon the hazels, and late ivory blackthorn buds, like webs of pearls, were overhung upon those ebony-fingered bushes, and fair pale primroses shone in starry carpets under the fresh green canopy of the new-tented woods. And my fair Bess knew where the mavis built; and when I began to speak warm, and close into her ear, she would turn away her head and laugh, and, to change the matter, play traitor to the little birds and point their mossy home, and make me stoop and peer under the leaves, and in pretty excitement—but was it all absent-mindedly?—would lay a hand upon my own and be cheek to cheek with me for a moment, and then, with country pleasure, take the sapphire shells of future woodland singers in her rosy palm, and count and con them, and post me in the lore of spots and specks and hues and colours, and all the fair, incomprehensible alchemy of nature—then put those tender things back, and lead on again to more.

Pleasant is the sunshine in such circumstances! Fair Elizabeth knew all the flowers by name. She knew where the gorgeous celandine, like bright-blazoned heralds of the spring, was flashing down by the stream that ran sparkling through the woods; the underglow upon the frail anemone was not fairer than her English skin, as she did bind a bunch into her bosom-knot. She could tell the reasons of affinity 'tween cuckoo-pint and cuckoo, and how it was that orchid-leaves came spotted, and the virtue of the blue-eyed pimpernels, and why the gently rasping tongues of the great meadow kine foreswore the nodding clumps of buttercup. And she liked cowslips and made me pick them—ah! swarthy, strong, and sad-eyed me—me, with the wild alarms of battle still ringing in the ambient country air—me, to whose eyes the fleecy clouds, even as she babbled, were full of pictures of purple ambition, of red mêlée, of the sweeping yellow war-dust that canopies contending hosts—me, who heard on every sigh of the valley wind the shouting of princes and paladins, the fierce deep cry of captains and the straggling cheer that

breaks from swinging ranks fast locked in deadly conflict as the foemen give.

But nothing she knew of that, and would lead from cow-slip-banks back to coppice, and from coppice-path to orchard, and there mayhap, in the eye of the sun, secure from interruption we would sit—she meetly throned upon the great stem of a fallen apple-tree, whose rind was tapestried betimes for that dear country sovereign by green moss and tissued gold and silver lichens, and overhead the leaves, and at her feet the velvet cushions of the turf, and me a solitary courtier there.

A very pleasant wooing—and if you call me fickle, why should I argue it? Think of the vast years that lapsed between my lovings; think how solitary was the lovely loveless world I was born into anew each time; think how I longed to light it with the comradeship that shines in dear eyes and hearts, how I thirsted to prejudice some sweet stranger to my favour against all others, and claim again kinship of passion for a moment with one, at least, of those dear, fickle, mocking shadows that glanced through this fitful dream of mine!

Besides, I was young—only some trivial fifteen hundred years or so had gone by since they first swaddled me and dried my mother's tears—my limbs were full and round, my blood beat thick and fast, youth and soldier spirit shone in my undimmed eyes; not a strand of silver glanced in that beard I peaked so carefully; and if my mind was full of ancient fancies—ah! crowded with the dust and glitter of bygone ages fuller than yonder old fellow's strange museum—why, my heart was fresh. Jove! I think it was as young as it had ever been; and that maid was fair and rosy, and kind and tender. All in the glow of her hat-brim her face shone like the ripe side of a peach; her smooth hands hung down convenient to my touch, and her head, crowned with its sweet crown of sunlit hair, was ever bent indulgent to catch my courtier whispers. What? I argued, shall the river play with no more blossoms because last year its envious fingers shook some petals down into its depth? Must the lonely hill for ever frown in solitude and put by the white mist's clinging arms, because, forsooth, some other earlier cloud once harboured on its rugged bosom? 'Twas miserly and monstrous, said my youthfulness. So, nothing forgetting and nothing diminishing of those memories that I had, I plunged into the new.

And that kind country girl played Phyllis to my new-tryed Corydon as prettily as anyone could wish. I will not weary you with all we did or said—the murmur of a summer brook is only good to go to sleep by—but picture us immersed in solitary conclave, or wandering about in the sweet green math of April meadows and finding the long days some six hours all too short to say the nothing that we had to. Suppose this written, and I turn to other scenes which, perhaps, shall amuse you better.

It by no means followed that because Mistress Elizabeth proved so charming, her father was neglected. That old fellow had taken me for his helper, had fed and harboured me, and something seemed owing him in return. His huge and bulky engine was growing apace; indeed, it was just upon the finishing. It was that my strong arms might second him in some final parts he had brought me hither, and, being by nature something of a smith, I helped him readily.

Each day was spent in the sunshine and flowers, then, when evening came and my fair playmate was gone to bed, I descended into old Faulkener's crypt, and, adding one more character to the many already played, turned Vulcan. Hard and long we worked. Had you looked upon us, you would have seen, by the sullen furnace glow, two men, bare-armed and leather-aproned, toiling in that black gallery until the sweat ran trickling from them; forging, riveting, and hammering bars of iron, plying the creaking bellows until the white heart of the fire-heap was whiter than a glowworm-lamp; hurrying here and there about that glistening mountain of cunning-fashioned steel that they were building; filling their grimy den with flying dust and smoke and sparks; and thus working on and on through the long midnight hours as though their very lives depended on it, until the black curtain of the night outside faded to pallid blue, and the chirrup of the homing bats coming to sleep upon the rafters sounded pleasantly; and the furnace gave out, and tired muscles flagged, and the night's work was over with the night!

Evening after evening we toiled upon the iron giant that was to do such wondrous things, old Faulkener directing, and I supplying with my thews and sinews the help he needed. Then one day it was finished—finished in every point and part—complete, gigantic, wonderful! I do confess something of

the old man's spirit entered into me when our work was thus accomplished. I stood minute by minute before it overcome with an awe and wonder inexplicable. And if the 'prentice felt like that, the master was mad with expectation and delight. Nothing now would do but he must try it, and the next night we did so. We sent the household early to their rest, and, as soon as it was dark, I, carrying a spluttering torch, and Faulkener the great cellar key, stole like thieves across the cobbled courtyard to our workshop. The scholar's fingers trembled till he scarce could fit the key into the wards, but presently the door was opened, and we entered. •

'No strangers trespass here to-night,' the old man chuckled, while he closed and double-locked the iron-studded door, and put the key into his belt and the torch into a socket.

Well, all agog with excitement, we lit the fires in the iron stomach of that finished monster; we filled his gullet with kegs of water, slewed his guiding-wheels round, laid heavy, sloping oaken planks for his Highness to leave his birthplace by, set back the litter, and, lastly, turned the tap that brought the fire and water together, and put the blood of that iron beast in motion. He came down from off the pedestal for all the world like some black Gorgon issuing from a den! Resplendent in weight and strength, he came sliding down from off the platform of his cradle, and amid the crash of struts and stays, amid flying splinters and the dust of transit, rolled out majestic into the red furnace light; where, trembling in every fibre, and gently swaying like a young giant feeling his strength for the first time, with the strong breath within murmuring, and the great steel heart pulsating audibly, our iron toy was born and launched, and came forth magnificent, huge, overpowering—then, checked by its anchor-chains, swerving round to face the farther end, and halted.

Old Faulkener was possessed with joy, dancing and capering round that huge carcase as though he were a ten-years' urchin, his white beard all astream, his elfin locks shaggy on his head, his black venerable robes flapping like the wings of a great bat, his hands clasped fervidly as he leapt and skipped with pleasure, and his lips moving rapidly as he habbled incoherent adulation and love upon that firstling of his hopes. Even I, grave and thoughtful, was elated, and walked round and round the wondrous thing, patting its iron sides as one might a charger's just led from stall, while,

half in wonder and half in pleasure, catching a fraction of the old man's fancies. So far everything had happened as we wished for, and Faulkener, when he could get his breath, burst out in wild rhapsodies of all his bantling should do, and I put in a sentence here and there amid his pæans; and then he capped on a hope, and I again a fancy, and so, nodding and laughing to each other, we bandied words across that carcase for twenty minutes, and felt its sinews, and marvelled at its tractableness and grace.

