

Stoddard William Osborn

With the Black Prince



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CHAPTER I. THE KING'S DEER

There came a sudden sound, breaking the shadowy silence of Longwood forest.

Crash followed crash, at short intervals, with the snapping of dry twigs and bush branches, and then came ringing, clear and sweet, three notes of a hunting horn.

Out into an open glade, where the sunlight fell upon the long, green grass of midsummer, there bounded a splendid stag – a stag royal, a stag of ten – fit to be the antlered monarch of the king's deer in Longwood.

Three leaps, and then the beautiful animal stood still; but as he turned, panting, and lowered his horns, it could be seen that he was wounded. The feather of an arrow in his flank told how deeply the shaft was driven.

He was at bay now, and splendid was his courage as he stood to battle with his pursuers.

Again, and nearer, nearer, sounded the horn; for the hunters were coming.

Out through the leafy barrier of the bushes at the edge of the glade bounded three eager deerhounds, one after another. Large dogs they were, brown-haired, lop-eared. Their baying had chimed in with the music of the horn. Better for them it were if one of the huntsmen had been there to hold them from their haste; for there is danger for any who rush rashly in upon a stag at bay.

Loud voices and the thud of galloping hoofs told that the hunters were close at hand; but they were too late in arriving. The foremost hound dashed fiercely on, his white teeth showing, and his eyes flashing with green light; but the ten-tined antlers passed under him and were lifted swiftly.

Away the hound was hurled, pierced fatally, and then a sudden side stroke disabled the second of the four-footed assailants. The third paused, lifting a forefoot doubtfully as he glanced from one to the other of his unlucky companions. A whizzing shaft passed over his head, and a cloth-yard arrow sped to its mark, inside the shoulder of the deer. The spreading antlers plowed the sod for a moment, and then all was over. A tall, powerful-looking man, who came riding up, sprang from his horse, and stood by the wounded dogs, exclaiming:

"These short-legged galloways have cost us two hounds! We had better stalk a deer than run him, unless we have swifter steeds."

"Stalking must serve our turn, now the dogs are gone," growled a shorter man who had come up and now stood beside him. "I would the legs of our nags had been longer!"

They were rough-looking men, and they spoke in the burred Saxon-English of Warwickshire five hundred years ago. It was another tongue from any now spoken in England.

The galloways, of whose legs they had complained, were the undersized and shaggy-maned horses they had ridden in that hunt. Such were plentiful then, but none other could be had save by those who could pay large prices.

"Fools are we," remarked another man. "And mayhap the horn blast has gone to the wrong ears with token of our doings. That was thy blowing, Guy the Bow."

"And what care we?" responded the tall hunter. "'Tis long since there hath been a royal keeper in any wood of Arden Forest. Earl Warwick himself never hunteth as far to the north as this. There's no harm in a horn, and I like well the sound, and the baying o' the dogs. We'll not again hear either very soon."

Others had now come up, but they said little. They lifted their game to the back of one of the gallows. The arrows were carefully extracted, cleaned, and restored to the quivers of their owners. The men were all stalwart fellows, and the bows they carried were tremendous weapons. When unstrung, such a bow would rest upon a man's foot and touch his nose, and only a strong and practiced arm could bend one. Besides the bows, they carried short, two-edged swords hanging at their belts, in which were also stuck broad-bladed knives or daggers. They wore no armor except light headpieces of steel, and their garments appeared to be made of leather. The body coats were like leather blouses, soiled and worn. They wore leggings of deerskin, but several were barefooted.

A brave-looking dozen were these hunters of Longwood. Their faces were not evil, and their talk was that of kindly men fond of adventure and of sport, but caring little whose deer they were taking.

The carcass of the stag had been bound to one of the horses, and the hunters were mounting, when a loud shout came from under the nearest oaks:

"Ho, there! Halt! What do ye, killing the king's deer?"

"Stand for your lives, men!" exclaimed Guy the Bow. "I'll not be taken!"

"Nor I!" roared a burly hunter at his side; "but – it's young Neville of Wartmont. I could not strike him."

Only five men came riding out from under the trees, but they were all well mounted, and were better armed than were the hunters. Every man of them wore linked mail, with shield and lance and sword, while at every saddlebow hung a mace or battleaxe. Their helmets were open in front, and the face of the foremost rider was that of a beardless boy. It was a very resolute face, however, and he raised his hand as he again demanded:

"In the king's name, what do ye?"

"We be free men," said Guy sturdily. "Little reason hath thy father's son to question our acts."

"Why not?" came back. "Yonder stag is a death-warrant for every man of you!"

"Not so," exclaimed the burly hunter. "I am Ben o' Coventry, and we all stand by Guy the Bow. Will thy mail shirt keep out a cloth-yard shaft, Richard Neville of Wartmont?"

An arrow was on every bowstring at that moment; but Guy the Bow spoke again.

"Thou art a boy, Richard Neville," he said. "I will tell thee somewhat thou shouldst know. Thou hast only the ruins of thy tower to dwell in; but when Earl Mortimer claimed thy father's barony, and sent his men to put his seneschal in holding, the yeomen of Wartmont and Longwood, and more from further on in Arden, stood by the Neville. The Mortimer raided our holdings, burning house and barn. He lost his head years on, and thy uncle is Earl of Warwick; but the bowmen of these parts had become used to taking Earl Mortimer's deer."

"They are the king's deer now," said Richard. "Ye know that well."

"They bear no mark," grumbled Ben, lowering his bow. "We'll call that stag for Mortimer, this day, in spite of the Neville. Take us not. Go back to your tower."

"My young lord," was spoken in a low voice from among the men in mail behind him, "let them alone. They are thine own men. It's only a deer more or less. There are foes enough. Hark to Ben once more."

"I heard thee, sir," said Ben gratefully. "He might do well to heed thy saying; but let him now hear what Guy may tell him."

"My young Lord of Wartmont," said Guy, "I had verily thought to go and see thee this day. Knowest thou not that Clod of Lee, the Club of Devon, hath been heard from this side the Avon? He was one of Mortimer's men, and he hateth thee and thine. He is a wolf's head, by all law. He and his outlaws would find at Wartmont much that such as they would seek. Go in haste and hold thy tower against them, if thou canst, and bother not thyself with a free hunt and a nag-load of venison."

"Thou art no king's forester," added Ben of Coventry. "These are times when a man may let well enough alone."

"He speaketh truly," whispered Richard's mailed adviser. "Ride we to the castle as fast as we may. Thy mother – "

"Not a dozen swordsmen are at the Mount!" exclaimed Richard. "My mother is unprotected! Guy the Bow, I thank thee for thy warning. What care I for a few deer? Only, watch thou and thy men; for the earl sendeth soon to put this part of the shire under close forest law. None may escape if work like this go on then."

"Thou art right, my young lord," responded Guy; "but the yeomen of Longwood have no fellowship with the wolves of Devon and Cornwall. It is said, too, that there be savage Welsh among these outlaws that spare neither woman nor child. Ride thou with speed, and God be with thee! Well for thee that they are not bowmen, like thy neighbors."

"Haste, my lord!" cried another of Richard's men. "There are many women and there are children at the tower."

"On! on!" shouted Richard; but his face was white, as he wheeled his horse southward.

