EDGAR JOHN GEORGE

CRESSY AND POICTIERS

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Содержание

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Introduction

"Ivanhoe," picturing the days of Richard Cœur de Lion, leapt over all but a couple of centuries to draw upon Froissart. The present romance of Edward the Black Prince's time is well within the barriers of the best of all the romantic chroniclers, and perhaps its chief merit is that it is both historically and romantically an avowed Froissart book. Its author, J. G. Edgar, who was of course not a Walter Scott, wrote and was content to write for "Beeton's Boys' Own Magazine" in its palmy days, between forty and fifty years ago, when its editor had a very distinct idea of bringing English history into holiday range. Edgar was one of his chief contributors, and wrote some capital stories and histories, of which three or four are still in favour, and this story of "Cressy and Poictiers" is the best of them.

Edgar, being a minor and not a major romancer, gave less rein to his fantasy than Scott, and kept closer to his originals.

He conceived in this story the happy idea of accommodating the Black Prince with an adventurous and vain-glorious page, whom he calls Arthur Winram, who is, as a necessity of fiction, bound to be of nobler birth than that name would seem to say, and to be subject to the wicked designs of those who would keep him from his birthright. Through the eyes of this page are viewed the martial events and pageantry in the career of the Black Prince, leading up to the fields of Creçy and Poictiers, and so to the Prince's death. Thus there are three chief fortunes at stake: that of the page and hero, that of the Black Prince, and that of England herself.

If you turn from the romance to the actual story of the Black Prince, as it is told by the historians, you will find the details in which Edgar differs from them are either those that are necessarily fictitious, or those that are not very essential. And if you compare his book with Froissart, you will find that once he has got on common ground with the fourteenth-century chronicler, he keeps pretty well on terms with him in the succession of events.

Edgar takes 1328 as the year of his page and hero's birth; and that was a year to "precipitate affairs," as the chroniclers of a later date than Froissart's used to say. In that year Charles of France died, and Philip of Valois was elected by the peers and barons of France to the realm, and so put out the Queen of England, Isabel, daughter of Philip le Beau, who was the next heir.

"Thus," says Froissart, "passed this realm of France out of her

right lineage, as it hath been deemed by many." And thus came many wars and dire calamities. And "this is the very foundation of this history, to recount the great enterprises and feats of arms that have fallen: for since the time of Charlemagne there never befell so great adventures."

In the same year – that is, 1328 – King Edward married Philippa of Hainault. "The English chronicle saith this marriage and coronation of the queen was done at York with much honour." In the year following, their first-born child, Edward, afterwards called the Black Prince, blessed this union.

This gives us the year of 1344 (when the Black Prince was fifteen, and his future page a year older) as the natural one for this boyish tale of adventure to open. It was the year when Philip of Valois murdered twelve Breton hostages, and Edward vowed revenge; and this was the time, too, of the revolt in Flanders. In 1345, Jacob von Arteveldt was the victim of the mob. "Poor men first set him high, and evil men slew him," says Froissart. One may compare the romance with the chronicle here to the advantage of the latter. In the eleventh chapter of the story we are at Caen; and Froissart's chronicles give us one or two inimitable story-teller's cues of which hardly sufficient account is made. That little tower at the foot of the bridge, seen at the end of the street, and the one-eyed knight Sir Thomas, who saved the lives of many dames and damosels and cloisterers, as he rode through the town, make one of those medieval pictures, lifelike and minute, which are like little windows into actual history.

Many such episodes fill in the story before we come to the big battle-piece of Creçy. In the preamble, good use is made of the guide, Gobin Agace, who guides the English in the passage of the Somme, at the passage called Blanche Paque. There is no better account anywhere in history and romance than that Froissart gives of Cressy at its most striking moments. It may seem here and there that something of the confusion of the field itself obscures his story; but his strokes are sure and tell-tale as can be desired when the climax comes; and wonderfully he uses the natural effects – the storm, the great rain, the thunder and lightning; and then the ominous flight of crows over both battles; and the sudden bright emergence of the sun, to dazzle the Frenchmen's eyes, and warm the stout backs of the English; and finally the arrow-shot of the English archers, so thick and so concerted, that "it seemed to be snow!" The disastrous failure of the Genoese crossbows in reply we find both in Froissart and in Edgar's pages; and the detail of the King's post, "on a little windmill hill," where he hears that his son, the Prince, is hard pressed, and says: "Let them suffer him this day to win his spurs!" is another famous incident on which the chronicler and the novelist draw alike.

One or two circumstances of the battle are slightly changed in Edgar's page. The strength of the English position on the high ground, upon the right bank of the river, is hardly made so clear as might be. The English are seated on a large plain when first seen by Philip, in the romance. Edgar would have gained by

comparing Froissart with other records in picturing this scene. Again, he does not speak of the small cannon that were used at Creçy, though at the siege of Calais they are remembered in his account. Froissart says expressly, however, that small cannon were posted between the archers; and Edward certainly took cannon with him from England. The cannon used in the siege of Calais threw balls of three or four ounces weight.

The Black Prince's page is made a prisoner after Creçy; and the succeeding chain of events is again not quite given its proportionate effect in the romance. However, we have some compensation – the battle of Neville's Cross, which Froissart, by the way, reports to have taken place only three miles from Newcastle-on-Tyne and calls after that famous old town accordingly. Then succeeds the siege of Calais, and its surrender on the 3rd August, 1347. One passage here from Froissart that is not in Edgar is too good for either romance or history to forget. It is where the French herald Sir John returns into the beleaguered town with the message of the English King:

"Then Sir John went unto the market place, and sounded the common bell: then, all incontinent, men and women assembled there, and the captain made report of all he had done, and said, 'Sirs, it will be none otherwise, therefore now take advice, and make a short answer.' Then all the people began to weep and make such sorrow, that there was not so hard a heart, if they had seen them, but that would have had great pity of them; the captain himself wept piteously."

At this surrender of Calais, the question whether the six townsmen came forth with halters round their necks or with ropes in their hands need not disturb the reader. Tradition favours the former, and plain history the latter.

It is at the battle of Poictiers that the real value of Edgar's story as a tributary current leading into the broad stream of history is best to be discovered. One more illustration from Froissart may be given here, because it has to do with an incident which gave Edgar one of his clues. It is that of the scene where the Squire of Picardy, Johan de Helenes, takes the Lord Berkeley, who had been pursuing him.

"And when he had pursued him the space of a league, the said John turned again, and laid his sword in rest instead of a spear, and so came running toward the Lord Berkeley, who lift up his sword to have stricken the Squire. But when he saw the stroke come, he turned from it, so that the Englishman lost his stroke; and John struck him as he passed on the arm, that the Lord Berkeley's sword fell into the field."

This is enough to show how close the martial passes and exchanges in the story keep to the picture seen by Froissart.

One of the drawbacks of the story as a piece of history, as something more than a picture, is that it does not make us realise the daring – the merciless, impressive personal effect of the Prince; or the tragedy then of the last illness pursuing this man of force all through the final campaign; for his end in this book is a casual matter, treated in a postscript or little more than

that. But the romance carries us through an extraordinary and overwhelming series of events, and serves to stimulate – although Edgar's manner is staid comparatively with other romancers of history – a new delight in the heroic and chivalric colours of the time.

Sir John Chandos and the Cardinal of Perigord, as they pass through Edgar's story, do not leave you at all satisfied to know them only there. It is of the nature of good romance to suggest and not to complete, offering an oblique reflection of great affairs and huge figures; and if Edgar's mirror in this is a fainter one than Scott's, one is still grateful to him for holding it up to the fourteenth century as he did. Read him with Froissart in reserve, and you have a very good idea of that fighting time which was at once so valiant and so meagre, so adventurous and so mortal for the soldiers and captains, and often so terrible for the poor folk – men, women, and children, who, like those of Caen, were massacred because their masters were pleased to be militant.

One other point remains, which has perplexed the historians and is of extreme interest in romance, and that has to do with the Black Prince's proverbial colour. Was it his armour, or the terror he caused, that made men call him "Black"? Froissart never uses the label at all; but there is evidence of his black armour, and romance dare not now change his coat.

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

In the fourteenth century, when the population of England was estimated at two millions – when our railways were bridle-roads and our cornfields forests, and when the capital was a little town enclosed by an old Roman fortified wall, with towers and turrets – no festival, save Christmas and May Day, was regarded with more interest than Midsummer Eve, or the vigil of St. John the Baptist.