And what was our sweet Cheops doing all that while? Oh! we were young in mechanics; and all the time we talked and capered the glowing fires were working in that body, and presently the wheels began to ramble and the bars to move; strange dull thunder came fitfully from under those steel ribs, and quaint unaccountable knockings sounded deep within; the furnace glowed white and hot as angry jets of steam commenced to spit from every weak point in the monster's harness. All this I noticed and pointed out to the master; but he was stupid with gratification in that moment of consummated labour, and now our vast machine began to fret! It was impatient, I saw with a presage of coming evil, and the great circles above began to grit their iron teeth and spin like distaff wheels under a busy housewife's hand, the pistons were shooting to and fro faster and ever faster, while that fifty tons of metal, glowing hot, now began to yank hungrily upon its chains, and start forward a foot and then come back, and sniff and snort and tremble, and strain in every part, and thunder and pant as the hot life surged stronger and stronger into its veins, until it was rocking like a skiff at anchor, and bellowing like a bull in agony.

'By every saint, old Adam Faulkener!' I shouted through the gathering roar—'by every saint in Paradise, have a care for this frightful beast of thine!'

And I think he saw at last our danger, for the hundredth rhapsody died unfinished upon his lips, and, dropping from the clouds at once with an anxious look, he scanned the now flying wonders of his offspring, and then ran round and seized the handle which should have shut off the red-hot vapour which was the breath and being of the puissant thing he had conjured into being. Twice and thrice he bore upon that handle, then turned to me with a wild and frightened look. 'Twas as hot as hot could be, and could not move an inch! Hardly had

I read that in his face, when with an angry plunge the engine started forward, and the philosopher missed his footing, rolling over headlong to the ground at my feet. And now our beast was mad with waiting, and stronger than fifty elephants, and fiercer than the netted lion. The chains that held him upon either side were as thick as a man's arm, being fastened to mighty staples in the forge. Our swaddling came back two yards upon those chains—then started forward, and was brought up all on a sudden with such a jerk as made the ground tremble, and filled us with a sickly dread. Back came our splendid plaything again in no good mood, and then forward once more, putting his mighty shoulders against his bonds until the great steel chains stretched and groaned beneath the strain, and Adam Faulkener yelled in fear. The third time the monster did this the staples gave, and all the forge fell into one dusty smoking ruin, while the great engine twirled up those heavy chains upon its thundering axles, and, laughing in savage joyfulness, recognised the fatal fact that it was free!

Then began a wild scene of chaos which brings the dampness of fear and exertion on my forehead even to remember. What mattered chains or bars or fetters to that splendid life that we could hear humming there under those iron ribs?—to that unruly devil-heart which knew its strength, and thundered in proud tumultuous rhythm to the consciousness? The wonderful new Titan was born, and there in his own den, in the black cradle of his nativity, would brook no master—he was born for strength and might, and, Hoth! they were running hot within him, and we could but cower in the shadows waiting and watching.

And now that hideous monster, being free to do what he listed, set off for the far end of the stony cellar, and, like a great black ship floundering in a chopping sea, went plunging and reeling over the uneven floor. We held our breath. What would he do when he reached the end? And in a minute he was there, and through the gloom we heard him crash into the rocky walls and recoil; then, with a scream like an angry devil-baby, charge the native masonry again and again. But Faulkener's wretched cunning had put the guiding-wheels on pivots, and now they slewed, and here he was coming down the walls towards us.

We did not stop or wait to parley. We ran and dodged

behind the pillars, whence we heard him thud into the broken forge—ay, through the reek and cloudy steam we caught the sound of that fifty tons of metal clambering over the fallen masonry, all the time screeching in his anger like a peevish Fury at being so thwarted; then back we dodged again, and the huge thing went lumbering by us full of a horrid giant life no valour availed against, no mortal hands could shackle.

The more he beat about the bounds of that narrow infernal kingdom, the less our Cyclops seemed to like it. His rage mounted at each turn he made and found his prison-cell so narrow, and every rebuff swelled his budding choler. Therefore, seeing how hopeless it was to strive to tame him in this present mood, I waited till Cyclops was exploring at the bottom of the hall; then, plunging through the dusty turmoil, found old Faulkener. That grey inventor was reeling like a drunken man, and witless with terror.

'The key—the key!' I shouted in his ear. 'To the door! We can do no good here. Let your infernal beast burn out some of his accursed spleen—then we'll make a shift to tame him. But 'tis no good now! Hear how he thunders! And—see—he is coming back again!'

'Ay, the door, good friend, the door!' gasped Faulkener; and, clinging to my arm, hotly pursued by the monster behind—whose red-hot madness now seemed tinged with cruel purpose—we fled down the long black cavern to the iron-studded postern. There was not a second to spare: the old man plunged his trembling hands into his belt and felt all round it, then turned to me with a horrid stare in his eyes and a sickly smile upon his thin white lips—the key was gone!

I dragged that old man back just as the great engine—ramping hot—lurched down and cut a long smoking groove half a foot deep from the rocky wall whereby we had been standing, then, disappointed of us, went howling on into the blackness. And now there was nothing to do but to stay and fight it out, no exit for us, and none for our sweet bantling, and he seemed to know it! Round and round he drove us through the flickering gloom and shadows of that dismal cock-pit, till the gushing sweat ran from us, and our choking breath came short and panting through our parching throats. Oh! it was a sight to see that shrieking monster, spurting steam at every joint and howling like a pack of winter wolves

come careering through the darkness at us, with every plate of his mighty harness quivering with the force within, and all his thundering vitals glowing white and spawning golden trails of molten embers as he lurched along. Down I would see him come, perhaps, hunting something in savage mood, and as I dodged behind a pillar and looked, out of the vortex of the shadows would leap old Adam Faulkener, as a leveret leaps from the ferns under a lurcher's nose, and, with ashy wild face, and flying wizard locks, and ragged sorrel cloak flapping in shreds behind him, the master would flash in frenzied fear across the glow that shimmered from the heart of his young Titan, and then be swallowed up again by the next friendly blackness, and I scarce dare breathe as, with a hideous parody of vindictive cunning, that great thing would swirl and swerve, and be after him again!

It was a wild, wonderful game, and the longer it went the hotter it grew. Closer, denser, and blacker grew the gloom of that place, until at length you could not see an arm's-stretch ahead of you in the sulphurous reek—a hot, steamy pall of dismal vapour, through which glimmered redly, now and then, the ashes of the overturned furnace place, and the rosin-dripping splutter of the feeble torch which we had put into the socket by the door. Ah! that was all we had to light us as we crawled and leapt and dodged before the vengeful fury of that screaming harpy of ours—all but his own red copper glow that flamed now here, now there, on the black horizon of our den. Darker and still darker and hotter became the air, until at last—in half an hour perhaps—the torch and the furnace ashes were sickly stars, too pallid to light our merriment to any purpose, and even the glow of Faulkener's great invention was a red-hot haze, only illumining the seething dust and smoke a yard or two about it, and everywhere else reigned black, choking, Stygian, infernal darkness.

A blank midnight void hung about the arena where we danced to that great being—sprung like a black Minerva from my master's over-fertile brain. Yet, Jove! 'twas midnight dark, but there was no midnight stillness in it. The very air seemed palpitating to the thunderous beat of that beast's mighty life—every hollow cavern-niche in our rocky walls belloyed into our startled ears a hideous mockery of his screeching; while the ceaseless roar of his cruel stride rattled down the ragged juts of our stony roof like dislocated thunder. And

in that darkness and ear-splitting din we dodged and dipped and scuttled like two cornered rats. I have been brave—by this time I hope you know it—but what was mortal strength or valour against the strength and recklessness of that iron god? No, he had the upper hand, and screamed for blood like the devil that he was, pressing us with such fury that my very soul seemed oozing through my sweating skin. As for dignity—gods! I had none! At one moment I and Faulkener would be struggling for a narrow passage like two hoggets in a meadow gate; then I was anon crawling on hands and satin knees through pools half a foot deep with filthy furnace-water, or straddling greasy heaps of brash and ashes with the beast close behind to fire my flagging spirits, spurting flame and scalding steam, and crunching with his ponderous weight through the iron litter of the den as though it were an August stubble.

And this was not all. Being so dark, as I have said, presently that iron monster, inspirited with the soul of a Fury, found it more and more difficult to follow us, and went reeling and bellowing through the steamy blackness ever more at random. Thereon he stopped a spell and seemed to listen, and, though we could only tell his whereabouts by the great fiery nebulae of his glowing sides, we could plainly hear his thousand steel teeth champing, and the gush of the boiling force flying within him. We held our breath, and then we heard something change in the machinery—some pin or rivet fail—and the next minute Faulkener's baby was off again with a scream like a lost spirit and possessed of a cursed, brand-new idea. I have said the chains wherewith he had been held to the forge were fastened to great revolving bars upon his side. When he burst free he had torn these from the solid masonry and wound them up upon the spinning axles, whereto by some misguided cunning Faulkener had welded them. And now that devil was ramping round to find us in the void, and had unwound those hideous flails, and with infernal patience was beating down one wall and up the other. Oh! it was sickly to hear the screech of those steel whips sweeping unseen through the startled air, to hear them thud upon the trembling ground and cut deep furrows in it at every savage lash—now here, now there, flogging the frightened shadows and scourging the trembling rocks, and whistling overhead like a thousand winged snakes—and all for us!—

while that great babe of my master's hunted slowly round about our narrow prison, and thundered and howled and rattled like a tempest in a mountain pass, and, as though he were some great monster in a deep sea cave, shot out and drew in those humming tentacles, and tried each nook and corner, and squirted steam and fire into every crevice, and plied his cruel whips madly about in that darkness till 'twas all like Pandemonium.