Very terrible was the name which had been won by some of the robber bands of England. They had been more numerous during the reign of Edward the Second. His son, Edward the Third, was only fourteen years of age when he was crowned, and it was several years more before he really became king. Ever since then he had striven with only moderate success to restore order throughout his realm. Several notable bodies of savage marauders were still to be heard from only too frequently, while in many districts the yeomen paid as little attention to the forest laws as if they had been Robin Hood's merry men of Sherwood. This was not the case upon the lands of the great barons, but only where there was no armed force at hand to protect the game. The poachers were all the safer everywhere because of the strong popular feeling in their favor, and because any informer who should give the life of a man for that of a deer might thenceforth be careful how he ventured far into the woods. He was a mark for an arrow from a bush, and not many cared to risk the vengeance of the woodsmen.

On rode the young Neville and his four men-at-arms; but hardly had they disappeared among the forest glades before Ben of Coventry turned upon his galloway to ask:

"Guy the Bow, what thinkest thou? The Wartmont boy spoke not unkindly. There be kith and kin of the forest men at the tower. What if the Club of Lee should reach the moat and find the gate open? 'Tis a careless time."

"Hang up the stag and follow!" at once commanded Guy, captain of the hunt. "We have taken three the day. There will be venison at every hearth. If only for his father's sake – "

"We are not robbers, Guy the Bow," interrupted another of his followers. "We are true men. 'Twill be a wolf hunt instead of a deer hunt. I like it well."

They strung up the stag to a bough of a tree, and then wheeled with a shout and galloped away as merrily as if they had started another hart royal.

Three long miles away, easterly from the glade where the stag had fallen, the forest ended; and beyond the scattered dignities of its mighty oaks lay a wide reach of farm land. The fields were small, except some that seemed set aside for pastures and meadows. There were well-grown but not very well-kept hedges. There were a few farmhouses, with barns and ricks. Nearly in the center rose a craggy hill, and at the foot of this clustered a small hamlet. It was a sign of the troubles that Edward the Third had striven to quell that all along the outer border of the hamlet ran the tattered remnants of what once had been a strong line of palisades and a deep ditch.

The hill was the Wart Mount, and on its crest were massive walls with a high, square tower at one corner. Viewed from a distance, they seemed to be a baronial stronghold. On a nearer approach, however, it could be seen that the beauty and strength of Wartmont had been marred by fire, and that much of it needed rebuilding. Some repairs had been made on the tower itself. Its gateway, with moat and bridge, was in fair condition for defense. More than one road led across the open country toward the castle; but the highway was from the east, and travelers thereon were hidden from sight by the hill.

There was a great stir in the village, for a man came riding at full speed from one of the farmhouses, shouting loudly as he passed the old palisades:

"To the hill! To the castle! The wolves of Devon are nigh! They have wasted Black Tom's place, and have slain every soul!"

The warning had already traveled fast and far, and from each of the farmhouses loaded wains, droves of cattle, horses, sheep, were hurrying toward the hill. Women, with their children, came first, weeping and praying.

Far away, on the southerly horizon, arose a black cloud of smoke to tell of the end of Black Tom's wheatstacks and haystacks.

"Aye! aye!" mourned an old woman. "It's gone wi' fire! Alas! And the good king is in Flanders the day, and his people are harried as if they had no king."

"It's like the old time," said another, "when all the land was wasted. I mind the telling o' what the Scots did for the north counties till the king drave them across the border."

Well kept were the legends that were told from one generation to another in the days when there were no books or newspapers; and they were now rehearsed rapidly, while the affrighted farm people fled from their threatened homes, as their ancestors had many a time been compelled to do. Still they all seemed to have great faith in the castle, and to believe that when once there they would be safe.

The rider who brought the news did not pause in the village, but rode on, and dismounted at the bridge over the moat. Not stopping to hitch his panting horse, he strode into the open portal, sending his loud message of evil omen through the corridor beyond. Voice after voice took up the cry and carried it up through the tower and out into the castle yard, till it seemed to find weird echoes among the half-ruined walls. At no place were these altogether broken down. There was no breach in them. Large parts of the old structures were still roofed over, and along the battlements there quickly appeared the forms of old and young, peering out eagerly to see whatever there might be to see upon the lowland.

There were very few men, apparently; but in the lower rooms of the tower there were quickly clanking sounds, as shields and weapons and armor were taken down from their places.

A large open area was included within the outer walls, and there was room for quadrupeds as well as for human beings. Still there was a promise of close crowding, if all the fugitives on the roads were to be provided for.

Gathered now in the village street was a motley crowd of men. They were by no means badly armed, but they seemed to have no commander, and their hurried councils were of all sorts. Most seemed to favor a general retreat to the castle, but against this course was urged the fact that the marauders had not yet arrived, nor had all the people from the farms.

"Men!" exclaimed a portly woman with a scythe in her strong hands, "could ye not meet them at the palisades? Bar the gap with a wain. There are bows and crossbows among ye. Fight them there!"

"We could never hold them back," came doubtfully from one of the men. "They'd find gaps enough. It's only a stone wall can stop them."

"They'll plunder the village," the woman said.

"Better that than the blood of us all," responded the man. "We are few. Would the young lord were here with his men-at-arms!"

"He rode to the north the morn," she was told. "Only four were with him. The rest are far away with the earl. A summons came, telling that the Scots were over the border."

"Could not the north counties care for themselves, without calling on the midlands?" grumbled the woman.

At that moment there came a terrified shriek from the road-gap in the palisades. The last of several wains was passing in, and all the street was thronged with cattle.

"They come! They come!" screamed the women by that wain. "Oh, that they gat so nigh, and none to see! It's over with us the day! Yon is the Club, and his men are many!"

Partly mounted, but some of them on foot, a wild-looking throng of men came pouring across a stubble-field from the southward. It seemed as if they might be over a hundred strong. No marching order was observed. There was no uniformity in their arms. At the head of them strode a huge, black-haired, shaggy-bearded brute who bore a tremendous club of oak, bound at its heavier end with a thick ring of iron. He laughed and shouted as he came, as if with a savage pleasure over the wild deeds he had done and the prospect before him.

"Short work!" he roared to those behind him. "Burn all ye can not take. And then for the hills o' Wales! But we'll harry as we go!"

Other things he said that sounded as if he had an especial grudge against the king and against all who, like the Nevilles, had been his strong personal adherents.

The castle gateway was thronged, so that getting in was slow, but the yard was already filling fast. So were the rooms of the tower, and such as remained of the ruined buildings. Everywhere were distress and terror, except upon one face just inside the portal.

Tall and stately was Maud Neville, the widowed lady of Wartmont Castle. Her hair was white, but she was as erect as a pine, and all who looked into her resolute face might well have taken courage. Some seemed to do so, and around her gathered a score of stalwart retainers, with shields, axes, and swords. Some who had bows were bidden to man the loopholes on the second floor, and bide their time. Here, at least, if not in the village, there was a captain, and she was obeyed.

"Men," she said, "you know well what wolves these are. If they force their way into the keep, not one of us will be left to tell the tale."

A chorus of loyal voices answered her, and the men gripped their weapons.