Great was the commotion, much the ceremony, in London on such occasions; and as the shades of evening fell, young and old, high and low, rich and poor, participated in the excitement of the hour. The houses were decorated with branches of green birch, long fennel, St. John's rush, and orpine; and as night closed over the city the inhabitants illuminated their dwellings with clusters of lamps, and made the streets resound with merriment and song.

At the same time, the ceremony of "setting the watch" – a body of armed guards, instituted in the reign of the third Henry to keep the peace, and prevent robberies and outrages – was performed with much show and splendour. On this ceremony, indeed, large sums of money were expended, and the watchmen, arrayed "in bright harness," marched in procession, accompanied by the Lord Mayor and aldermen, the city officers, a crowd of

minstrels, giants, and morris-dancers; while blazing cressets and huge torches, borne on men's shoulders, threw a flood of light over the scene, and raised the wonder of the thronging populace.

Meanwhile, a large fire was kindled in the street, and stirred to a blaze, which was intended to typify the patron saint of the day. Around this fire lads and lasses danced and disported themselves merrily to the sound of music. Many and gay were the capers they cut as the flames rose and fell. Sometimes they leaped over the fire amid many shouts, and at others they looked through garlands at the flame, believing that, by so doing, they freed themselves from various pains and diseases, present and prospective.

Not till midnight – sometimes not till dawn – did the dancing cease; and as soon as day broke, while the dew was still on the grass and flowers, the young women went forth to practise certain rites, by which they believed they could assure themselves of the constancy or inconstancy of their wooers. Collecting garlands of flowers, the nymphs bound them on their heads, and according as the dew remained a longer or shorter time on the flowers, they augured more or less favourably of the fidelity of their lovers. Moreover, they secured a snow-white wether, decorated it with garlands, and, enclosing it in a hut of heath, danced and sang around. She who wished to test her fortune stood by the door, and if the wether remained quiet she considered the omen good; but if he pushed his horns through the door of the hut, she concluded that her suitor was to prove false.

Such was the great medieval festival that was being celebrated at the time when our chronicle opens, when Edward III. was King of England, and on the point of undertaking the war with France, which resulted in mighty victories won and splendid conquests achieved against great odds; and when the hero of this story entered upon the remarkable adventures which associated his name with that of the young conqueror of Cressy and Poictiers – Edward, Prince of Wales, popularly known as "the Black Prince."

CHAPTER II
THE FALCON IN GRACECHURCH

It was Midsummer Eve in the year 1344, and the citizens of London were celebrating the festival of St. John the Baptist, when I, then a stripling of fifteen, with a tall figure and a dreamy eye, like that of one indulging much in internal visions, mounted on a little black horse of great speed and high mettle, trotted by the side of my aged grandsire, a tall and still vigorous man, into the capital of England, and alighted at the hostelry known as the Falcon, situated in Gracechurch, and kept by Thomelin of Winchester.

I had journeyed with my grandsire from his homestead at Greenmead, on the border of Windsor Forest, and my eyes were, for the first time, gladdened with a sight of London. Hitherto I had been reared in obscurity; and, except on the occasion of a rare visit to the little town of Windsor, I had seen nothing of life. I was well aware of the disadvantages of my position; for, though brought up in obscurity, my ambition was ardent; and, while seeing little of life, I was constantly regaling my imagination with stirring scenes, in all of which I enacted a conspicuous part.

My excitement on entering a city I had often longed to behold was naturally high; and, as we rode along, I was much impressed with the novelty of the scene. London and the Londoners were

that evening in holiday attire, and everything wore a gay aspect. The houses were lighted up; the streets were crowded with the populace; and an unwonted degree of jollity appeared to brighten every face. Even the beggar and the outcast began to think their condition tolerable, as they watched the kindling of the great fire which was to typify the saint of the day, who has been described as "a burning and shining light."

It is not wonderful, indeed, all things considered, that such should have been the case at the period of which I write. During the long and prosperous reign of the first Edward, Englishmen, while enjoying the blessings of freedom and order vigilantly guarded by law, had learned to speak their minds without fear, and with little hesitation; and, albeit nearly forty years had elapsed since the great king had been laid at rest in Westminster Abbey, they had not yet unlearned the lesson that an Englishman's words should be as free as his thoughts. Nor, so far, was public order in any danger from the utmost freedom of speech; for the House of Plantagenet was still so popular, that, had the reigning sovereign deliberately gone among his subjects in disguise, to learn what they thought of him, he would probably have heard nothing more offensive to his ear than complaints as to the rapacity of the royal purveyors. The day which I have lived to see was not yet come when a crazy priest, like John Ball, could rouse a populace to frenzy, or when a rude demagogue, like Wat Tyler, could lead on a rabble to plunder and bloodshed.

"Adam of Greenmead," said the Thomelin of Winchester, as

he rose to welcome my grandsire and myself; "old kinsman, I am right glad to see thee and thy grandson too. Body o' me, Arthur, it seems but yesterday when you were cock-bird height, and now you have grown as tall and handsome a lad as the girls would wish to set eyes on."

"And how farest thou, Thomelin?" asked my grandsire, as he seated himself near the host, and I took a place by his side.

"Passing well, kinsman – passing well, the saints be thanked; and it makes me all the better, methinks, since I see thee so hale and hearty."

"For that matter," said my grandsire, with an expression of discontent in his face, "I am hale as a man who has seen threescore and ten years can expect to be, and hearty as a man can hope to be in the days in which we live."

"You are not pleased with the times we live in, kinsman," remarked Thomelin.

"In truth, they are not much to my liking," said my grandsire. "As we rode along, my mind went back to the time when King Edward hammered the stubborn Scots at Falkirk, and to the day when he entered London, and the Londoners kept holiday in honour of his victory."

"Grand times, doubtless," said Thomelin.

"Ay, you may well say so," exclaimed my grandsire, with a tear in his eye. "England was then prosperous and contented. But now King Edward has been thirty-seven years in his tomb, and the world has well-nigh gone to ruin."

"No, no, Adam," protested Thomelin. "Matters are not so bad as you fancy. The world goes on well enough – in fact, as well as ever – in its way. Men buy and sell, sow and reap, marry and give in marriage; and, albeit the king whom you serve is in his grave, we have a king who is bravest among the brave, and wisest among the wise."

"But not so great as his grandfather was," said the old man in a conclusive tone.

"Nevertheless, kinsman," observed Thomelin, as if anxious to change the subject, "you have come to see London town once more."

"Even so; and yet, God's truth! I might have gone to my long home without taking so much trouble; for what is London to me? But Arthur, hearing that the lads of the town were to try their skill at the quintain before the Prince of Wales, would come, reason or none."

"To see the display," suggested Thomelin.

"No, to try his own hand; and trust me, if I know anything of such matters – and I ought – his chance is not small."

"I doubt it not, kinsman – I doubt it not," said Thomelin; "and yet I know not how he is to get a chance; for the match is, in some measure, confined to the Londoners, and strangers may not be admitted."

"Tell that not to me," replied my grandsire conclusively, and striking the table with his clenched fist. "In my younger days I have seen not only the sons of yeomen, but squires' and knights'

sons take part in such diversions; and if rules were relaxed then they can be relaxed now."

"Well, kinsman, we must see what can be done," said Thomelin mildly, but somewhat doubtfully. "Meanwhile, kinsmen, you must eat and drink, and let me show to you what hospitality my house can afford, for the sake of Richard Tythering, whose blood we both have in our veins."

"Ay; blood is thicker than water, as they say in the North," responded my grandsire; "and trust me, Thomelin," he added, "my heart warms to thee for thine own sake, and for that of thy mother; she was my first cousin."

"And so, Arthur, my lad," said Thomelin, turning to me, "thou art determined to win the peacock."

"I know not whether I can win the peacock or not," answered I, trying not to appear too vain of my skill; "but I hope to do so; and, in any case, I'll do my best."

CHAPTER III
WINNING THE PEACOCK

On the forenoon of St. John the Baptist's Day the Londoners crowded to Smithfield to celebrate the festival with sports and diversions; and thither I, mounting my horse, accompanied my grandsire and Thomelin of Winchester.

Various were the spectacles there exhibited to please the populace; and much was I interested with what I beheld. At one place a glee-woman was dancing round an unmuzzled bear, which endeavoured to seize her, while the keeper scourged the animal to excite its fury; at another, two men, in warlike attire, armed with brand and buckler, were playing at the sword-dance of the Anglo-Saxons to the sound of music, while a woman danced round them as they combated; at a third, wrestlers were exercising their skill in various attitudes; in one of which, said to have been derived from the ancient Greeks, two men, each mounted on the back of a comrade, encountered like knights on horseback, and endeavoured to secure victory by pulling his antagonist to the ground.