Well, I will say no more, or you may think I wrap sober fact in that mantle of fancy which the gods have lent me. We had dodged and ducked at this game for many minutes when Faulkener's mind gave way! I chanced upon him in the middle space, laughing and screaming and taking off his cloak and vest. He saw me stalk from the shadows, and, with a frightful grin and caper, shouted that he knew what was the matter—'his pretty firstling needed a bloody sacrifice, and who could provide it better than himself.' Just then the engine turned and came looming through the mist towards us, and the old enthusiast made ready to cast himself under those mighty wheels.

'Come back!' I shouted, 'Come back!' But Faulkener yelled: 'Touch me at your peril, the sweet one must not be balked!' And made towards it.

I seized him by the arm and dragged him to one side, whereat, without further parley, like a furious wild cat, he turned, and in a twinkling had me by the throat, with those old talons of his deep buried in my gullet, and his long, lean legs twirled round mine like thongs of leather, and his mad eyes flashing, his white face lit up with maniac passion; and so we heaved and struggled, then down upon our knees, and over and over upon the floor, the old man striving all he knew to kill me; while I, for my part, heaved and wrenched—all my splendid strength cramped up in the wild grip of that sinewy old recluse—and over us, as we fought upon the earth, was glimmering in a minute the red-copper glow, the towering form, and the cruel, shrieking flails of that exulting demon we had invented!

We rolled and plunged in the dust, just where that circle of red light fell on it, while guttural sobs and sighs came from us, as, forgetful of all else, now one was on top, in that ruddy arena, and then the other. The veins were big upon my forehead; I felt faint and sick; I could not loosen Faulkener's

iron fingers, deep bedded in my neck, and did not care ; and that grim old fellow had no desire now but to watch me die. I saw the glowing haze wherein we fought, and dimly understood it. I heard, faintly and more faintly, the rattle of the chains, and the thunderous, black laughter of our plaything, and then, just as that glowing Fury seemed drawing itself together for one final effort which should crush us both from all form and shape, that very effort put something out of gear—the tangled wheels fell into dead-lock all on a sudden, the heavy chains jerked wildly in their swing and twisted together, the mighty rods and pistons went all asplay like a handful of broken straws, the great beast trembled and reeled and shook, and then split open from end to end, and, with a thunderous roar that shook our cellar to its deepest foundations, amid a wild gust of flame and steam, blew up !

I rose unhurt from the dust and ashes, and unwinding Faulkener's lifeless limbs from about me, found a hammer by the forge, and, scrambling over the now pulseless remnants of the giant, burst open the door, and a few minutes later laid the great inventor's body down upon a bench in the peaceful moonlit courtyard.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE episodes I now relate are so strange, so nearly impossible, that I hesitate to set them down lest you should call me untruthful and a *jongleur* ; nevertheless, they are told as they occurred, and you must believe them as you may.

My quaint recluse had not been slain that night we tried his infernal engine, but had lain in a long swoon after I carried him from amid the wreck and débris of his den out into the moonlight. That swoon, indeed, lasted for a whole day and night ; and Elizabeth wrung her white hands over her father's seeming lifeless body, while Emanuel picked his yellow teeth reflectively with his dagger-point at the couch-foot and Dame Margery spent all her art in unguents and salves upon the luckless inventor ere he showed signs of returning life.

At last, however, he revived, and made a long, slow recovery of many days under the gentle ministering of

his women. And while he throve hour by hour in the spring sunshine on the bench of his porch, I wooed his daughter in wayward, dissatisfied kind, and laughed scornfully at the black Spaniard's jealous scowls, and won the mellow heart of the old dame by my gallantness and courtesy. But it was child's play. I longed again to feel the hot pulse of keen emotions throbbing in my veins, to struggle with some strong tide of hot adventure, and so at last I had made up my mind to leave my good host and hostess at an early season, and, turning soldier again, espouse the first quarrel which chance threw in my way.

Then one day it happened—a strange day indeed to me—old Master Adam Faulkener had grown weary of his cranks and fan-wheels, and had gone for solace to his dusty tomes and classics. Exploring amid them, in an eventful moment he had taken down a missal penned by some old Saxon monk, and turned to a passage he must have known well, since it was marked and thumbed. And while the ancient scholar read and mumbled over that quaint black letter with its gorgeous gold and crimson uncials, I, who chanced to stand a little way apart, saw the wan blood mount in a thin pink glow to the enthusiast's cheeks, and in that flush recognised that he was warm upon another quest. He mumbled and muttered to himself, and while he sauntered up and down, or stopped now and then to thumb and pore over that leathern volume, I caught, in disjointed fragments, some pieces of his thoughts. 'Ha! ha! a most likely find indeed, a splendid treasure-house of trophies—and to think that no one but old Ambrose and I wot of it, ho! ho! What does he say? "*And in this place was destroyed a noble house, and the anger of the Lord fell on the pagan defenders, and they were slain one and all. Ah! God levelled their idolatrous dwelling-places and scattered their ashes to the four winds of heaven, and with them were destroyed—the common legend sayeth—all their hoards of brass and silver, all their accursed images of bronze and gold, all their trinkets and fine raiment, so that the vengeance of the Lord was complete, and the heathen was utterly wiped out.*"' 'Good, very good, Brother Ambrose,' muttered the old man with chuckling pleasure. 'And now, where did this thing happen? "*This house which harboured so much lewdness stood on the hillock by the road a few miles from the river, and had all that land which now is holy perquisite to*

the neighbouring abbey." Good! good!—for certain 'tis the very spot I thought of—a happy, happy chance that made me light upon this passage—I who live so near the spot it speaks of—I who alone of thousand can use it as the golden key to unlock such a sweet mine of relics as that buried pagan home must be. Oh! Ambrose, I am grateful,' and patting the musty monkish tome in childish pleasure, he replaced it reverently upon its shelf.

Then up and down he paced, the student's passion burning hot within him, muttering as he went: 'Why not to-night? Why not, why not? There is no season better for such a work than soon, and I have my license,' whereon he went to a peg on the wall and fumbled in the wallet of the ragged cloak I had seen him wear the night we met. In a minute out came a brand-new scroll of parchment, neatly rolled and folded, and stamped with the Royal seal. That scroll Adam Faulkener undid, and, setting his horn glasses on his nose, began to read the paper at arm's length with inarticulate sounds of rapture. It seemed to delight him so much that presently I sauntered over to share in the merriment, forgetting I had thus far been unobserved; but when we came within two paces of each other the scholar, perceiving me, with a cry of dismay stuffed the crushed parchment hurriedly into his bosom as though he thought himself about to be robbed of something precious by a sudden ambushade. However, in a minute he recognised the robber, and was reassured, yet undecided still, and inch by inch the white roll came forth, while the old man kept his eyes fixed on mine. What were his scrips and scrolls to me? I smiled to note the store he set by them: there was not one of those poor things could interest me more nearly than a last year's leaf from the garden yonder—and yet, strange to say, that white roll, creeping into light from under his rusty gaberdine, *did* attract me somehow. Long life and strange experience have wakened in me senses dormant in other mortals, and I begin to be conscious of a knowledge beyond common knowing, a sense behind other senses, which grows with practice, and seems ambitious by-and-bye to bridge the gulf which separates tangible from unreal, and what is from what will be. That growing perspicacity within me smelt something of weight about Faulkener's writing more than usual, and with my curiosity gently roused, I queried—

'That seems a scrip of value, sir. Is its interest particular or public?'

'In some ways, good youth,' Faulkener answered hesitatingly, as he unfolded the scroll so slowly as though he were jealous even of the prying sunshine, 'in some ways the interest of what this is the key to is very general, and in other ways it is, at least for some time to come, most private.'