So was it on that side of the hill; but on the other, toward the east, the highway presented another picture. Whether they were friends or foemen, there was none to tell; but they were a warlike band of horsemen. They were not mounted upon low-built galloways, but upon steeds of size and strength. The horsemen themselves wore mail and carried lances, and several of them had vizored helmets. They were ten in number, riding two abreast, and one of the foremost pair carried a kind of standard – a flag upon a long, slender staff. It was a broad, square piece of blue silk bunting, embroidered with heraldic devices that required a skilled reader to interpret them.

Strangely enough, according to the ideas and customs of the times, the rabble that followed Clod the Club had also a banner. It was a somewhat tattered affair; but it must once have been handsome. Its field was broad and white, and any eyes could see that its dimmed, worn blazon had been intended for three dragons. Perhaps the robber chief had reasons of his own for marching with a flag which must have been found in Wales. It may have aided him in keeping at his command some men who retained the old fierce hatred of the Welsh for the kings of England.

He and his savages had now reached the palisades. The village men retreated slowly up the street, while the remainder of those who could not fight passed across the drawbridge and entered the castle gate. More than one sturdy woman, however, had picked up a pike or an axe or a fork, and stood among her kindred and her neighbors.

Not all the cattle nor all the wains could be cared for; and a shout from the portal summoned the villagers to make more haste, that the gate might be closed behind them. Part of them had been too brave and part too irresolute, and there was no soldiership in their manner of obeying. They were, indeed, almost afraid to turn their backs, for arrows were flying now.

Well it was for them that there seemed to be so few good archers among the outlaws; for down went man after man, in spite of shields or of such armor as they had. Better shooting was done by the men of Wartmont themselves, and the archers in the tower were also plying their bows. It was this that made the Club of Devon shout to his wolves to charge, for the shafts were doing deadly work.

With loud yells, on they rushed; and further retreat was impossible. The foremost fighters on each side closed in a desperate strife, and the Wartmont farmers showed both skill and strength. Half of them carried battle-axes or poleaxes, and they plied them for their lives. Had it not been for Clod

himself, the rush might even have been checked; but nothing could stand before him. He fought like a wild beast, striking down foemen right and left, and making a pathway for his followers.

Victory for the outlaws would have been shortly gained but for the help that came to the villagers.

"Onward, my men!" shouted Lady Maud, as she sprang across the narrow bridge. "Follow me! Save your kith and kin!"

"We will die with you!" cried out her retainers as they pushed forward, while the archers in the tower hurried down to join them.

Still they were too few; and the white head of the brave woman was quickly the center of a surging mass, her entire force being almost surrounded by the horde of robbers.

No shout came up the road. There was no sound but the rapid thud of horses' feet; but suddenly five good lances charged furiously in among the wolves. The foremost horseman went clean through them, but his horse sank, groaning, as a Welsh pike stabbed him, and his rider barely gained his feet as the horse went down. Sword in hand, then, he turned to face his foes, but he spoke not to them.

"Mother!" he shouted, "I am here!"

"Thank God for thee, my son!" responded the brave woman. "Thou art but just in time!"

Dire had been her peril, at that moment, but Richard's presence gave courage to the defenders, while his charge had staggered the outlaws. He was more than a match, with three of his dismounted men-at-arms at his side, for the foes immediately in front of them. His fourth follower lay several yards away, with his steel cap beaten in by a blow of the terrible club.

"Hah! hah! hah!" yelled Clod as he turned from that victim to press his way toward young Neville. "Down with him! Out of my path! Give the youngster to me!"

"Face him, my son!" said Lady Maud, "and Heaven's aid be with thee! Oh, for some o' the good king's men!"

"I have thee!" roared Clod, swinging high his club and preparing for a deadly blow.

Firm as a rock stood the young warrior, raising his shield to parry.

Down came the club, but forward flashed the sword with an under-thrust.

"O my son!" burst from the lips of the Lady of Wartmont. "My son hath fallen! Stand firm, men!"

Fallen, indeed, but so had Clod the Club, pierced through by the sword-thrust; and a fierce yell burst from his followers as they sprang forward to avenge him. They had been faring badly, but they were many and they were desperate. They might even yet have broken through the men of the tower who had stepped in front of Richard while his mother knelt to lift him, but for another turn in the strange fortunes of the day.

There was no warning, and all were too intent on the fray to note the arrival of newcomers; but now there came a sudden dropping of the outer men of the throng of robbers. Shaft after shaft, unerring, strongly driven, pierced them from back to breast.

"Shoot close!" shouted a voice. "Miss not. Steady, men! O Richard Neville of Wartmont, we are the killers of the king's deer!"

"Aye!" added Ben of Coventry. "We are with Guy the Bow, and 'tis a wolf-hunt!"

They were not many, but their archery was terrible. Fast twanged the bows, and fast the outlaws fell.

"Closer, men! Spare not any!" commanded Guy the Bow, and the line of gallows wheeled nearer.

It was too much. The remaining robbers would have fled if they could, but they were between two fires.

"O Richard!" murmured Lady Maud. "Thou art not dead?"

His fine dark eyes opened, just then, and a smile came faintly upon his lips as he replied:

"Only stunned, mother. The caitiff's club banged my shield down upon my head, but my steel cap bore it well, else my neck were broken. Did he go down?"

"He lieth among the ruck," she said. "But oh, thank God! The archers of Longwood have come! The fight is won!"

It was won, indeed; for neither the archers nor the Wartmont men were showing any mercy to the staggering, bewildered remnants of the outlaw band which had been such a terror to the Welsh border, and was to other counties almost as far inland as was Warwick itself. Never more would any peaceful hamlet or lonely tower be left in ruins to tell of the ruthless barbarity of the wolves of Devon.

Why they were so called, none knew; but it might be because that fair county had at one time suffered most from their marauding, or because fierce Clod the Club and some of his wild followers came from Lee on the Devon shore.

"Bloody work, my young Lord of Wartmont! Bloody work, my lady!"

"Thank God for thee, Guy the Bow!" she responded. "Alas, my neighbors! But who cometh there? My son, yonder is the flag of Cornwall, and none may carry it but the prince himself. All ye stand fast, but those who care for the hurt ones."

These, indeed, were many, for the women and children were pouring down from the castle. With weeping and with wailing they were searching for their own among the dead and the wounded. But even the mourners stood almost still for a moment, as a knightly cavalcade came thundering up the street.

The foremost horseman drew rein in front of Lady Maud and her son, and the taller of them demanded:

"O Lady Neville of Wartmont, what is this? The prince rideth toward Warwick. I am Walter de Maunay."

"His highness is most welcome," she said, with calm dignity. "So art thou, Sir Walter. Around thee are the dead wolves of Devon. Some of our own people have fallen. Would thou wert here an hour the sooner. God save the king!"

Rapid were the questions and the answers, but the Black Prince himself, as he was called, left all the talking to Sir Walter, while he dismounted to study the meaning of the fray.

He had singularly keen, dark eyes, and they flashed swiftly hither and thither, as if they were seeking to know exactly how this small battle had been fought and won.

"And this is the famous Clod the Club?" he said. "By whose hand was this thrust?"

"'Twas young Lord Richard," answered Guy the Bow. "Both went down, but the Neville was little hurt. 'Twas bravely done!"

"Richard Neville," exclaimed the prince, "thou hast won honor in this! I would that I had slain him. Thou art a good sword. The king hath need of thee."

"He shall go with me," added Sir Walter admiringly, as he gazed down upon the massive form of the slain robber. "Madame, give the king thy son."