But the chief point of attraction was a broad space, inclosed with railings and covered with sawdust, where the youthful Londoners, in imitation of apprentices to chivalry, were about to display their dexterity at the quintain. In the courtyards of princes

and feudal magnates, the quintain was a wooden figure, made to resemble Saladin the Great, or Bibars Bendocdar, or some other famous Saracen, holding a shield in one hand, and brandishing a sabre in the other. However, that erected in Smithfield was of a humbler description. In fact, it was very much like a turnstile with two arms, which revolved on a spindle, on one of which was a painted board resembling a shield, while from the other hung a bag filled with sand.

Mounted on horseback, the youth, armed with a long staff or blunt lance, rode at the quintain, and aimed at the wooden shield. If he failed to strike it, all the spectators laughed him to scorn; and if he struck it without making an escape in time, he was exposed, not only to the ridicule of the spectators, but to the inconvenience of receiving a severe blow on the neck from the sand-bag.

In other days, when the game of quintain was played at Smithfield, squires and pages of the king's household had taken part in the diversion, and added interest to the competition. Such was no longer the case. On the present occasion, however, the crowd flocked to witness the contest with more than the ordinary curiosity; for it was known that John Hammond, Mayor of London, was to be present to award the prize; and it was rumoured that the mayor was to do so because the Prince of Wales intended to ride from Westminster to witness the competition.

As the hour when the competitors were to mount approached, the crowd, pressing, surging, and swaying, gathered round the

inclosed space, and manifested their interest in the coming contest by shouting the names of their favourites. My grandsire, whose high head and white hair commanded so much reverence that the spectators instinctively made way for him, guided me to a place near the lord mayor's chair, and was evincing much anxiety to lay before that functionary my claim to compete for the peacock, when suddenly all attention was withdrawn from the quintain by a cry of "The prince comes – long live the Prince of Wales!"

I turned as the shout rose; and as the prince, with a train of young nobles, and squires, and pages, rode up to the lord mayor, I gazed for the first time, and earnestly, on the young hero, who, ere long, was to prove himself the flower of all the chivalry of his age. At that time Edward was not more than fifteen; but he was tall for his years, fair to look upon, and distinguished by the manly beauty and the intellectual air of the great Plantagenet race. Trained to feats of strength in the tilt-yard and in the forest, his frame was strong and vigorous, and his face glowed with health; and, as he rode forward and uncovered his head, his grace and elegance of bearing moved the admiration of the multitude, who, with one voice, renewed their shouts of welcome and applause.

And now the business of the day commenced in earnest, and the youths of London, one after another, mounted and rode at the quintain. The result was not gratifying to the pride of the citizens. Indeed, fortune proved adverse to each competitor in turn. Some

altogether missed the mark; others, after hitting the shield, failed to retire in time to escape the blow of the sand-bag; and several who, in both respects, were successful in two trials, failed in the third attempt, and were consequently judged to have forfeited all claim to the prize. The crowd jeered; the mayor looked gloomy; and the cavaliers surrounding the prince sneered in contempt of the city chivalry; and many of the Londoners who had intended to compete, discouraged by the failure of their compeers, and fearing to tempt fortune, deemed it more discreet to submit to obscurity than to expose themselves to ridicule, and declined to try their skill.

It was at this stage of the proceedings that my grandsire, leading my horse by the rein, drew nigh to the chair of the lord mayor, and raised his voice.

"Sir," said the old man, "my grandson, who, albeit not a Londoner, is a lad of mettle, and much given to exercises of this kind, would fain try his skill, if he had your permission so to do."

"I know not how that may be," replied the mayor, eyeing me with interest, "seeing that the competition is intended for the youths of the city; and if a stranger bore off the prize, men might say that – "

"That you had taken the children's bread and given it to dogs," interrupted I, with a disdainful toss of the head; "wherefore, my lord mayor, I will not trespass so far on your courtesy as to ask you to relax the rules."

"A bold youth, on my faith," said the mayor, starting and

colouring. "However, my lord the prince shall decide."

"By good St. George! my lord mayor," exclaimed the prince, to whom my display of spirit seemed the reverse of displeasing, "were I in your place, I should certainly relax the rules, in order to make the sport more worthy of the occasion."

"If such be your pleasure, my lord, I will strain a point;" and my grandsire waving his hat in the air, said —

"Now, Arthur, lad, ride; and bear in mind that it is to the prince you are beholden for the privilege granted thee."

I lost no time in obeying my grandsire; and, a new candidate for the peacock having been announced, the crowd, with renewed interest, turned again to the inclosed space, and speculated on my chances of success. Nor, stranger as I was, did I meet with a discouraging reception. At first, indeed, my rustic garments evoked remarks not highly complimentary. But a closer examination disarmed prejudice; and my firm seat, my equestrian skill, and something of juvenile audacity with which I handled my blunt lance, created such an impression in my favour, that the crowd raised an inciting cheer; and the prince, turning to Roger, Lord De Ov, a young baron of high rank, who rode by his side, exclaimed —

"A strong and handsome stripling, and one likely to acquit himself with honour, here and elsewhere."

"A likely lad is Arthur," muttered Thomelin of Winchester to my grandsire; "and, in the prince's presence, will do credit to his bringing up."

Nor did mine host of the Falcon speak without prescience. Managing my steed with perfect facility, and displaying with my weapon a familiarity that had not characterised the Londoners who had preceded me, I spurred towards the quintain, struck the shield fairly, and, ere the spindle could revolve, retreated with seeming ease amid shouts of applause. Three times I repeated the attempt, and on each occasion performed the feat with such success, that the crowd shouted louder and louder in compliment to my skill.

"Gallantly and dexterously done," said the prince, as, flushed with exertion and excitement, I was brought to the presence of the mayor, and uncovered my head.

I bowed low to the compliment so sincerely expressed.

"Thy name, youth?" said the prince.

"My lord," I answered, "my name is Arthur."

"And your surname?" continued the prince.

"I have no surname, my lord," replied I; "but since I won the ram at the wrestling match at Windsor, on May Day, men have called me Arthur Winram."

"Arthur Winram," said the prince, smiling. "Beshrew me! it sounds well, and is a name that a ballad-maker would deem worthy to put in verse. However," continued he, "I trust you will live to make yourself a name worthy of your skill. Meanwhile," he added, "carry with you this comfort, that your performance to-day has been marked and appreciated by your king's son."

"Ha! my lord," interposed the Lord De Ov, "this hardly

beseems you. We have already tarried here long enough. Why waste words on this young rustic? Let us ride;" and he laid his hand on the prince's rein.

"Roger De Ov, you forget yourself," said the prince haughtily, as he was led off, after exchanging courtesies with the mayor; while I, having watched his departure with a flashing eye, turned to my grandsire, whose brow was bent darkly and sternly.

"Grandsire," asked I, my heart swelling with rage and mortification, "who is that man?"

"What matters it, Arthur, my lad?" answered my grandsire, recovering with a start. "Be calm and be silent, and thine hour will come. Patience is a good palfrey, and will carry thee through many a day's journey."

"I could feel it in my heart to follow the miscreant, and strike him, even in the prince's presence," said I.

"And ruin yourself for ever. Nay, nay. Better let us carry the peacock you have won to the Falcon, and drink a cup with Thomelin, my cousin, ere we mount and ride homeward."

"Ay," said Thomelin; "let us to the Falcon."

And we went.

CHAPTER IV
AT MY GRANDSIRE'S HOMESTEAD

My grandsire's homestead, as I have already intimated, stood on the outskirts of the royal forest of Windsor. It was a humble enough tenement, but not without its comforts, and it occupied a fair spot of ground, shadowed by ancient trees, and surrounded by green sward stretching away into meadows by the river side, where flowers grew and kine grazed, and young maidens sat tending their fathers' flocks and singing the ballads of their country.

Nobody could deny that the place was fair to look upon and pleasant to dwell in; and my grandsire, save when in his gloomy moods, was in the habit, not only of saying that such was the case, but of expressing contentment with his lot. In this respect I was certainly far from sharing his sentiments; and every day I experienced a stronger desire to escape from an obscurity which was ill suited to my aspiring nature.