'Enough!' I said, 'and I am sorry to have questioned you; but your pleasure in the tome over there suggested just now that this were some general matter of curiosity—some dark passage in history whereon, perhaps, two minds might shed more light than one. I ask indulgence for intrusion.'

'Nay, but stop a minute! History, did you say? Why, this is history; this is the birthscrip of a brand-new page in history; this is leave to turn a leaf no other fingers have ever turned, to spell out in sweet ashes and lovely fragments a whole chapter, perchance, of the bygone. Boy!' cried the old fellow, grasping my arm with his lean fingers, and whispering in my ear as though he dreaded the grinning mummy of Pharaoh in the shadow might play eavesdropper 'can you keep a secret?'

'Ay! fairly, when it does not interest me.'

'Why, then—there, take that and read it,' and Faulkener thrust the roll into my hands, and cast himself into an attitude, and crossed his arms upon his chest, and stared at me from under his shaggy eyebrows as if he fancied to see fear and wonder and delight fly over my countenance while my eyes devoured that precious deed of his. What was there so wonderful in it? The thing was sealed and tasselled, the ink and paper were new, the parchment white; it was, in fact, the very vellum Faulkener had been on his way to beg at Court when we two met—a wonderful chance, as you shall presently see, an extraordinary hap indeed that brought me to his side out of the great wastes of time at the very instant when that ancient scholar was on the road to ask that license. But I did not know while I read how nearly the parchment touched me. It looked just an ordinary missive from high authority to humble petitioner, profuse and verbose, signed and counter-signed, and, amid a wilderness of words, just a grain of sense that I construed as giving the bearer leave to seek for treasure on certain lands therein mentioned, and

adopt the same to his proper pleasure without tax or drawback.

'This may be a golden key, Sir,' was my response, as the thing was handed back, 'but it is difficult to learn anything of the door it opens by looking on it.'

'Yet, nevertheless, young man, it is a golden key, and you shall see me use it, for if, as yonder broken engine hints, the Fates will that I may not pry into the misty future, yet with their leave, with the help of this and you, will I peep into the even more shadowy past. Wère you ever at the opening of an ancient crypt—a stony hiding-place, for instance, where dead men's bones lay all about mid dim gems and the rusty iron playthings of love and war?'

'I do recall one such an episode.'

'And did it not affect you greatly?'

'Greatly indeed.'

'Ay, boy, and this that I will show you shall affect you more—we two will turn a leaf which shall read as clear to you as though you had been at the writing of it a thousand years before. It is a grassy hillock, and you shall lift that sod with me, and, if this thing is as I think it is, oh! you shall start at what you find, and coward ague shall unstring your soldier legs, you shall be dumb with wonder, and ply your mattock with damp, fearful awe beaded on your forehead, and starting eyes fixed fast in horrid pleasure on what we will unearth. Ay, if you have a spark of generous comprehension, if one drop of the milk of kindness still bides within you, you shall people this place we go to find with such teeming sprightly fancies, such moving mockeries of frail human kind new risen from their ashes at your feet, that you shall wring your hands out of pure rue for them that were, and pluck your beard in dumb chagrin, and beat upon your heart, even to watch all that which once was ruddy valour and hot love, and white beauty go adrift—so upon the dusty evening wind! You will come with me?'

'Old man!' I said, pacing up and down with folded arms and bent head, 'twas upon my tongue to say I would not—I had a fair tryst to keep this evening, and something that I have seen of late makes such ventures as you have planned doubly distasteful to me; 'twas in my mind to laugh and shake my head—but, gods! you have stirred a pulse within me that rouses me with resistless wonder; your words tell on me strangely—there is something in that you say which echoes

through my heart like the footfall of a storm upon the hollow earth, and I can do nothing but listen and acquiesce. I will come !'

'Good youth, good youth, I knew you would ; and, that our hopes may not suffer by delay, let us prepare at once. Get you mattock, spade, and pick, with whatever other tools your strength shall need, and I will feed and have my pretty palfrey saddled, and con yon crabbed passage over once again. So we will be ready ; and at nightfall, under the yellow stars, will start upon a venture that you shall think on for many a day.'

I bent my head, and we did as Faulkener suggested. But a strange unrest possessed me. When spade and mattock were hidden where we could take them up in secret (for we did not wish our enterprise too widely known), the time hung wondrously heavy on hand. All the tedious hours before sunset I was oppressed with an anxiety quaint and inexplicable ; half wishing by turns I had not promised to join the mad old fellow in his moonlight quest, and then laughing my scruples down and becoming as restless for the start as before I had been reluctant. As for the scholar himself, the very shirt of Dejanira possessed him, and his impatience shone behind his yellow wrinkled face like a candle inside a horn lantern. Somehow the hours wore through, however, and when the evening was come, we set forth, Faulkener pale and eloquently raving from astride of that mean palfrey whose sumpter pad was loaded with our tools on one side, and on the other a monster sack wherein to bring back all the treasure we were to rifle, and I on foot leading that gentle beast, and thoughtful, past proportion or reason.

At first we pushed on at a brisk pace by familiar roads, but after a time our path lay more to the eastward, the scholar said, and once off the broad white track leading to the nearest town the road grew narrower and more narrow. On we went in silence, mile after mile ; by rutty lanes where twittering bats flitted up and down the black arcades of overhanging bush and brier ; by rushy flats where the water stood wan and dim in the uncertain light ; now brushing by the heavy, dew-laden branches of a woodman's path through deep thickets of oak and beech, and then following a winding sheep-track over ling and gorse. So sombre was that way, and so few the signs of life, I wondered how

the scholar kept even the direction ; but he was a better pilot than he seemed, and, while he ranted silently upon the sky and waved his hands in ghostly rhythm to his unspoken thoughts, I found from a chance word or two he was in some kind watching the stars, and leading us forward by their dim light towards that goal whereof he had got knowledge from his musty tomes. On we went through the still starry night, pacing along from black shadows to black shadows, and moonlight to silver moonlight, until it must have been within an hour or two of day-breaking, for under the purple pall of sky there was a long stream of pale light in the east. It was about that time, and the night shadows were strong and ebony, and the cold breath and deep hush of a coming morning hung over everything when Faulkener first began to hesitate, and presently confessed that that which he sought for should be somewhere here, but in the glimmer of the starlight he was uncertain whether it lay to right or left. We halted, and, mounting on a hillock, peered all about us, but to little purpose, for the sombre night hid everything, the massed forest trees rose tier upon tier on every hand, like mountain ranges running on indefinite into the gloomy passes of the clouds, and the chance gleams of moonlight, lying white and still upon the dew-damp meadows, were so like great misty lakes and rivers, it were difficult to say whether they were such or no.

So back we scrambled once more, and unhitched our patient beast from the hazel whereto we had tied him, and plunged on again by dingle and sandy road, and rough woodland path, until we were hopelessly mazed, and there seemed nothing for it but to wait till daylight or go empty back. Yet, reluctant to do either, we held to it a little, hoping some chance might favour us. 'Twas past midnight—not a crow of distant cock or yelp of village cur broke the dead stillness, and we were plodding down a turfy road, when on a sudden our patient steed threw forward his ears and came to a dead stop, and, almost the same minute, the grey-clad figure of a countryman in long cape and hood, a wide slouch hat upon his head, and a tall staff in his hand, came out from the depth a hundred yards ahead of us, and with slow, measured gait and bent face walked down towards us. Old Faulkener was overjoyed. Here was one who knew the country, and would show us his precious hillock ; and he shouted to that stranger, and tugged his palfrey's rein. But that observant beast was strangely

reluctant : he went on a pace, then stopped and backed and pawed the silent ground, throwing his prick ears forward, whinnying, and staring at that silent coming stranger, with strange disquiet in every movement. And I—I sympathised with that dumb brute ; and, as the countryman came near, somehow my blood ran cold and colder ; my tongue, that was awag to ask the way, stuck helpless to my teeth ; a foolish chill beset my limbs ; and, by the time we met, I had only wit enough left to stare, speechless, at that grey form, in silent expectation. But the old philosopher did not feel these tremors. He was delighted at our good luck, and, fumbling in his wallet, pulled out a small silver piece which he tendered to the man, explaining at the same time our need and asking him to guide us.

The stranger took the coin in silence, and, keeping his face hidden in the shadow of his hat, said the mound was near, ' he knew it well, he had bided by it long,' and he would willingly show us where it lay. Back we went by copse and heather, back for half a mile, then turned to the right, and in a few minutes more came out of the brushwood into the star-light, and there at our very feet the ground was swelling up in gentle sweep to the flat top of a little island-hill lost in the sea of forest-land about it. It was the place we came for, and the scholar, without another thought for us, joyfully pricked his steed to the rise, and was soon out of sight round the shoulder of the ground.