"Yea, and amen," she said. "He is the king's man. I would have him go. And I will bide at Warwick Castle until he cometh again. Speak thou, Richard!"

"I am the king's man," replied Richard, his face flushing. "O my mother, bid me go with the prince. I would be a knight, as was my father, and win my spurs before the king; but I fain would ask one favor of his grace."

"Ask on," said the prince. "'Twere hard to refuse thee after this gallant deed of arms."

"This work is less mine," said Richard, "than of Guy the Bow and my good forestmen. But I trow that some of them have found unlawful marks for other of their arrows. I ask for them the grace and pardon of the king."

"They have sinned against the king's deer," loudly laughed Sir Walter de Maunay. "There needeth no promise. Thou hast not heard of his royal proclamation. Free pardon hath he proclaimed

to all such men as thine, if they will march with him against the King of France. 'Tis fair pay to every man, and the fortune of war beyond sea."

No voice responded for a moment as the archers studied one another's faces.

"Richard," said his mother, "speak thou to them. They wait for thee."

"O Guy the Bow," said Richard, "wilt thou come with me – thou and thy men?"

There was speech from man to man behind Guy; but it was Ben of Coventry who said:

"Tell thy prince, Guy the Bow, that two score and more of bows like thine will follow Richard Neville to fight for our good king."

To address the prince directly was more than Guy could do; but he spoke out right sturdily:

"My master of Wartmont, thou hearest the speech of Ben. 'Tis mine also. We take the pardon, and we will take the pay; and we will go as one band, with thee for our captain."

"Aye," said another archer, "with the young Neville and Guy the Bow."

"Ye shall be the Neville's own company," responded the prince. "I like it well. So will they do best service."

"Aye, 'tis the king's way also," added Sir Walter de Maunay; and then the Lady of Wartmont led the way into the castle.

Richard went not forthwith, but conferred with his archers. He had care also for the injured and the dead, and to learn the harm done in the village and among the farms.

In a few minutes more, however, the banner of the prince was floating gayly from a corner of the tower, to tell to all who saw that the heir of the throne of England was under the Wartmont roof.

CHAPTER II.

THE MEN OF THE WOODS

Lacking in many things, but not in stately hospitality or in honest loyalty, was the welcome given that night at Wartmont Castle to the heir of the English throne and to his company.

Truth to tell, the fortunes of this branch of the great house of Neville were not at their best. The brave Sir Edward Neville had fallen in Flanders fighting for the king. His widow and her only son had found themselves possessed of much land, but of little else. Too many acres of the domain were either forest or hill, that paid neither tithe nor rental. Not even Lady Maud's near kinship to the Earl of Warwick was as yet of any avail, for these were troublous times. Many a baron of high name was finding it more and more difficult to comply with the exactions of Edward the Third, and the king himself could hardly name a day when his very crown and jewels had not been in pawn with the money lenders.

The less of discomfort, therefore, was felt by Lady Maud; but she was grateful that the prince and the famous captain, Sir Walter, so frankly laughed away her apologies at their parting the next morn.

"I am but an esquire," said the prince. "My royal father biddeth me to wear plain armor and seek hard fare until I win my spurs. Thou hast given me better service than he alloweth me."

"Most noble lady," added Sir Walter, "I am proud to have been the guest of the widow of my old companion in arms – "

"Be thou, then, a friend to his son," she broke in earnestly.

"That will I," responded De Maunay, "but we may not serve together speedily. I go to confer with the Earl of Warwick. Then I am bidden to join Derby's forces in Guienne and Gascony. Hard goeth the war there. As for thy son, he, too, should come to Warwick with his first levies. The king hath ordered the power of the realm to gather at Portsmouth by the ninth day of next October."

"I must be there, mother," said Richard.

"Bring thy archers with thee, if thou canst," replied Sir Walter. "It is the king's thought that his next great field is to be won with the arrow, rather than the sword or the lance. But he will have only good bows, and them he will train under his own eye. It is time, now, for our going."

The young prince, like the knight, gave the respectful ceremony of departure to the Lady of Wartmont, but much of youthful frankness mingled with his words and manner to Richard.

"I envy thee, indeed," he said to him, "thy close with the Club of Devon. I have never yet had such a fortune befall me. I have seen fights by sea and land, but ever some other hand than mine struck the best blow."

"Thou wilt strike blows enough before thou art done, thou lion's cub of England," said Sir Walter admiringly, for he loved the boy. That was good reason, too, why he was with him on this journey with so small a company.

"Few, are they?" had Richard responded to a word from his mother concerning peril to the prince. "I have marked them, man by man. I think they have been picked from the best of the king's men-at-arms. A hundred thieves would go down before them like brambles before a scythe. And the prince told me he thought it scorn to need other guards than his own people – "

"And his own sword," she said, "and the lances of De Maunay and his men. But the roads are not safe."

"Thou wilt be securely conveyed to Warwick, O my mother," he said lovingly. "I will not leave thee until thou art within the earl's own walls."

This had been spoken early in the day after the conflict with the outlaws, and now the horsemen were in their saddles, beyond the bridge of the moat, waiting for the prince and the knight.

Their waiting ended, and it was fair to see how lightly the great captain and his young friend, in spite of their heavy armor, did spring to horseback.

Gracious and low was their last salute to the bare, white head of Lady Maud at the portal, and then away they rode right merrily.

"O my son!" exclaimed she, turning to Richard at her side, "I can wish no better fortune for thee than to be the companion of thy prince. I tell thee, thou hast won much by this thy defense of thy mother and thy people."

"Aye," said Richard, laughing, "but thou wast the captain. I found thee leading thy array, and I did but help at my best. I would Sir Walter were to be with us, and not with the Earl of Derby."

"There be men-at-arms as good as he," she said. "Thou wilt have brave leaders to learn war under. And, above all, thou wilt be with thy king. Men say there hath not been one like him to lead men since William the Norman conquered this fair land. Thou, too, art a Neville and a Norman, but forget thou not one thing."

"And what may that be, my mother?" asked Richard, wondering somewhat.

"Knowest thou not thy hold upon the people, nor why the bowmen of Arden forest come to thee rather than to another? Neville and Beauchamp, thou art a Saxon more than a Norman. Thy father could talk to the men of the woods in their old tongue. It dieth away slowly, but they keep many things in mind from father to son. Every man of them is a Saxon of unmixed blood, and to that degree that thou art Saxon thou art their kinsman. So hated they Earl Mortimer and would have none of him, and so he harried them, as thou hast heard. They will stand by thee as their own."

"So will I bide by them!" exclaimed Richard stoutly. "And now there is one yonder that I must have speech with. I pray thee, go in, my mother."

"That will I not," she said. "It behooveth me to pass through the hamlet, house by house, till I know how they fare the day. There are hurts among both men and women, and I am a leech. Are they not my own?"

"And well they love thee," said her son, and they walked on down the slope side by side.

That they did so love her was well made manifest when men, women, and children crowded around her. Every voice had its tale of things done, or seen, or heard, and there was wailing also, for the few who had escaped from near Black Tom's place were here, and others from farther on. Dark and dire had been the deeds of the robber crew from the Welsh border to the heart of Warwickshire, and great was the praise that would everywhere be given to the young lord of Wartmont manor and his brave men. The Club of Devon and his outlaws would be heard of or feared no more. 'Twas a deed to be remembered and told of, in after time, among the fireside talks of the midland counties.