My existence was surrounded with a mystery which I in vain endeavoured to penetrate. Of my father I had no recollection, and little knowledge. I was given to understand that he ceased to live when I was an infant in the cradle, and that, during the troubles which distracted England at the opening of King Edward's

reign, he perished under cruel, and somewhat ignominious, circumstances. But I suspected much more than had ever been told me. In fact, from vague hints and allusions, I gathered sufficient to inspire me with the conviction that his tragic fate, though its immediate cause was a political conspiracy, was, in reality, the result of enmity engendered by a political family feud. That my mother, a sad, religious, and broken-hearted woman, showed much anxiety to keep me in ignorance of the facts was evident; and I was given to understand that my safety – even my life – depended on my name and origin remaining a profound secret.

I have, however, hinted that my imagination was lively; and, as it was frequently at work on the subject, I was soon led by it to the conclusion that I was of different flesh and blood from those among whom my lot had been cast; that my father was, at least, a man of knightly rank; and that I was, probably, the heir of a pedigree which a Montacute or a Merley might have envied. My pride, stimulated by my imagination, became daily higher; and, buoyed up with some knowledge of grammar and letters acquired from the tuition of a neighbouring priest, I early cherished ideas far above my station, and dreamt of chances and possibilities that might raise my fortunes to a level with my aspirations.

Either by accident or design, my grandsire fed my ambition by the kind of conversation in which he indulged, on winter evenings, by the blazing fire of wood that warmed our little hall. Plain yeoman as the old man seemed, he had been a good deal

in the world; and he knew much of its ways. In youth he had, as a warrior, served King Edward – the first of the name – and he delighted to tell of the battles and the sieges to which he had ridden under the banner of that mighty monarch. Fired by the countless stories of war and victory, I conceived an irresistible desire to excel in arms; and, ere reaching my fourteenth year, I began to despise the sports and athletic exercises of the young peasants and villagers who deemed themselves my equals, and to endeavour, as well as I could, to acquire accomplishments which qualified youths of gentle blood for knighthood and the honours of chivalry.

My success was greater than might have been anticipated, under the circumstances. Excluded from the training bestowed in feudal castles on the sons of nobles and knights, my disadvantages were obvious. But patience and perseverance always will do much; and I set myself deliberately to acquire skill and dexterity in the use of the sword, and riding at the ring and the quintain; and, with instructions from my grandsire, I soon found my patience and perseverance rewarded. At the exercise of quintain, especially, I was so perfect a performer, in my own opinion, that I was all eagerness for an opportunity of proving my superiority. When, therefore, I learned that, on the day of St. John the Baptist, the Londoners of my own age, or thereabouts, were to compete for the peacock, in the presence of the Prince of Wales, I insisted on my grandsire conducting me to the capital, that I might display my proficiency in public, and that I might

advance my fortune by exhibiting, under the eye of England's heir, the skill and dexterity which I had acquired by constant exercise among the trees that shadowed our quiet grange.

Naturally enough, the result was flattering to my juvenile vanity; and the events of the day on which I won the peacock made a strong impression on my mind. It opened up to me views of life with which I was previously quite unacquainted, and quickened my desire to begin my career in earnest. My life of obscurity became more and more distasteful. Even the lot of forest outlaws seemed infinitely preferable to mine; and while I essayed to look cheerful as I drove out the cows to the meadows, and talked to the hinds as they gathered the harvest into the barns, I was bitterly cursing the Lord De Ov for cutting short my interview with the prince, and, in melancholy mood, tasking my ingenuity to discover some way of again bringing myself under his notice.

At this season, Thomelin of Winchester happened to visit our homestead, and was welcomed with the hospitality due to a friend and kinsman.

"And what news bringest thou, Thomelin?" asked my grandsire.

"None likely to cheer thy heart," answered the host of the Falcon. "Thou knowest the Vipseys, in Yorkshire?"

"Ay do I," said my grandsire; "they are brooks that rise every other year out of springs, and rush rapidly to the sea near the promontory called Flamborough."

"And thou knowest," continued Thomelin, "that their drying up is deemed a good sign, and that their running is held to be a sure presage of famine or pestilence?"

"I have so heard in other days," said my grandsire contemptuously; "but then, again, I have known them run, and better run, and neither plague nor famine come in consequence."

"Anyhow," said Thomelin, not caring to dispute the point, "we are almost certain to have more war."

"More war?" exclaimed my grandsire.

"By my faith," said Thomelin, "little doubt can there be as to that. Think how matters now stand. King Edward makes a peace with Philip of Valois, and, not just in the best humour, comes home; and no sooner is his back turned than Philip causes twelve knights of Brittany – all our king's friends and allies – to be arrested, without rhyme or reason, and beheaded without trial."

"Ho, ho!" exclaimed my grandsire.

"Well," continued Thomelin, "all the kinsmen of the murdered men have taken up arms; and Godfrey Harcourt, one of the great lords of Normandy, has come to England, and got a promise from King Edward to avenge them. Everybody who knows aught of King Edward knows what that means."

"Doubtless," said my grandsire, "it means such a war as has not been seen in thy time."

"And," added Thomelin, "when we have more war, trust me, we will have more taxes, and already they are hard enough to

bear. And yet, if King Edward would just make up his mind, instead of being longer fooled by foreigners, as he has been, to take an English army to the Continent, I see not why war should not turn out both to the honour and profit of the nation."

"I hold with you, kinsman," said I, sliding into the conversation; "and beshrew me if aught would be more to my mind than to cross the narrow seas, to fight the braggart Frenchmen."

"You would fain see something of war, then, Arthur?" observed Thomelin, startled at my enthusiasm.

"Yes," replied I, in a tone of decision. "Life, at the longest, is but short; and, to me, every day seems wasted that I pass in obscurity."

It was while my mind was wholly bent on this subject – while I was brooding over the past, and panting to penetrate the future – that Fortune, as if in compassion, threw in my way a great opportunity, and enabled me, under favourable auspices, to commence the arduous enterprise of climbing the ladder of life.

CHAPTER V
JACK FLETCHER

It was a warm day in the month of September – one of those autumnal days when the sun still shines in all its vigour – and my grandsire, with me as his companion, was leaning on his staff, strolling about in the neighbourhood of his homestead, and grumbling somewhat savagely at the rapacity of the royal purveyors, by whom we had recently, to our consternation and our cost, been visited; when we were suddenly roused by the tramp of a horse's hoofs, and, looking round, found ourselves face to face with a cavalier of thirty-five whose dress and demeanour at once proclaimed him a man of high rank.

I confess, indeed, that I was lost in admiration, and stood silent with surprise. The stranger was by far the most striking personage I had ever seen, and, in point of appearance, even rivalled the imaginary heroes of my boyish day-dreams. He was about six feet in height, and in the flower of manhood, with a figure admirably proportioned, long-drawn features, a thoughtful brow, a noble air, and an eye bright with valour and intelligence. His aspect indicated more than regal pride, modified, however, by frankness of spirit; and as he approached, with a hawk on his wrist, a bugle at his girdle, and two hounds running at his horse's feet, his bearing was easy as well as dignified, and he accosted

my grandsire with the tone of one who had at once the right to command and the privilege to be familiar.

"Good-day, friend," said he, reining in his steed.

"Sir, good-day," replied my grandsire briefly, and with an indifference in accent and manner to which it was evident the other was unaccustomed.

"I have lost my way in the forest," remarked the cavalier, after a pause, during which he appeared to reflect; "and yet methinks I should not consider that a misfortune, since it has conducted me to so pleasant a spot."

"Yes," replied my grandsire, "I thank God that my lines have fallen in a pleasant place."

"And your lot is, therefore, to be envied by men who dwell in king's palaces."

"Mayhap it might," said my grandsire; "but that the exactions of the king's men are so unjust and oppressive."

"Ha!" exclaimed the stranger, as if in a tone of inquiry.

"Yes," continued my grandsire resolutely, "never in my time has there been anything to compare to it, albeit this is the fourth reign in which I have lived. Did King Edward but know of the tyranny and rapacity exercised in his name, and that his subjects live in dread of the purveyor's horn, he would take such order that the commons should no longer be so outrageously plundered."

"Doubtless," replied the cavalier, "the king would do what is right and lawful."

"I would that I had some talk with him," said my grandsire.

"I could tell him many things that he is little likely to hear from knight or noble."

"Expound your grievances to me," said the cavalier; "I am not altogether without influence at the king's court, and I may even have power to set matters right."