But I! Oh, what was that strange, dull hesitation that made my feet heavy as lead upon that threshold? Whence came those thronging, formless fancies that crowded to my mind as I surveyed that smoothly rounded hillock, and all the fantastic shadows beyond it? That spot was the same one I had wandered to when I walked lonely from Faulkener's house, and here chance brought me to it anew at dead midnight ; and all the old thrills of indistinct remembrance I then had felt were working in me again with redoubled force, moving my soul to such unrest that I bent my head and hid my eyes, and strove long but vainly to recall why or when I had last trodden that soil, as somewhere and somehow I was certain that I had. Thinking and thinking without purpose, presently I looked up, and there, two paces away was still that grey hedgeman leaning on his staff and regarding me from under his country hat with calm, soulless attention. I

had forgotten his presence, and it was so strange to see him there, so rustic and so stately, that I started back, and an unfamiliar chill beset me for an instant. But it was only a moment, then, angry to have been surprised, I turned haughtily upon him, and, with folded arms, in mockingness of his own stern attitude, stared proudly into those black shadows where should have been his face. Jove! 'twas a stare that would not have blanched for all the lightning in a Cæsar's eye or wavered one moment beneath the grim returning gaze of any tyrant that ever lived; and yet, even as I looked into that void my soul turned to water, and my eyelids quivered and bent and drooped, my arms fell loose and nerveless to my side, and every power of free action forsook me.

That being took my perturbation with the same cold lack of wonder he had shown throughout. He eyed me for a minute with his sleepy, stately calm, and then he said, 'You have been here before.'

'Yes,' I answered, 'but how or when only the great gods know'—and though I noticed it not at the moment, yet since it has flashed upon me as another link in a wondrous chain, that at that moment both I and the grey countryman were using the long-forgotten British tongue!

'And would you know, would you recall?' he queried in his passionless voice.

'Ay, if it is within your power to stir my memory, stir it, in the name of loud Taranis, of old Belenus, and all the other fiends I once believed in!'

'Well sworn, Phœnician!' said that tall nocturnal wanderer, and without another word grasped his staff and, signing to me to follow, led round the shoulder of the hillock to where, alone and solitary, we two were stayed by a trickling rivulet that sprang from a grassy basin in the slope, and went by a little rushy course winding down into the dusky thickets beyond. At that pool my guide stopped suddenly, then, pointing with stern finger still shrouded under the folds of his ample cloak—

'Drink!' he cried. 'Drink and remember!'

I could no more have thwarted him than I could have torn that solid mound from off its base, and down I went upon one knee, and took a broken crock some shepherd had left behind, and filled it, and put it to my lips, and drank. Then up I

leapt with a wild yell of wonder and astonishment, while right across the sullen midnight sky, it seemed, there shot out in one broad living picture all the painted pageantry of my Roman life. I saw old Roman Britain rise before me, and the quaint templed towns of a splendid epoch leap into shape from the tumbled chaos of the evening clouds. I saw the crowded episodes that had followed after my awakening in the cave where my princess had laid me; the faces of my jolly long-dead comrades seemed thronging round about me; I heard the street cries of a Roman-British city; I saw the dust rise, and the glitter as the phalanges wheeled and turned upon the castra before the porch where, a gay patrician gallant, I lounged in gold and turquoise armour. I saw Electra's ivory villa start into form and substance out of the pale, filtering Tudor moonlight, and the great white bull, and the haughty lady, stately and tall, beckoning me up her marble steps; and then I was with her, her petted youth, lying indolent and happy, toying disdainfully with the imperial love she proffered me, while we filled our rainbow shells from that bright fountain that spurted in her inner court!

With a wild cry I dropped the shepherd's crock and started back. The water I was sipping was the water of Electra's courtyard fountain! Gods! there was none other like it. Often we two had drunk of that crystal torrent as it burst, full of those sweet earth-salts the Romans loved so well, from the bowels of the earth straight into her pearly basins; the last time I had stooped to it was on that night of fiery combat when Electra's villa fell—and here I was sipping of it again, so strangely and unexpectedly that I hid my eyes a space, scarce knowing what might happen next. When I uncovered them the black dusky clouds had swallowed the painted pageantry of my vision, the night-wind blew chill round the grassy slope; the Roman villa and fountain had gone from the grey shadows where we stood—only the tinkle of the falling water was left in the darkness, and in front of me still the tall figure of that grey-clad countryman. *Only* that countryman! Hoth! how can I describe the rush of keen wonder and fear which swept over me when, looking at him again, I saw that he had turned back the flap of his wide hat, and there, in the dead grey light, was staring at me—the same stern, passionless face that had come to my shoulder in the reek and heat of combat on this very spot thirteen hundred years before, and,

doing the bidding of the great Unknown, had drawn me from those fiery shambles only just in time.

I knew him then, on the instant, as no mortal, and glared, and glared at him with every nerve at tension, and speechless tongue, too numb to question, and while I stared like that with the strong emotion playing on lip and eye—it was only a minute or so, though it seemed an epoch, the face of that being was lit by a smile, sedate and impalpable.

Then, turning to me with gentle superiority, he said: 'You have been long, Phœnician! They told me you would come again, and I have waited—waited for you here these few hundred years—waited until I near tired of watching all your circling vagaries. Here is the place you came to-night to find—my errand ends! Dig, wonder, and reflect—this I was told to show you and to say!' And like the echo of his own words, like the shadow of a cloud upon a rock, that strange messenger of another life was drunk up by the darkness right in front of my wondering eyes.

So swift and silent was his passage back into the outer vagueness that for a minute I could not believe he had gone in truth, and held my breath, and stared up and down, expecting he would fashion again out of the draughty air, or speak above or below, once more, in that voice every syllable of which fell clear on my soul, like water falling in a well. But it was useless to listen and peer into the gloom. The shape was gone beyond recall; and, while my mind still pondered over the strangeness of it, keeping me spellbound at the brink of that enchanted fountain, with bent head and folded arms, trying to guess how much of this was fantasy, and how much fact, there rose a shout upon the still night air, and, raising my eyes, there was Faulkener's quaint black image capering wildly on the dusky skyline, the while he brandished aloft in one hand a spade, and in the other—looking quaintly like a new-severed head dangling by the hair—the first sod he had cut of that 'treasure-heap' so dear and dreadful to me.

I went sullenly up to the recluse, full of such strange, conflicting feelings as you may suppose, and found him eager and excited. He had marked out a long furrow across the crest of the hill, 'and this we were to open and strike out right or left according as our venture throve.' Jove! I stared for a time at that black trench as though it were the narrow lip of hell, which presently should yawn and throw up a grim, ghostly,

warlike crew, worse than those who frightened Jason. And then I laughed in bitterness and perplexity, and tore off my doublet and rolled my tunic-sleeves above my shoulder, and took a spade, and at one strong heave plunged it deep into the tender bosom of the swelling turf just over where the out-skirts of the ancient Roman house had been, and wrenched it up. Then in again, and then again, while the mad philosopher capered in the twilight to watch my sinewy strength so well applied, and the whistling bats swept curious round us. I had not turned back a stitch of that light, peaty coverlet, when down my spade sank through an inner crust, deep into something soft and hollow-seeming; and the next minute Faulkener, who also had set to work, was into the same fine strata too. We laid it bare, and there below us shone a floor of white dim ashes, mixed with earth, and leaves, and roots.

‘A torch! a torch!’ yelled Faulkener, and down he went upon his knees, and, wild with exultation, wallowed in that powdery stuff, throwing it out by hand and arm-fuls, till all his clothes were covered with it, and his hoary beard was still more hoary, and his white face still more white, and his mad twinkling eyes were still more lunatic, and I helping him, full of crowding hopes and fears. And so we dug and grovelled and scraped, while the pale stars twinkled overhead, until soon my master gave a shout, and looking quickly at him—Jove! he was hand in hand with a dead white hand that he had uncovered, and was hauling at it in frantic eagerness, and scraping away the rubbish above, and slipping and plunging and staggering in the grey dust, while the beaded sweat shone on his forehead, and his white elf-locks were all astray upon the night air; and then—gods!—it began to give, and I held my breath—knowing all I knew—while the white stuff cracked and heaved about that ghostly palm, and then it opened, and—first his head, and then his shoulders, and then his stiff contorted limbs—my master dragged out into the starshine, with one strong effort, a bulky ancient warrior!