The madame now had household visits to make not a few, and Richard listened long to the talk of the farmers and the village men. He seemed to have grown older in a day, but his mother said, in her heart:

"I can see that the folk are gladdened to find that he is so like to the brave knight, his father. God keep him, among the spears and the battle-axes of the French men-at-arms! I fear he is over young to ride with such as serve with the prince."

She could not think to hold him back, but he was her only son, and she was a widow.

Patently, all the while, a little apart from the rest, had waited the burly shape of Guy the Bow, and with him was no other forester, but beside him stood his shaggy-maned galloway.

"Thou art come?" said Richard. "Brave thanks to thee and thine. What errand hast thou, if so be thou hast any for me?"

"I bided out of seeing till the prince and Lord de Maunay rode on," replied Guy. "Even now I would no other ears than thine were too near us."

"This way, then," said Richard, turning to walk toward the moat. "I have somewhat to say to thee as we go."

None joined them, and as they walked the archer was informed concerning the mandates of the king and the mustering by land and sea at Portsmouth.

"I have been there," said Guy, "in my youth. 'Tis not so far to go. 'Tis well in behind the Isle of Wight. I have been told by seafaring men that the French have never taken it, though they tried. A safe haven. But there are others as safe on the land. Part of my coming to thee is to ask that thou wilt venture to look in on one."

"I may not venture foolishly or without a cause," said Richard. "Thee I may trust, but all are not as thou art."

"All thou wilt see are keepers of good faith when they give troth," laughed Guy pleasantly, "or else more in Wartmont would know what to this day they know not. My Lord of Wartmont, plain speech is best. The men who are to go with thee are under the king's ban, as thou knowest. They will not put themselves within the reach of the sheriff of Warwickshire till they are sure of safety. They will hear the king's proclamation from thine own lips, for thou hast it from the prince himself. A man's neck is a thing he is prone to guard right well."

"Go and have speech with them? That will I!" exclaimed Richard promptly. "Nor is there time to lose. I will bid them bring my horse –"

"Not as thou now art," responded Guy. "Don thou thy mail. Be thou well armed. But men of thine from the castle may not ride with us. I have that to show thee which they may not see. Wilt thou trust me?"

"That will I," said Richard.

"And thine own sword is a good one," added the archer, with soldierly admiration in his face. "I have seen thy father in tourney. Thou wilt have good stature and strong thews, as had he in his day. They say 'twas a great battle when he fell among the press, and that many good spears went down."

"Aye. Go!" said Richard thoughtfully. "I will explain this thing to my mother. She needeth but to know that I go to meet a muster of the men."

"Nay," said Guy. "Fear thou not to tell my lady all. In her girlhood she was kept, a day and a night, where none could do her harm, for the Welsh were over the border, under Lewellyn the Cruel, and the castle of her father was not safe. She was not a Neville then, and the Beauchamps fled for their lives."

"What was the quarrel?" asked Richard.

"Little know I," replied the archer. "What have plain woodsmen to do with the feuds of the great? Some trouble, mayhap, between King Edward the Second and his earls. We aye heard of fights and ravages in those days, but there came none to harry us in Arden."

So they talked but little more, and Richard passed on into the castle followed by Guy the Bow.

Their first errand was to the hall of arms in the lower story, and the eyes of the forester glittered with delight as they entered.

"Thou couldst arm a troop!" he exclaimed. "What goodly weapons are these!"

"Wartmont hath held a garrison more than once," said Richard. "Pray God that our good king may keep the land in peace. But it needeth that his hand be strong."

"Strong is it," said Guy, "and the young prince biddeth fair. I like him well. But, my Lord of Wartmont, the noon draweth nigher and we have far to ride."

"Aye," said Richard; but he was taking down from the wall piece after piece and weapon after weapon, eying them as if he loved them well but was in doubt.

"No plate armor, my lord," said Guy. "It were too heavy if thou went on foot. Let it be good chain mail; but take thee a visored headpiece. With thy visor down strange eyes would not know thee too well. Leg mail, not greaves, and a good, light target rather than a horseman's shield. This is a rare good lance."

"That will I take," said Richard, as he tested a sword blade by springing it on the stone pavement of the hall. "I will hang a mace at my pommel."

"Thou art a bowman," said Guy. "Thy bow and quiver also can hang at thy saddle. Nay, not that heavy bit of yew. Thy arms are too young to bend it well. Choose thee a lighter bow."

"I will string it, then, and show thee," replied Richard, a little haughtily. "Yon is a target at the head of the hall. Wait, now."

The bow was strung with an ease and celerity which seemed to surprise the brawny forester. He took it and tried its toughness and handed it back, for Richard had taken an arrow from a sheaf beneath a window.

"Good arm, thine!" shouted Guy, for the shaft was drawn to the head and landed in the very center of the bull's eye of the wooden tablet at the hall end. "Thou art a Saxon in thy elbows. Canst thou swing an axe like this?"

He held out a double-headed battle-axe that seemed not large. It was not too long in the handle, but its blades were thick as well as sharp edged. It was no weapon for one at all weak-handed.

Clogs of wood lay near, with many cuts already upon them, as if there had been chopping done. Richard took the axe and went toward a clog of hard oak.

Click, click, click, in swift succession, rang his blows, and the chips flew merrily.

"Done!" shouted Guy. "Take that, then, instead of thy foolish mace. It will but bruise, while thine axe will cleave through mail or buff coat. Ofttimes a cut is better than a bruise, if it be well given. I would I had a good axe."

"Take what thou wilt," said Richard. "Put thee on a better headpiece, and change thy sword. If thou seest spears to thy liking, they are thine; or daggers, or aught else. We owe thee good arming."

"Speak I also for Ben o' Coventry," responded Guy. "He needeth a headpiece, for his own is but cracked across the crown, and his sword is not of the best."

"Choose as thou wilt for Ben," said Richard, "or for any other as good as he. Needeth he mail?"

"His buff coat is more to his liking," said Guy, "and men say that the king will not have his bowmen overweighted for fast walking. The weary man draweth never a good bow, nor sendeth his arrow home."

"Right is the king," replied Richard. "I am but a youth, but I can see that a foe might get away from heavy armor."

Guy was busy among the weapons and he made no answer. At that moment, however, there was a footfall behind him, and he sprang to his feet to make a low obeisance.

"Mother!" exclaimed Richard, "I was coming to tell thee."

But not to him was her speech, nor in Norman French, nor in the English dialect of the Warwickshire farmers. She questioned Guy in old Saxon, such as was not often heard since the edicts of the Norman kings had discouraged its use. Richard could speak it well, however, and he knew that Guy was explaining somewhat the errand before him.

"It is well," she said. "I will trust him with thee. The castle is safe. But hold him not too long, for I make myself ready to pass on to Warwick, to abide with the earl for a season."

"Right soon will he return," said Guy the Bow, "and good bows with him. The king shall be pleased with the company from Arden and Wartmont."