"Enter my house, then, if you deem me not unworthy of such an honour," said my grandsire, as we reached the door.

"Right gladly," replied the stranger, dismounting; and, resigning his steed to my care, he followed my grandsire.

Evidently with curiosity, the cavalier, on entering the little hall, examined several pieces of armour and weapons that had been in fashion late in the thirteenth century, especially a huge iron club that was suspended on the wall. But when, having stabled the stranger's steed, I appeared in the hall, I found him seated at the board with my grandsire, partaking of such good cheer as the tenement afforded, and quaffing horns of ale, with apparent relish. Ere the meal was at an end my grandsire had uttered all his complaints against the royal purveyors, and was evidently delighted with his guest; and, as his heart opened, he did not fail to express his satisfaction.

"Courtier," exclaimed the old man, almost with enthusiasm, "I begin to believe that thou art an honest fellow."

"I would fain hope, my friend," replied the stranger, "that men who know me best would so report me."

"I believe it," said my grandsire; "and," added he more soberly, "I should know men when I see them; for in my life I have held

discourse with men of all ranks, and with some whose names will live for ever in chronicle and song."

"Indeed?" quoth the cavalier, struck by a remark which gave him a higher idea of his new acquaintance. "I perceive, then, that you have not passed your life in this quiet homestead."

My grandsire laughed, as if in scorn of the thought.

"No," replied he, recovering his serenity, "not at this homestead did I pass my early years, but where banners were flying, and bridles ringing, and swords flashing. My father, who was well known in his day as the Farrier of the Strand, fought with his iron club, which hangs on my wall, for the king at Evesham, under the banner of Lord Merley; and when my father departed this life, I was taken to the North, by the Lord Merley, and there trained to arms. I then went into the service of the good King Edward, and by him was much trusted. I was with the king when he was in danger at Ghent; I was with him when he conquered at Falkirk; I was with him when he died at Burgh-on-the-Sands."

"And how came your services to pass unrewarded and unrecognized?"

"Listen, courtier, and learn. When the old king was laid in his grave, I served his son as I had served himself; and how I fought at Burton and at Borough Bridge it would ill become my tongue to tell. But this cannot be gainsaid; it was my hand that struck down the rebel Clifford; and it was my hand that seized the rebel Lancaster. However, evil days came on apace; fate went against

my king; and leal service could avail naught. At length, when all was over, and when, at Berkeley Castle, he was cruelly murdered, I crept hither to pass my days in peace; and I have since lived on, persuading myself that I cannot be altogether useless on earth, since it is God's pleasure that I survive the evil times I have seen."

"Evil days they were," said the cavalier, as he rose and paced the floor, evidently much agitated by memories which my grandsire's story had recalled.

I gazed with some surprise on the effect which had been produced; and my grandsire was in such perplexity, that he seemed quite relieved when the cavalier turned towards me and eyed me keenly.

"And this," said he, "is your grandson?"

"Yes," answered the old man; "my grandson, Arthur, whom I have taught to serve God and honour the king, and whom it lately pleased my lord the prince to commend, at Smithfield, for his brave looks and gallant bearing."

"A goodly youth, on my faith," said the cavalier; "and one who it seems to me, might acquit himself with honour in a higher sphere."

"His father was not of our rank," replied my grandsire. "But that is a long story, which it would pain me to tell, and you and him to hear."

"Another time, mayhap, I may hear it," said the cavalier, not without exhibiting some interest in what my grandsire had told him; "meanwhile," continued he, "it is time for me to ride

towards Windsor, which I will do, if you will put me in the way. But, my friend," added he kindly, "fail not to visit me at the castle, and bring thither your grandson, and I will so requite your hospitality as to convince you that I am no churl."

"Come to Windsor," exclaimed my grandsire, "to be driven from the gate like a mangy cur! No, courtier; men shall never have it in their power to say that such was my fate."

"Fear not such a repulse," said the stranger. "Ask for me; and, if you so do, trust me you will be admitted with all courtesy."

"And, pray thee, by what name are you known?" added my grandsire.

The cavalier looked puzzled, but took from his hand a ring.

"Ask for Jack Fletcher," he said; "and if that suffices not," added he, presenting the ring, "show this, and, at the sight of it, gates and doors will open to admit you."

My grandsire bowed low as he received the ring; and the stranger rising to depart, took leave of me kindly, sallied forth, mounted his horse, and with my grandsire showing the way through the forest, and talking of deer and wild cattle, rode towards Windsor, as he had come, with his hawk on his wrist, his bugle at his girdle, and his hounds running at his side.

"Now," soliloquised I, as I watched his departure, "I will wager that the visit of this stranger is to exercise some important influence on my destiny."

CHAPTER VI
WAR WITH FRANCE

At the time when the cavalier who called himself Jack Fletcher lost his way in Windsor Forest, and accepted such hospitality as my grandsire's tenement could afford, King Edward, as Thomelin of Winchester had predicted, was preparing to renew that war which made Englishmen for a time almost masters of France. In order to render my narrative the more intelligible, it is necessary to refer to the origin of that war, to the events by which it had been distinguished, and to the stage at which it had arrived.

It was on the 1st of February, 1328 – the year in the course of which I drew my first breath – that Charles, King of France, the youngest of the three sons of Philip the Fair, and brother of Isabel, wife of our second Edward, died without male heirs. For the vacant throne – from which, centuries earlier, Hugh Capet pushed the descendant of Charlemagne, and to which subsequently St. Louis gave dignity – several candidates appeared, the chief of whom were Philip of Valois and Edward of England. Philip, relying on the fact that the Salic law excluded females from reigning, claimed the crown of France as heir male of the old king. Edward, without denying the validity of the Salic law, pleaded that, so far as succession was concerned, it did not bar the sons of a king's daughter. The Parliament of

Paris, however, was appealed to; and, being much under the influence of Robert, Lord of Artois, who was Philip's brother-in-law, the Parliament decided in favour of Philip; and Edward, then young and governed by his mother, Queen Isabel, and Roger de Mortimer, so far bent his pride as to visit France, and do homage at Amiens for Guienne and Ponthieu. But he privately protested beforehand against the homage he was about to perform; and perhaps he felt little regret when Philip's interference in Scottish affairs gave him a fair excuse for a rupture, and for not only renewing his claim, but submitting it to the arbitrament of the sword.

Meanwhile, Philip of Valois had involved himself in a scandalous quarrel with Robert, Lord of Artois, to whom he owed his crown; and Robert, threatened with vengeance and destruction, reached England, disguised as a merchant, and exerted all his eloquence to rouse Edward's ambition. Circumstances favoured his exertions in this respect. Enraged at his exclusion from a throne which he believed to be his by hereditary right, and exasperated at the aid given by Philip to the Scots, Edward lent a willing ear to Robert's suggestions; and, resolving to avail himself of the state of affairs on the Continent, which was most favourable to his projects, he prepared without delay to put his fortune to the test.

At that time, in fact, the Flemings were up in arms. The Count of Flanders, a faithful ally of Philip of Valois, was guilty of tyrannies which drove his subjects to revolt; and Jacob von

Arteveldt, a brewer, who ruled in Ghent, and exercised an enormous influence all over Flanders, formed a great league against Philip and the Count, and invoked Edward's aid. Not unwilling to interfere, the King of England entered into an alliance with the Emperor of Germany; and sailing from the Orwell, in July, 1338, he landed in Flanders to pursue his schemes of conquest.

Taking up his residence at Antwerp, Edward linked himself in close friendship with the Flemings, and prepared for active operations; and Philip, supported by John, the blind King of Bohemia, by the Spaniards, and the Genoese, prepared to defend the dominions which he called his own. For a year little or nothing was done. But in November, 1339, the English began the war by wasting Cambresis; and about the middle of October, Philip of Valois advanced with a mighty army to give the invaders battle. No battle, however, took place. The French retreated without striking a blow; and Edward, after having assumed the title and arms of the kings of France, returned to England to make arrangements for pursuing the prize on which his heart was set.

By this time the sympathies of the English nation were enlisted in the king's struggle. No sooner, indeed, had the war begun than Philip of Valois ordered his admirals to make a descent on England; and these master corsairs, approaching the coast with a fleet manned with Normans, Picards, and Spaniards, plundered Southampton, Sandwich, Winchelsea, Rye, Dover,

and Portsmouth. Everywhere they were guilty of fearful violence; and when Edward returned to England, he was surrounded by multitudes, complaining loudly of the outrages that had been committed in his absence.