There, in the torchlight which Faulkener held above him, slept that kiln-dried soldier. He lay flat upon his back, and, while one knotted shrivelled fist was stretched stiff in front in deathless anger, the broken digits of his other hand were welded by red iron rust about the red rusty hilt of a bladeless

sword. And that soldier's soulless face was set stiff and hard, while on his stern, shut lips and deep in his eyeless sockets even now restless passion and quenchless hate seemed smouldering. About that frail body still clung in melancholy tatters the shreds and remnants of purple webs and golden tissue. On his shoulders, sunk into his withered, lifeless flesh, were the mouldy straps and scales of harness and cuirass, and on his head what once had been, though now it was more like winter wrack, a gay helmet and a horseman's nodding crimson plume. It was a ghostly plaything to unearth like that under the wavering starlight, and it was doubly dreadful to note how deathlike was it while yet all the hot life-passion lay stamped for ever in unchanging fierceness on the hideous mask of dissolution. I turned away as Faulkener, gleefully shouting that he was a thousand years old if he was a day, tore the russet trophies from him, and pushed him down the hill; I turned away, grimly frowning, out into the black starlight, with folded arms, for that contorted thing was jolly Caius Martius, my merry Byzantine captain of those mercenaries who stood it out with me that last night of Roman power in England! Jolly Caius Martius! Often we two had set the British dogs a-yelping as we wandered home from noisy midnight frolics down the moonlit temple streets; often we two had driven the same boar to bay deep in his reedy stronghold; often at banquet and at feast, when the roses lay deep below and the strong warm breath of scented wine hung thick above, that curly black head the Mercian damsels liked so well had sunk happy and heavy on my shoulder. Jove! how the world had spun since then!—and there was Faulkener pushing him down the slope, and I could not raise a comrade finger for merry Caius, and could only stupidly remember, as the sprawling heap went trundling away into the brambles, how, in that long ago, I had owed him half a silver talent and had never yet repaid it!

Well, we fell to work again, and farther on, amid the passages where these ancient men had fought and fallen in the rout, we found a limb, and dug about it till we uncovered another strange, twisted hide of what was once humanity—a stalwart shell this one, but Faulkener thought little on him because he wore no links or chains, and set him rolling after the other with scant ceremony. The next we came to seemed by gear and weapons a Southern mercenary. He lay

asprawl upon his face, and my master levered him out and plucked him of his scanty metal relics with no more compunction than if he were a pigeon. It was grim wild work, there under the leer of the yellow dawning, all in the hush of the twilight, coming on those ghastly relics thus one by one, and prising them out of their ashy shells, and turning them over, and reading on each black mummy mask, that seemed to smile and grin with dead ferocity under the flickering flambeau light, the countenance and fashion of ancient comrade and ally. And ever and anon as I worked, held to the labour by a strange fascination, the melancholy footfall of the gusty wind came pacing round the hill, and with a frown and start I would look over my shoulder, half fearing, half hoping it was my grey countryman come once more. So we toiled, and toiled, while the light waned, and Faulkener's treasure-heap was swelling. And the nearer we worked to the centre of that ample round of corridors and courts the thicker came to light those old-world fighters, and presently we got right down to the tessellated paving of Electra's lordly hall, and here we found what it was which made all these ancient warriors so still and lasting. It was that strange, mysterious fountain. That jet of pungent taste and wondrous properties, when the walls fell in, had overflowed its basins and percolated through the deep soft ashes lying thick about these marble rooms and chambers, and, by the stony magic wherewith it was charged, had lined and filled those ancient gentlemen it met with, and thereafter, in long dark months of silence, had supplemented their wasting tissues with its calcareous sediment, and kept them for ever as we found them—strange, horrible, exact, and real, with passion and life stamped deep on every face, and strength and vigour in every limb, although those faces wore only ashy masks, and those limbs no stouter than the vellum on which I write.

Under that crust of welded stone and ashes it was wonderful to see how perfectly was everything preserved. We raised it in great flakes from the stony flooring, and all the stain and litter of the fight lay under it, as though they were not a dozen hours old; we chipped that scaly covering from the walls, and there, fresh as the moment they were made, gleamed up under our wavering torch-light all the gay mural paintings, the smudges of battle, and the scars of axe and arrow. We lifted that pale, stiff shroud from the inner chambers, and

beneath lay shreds and shells of furniture and gear ; the half-baked loaves were in the oven ; the flesher's knife was on the block ! Round about the bounds of that stately ruin we went, uncovering at every spadeful something mournful, forgetting fatigue and time, as wonder after wonder rose to view ; thus we came at last to the mid court, where the great fight had been, and peeled the thin turf from off it, far and near.

We had scarce begun to rake aside the ashes, when down to help us came, out of the black parting clouds, strong gusts of cold morning wind, blowing fitfully at first and chill, and sobbing overhead and all about us, as though the grey air was full of spirits. It gathered strength, and, wailing over the wide floor we had uncovered, in one strong breath swept back the veil of ashes, and there—Jove!—all amid the juts of fallen masonry and stumps of beam and rafter, blackened in that fire which seemed but yesterday, were high, protruding knees of dead combatants, and stiff bent elbows, as thick as grass ; and haggard, wizened faces, all stamped with twenty fine degrees of terror ; and fierce clenched fists, and hands that still waved above them broken hilt and blade. There they lay in heaps and rucks about that ancient villa floor, just as they had died fighting amid the red choking ashes of the blazing roof, all horribly lifelike and yet so grimly dead ! Old Faulkener yelled in sheer affright, and capered, and shook his fists towards them, and tore his lean white locks 'tween dread and wonder ; and stiff my Phrygian curls seemed on my head, and cold the sweat upon my forehead.

And then, while we watched, a very wonderful thing happened, and, dreadful and beautiful, those cinders began to glow. Jutting beam and rafter grew red and redder, pile and timber and cornice caught the ambient blush, the crimson stain crept all across the hall, it burnt in mockery upon ruined wall and portico, and lit with an unearthly radiance those parched, contorted faces that grinned and leered and frowned, still in frantic struggle with their kind, all round us. Was I mad ? Was this some hideous last delusion which beset my aching mind and horror-surfeited eyes ? No ! there was Faulkener saw it too, and had fallen on his knees and buried his fearful face behind his hands and thrown his gaberdine cloak over his head to shut out that dreadful sight. I drew my hand across my face and looked again : it was true, too true—that charred and ancient villa was all alight once more ; wherever fire had

been, at every point and crevice, there the ambient glow was smouldering with a flameless brightness. It underlay the silver ashes with a hot golden shine; it gilded all the fallen metal statues of gods and goddesses until they seemed to shimmer beneath its touch; it shone near by under the walls and far out upon the steps—it was so real, so terribly like what it had been here a thousand years before, that I half bent to take a weapon, in the delusion of that brilliant fantasy, a husky cry of encouragement to those stark, ancient warriors half framed itself upon my lips—and then, how exactly I know not, but somehow a slight insequence flashed upon me, and in another minute I had spun angrily round upon my heel—and there I saw, right behind us, calm, benignant, crimson, the great May sun was topping the eastern oak-trees.

CHAPTER XXIV

AFTER that eventful episode just detailed, life ran smooth and uneventful for a time in the old manor-house. I had had enough to think of for many a day, and was inert and listless somehow. War, that had seemed so bright, had lost half its colour to me. Honour! and renown! Why, the green grass in the fields was not more fleeting, I began to think; and what use was it striving after conquests which another age undid, or attempting brave adventures whereof a later time recognised neither cause nor purpose? I was in a doleful mood, as you will see, and lay about on Faulkener's sunny, red-brick terraces for days together, reflecting in this idle fashion, or pressed my suit upon his daughter when other pastimes failed.

Now, this latter was a dangerous sport for one like me, and one whose fair opponent at the game had such a fine untaught instinct for it as Mistress Bess possessed. I began to speak soft things unto that lady's ear, as you may remember, like many another, for lack of better occupation, and because it seemed so discourteous to be indifferent to the sweet enticement of my friend, and then I took the gentle malady from her, and, growing worse than she had been, how could she do aught but sympathise. And so between us we eked the matter on in ample leisure, until that which was a pretty jest became at last very serious and sober earnest.