Small wonder was it, after all, that while all Welshmen retained their ancient tongue, and many Cornishmen, and the Manxmen all, and the Gaels of Scotland and the wild Erse of Ireland, so also many thousands – no one knew how many – in the rural districts of England, still preserved but little changed the language with which their fathers had answered to Harold, the last of the Saxon kings. Hundreds of years later the traces of it lingered in Warwickshire, Lincolnshire, Yorkshire, Lancashire, and elsewhere, in a manner to confuse the ears of modernized men from the towns and from the coasts, as well as all outland men who might believe that they understood English.

Well did Guy obey the commands of both Richard and his mother; for when, after a hearty breaking of his fast, he stood by the side of his galloway, that good beast had cause to whinny as he did, as if to inquire of his master what need there might be that he should so be packed with weapons and

with steel caps for the heads of men. The gallant animal that was to carry Richard, on the other hand, was fitted out and laden as if at any moment his rider might be changed from a lance-bearing man-at-arms to a bowman on foot. Other baggage there was none, and Lady Maud, from her crenelated peephole in the Wartmont keep, saw her son and his companion ride slowly away through the village.

"Heaven guard him!" she murmured. "But he can not gain too well the hearts of the old race. They be hard-headed men and slow to choose a leader, but they are strong in a fray. I would the tallest of the forest deerslayers should go shoulder to shoulder with my son into the king's battles."

So she gazed until the pair of horsemen disappeared along the road; then she descended a flight of stairs and walked to the end of a corridor. Here was a door that opened into a high vaulted chamber, at the far end of which were candles burning before an altar and a crucifix. This was the chapel of the castle, and Lady Maud's feet bore her on, more and more slowly, until she sank upon her knees at the altar rail and sobbed aloud.

Well away now, up the valley, northward, rode Richard Neville and Guy the Bow, but they were no longer in any road marked by wheels of wains. They had left the highway for a narrow bridle path that was leading them into the forest.

"My Lord of Wartmont," said the archer, "I pray thee mark well the way as thou goest. Chance might be that thou shouldst one day travel it alone. Put thou thine axe to the bark of a tree, now and then, and let it be a mark of thine own, not like that of another. I think no man of knightly race now liveth who could guide thee, going or coming."

In an instant Richard's battle-axe was in his hand, and a great oak had received a mark of a double cross.

"There hangeth a shield in the gallery of the armory," he said, "that is blazoned in this wise. It is said that a good knight brought it home from Spain, in the old wars. Well is it dented, too, in proof that it fended the blows of strong fighters. It is thrust through and it is cloven."

"Mayhap in frays with the heathen," said Guy. "A sailor, once, at Portsmouth, one of our own kin, told me rare tales of the Moors that he had seen in the Spanish seas. He told me of men that were black as a sloe; but it is hard to believe, for what should blacken any man? He had seen a whale, too, and a shark three fathoms long. There be wonders beyond seas."

"And beyond them all is the end of the world," said Richard, "but the ships do not venture that far to their ruin."

So more and more companionlike and brotherly grew the young lord and the forester, as they rode on together, and it seemed to please Guy well both to loosen his own tongue and to ask many questions concerning matters of which little telling had ever yet come in among the forests of Arden.

The day waned and the path wound much, and there was increasing gloom among the trees and thickets, when Guy turned suddenly to Richard.

"Put down thy visor," he said sharply, "and draw thy sword. We are beset! Sling thy lance behind thee, and get thee down upon thy feet. This is no place to sit upon a horse and be made a mark of."

The actions of both were suited to the word on the instant, but hardly was Richard's helmet closed before an arrow struck him on the crest. But that he had been forewarned, it had smitten him through the face.

"Outlaws!" said Guy. "Robbers – not our own men. How they came here I know not. Down, quickly!"

Even as he spoke, however, his bow twanged loudly, and a cry went up from a dense copse beyond them.

"One!" he shouted, and he and Richard sprang lightly to the earth.

"Well my sword was out!" said the latter as he gained his feet, for bounding toward him were half a dozen wild shapes carrying blade and buckler.

"Down with them!" roared the foremost of the assailants; but Guy the Bow was in front of him, and in his hand was a poleaxe from Wartmont armory.

It was a fearful weapon in the hands of such a man as he, to whom its weight was as a splinter. It flashed and fell, and the lifted buckler before it might as well have been an eggshell for all the protection it gave to the bare head of the robber. He should have worn a helmet, but he would never more need cap of any kind. Useless, too, was the light blade that glinted next upon the shield of Richard, for it made no mark, while its giver went down with a thigh wound, struck below his buckler.

On swept the terrible blows of the poleaxe, and Guy had no man to meet but was nearly a head shorter than himself.

"They are all down!" he shouted. "Mount, my Lord of Wartmont; they in the copse have fled, but there may be more at hand. We will ride hard now. These are thieves from Lancashire, and they have not been heard of in these parts for many a day. I think they have been harried out of their own nests. They are but wolves."

"What kin are they?" asked Richard, as he regained his saddle.

"That I know not, nor do I know their speech," replied Guy. "But among them are no tall men nor many good bows. Ben o' Coventry hath been told by a monk from those parts that they are a kind of old Welsh that were left when the first King Edward smote their tribe to death. They will live in no town, nor will they obey any law, nor keep troth with any. But the monk told Ben that they were not heathen, and among them were men who could talk Latin like a priest. How that could be I know not."

"Nor I," said Richard; "but I tell thee, Guy the Bow, I like this war of the king's with France. We shall cross the sea, and we shall look upon strange lands and towns. I would not bide aye at Wartmont. I would see the world."

"That would not I," laughed Guy, "but if the king winneth battles and taketh towns there will be spoils to bring home. I will come back to own land and cattle, and thou canst build again thy castle walls and maintain thy state. I saw a piece of gold once."

"There is little enough of gold in England," said Richard; but the path was narrowing and they could no longer gallop abreast.

Not far had they pushed on, however, before Guy drew his rein and turned upon his gallows to say, in a hushed voice:

"My Lord of Wartmont, I dare not sound a horn. I pray thee dismount and come after me through the hazels. I know not of peril, but we need to go lightly."

"Aye," returned Richard, as he dropped from the saddle nimbly enough considering his arms. "I am with thee."

Path there seemed to be none in that dim light, but ere long, as he followed his guide, the hazel bushes on either side opened widely and before him spread a grassy level. Only that the grass was too luxuriant and that here and there were rushes, it might have seemed a pleasant glade.

"'Tis the southerly arm," said Guy, "of the great moss of Arden. There is little more of it till you get leagues north of this. Oh, but it's deep and fateful. He who steppeth into it cometh not up."

"What do we, then?" asked Richard.

"That which few may dare," replied Guy with one of his brave laughs. "But a piece onward and I will show thee. Here might be barred an army."

"That might they," said Richard, staring across the treacherous green level, below which, Guy told him, there was no bottom.

Beyond were shadowy lines that told of forest growths, and these were nearer as they led their horses onward.

"A bridge!" exclaimed Richard, as he caught a glimpse of a mass of logs and planks. "Is there crossing?"

"None but what the men of the woods can take away before dawn," said Guy. "It is a bridge that some have crossed who came not back again. I pray thee, speak not save in old Saxon. 'Tis the only tongue that may be heard inside o' the moss of Arden."

Richard spoke not aloud, but he was saying much in his thoughts.

"This, then, is the reason why the sheriff of Warwickshire had missed finding many that were traced to the forest. The takers of the king's deer know where to hide their venison. But even on this bridge a few axemen could hold back a troop. Yonder bushes could hide archery. He would be a bold captain, or crack-brained, who would lead men upon this narrow way."