"O king!" cried the populace, "our towns have been burned, our houses pillaged, our young men slain, and our maidens deflowered."

"Be patient," replied Edward, "and rest assured that my turn is coming, and that I will not only protect you from your enemies, but make them pay dearly for all they have done."

Faithful to his promise, the king fitted out fleets to defend the coast, and prepared a great armament at Ipswich, with which to return to the Continent. It was the summer of 1340, and, every preparation having been made, Edward sailed from the Orwell; and on Saturday, the 24th of June, approached the coast of Flanders. As there were rumours of mighty preparations to prevent a landing, a sharp look-out was kept from the admiral's ship, and suddenly the sailors, who were aloft, shouted that they saw masts.

"Who will they turn out to be?" asked Edward.

"Doubtless," was the answer, "this is the fleet kept at sea by the French, under the admirals who have done England so much harm."

"Well," said the king, "I have, for a long time, wished to meet these men; and now, please God and St. George, we will fight with them."

As the king spoke, all doubts were removed. Before him lay a fleet of a hundred and twenty vessels, under the command of admirals who had peremptory orders not to allow him to set foot on continental soil.

Every man on board the English ships was now on the alert, and a great naval battle began, and speedily assumed an aspect of excessive fury. Being able and determined men, the French admirals made every exertion, and, having the advantage of numbers, they pressed hard on their foes. But, in spite of the great odds against them, the English fought dauntlessly; and, after the conflict had raged for several hours, the French lost heart and hope, and leaped by hundreds into the sea. By seven o'clock in the evening the victory was complete, and Edward, landing next morning, set off on foot, with his knights, on a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Ardembourg, and afterwards rode to Ghent to visit Queen Philippa, who, in that city, had just given birth to her son, John of Gaunt.

While Edward was destroying the French fleet at Sluys, Philip of Valois was making war on Edward's brother-in-law, the Count of Hainault. It was of importance that he should at once hear the news; but he was a man of such violent temper that none of his knights had the courage to tell what had happened. At length the court jester undertook the delicate duty of informing his master of the loss he had sustained.

"Cowardly English!" said the jester, with bitter emphasis.

"What do you say?" asked Philip.

"Cowardly English!" repeated the jester. "Dastardly English! False-hearted English!"

"Why do you call them so?" asked Philip.

"Because," answered the jester, "they durst not leap out of their ships as our men did when they fought at Sluys."

Philip beginning to understand, uttered an exclamation of pain; and, on learning all, he flew into a violent passion, retreated towards Arras, broke up his army, and employed the mediation of the Countess of Hainault, who was his sister, and mother of the Queen of England. Edward, eager for a meeting, proposed to decide their dispute by a single combat; but the Frenchman declined on the ground that the challenge was addressed to Philip of Valois, not to the King of France, and could not, therefore, be intended for him. After some negotiation, a peace was brought about by the Countess of Hainault's mediation, and Edward, who was by this time reduced to extreme poverty, returned to England to brood over the failure of his great schemes.

It was now the spring of 1340, and a renewal of the war seemed somewhat improbable. But, ere long, an event occurred in Brittany which produced unexpected consequences. In 1341, the Duke of Brittany died without issue, and two candidates appeared to claim his Duchy. One of these was Charles of Blois, who had espoused the duke's niece, and claimed Brittany in her right; the other was the duke's brother, John, Count of Montfort, who claimed as heir male. Philip of Valois, who now forgot the Salic law, and only remembered that Charles of Blois was

his own nephew, decided in Charles's favour; and Montfort, having implored the support of the English king, seized upon the strongholds in the duchy. Unfortunately, the earl was taken prisoner early in the war; but his countess, Joan, the Fleming, bravely maintained the struggle, and, aided by an English force under Sir Walter Manny, made herself famous by her defence of Hennebon.

While contending with countless difficulties, the Countess of Montfort came to England to represent her case to the English king; and Edward, who was deeply interested in what was occurring on the Continent, sent Robert, Lord of Artois, with an army to aid her efforts. The expedition was not fortunate. Attacked suddenly at Vannes, and taken by surprise, Artois received wounds of which he soon died; and Edward, vowing to avenge him, embarked to conduct the war in person.

It was late in 1343 when the King of England landed in Brittany, and took the field with the hope of conquering. But fortune proved so adverse that nothing but his martial skill saved him from humiliation. While before Vannes he found himself threatened by the heir of France and Charles of Blois, at the head of a French army four times more numerous than that under his banner; and his doom looked dark. However, the French, finding that he had taken up a very strong position, and not particularly eager to try conclusions with the conqueror of Halidon and Sluys, did not venture on an attack; and, after the hostile armies had lain for some time facing each other, two cardinals, sent by the

pope, appeared in the character of peacemakers.

Edward had scarcely a choice. He was surrounded by enemies, and almost destitute of provisions; and the coasts were so vigilantly guarded by the fleets of Spain, that he despaired of receiving supplies from England. His men were, in consequence, suffering much. At first, however, he would not consent to peace; but the two cardinals, having made great exertions, at length succeeded in bringing the belligerents to reason, and ambassadors on both sides were nominated to confer in the Priory of the Magdalen at Malestroit. Eventually they came to terms; and, a truce for three years having been sworn to, Edward embarked for England about the close of February, 1344, and landed at Weymouth, probably with the idea that he had seen the last of the Continent, and had more than enough of continental war.

If so, he was much mistaken. Scarcely, in fact, was Edward's back turned when Philip of Valois startled Christendom with a display of the perfidy and cruelty which characterised his life. At a tournament, to which the Bretons went without misgiving, twelve lords, who had fought for the cause of Montfort, were arrested. No charge was brought against them; nor were they allowed the benefit of a trial. Without having assigned a cause, or given the opportunity of a defence, Philip caused them to be conducted to the scaffold and beheaded.

This tragic event caused the utmost horror. The friends and kinsmen of the murdered men took up arms, and went in a body

to the Montfort standard; and Godfrey Harcourt, a great baron of Normandy, finding himself in danger of sharing their fate, escaped to England, and obtained from Edward a vow to avenge the lawless execution of his allies.

CHAPTER VII
WINDSOR CASTLE

My grandsire, much to my surprise, and much to my disappointment, showed no inclination whatever to avail himself of the cavalier's invitation, or to put the hospitality of Windsor Castle to the test. At first, indeed, he was very enthusiastic about the visit of a guest so brilliant, and pleased to make comparisons between him and the high-bred personages whom he had seen in his earlier days. But no sooner did a week pass than all this enthusiasm began to die away, and the aged worthy seemed to give up all idea of pursuing the acquaintance he had accidentally formed, and evinced considerable and increasing uneasiness about possession of the ring which had been left as the pledge of welcome and good cheer. In vain I endeavoured to persuade him to seek out the stranger; he only replied that Jack Fletcher was, doubtless, a very merry companion, who doubtless also, loved an adventure, and would, on occasion, say more in an hour than he would stand to in a year.

"But the ring," urged I.

"Ay," exclaimed my grandsire, shaking his head in evident perplexity. "That is the rub; what is to be done with the ring I know not."

"I will tell you," suggested I, perceiving my advantage, and

resolved to follow it up. "Intrust me with the ring, and I will ride to Windsor, seek out the courtier, and place it in his hands."

My grandsire did not much approve of my plan; and my mother, on hearing of my proposal, protested loudly against it. But I had a will of my own, and an idea, which haunted me night and day, that the stranger's visit was, in some way, linked with my destiny; and believing, at all events, that he could aid me to emerge from obscurity, I held to my intention with all the tenacity and determination of my nature. Nothing daunted by the opposition of my grandsire and the alarm of my mother, I never rested till I obtained their sanction to what I, at that age, deemed a grand enterprise; and having, at length, by perseverance, removed all obstacles, I prepared for my journey.

Accordingly, one morning in October, I arrayed myself so as to appear to the best advantage, mounted my black steed, and rode through the forest, with a feeling that I was on the road to fortune. I confess, however, that, as I neared the town of Windsor, my confidence in myself gradually weakened; and, as I reflected how little qualified I was by experience and knowledge of life to carry the project of boldly pushing my fortune to a successful termination, I not only repented of having ventured on such an errand, but almost made up my mind to turn rein, ride back to my grandsire's homestead, abandon once and for ever all ambitious ideas, and live, with independence, if not content, tending the oxen, and tilling the soil.