It was a strange wooing. I still worked in the forge, riveting, hammering, and piecing together the fragments of the scholar's shattered dream, and down the damsel would come at times into the grimy den and sit upon the forge-corner in her dainty country smock, twirling her ribboned points and laughing at me and my toil, as fresh and dainty among all that gloomy black litter round about as a ray of spring sunshine. I was so solitary and glum, how could I fail to be pleased in that dear presence? And one time I would hammer her a gleaming buckle or wristlet out of a nob of ancient silver, and it was sweet to see that country damsel's eagerness as, with flushed face and sparkling eyes, she bent over and watched the pretty toy shine and glitter and take form and shape under my cunning hammer. Or then again, perhaps, another day I would tell her, as though it were only hearsay, some wondrous old story of the ancient time, so full of light and colour and love as I could fill it, and that dear auditor would drink in every syllable with thirsty ears, and laugh and weep and fear and tremble just as I willed, the while I pointed my periods with my anvil irons, and danced my visionary puppets against the black shadows of that nether hall. Hoth! a good listener is a sweet selace to him whose heart is full! Those narratives did so engross us that often the forge went cold, and bar and rivet slumbered into blackness, while I stalked up and down that dingy cavern peopling it with such glowing forms and fancies as kept that dear untutored damsel spellbound; often the evening fell upon us so, and we had at last to steal shamefacedly across the courtyard to where the warm glow behind the lattices told us supper and the others waited.

There was small difference in these days. I hammered cheerful and I hammered dull, I hammered hopeful and I hammered melancholy, I hammered in tune to the merry prattle of that girl, and I hammered sad and solitary. And ever as I forged and welded by myself you may guess how I thought and speculated—thought of all the love that I had loved, and all the useless strife and ambition, and now hung over my blackening iron as the pain of ancient perplexities and disappointments beset me, and then anon laughed and beat new life into the glowing metal as the light of forgotten joys flashed for a moment on the fitful current of my mind. Ah! and again I forged hot and impetuous on my master's

rods and rivets as the old pulse of battles and onset swelled in my veins—forged and hammered while the stream of such fancies bore me on—until, unwitting, the very molten stuff beneath my hands took form and fashion of my thoughts, and grew up into shining spear-heads and white blades until the phantasy in turn was passed, and I checked my fancies and saw, ashamed, the foolish work my busy hammer had fashioned, and sadly broke the spear-heads and snapped the blades, and came back with a sigh to meaner things.

My mind being thus full of all those wild adventures and wondrous exploits I had seen and shared, when, as I was strolling one idle morning down Faulkener's dusty museum corridor, and sampling as I went his precious tomes, that thing happened to which you owe this book. I dipped into his missals and vellums as I sauntered from shelf to shelf, and soon I found there was scarcely a page, scarcely a passage within their mothy leathern covers that did not touch me nearly, or set me thinking of something old and wonderful. There was not a page in all that fingered, scholar-marked library, it seemed to me, upon which I could not find something better or nearer to the shining truth to say than they had who wrote those cupboard histories and philosophies; and first I was only sad to see so much inaccurate set down, and then I fell to sighing, as I turned the leaves of quaint treatise and pedantic monkish diary, that they should write who knew so little, and I, who knew so much, should be so dumb. And thus vague fancies began to form within my mind, and, backed by the brooding memories strong within, began to egg me on *to write myself!* Jove! I had not touched a pen for many hundred years, and yet here was the budding hunger for expression rising strong within me, and I laughed and went over to old Faulkener's great oak table by the mulioned window, and took up his quill, and turned it here and there, and looked on both ends of it, then presently set it down with a shake of the head as a weapon past my wielding. I felt the texture of his vellums and peered into the depth of his inkpot, as though there were to see therein all those glowing facts and fancies that I yearned to draw therefrom. But it would not do; not even the challenge of those piled tomes, not even the handy means to the end I coveted, could for a time break down my diffidence.

So I fell melancholy again, and wandered down that

quaintly stocked museum library, gazing ruefully on each sad remnant of humanity, and thinking how quaint it was that I should come to dust my kinsmen's skulls and tabulate those grim old heads that had so often wagged in praise of me, then back again to the shelves, and pored and pondered over the many-authored books, until, by hap, my eyes lit upon a passage in an Eastern tale that was so pregnant with experience, so fine, it seemed to my mood, in fancy and philosophy, that it entranced me and fired my zeal to a point naught else had done.

The ancient Arabian narrator is telling how one came, in mid desert, upon a splendid, ruined city—a silent, unpeopled town of voiceless palaces and temples—and wandered on by empty street and fallen greatness until, in the stateliest court of a thousand stately palaces, he found an iron tablet, and on it was written these words :—

In the name of God, the Eternal, the Everlasting throughout all ages : in the name of God, who begetteth not, and who is not begotten, and unto whom there is none like : in the name of God, the Mighty and Powerful : in the name of the Living who dieth not. O thou who arrivest at this place, be admonished by the misfortunes and calamities that thou beholdest, and be not deceived by the world and its beauty, and its falsity and calumny, and its fallacy and finery ; for it is a flatterer, a cheat, a traitor. Its things are borrowed, and it will take the loan from the borrower ; and it is like the confused visions of the sleeper, and the dream of the dreamer. These are the characteristics of the world : confide not therefore in it, nor incline to it ; for it will betray him who dependeth upon it, and who in his affairs relieth upon it. Fall not into its snares, nor cling to its skirts. For I possessed four thousand bay horses in a stable ; and I married a thousand damsels, all daughters of Kings, high-bosomed virgins, like moons ; and I was blessed with a thousand children ; and I lived a thousand years, happy in mind and heart ; and I amassed riches such as the Kings of the earth were unable to procure, and I imagined that my enjoyments would continue without failure. But I was not aware when there alighted among us the terminator of delights, the separator of companions, the desolator of abodes, the ravager of inhabited mansions, the destroyer of the great and the small, and the infants, and the children, and the mothers. We had resided in this palace in security until the event decreed by the Lord of all creatures, the Lord of the heavens, and the Lord of the earths, befell us, and the thunder of the Manifest Truth assailed us, and there died of us every day two, till a great company of us had perished. So when I saw that

destruction had entered our dwellings, and had alighted among us, and drowned us in the sea of deaths, I summoned a writer, and ordered him to write these verses and admonitions and lessons, and caused them to be engraved upon these doors and tablets and tombs. I had an army comprising a thousand thousand bridles, composed of hardy men, with spears, and coats of mail and sharp swords, and strong arms; and I ordered them to clothe themselves with the long coats of mail, and to hang on the keen swords, and to place in rest the terrible lances, and mount the high-blooded horses. Then, when the event appointed by the Lord of all creatures, the Lord of the earth and the heavens, befell us, I said, O companies of troops and soldiers, can ye prevent that which hath befallen me from the Mighty King? But the soldiers and troops were unable to do so, and they said, How shall we contend against Him from whom none hath secluded, the Lord of the door that hath no door-keeper? So I said, Bring to me the wealth! (And it was contained in a thousand pits, in each of which were a thousand hundredweights of red gold, and in them were varieties of pearls and jewels, and there was the like quantity of white silver, with treasures such as the Kings of the earth were unable to procure.) And they did so; and when they had brought the wealth before me, I said to them, Can ye deliver me by means of all these riches, and purchase for me therewith one day during which I may remain alive? But they could not do so. They resigned themselves to destiny, and I submitted to God with patient endurance of fate and affliction until he took my soul and made me to dwell in my grave. And if thou ask concerning my name, I am Khoosh, the son of Sheddád, the son of 'Ad the Greater.

'Oh, well written!' I cried. 'Well written, Khoosh, the son of Sheddád, the son of 'Ad the Greater, well and wisely written, and also I will write, for I have much to tell, and I too may some day be as thou art!'

Thus was the beginning of this book. I got pen and ink and a volume of unwritten leaves forthwith, and carried them away to a lonely chamber in the thickness of a turret wall, a little forgotten cell some six poor feet across, and there solitary I have written, and still write, peopling by the flickering yellow lamp-light that stony niche with all the brilliant memories that I harbour, letting my recollection wander unshackled down the wondrous path that I have come, and step by step, by episodes of pain and pleasure, by wild adventure and strange mischance down, far down, from the ancient times I have brought you until now, when my ink is still wet upon the events of yesterday, and I cease for the moment.

This, then, is all that there is to say, all but one suggestive line. I and yonder fair damsel have plighted troth under the apple-trees out in her orchard! We have broken a ring, and she has one half of it and I have the other. To-morrow will we tell her father, and presently be married. 'Tis a right sweet and winsome maid, and together, hand in hand, we will rehabilitate this ancient pile, and dock that desert garden, and get us friends, and troops of curly-headed children, and lie and bask i' the jolly sunshine of contentment—and so go hand in hand for ever down the pleasant ways of peaceful dalliance.