The woodwork trembled somewhat with the weight of the two horses and the men, but it bore them well enough.

"Hail, thou!" came hoarsely from among the shadows as they reached the farther bank. "Come well. Thou hast him with thee."

"Greet them in Saxon," whispered Guy, and he also responded loudly:

"Hail, men, all! Is Ben o' Coventry with ye? This is Richard of Wartmont, with the king's word in his mouth. I gave him safe conduct, and his mother sendeth ye good greeting."

Something like a cheer arose from several voices, but the speakers were unseen until Guy and Richard had passed on many paces into the forest. Even then only dark and silent forms walked with them, and there were gleams of bright spearheads before them and behind.

"Every man hath his bow and his buckler," thought Richard, "and most of them are sturdy fellows. The king hath need of such. It is said that the outland men are smaller in the bones."

It was the prevailing opinion among the English of that day that one of their own was equivalent to four Frenchmen, and they counted as French nearly all of the dwellers beyond the Channel, except the Hollanders and the Danes, or Norsemen. The Norway folk were also, by the greater part, counted as Danes, and were believed to be hard fighters. So, among the country folk, still lingered the traditions of the ancient days, when Knut and his vikings had swept the coast and conquered the island.

It was a walk of a league, and there was some talking by the way, but the men all seemed in haste and they strode rapidly.

Then they were greeted by loud shouting, and Richard saw a red light grow beyond the trees.

"Here is cleared land," was his next thought, "and yonder is a balefire. Ho! In the king's name, what is this? Are there strongholds hidden among the woods?"

Before him, as he went forward, was an open area which may have contained hundreds of acres. He could see broad reaches of it by the glaring light of a huge heap of burning wood, a few score yards from the edge of the forest. Beyond the fire, as much farther, he could discern the outlines of a large building, and, even more distinctly, a long line of palisades in front of it.

"My lord," said Guy, "yonder is the hidden ward in Arden. If any that are great of thy kinsmen ever heard of it, they told thee not. There was thy mother fended, and there thy father lay long days, when Earl Mortimer's men were seeking his head. Thou art welcome, only let thy lips be as our own concerning our hold. It will be kept well should strangers come."

Richard glanced at the rugged forms around him, and at many more that were walking hither and thither in the firelight. All were armed, and he could well believe that they would make Guy's word good for him. They crowded around as he drew near, and there was an increasing heartiness in their manner and words as he continually replied to them in the forgotten tongue. He knew not of gypsies, or the thought might have come to him that these half-outlaws, every man a deerslayer, under the ban of the stern forest laws, had need, as had the Romany or "Bohemians" as they were called, to possess a speech of their own. It was a protection, inasmuch as it aided them in detecting intruders and in secretly communicating with each other.

There seemed to be no chief man, no captain, but all stood on a kind of rude equality, save that much deference was paid to Guy the Bow.

"Right on to the house, if it please thee, my lord," he said. "It is late, and there is roast venison waiting. Thou mayest well be hungered. Is all ready, Ben o' Coventry?"

"All that's to be eaten," responded Ben, "but the talking with the men must be done on the morrow. They from the upper woods are not in. It was well to slay the Lancashire thieves. Some have gone out after what thou and he did leave. They may not tell tales of aught they have seen in Arden."

A few words more of explanation informed Richard that he was there sooner than had been expected, and he was quite willing to let his wild entertainers have their own way.

"I would see all," he said, "and talk to all at once."

"There might be jealousies," whispered Guy. "Thou doest wisely. Here is the gate."

A vast oaken portal heavily strengthened with iron swung open in the line of the bristling palisades while he was speaking. There was a moat, of course, with a bridge of planks to the gate, over which Richard and those who were with him went in. The inclosure beyond was large, and in it was blazing more than one log heap, the better to light up the buildings.

Some would have called it a grange, if there had not been so much of it, for there were more houses than one, all grouped, attached or built on to a central structure. There was no masonry, but the woodwork was exceedingly heavy and strong. If there were more than one story to the grange, it must have been hidden under the high-pitched roofs, for there were no upper windows. Such of these as could be seen below were all closed with heavy swing shutters, nor was there any chimney on any roof.

This was the manner in which the West Saxons of Harold's time builded the palaces of their chiefs and earls.

CHAPTER III. THE EARL AND THE ESQUIRE

When Lady Maud Neville arose from her knees at the altar rail there was a beautiful light upon her noble face. Her long, white hair had fallen around her shoulders, but for some reason she seemed to have grown younger.

"I will give him to the king!" she loudly exclaimed. "I have prayed that my son may be as was his father, a knight without a stain. But here I may not tarry. It were better I made ready for a journey even ere I sleep, for when Richard returneth there will be haste. There is much that I would not leave behind. I will load no wain with goods, but the pack beasts will bear full panniers."

She walked out of the chapel and her serving men and maidens met her, eager to do her bidding. After that there were chambers and storerooms to visit and coffers to open and packs to bind, for she was not ill supplied with the garments that were suited to her rank, and above all there were small caskets of dark wood that were not opened. It was said that there were gems and jewels in Wartmont, and the saying may have reached the ears of such as Clod the Club to bring him thither. If so, well was it that he and his would never come again.

Ever and anon, however, as the good lady passed a window, she would pause and look out toward the forest, as if in that direction there might be some one that she longed to see.

Day waned and the night came on, and all preparations appeared to be completed, for again she visited the chapel before retiring to her chamber. Long since had the great gate been closed, and the portcullis lowered and the bridge over the moat drawn in. Now, at last, the curfew bell sounded from the tower and the lights in castle and village went out, save one bronze lamp that still burned in that corner of the keep to which the lady herself had retreated.

It was a large room and lofty, with twain of narrow windows that were as if for archers to ply their arrows through them rather than for lighting the space within. The floor was strewn with dry rushes for luxury, and the garnishing was such as became the mistress of Wartmont. Heavily carved, of oak, were the tables and the high-backed chairs and the settles. The mirror over the chest of drawers must have come from Venice itself. There were curtains at the windows and around the high-post bedstead which might have been woven in Flanders or Normandy, for none such could be made in England. The walls were wainscoted to the height of a man's shoulder, but there were no tapestries to tell of great wealth. It was as if in this place of retirement had been preserved all that remained of the broken prosperity of this branch of the great house of Neville.

The lady slept not, nor even looked at the bed, but sank into a great cushioned chair and seemed to be lost in thought.

No words escaped her lips although much time went by. There was no hand to turn the hourglass on the bureau near her, nor could she have known at what hour she was startled to her feet.

Loud rang the summoning sound of a clarion at the great gate, and louder was the sudden answer of the alarum bell in the tower. She was at a window ere she knew, and she heard a shouting:

"Open, O ye of Wartmont! In the king's name! It is John Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick. Is our lord the prince within?"

"Open will we right gladly," sent back the warder at the gate. "But the prince and my Lord of Maunay rode on to Warwick in the morn."

"Saints preserve them!" uttered another voice. "But we must needs come in. Bid the Lady Maud rest. I will trouble her not until day."

"My noble kinsman!" she exclaimed, turning quickly from her window. "I will make haste to greet him. Well is it that I am robed. I will meet him speedily in the hall."