It happened, however, that my imagination, which, in reality,

had led me to undertake this journey to Windsor, did not altogether desert me in the middle. In the midst of my doubts, I conjured up, for the hundredth time, a brilliant future; and feeling, as if by instinct, that my fortunes were hanging on the decision of the moment, I summoned pride to my aid, and pursued my way. My shyness, natural to a youth reared in the solitude of a grange, was rather inconvenient at the moment; but I have hinted that I was not without courage. I will go further, and say that I was not without audacity; and it was with the fixed purpose of doing, daring, and risking all, that I spurred into the little town of Windsor, rode up the ascent that leads to the castle, and, reining in at the massive gate, cast a look of awe at the towers, and turrets, and fortifications of the Norman stronghold, from which the standard of England floated in the autumn breeze.

The warder appeared, as in duty bound, and demanded on what errand I came, and looked calmly on as I answered that I wished to be admitted to the presence of a cavalier who called himself "Jack Fletcher."

"Jack Fletcher?" he repeated, opening his eyes, and regarding me with a glance which seemed to intimate that he recognised the name, but was not quite certain whether or not to acknowledge that he did.

"I come at the invitation of the cavalier I have named," said I, endeavouring to appear as courageous as possible; "and, to remove any doubts, I bring a token, which I was given to

understand would secure me the privilege of being admitted to his presence."

I produced the ring; the warder looked at it, and bent his head.

"All right," said he; "enter, and presently you will be conducted to him you seek."

As the warder spoke, the gate opened; and, at a signal from him, I rode into the courtyard, where squires and knights, gaily dressed, were loitering about, and talking of adventures in love and war, and feats of arms. I remarked, with surprise, that several of them had one eye bound up with silk; and I afterwards learned that they had taken a solemn vow, in presence of the ladies and the peacock, never again to see with both eyes till they had performed certain deeds in arms against the French.

While I, having dismounted, stood looking with a feeling of that wonder produced by novelty on this gay scene, and somewhat astonished at my eccentricity in venturing into such a place, a young man of noble aspect and bearing approached and addressed me.

"Youth," said he with a smile, "you have come hither to see Jack Fletcher."

I bowed with great respect; for the air and appearance of the young noble impressed me with a sense of his importance; and I showed the ring, the influence of which on the warder I had carefully noted.

"Follow me, then," said he, smiling, "and I will lead you to his presence; though, in truth, it was an old man and not a youth for

whom I expected to do that office."

I was by this time much too agitated to explain or reply; and I followed my guide like one in a dream, as he passed through passages and galleries. At length he halted at a door, and, drawing aside a curtain, spoke some words, which to me sounded like an order for execution. Mechanically, however, I entered, and, with my heart beating, and my brain whirling, and all my courage, all my audacity vanished, found myself face to face with the cavalier whose figure had, for weeks, been present to my imagination, and whose words had, for weeks, echoed in my ear. He wore a black velvet jacket, and a hat of beaver, which became him much; and, as he turned his eye upon me, the truth as to who he was flashed, for the first time, so vividly and rapidly on my mind, that I stood stock-still, and almost felt as if I should have sunk to the floor.

My confusion and embarrassment, however, were so evident, that they pleaded for me more eloquently than words could have done; and he appeared all anxiety to put me at my ease.

"Brave youth," said he, "be not alarmed at finding yourself in a strange place; but make yourself as easy as if you were in your grandsire's grange. Why came he not with you, as he promised?"

"My lord," answered I, bending my knee, and trying to take courage, "my grandsire, on reflection, deemed it prudent not to intrude on the strength of the invitation which you gave in your courtesy; but intrusted me with the ring to restore to you, which I now do;" and, with great respect, I suited the action to the word.

I thought that a shade of disappointment passed over his

countenance as I spoke; and I shrewdly guessed that it had been his wish to question my grandsire further on the tragic events of the late reign, on which their conversation had formerly turned, and which at the time had produced so strong an effect.

"Well," said he, after a pause, "men who have seen many years must be permitted to do as seems best in their own eyes; and, moreover, methinks we ought not to murmur too loudly at his absence, since he has sent you in his stead; and now that we have you here, youth," he added, with a smile, "you shall not leave us at your own pleasure. You, as I gathered, wished to be a warrior. Will you choose between my service and that of the Prince of Wales?"

"My lord," I replied, more and more embarrassed. "I fear me I am little qualified, by breeding or accomplishments, to serve either; and, even if it happened to be otherwise with me, I could not venture to choose."

"Ah," said he, with charming frankness, "I see how it is. The prince is of your own age, and that is a circumstance which always tends to attract, especially in early youth. So let us consider the question settled, and I will at once have you installed as one of his pages."

So saying, and while I stared in amazement at the result of my journey to Windsor, he rose, took me by the arm, and talking of my grandsire as he went, conducted me to the tennis-court, where the prince and his companions were amusing themselves at play.

My guide, who every moment acquired additional importance in my eyes, stopped as we entered, and eyed the prince with a glance of high pride.

"I bring you," said he, "a youth of strength and courage, whom you will pleasure me by admitting among your pages; and I recommend him to your favour as the grandson of a man who, in his day and generation, served your progenitors faithfully and well."

"The hero of the quintain match at Smithfield!" exclaimed the prince. "My lord," he continued, "he is welcome for his grandsire's sake and his own."

"My lord," said I to the prince, "I pray you to pardon my seeming boldness. Had I known all I should not have dreamt of presenting myself at Windsor."

"Ah!" exclaimed the prince, with great good-humour; "you would not have come on Jack Fletcher's invitation had you known that Jack Fletcher was the king. But in that case I might have found you out; for I want striplings of courage and likelihood around me; and I have thought of you as such ever since the day when you won the peacock."

CHAPTER VIII
EDWARD THE BLACK PRINCE

To enable my readers to form some idea of the position which was occupied by the Prince of Wales at the time when I, Arthur Winram – for by this surname I was now known – was admitted to the castle of Windsor, and taken into his service as page, I must go back a few years to relate such particulars as to his birth and boyhood as may convey a notion of the advantages he had inherited and the training he had received.

It was at York, and in the minster of that capital of the North, that, one Sunday in January, 1328, Edward the king, then sixteen, espoused Philippa, one of the four daughters whom William, Count of Hainault, surnamed the Good, had by his wife Joan, who was a princess of the line of Capet, and sister of Philip of Valois, to whom the Parliament of France adjudged the crown which St. Louis had worn. The marriage, being brought about by the king's mother, Isabel, and Roger de Mortimer, was not at first regarded with favour in England. In fact, people expressed much discontent with the business. But for once the instincts of the English deceived them. It was a love match after all; and ere long the young queen displayed so much excellence and so many amiable qualities, that she became more popular than any Queen of England had ever been, with the exception, it must be

admitted, of Eleanor of Castile.

Nothing, probably, contributed more to the change of sentiment on the part of the English than the birth of the son destined to so glorious a career and so melancholy an end. At Woodstock – a sylvan palace associated with the memories of the Norman and early Plantagenet kings, and with the touching romance of Rosamond Clifford – Edward, Prince of Wales, first saw the light. It was ten o'clock on the morning of Friday, the 15th of June, 1330, when he was ushered into existence, and excited the admiration of the queen's household by his magnificent appearance.

No time was lost in sending a messenger to inform the king that a son had been born to him, and an heir to the house of Plantagenet; and on hearing the welcome news, and that the prince, just cradled at Woodstock, was a marvellously fine infant, and likely one day to be a most handsome man, the king gave a right royal reward to Thomas Prior, who had the good luck to carry the message.

Intelligence of the prince's birth proved hardly less welcome to the nation than to the king. The event was talked of with enthusiasm in every town and hamlet; and people told wonderful stories of the royal infant's remarkable size and beauty, the fineness of his limbs, and his state cradle, painted with designs from the Evangelists. Everywhere the young mother and her son were the subjects of conversation, and portraits of them, at the period, began to form favourite models for the Virgin and Child.

The king was, doubtless, well pleased at the interest that was manifested; and, in order that the public might participate in the rejoicings that followed the birth of England's heir, he proclaimed his intention of holding a grand tournament in London. Accordingly, the lists were erected in Cheapside, and a gay company of knights and ladies assembled on the occasion.

The ceremony, however, was interrupted by an accident that caused some unpleasantness. At the upper end of the street a gallery had been erected for the accommodation of the queen and her ladies; and, while the tilting was taking place, the scaffolding on which the gallery was reared gave way, and the structure fell to the ground. Great was the fright, loud the screaming, and alarming the confusion. Luckily enough, nothing fatal had occurred; but the king, much enraged, threatened to punish the workmen. Philippa, however, interceded in their behalf; and Edward, pacified by her mediation, and soothed by her earnest entreaties, consented to pardon their carelessness.