Jove!—my pen, and a few poor minutes more from the bottom dregs of life! It is over! all the long combat and turmoil, all the success and disappointment, all the hoping and fearing. That which I thought was a beginning turns out to be but an ending. My hand shakes as I write, my life throbs, and my blood is on fire within me; I am dying, friendless and alone as I have lived, dying in a niche in the wall with my great unfinished diary before me—and, with the grim briefness of my necessity, this is how it has happened.

I had wooed and won Elizabeth Faulkener, and, on the day after she had come down into the forge, as was her wont, sweet and virginal; and I was there at work, and took her into my arms; and, while we dallied thus, there entered on us the ancient scholar and the swart steward. Gods! that villain blanched and scowled to see us so till his swart face was whiter than the furnace ashes!

I took the maiden's hand, and boldly turning to her father told my love and its accomplishment, whereat she burst from me and threw herself upon his bosom, and, radiant with confusion, such a sweet country pearl as any Prince might well have stooped to raise, she pleaded for us.

Oh! a thousand thousand curses on that black fell shadow standing there behind her! The father, relenting, kissed the fair white forehead of that winsome girl. He bid Emanuel bring at once a loving-cup, and, while that foul traitor reeled away to fetch it, he joined our hands and gave us, in tones of love and gentleness, his blessing.

Then back came the scoundrel Spaniard, his lean, hungry face all drawn and puckered with his wicked passions, and in his hand a silver bowl of wine. O Jove! how cruel it flames

within me now ! My sweet maid took it, and, rueful for the pain she had given black Emanuel, spoke fair and gentle, saying how we would ever stay his friends and do our best to prosper him. And even I, generous like a soldier, echoed her sweet words, telling that fell knave how, when the game was played and finished, e'en the worst rivals might meet once more in good comradeship. And so—while the mean Spanish hound, with cruel jaw dropped down and, hands a-twitching at his side, turned from us—his tender mistress lifted the goblet to her lips and drank.

She drank, and because she was no courtly goblet-kissing dame, she drank full and honest, then passed the troth-cup to me—and I laughed and swept aside my Phrygian beard, and happy once more and successful, at the pink of my ambition, pledged those friendly two, pledged even yon black-hearted scoundrel scowling there in the shade, then poured all that sweet, rosy-tasting, love-cup of promise down my thirsty throat.

Gods ! what was that at bottom of it ? a pale, bitter white dreg. Oh ! Jove, what was this ? I dipped a finger in and tried it, while a dead hush fell upon us four. It was bitter, bitter as rue, cold, horrible, and biting. My fingers tightened slowly round the goblet stem. I looked at the sweet lady, and in a minute she was swaying to and fro in the pale light like a fair white column, and then her hands were pressed convulsive for a space upon her heart, while her knees trembled and her body shook, and then, all in an instant, she locked her fair fingers at arm's length above her head, and, with a long low wail of fear and anguish that shall haunt for ever that stony corridor, she staggered and dropped !

Down went the goblet, and I caught her as she fell ; and there she lay, heaving a moment in my arms, then looked up and smiled at me—smiled for one happy second her own dear smile of love and sunshine—then shut her eyes, trembling a little, and presently lay still and pale upon my bosom—dead !

Fair, fair Elizabeth Faulkener !

I held her thus a space, and it was so still you could hear the gentle draught of the curling smoke filtering up the chimney, and the merry twitter of the swallows perched far above upon it. I held her so a space, then kissed her fiercely and tender once upon her smooth forehead, and gave the white girl to her father.

Then turned I to the steward, the bitter passion and the deadly drug surging together like molten lead within my veins. So turned I to him, and our eyes met—and for a moment we glared upon each other so still and grim that you could hear our hearts pulsing like iron hammers, and at every beat a long year of terror and shame seemed to flit across the ashy face of that coward Iberian: he withered and grew old, grew lean and haggard and pinched and bent in those few seconds I stared at him. Then, without taking an eye from his eyes, slowly my hand was outstretched and my sword was lifted from the anvil where I had thrown it. Slowly, slowly I drew the weapon from its sheath and raised it, and slowly that villain went back, staring grimly the while, like the dead man that he was, at the point. Then on a sudden he screamed like a rat in a gin, and turned and fled. And I was after him like the November wind after the dead leaves. And round and round the forge we ran, fear and bitter, bitter vengeance winging our heels; and round the anvil with its idle hammer and cold half-welded iron swept that savage race; round by where the pale father was bending over the soft dead form of his sweet country girl; round the ruined chaos of the great broken engine; round by the cobwebbed walls of that gloomy crypt; round by the clattering heaps of iron in a mad, wild frenzy we swept—and then the Spaniard fled to a little oaken wicket in the stony wall leading by many score of winding steps far out into the turrets above.

He tore the wicket open and plunged up that stony staircase, and I was on his heels. Up the clattering stairs we raced—gods, how the fellow leapt and screamed—and so we came in a minute out into the air again, out on to old Adam Faulkener's ancient roof, out all among his gargoyles and corbie steps, with the pleasant summer wind wafting the blue smoke of luncheon-time about us, and the courtyard flags far, far down below.

And there I set my teeth, and drew my sinews together, and wiped the cold sweat of death from off my forehead, and stilled the wild strong tremors that were shaking my iron fabric, and, lost in a reckless lust of vengeance, crouched to the spring that should have ended that villain.

He saw it, and back he went step by step, screaming at every pace, hideous and shrill; back step by step, with no eyes but for me; back until he was, unknowing, at the very

verge of the roof; back again another pace—and then, Jove! a reel and a stagger, and he was gone, and, as I rushed forward and looked down, I saw him strike upon the parapets a hundred feet below and bound into the air, and fall and strike again, and spin like a wheel, and be now feet up and now head, and so, at last, crash, with a dull, heavy thud, a horrid lifeless thing, on the distant stones of that quiet courtyard!

It is over, and I in turn have time to laugh. I have come here, here to my secret den in the thickness of these great walls, staggering slowly here by dim, steep stairs, and rare-trodden landings—here to die; and I have double-locked the oaken door, and shot the bolts and pitched the key out of my one narrow window-slit, and, gently rocking and swaying as the strong poison does its errand, I have thrown down my belt and sword and opened my great volume once again.

Misty the letters swim before me, and the strong pain ebbs and flows within. All the room is hazy and dim, and I grow weak and feeble, and my heavy head sags down upon the leaf I strive to finish. Some other time shall find that leaf, and me a dusty, ancient remnant. Some other hand shall turn these pages than those I meant them for: some other eyes than theirs shall read and wonder, and perhaps regret. And now I droop anon, and then start up, and the pale swinging haze seems taking shapes of friendliness and beauty. There are no longer limits to this narrow kingdom, and before my footstool sweep in soft procession all the shapes that I have known and loved. Elocra comes, a pale, proud shade, sweeping down that violet road, and holding out her ivory palm in queenly friendship; and Numidea trips behind her, and nods and smiles; and there is stalwart Caius, his martial plumes brushing the sky; and earlier Sempronius, brave and gentle; and jolly Tulus; and, two and two, a trooping band of ancient comrades.

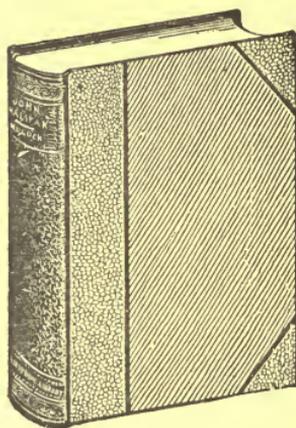
Now have I looked up once more and laughed, and here they come trooping again, those smiling shadows, and the fair Thane is with them, her plaited yellow hair gleaming upon her unruffled forehead; and by either hand she leads a rose-bud babe, who stretch small palms towards and voiceless cries upon me; and white-bearded Senlac; and, two and two, my Saxon serfs and franklins come gliding in. And there strides gallant Codrington, leading a pale shadow all in white, and

Isobel turns a fair pale face upon me as she goes by. Oh ! I am dead—dead, I know it, all but the hand which writes and the eyes that see, and I laugh as the last fitful flashes of the pain and life fly through the loosening fabric of my body. . . . And now, and now a hush has fallen on those silent shades, and their hazy ranks have fallen wide apart, and through them glides ruddy Blodwen—Blodwen, who comes to claim her own—and, approaching, looks into my eyes, and all those stately shadows are waiting, two and two, for us two to head them hence ; and she, my princess, my wife, has come near and touched my hand, and at that touch the mantle of life falls from me !

Blodwen ! I come, I come !

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