Even so she did, and the minutes were few before she stood face to face with a tall man of noble presence, in full armor save the helmet he had doffed on entering. He seemed in full vigor of life, but gray-headed, as became a statesman upon whom the king might lean.

Questions and answers followed fast, and all the while the Wartmont retainers were busily providing for the hundred horsemen who had ridden in the train of the earl. Of them were knights and nobles also, and some of these now stood near the lady and the earl. Strong was their speech, as was his, concerning the rashness which the prince had shown in riding across England with so small a company.

"Knoweth he not," said one, "that there is treason in the land?"

"Silence on that head, Geoffrey of Harcourt," responded the earl. "But we may trust he is safe in Warwick. Had we taken another highway we might have met him. But, madame, this is fine news of my young kinsman. Well for him that he hath won the favor of the prince and of that rare good lance, De Maunay. More than well is it also that he hath sallied forth promptly to gather his archery. It will please the king. Better bowmen are not than he will bring from Arden. Now, Lady Maud, hie thee to thy rest, and so will we all, for we are weary."

The remaining words were few, and once more the castle grew still, save for the stamping of restless horses in the courtyard and the busy chatter of the warders of Wartmont with the guard set by the earl.

Now there was another place in which all was quiet, only that on a heap of rushes and a spread garment lay a youth who slept not, but turned at times uneasily.

"I fear no treachery," he muttered, but not in Saxon. "I think these be true men. Yet I will leave my sword bare and my axe by it lest peril come. Who would have looked for a hold like this among these woods?"

Then his thoughts went back to that which he had seen on coming in. He had passed the moat and the portal with Guy the Bow, and through a short passage. Then he had entered a vast hall, in the middle of which blazed a fire, the smoke whereof escaped at a hole in the peak of the roof. At one end of this hall was a broad dais, two steps higher than the floor of beaten earth, and here had been spread a table for his refection. Kindly, indeed, and full of reverence for his rank and name, had been the words and manners of all who served, for none presumed to eat with him. No other man was there of gentle blood, and even Guy the Bow would have been angered had any trespassed upon his young captain. That was Richard, now, by the command of the prince himself, and the forestmen all honored the king, Saxons though they were. None were permitted to question, overmuch, although Guy himself went out to dispense whatever news was in his own keeping.

Refreshed, even with a tankard of ale that was brought him, Richard arose at last, and followed Ben of Coventry to the sleeping place allotted him. None better was in the grange. If at any past day there had been more costly furniture, some hand had taken it away, and naught was left now but safe quarters for such men as Richard had seen.

It was but day dawning when a hunter's horn sounded a clear note at the door of the rude chamber.

"Hail, my Lord of Wartmont!" spoke Guy the Bow. "I pray thee hasten. Thy men will be ready for thee within the hour. They all have come, and they are eager to hear thee."

"On the moment!" shouted Richard. "I am ready. Tell them I come."

"God speed thee this day," said Guy. "Full many a good fellow is ready to free himself from peril of the sheriff of Warwickshire. Aye, and to draw the king's good pay and have chance for pillaging French towns. They like it well."

Great indeed was the astonishment of Richard when, after hurriedly breaking his fast in the great hall, he walked out with Guy and others like him to view the gathering in the open space beyond the palisades.

Women and children, score on score, kept at a little distance, but not beyond hearing. In the middle, however, were clustered fully a hundred brawny men, eager to hear the king's proclamation of free pardon and enlistment for the war in France. They all knew what it was to be from other tongues, but to them the young lord of Wartmont was the king's messenger, and there was no certainty in their minds until he had spoken.

Without too many words, but plainly and well, did he announce his message, and they answered him with loud shouting. To some of them it was as a promise of life from certain death, for the law was in search of them, and the judges of that day were pitiless concerning forestry and the protection of the king's deer and the earl's.

Short ceremony was needed, for man after man came forward to kneel and put his hands between those of Richard, in the old Saxon custom of swearing to be his men in camp and field, in fight and foray, in the inland and the outland, until the king's will should give them grace to come home again.

Born warriors were they all, and they laughed with glee in the hope of fighting the French under so good a leader as was Edward of England. Good captain, good success, they knew; and as for Richard, had they not known the knight, his father, and had not he himself slain the Club of Devon in single-handed combat? They were proud to serve under a Neville, and a man of their Saxon blood, who could order them in their own tongue.

"One hundred and one!" shouted Guy at last. "May I not bid them to horse, Lord Richard? Every man can have his own galloway, or another, that the road to the camp at Warwick may be shortened."

"Mount!" shouted Richard. His own gallant steed had been led to his side and in a moment more he was in the saddle.

John, Earl of Warwick, was also early upon his feet, for he was a man whose life had been spent much in camps, and he was wont to be out and using his eyes as a captain before breaking his fast. From the men of Wartmont he speedily learned all relating to the raid of the Club of Devon and the brave fight made in front of the castle. Of this also he noted the defects, and he roundly declared that he would soon give command and provide means for its repair.

"We may need it again some day," he said to himself. "There may be stormy times to come. May God prevent strife at home, but there be overproud hearts and over-cunning heads in this good land of ours. I will see to it that Wartmont shall be made stronger than ever. Glad am I that Sir Edward Neville hath left so brave a son to stand for our house."

Many and bitter were the jealousies of the high-hearted barons of England, and none could tell the days to come. Who should prophesy how long the reigning house might keep the throne, or between what claimants of the crown might be the next struggle, if, for example, King Edward or his son, or both of them, and their next of kin, should go down in battle or should die suddenly in their beds, as others of royal blood had died? The head of a great baronial house might well bethink himself of every advantage or possible peril.

"But for the poverty the war bringeth," he said, "I would have builders here within the week. As it is, I will have a garrison, and the good dame herself must bide at Warwick while her son is with the army in France. 'Twere shame to leave her here alone."

So said he to Lady Maud when they met in the castle, and she told him then how well prepared she was for a departure. Already was she aware of his reason for coming so far to meet the prince; but his anxiety was at an end, and he was willing to linger and make full his soldierly inspection of the castle.

"Good fort," he said, "and well was it held against Earl Mortimer. Glad am I that thy son hath so good control of the forest men. They are as clannish as are the Scotch, and they will come to their own chief when they will bide no other."

He understood them, but he was yet taken by surprise before the noon.

"Horsemen!" he exclaimed, standing in the gateway. "Rightly did I say there was imprudence in the small company of the prince. Yonder is a troop – yea, twain of them."

No lances were visible, but at the head of the foremost troop rode one who carried on a high staff a blue banneret, and the earl knew not as yet what its blazonry might be.

Truth to tell, it was nothing but an old flag of Sir Edward Neville's which had been stowed away in the crypts of the grange. Not all of these had been inspected by Richard, but he had seen a good smithy wherein galloways were shod, and spearheads and arrowheads and knife blades were hammered and tempered. Not only arrowsmiths were there among the forest men, but good bowyers, that they might not depend for their weapons upon any but themselves. Weaving, too, was done among the women and by skilled websters of the men; but shoemakers or cordwainers they had none, and but rough potters and smelters. So dwelt they as best they might, with cattle and sheep and swine, and the black cattle of the woods and the king's deer for their maintenance. They were not at any time in peril of starvation, for excellent also were the fishes in the pools and streams, and there was no end of skilled brewing of ale.

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