While the tournament was held in Cheapside in honour of his birth, the prince was passing his childhood under the charge of women. Joan of Oxford was his nurse; Matilda Plumpton was rocker of his cradle; and the Lady St. Omer, wife of a brave knight, was his governess. But no sooner was he old enough for his book than he was intrusted to the charge of Walter Burley, to be instructed as became the heir of a family, one of whose chiefs had given it as his opinion that "a king without learning was a crowned ass."

I ought to mention that Walter Burley had been bred at Merton College, Oxford, and that he was a celebrated doctor of divinity. Having written divers treatises on natural and moral philosophy, his fame spread over the country, and recommended him to the Court; and when Philippa of Hainault came to England as queen, he had the distinction of being appointed her almoner; and, in after years, when he had the honour of figuring as tutor to her son, he fulfilled his functions with high credit. At the same time, Simon Burley, his young kinsman, a lad of great promise, was admitted as one of the prince's class-fellows, and formed that friendship which subsequently led to his being the prince's favourite knight.

Nor were those exercises which make men strong in battle neglected in the education of the prince. From childhood he was accustomed to arms, trained to feats of chivalry, and inured to exertion. As he grew up he gave indications not to be mistaken of turning out a learned, elegant, and brilliant hero, and, in some respects, reminded men of his mighty progenitor who conquered Simon de Montfort at Evesham, and reigned as the first Edward with so much power and popularity.

Meanwhile, the royal boy was admitted to the honours which naturally devolved on him as heir to the crown of England. At the age of three he was created Earl of Chester; at seven he was made Duke of Cornwall; and at thirteen he was, in parliament, invested by the king with the dignity of Prince of Wales.

About the same period, another honour, and one to which

he had no hereditary claim, seemed likely to fall to his lot. I have already mentioned that the Count of Flanders had, by his tyranny, driven his subjects to revolt, and that Jacob von Arteveldt, a famous brewer, exercised enormous influence among his countrymen, and that, especially in Ghent, his word was almost law.

Now it entered into the heart of Arteveldt to conceive the expediency of wholly depriving the Count of Flanders of his inheritance, of making it a duchy, and bestowing it on the Prince of Wales. Full of his scheme, and perhaps rather elated with the power he enjoyed in Flanders, Arteveldt entered into communication with the King of England, and had the gratification of finding that his proposal was quite the reverse of unwelcome. Indeed, King Edward promised, without delay, to take his son to Flanders, that Arteveldt might have an opportunity of putting his project into execution; and, accordingly, about St. John the Baptist's Day, he embarked with the prince, in his ship, the Katherine, for Flanders, and sailed into the harbour of Sluys, where, some years earlier, he had destroyed the French fleet.

At Sluys, King Edward kept his court on board his ship, the Katherine, and there received Arteveldt and his other allies among the Flemings. Many conferences were held. But it soon appeared that Arteveldt's enthusiasm was not shared by his countrymen. The idea of disinheriting their count and his son was one which they seemed most averse to entertain; and they could not be prevailed on to do more in the matter than promise to

consult the cities which they represented. Every attempt to bring the business to a conclusion proved abortive; and meanwhile a storm was gathering which was to destroy the whole scheme at a blow.

In fact, French influences, and perhaps French gold, were at work in every city of Flanders, and rapidly undermining the power which Arteveldt had for years been building up. All regard for freedom and commerce gave way before the prejudices of the hour; and the people of Ghent not only set their faces decidedly against Arteveldt's project of deposing their count in favour of the Prince of Wales, but manifested the utmost indignation against its author. In Arteveldt's absence from Ghent the murmurs were loud; and no sooner did he return to the town than the malcontents expressed their sentiments in a most menacing tone.

It was about the noon of a summer's day when Arteveldt, having left the King of England and the Prince of Wales at Sluys, entered Ghent. Immediately he became aware that his popularity was gone. People who, in other days, had been wont to salute him with profound respect, now bent their brows and turned their backs; and the multitude, at all times easily deluded, intimated that they were prepared to restore the count whom they had banished, and to throw down the great citizen whom they, till recently, had worshipped.

"Here," cried they, as they recognised his figure on horseback, "comes one who is too much the master, and wants to order in

Flanders according to his will and pleasure. This must not be longer borne."

Arteveldt was not blind nor deaf to what was passing. As he rode up the street he became certain that some mischief was in agitation, and probably suspected that his life was aimed at. In any case, he hastened to take precautions against any attempt at violence. As soon as he dismounted and entered his mansion, he ordered the doors and windows to be secured, and warned his servants to be on their guard.

It soon appeared that Arteveldt's instincts had not deceived him. In fact, a multitude, chiefly composed of the mechanical class, almost instantaneously filled the street, surrounded the mansion, and evinced a determination to go all lengths and force an entrance. Resistance appearing vain, Arteveldt despaired of saving himself by force; and, coming to a window with his head uncovered, he attempted to bring them to reason.

"My good people," said he, in the most soothing tone, "what aileth you? Why are you so enraged against me? How have I incurred your displeasure? Tell me, and I will conform myself entirely to your wills."

"We want," answered they with one voice, "an account of the treasures you have made away with."

"Gentlemen," said Arteveldt, "be assured that I have never taken anything from the treasures of Flanders; and if you will, for the present, return quietly to your homes, and come here to-morrow morning, I will be ready to give so good an account of

them that you shall have every reason to be satisfied."

"No, no!" cried they; "we must have it directly. You shall not escape us thus. We know that you have emptied the treasury, and, without our knowledge, sent the money to England; and you must, therefore, suffer death."

When Arteveldt heard this, he clasped his hands together, and wept in mortification of spirit as he thought of the services he had rendered his country, and perceived how they were likely to be requited.

"Gentlemen," he said, "such as I am, you yourselves have made me. Formerly you swore you would protect me against all the world, and now, without any reason, you want to murder me."

"Come down," bawled the mob, "and do not preach to us from such a height. We want to know what you have done with the treasures of Flanders?"

Seeing clearly that the populace were in that state of excitement which makes them mistake friends for foes, and that his destruction was certainly intended, Arteveldt left the window and attempted to get out of his house by the rear, with the object of taking refuge in a neighbouring church. But he was too late to save himself from butchery. Already four hundred men had entered the mansion by the back, and the toils were upon him. Shouting for his head, and clamouring like wild beasts, they rushed upon him, seized him forcibly, trampled him under foot, and slew him without mercy.

When this tragical event occurred at Ghent, the King of

England and the Prince of Wales were still at Sluys, awaiting the result of their negotiations. On hearing of Arteveldt's violent death, the king was enraged beyond measure; and, after vowing to avenge his ally and friend, he put to sea with his son and returned to England.

Extreme was the alarm of the more prudent among the Flemings when they learned what had been done by the mob at Ghent, and what had been said by the King of England on receiving intelligence of the murder of Arteveldt. Without delay they sent ambassadors from the various cities to explain and apologise; and at Westminster the Flemings were admitted to the royal presence. At first, Edward was haughty and disdainful; but, after much conversation with the ambassadors, who disowned all participation in the bloody deed, he consented to forego thoughts of vengeance.

By this time, indeed, the king had foes enough on the Continent without adding the Flemings to the number; and he perceived the impolicy of attempting to force his son on them as a ruler. It was not as Duke of Flanders, but as Prince of Wales, that the heir of England was to perform the martial prodigies which made him so famous among the men of the age he adorned with his valour and chivalry.

Events had already reached a crisis which rendered the continuation of peace impossible, when I so far realised the aspirations I had cherished in obscurity as to make my way into the service of the young hero around whose name so much fame

was soon to gather.

CHAPTER IX
KING EDWARD'S DEFIANCE

As King Edward had promised, I speedily found myself installed as one of the pages to the Prince of Wales, and hastened to provide myself with garments suitable to my new position in life, and to fall into the ways of the court over which the good Queen Philippa presided with so much grace and amiability.

In spite of the humble sphere from which I had emerged, I was treated with almost familiar kindness by the prince, and with perfect courtesy by the gentlemen who formed his household, with the single exception of the Lord De Ov, whose haughty words at Smithfield had so deeply galled me. Between the young baron and myself there existed an instinctive antipathy, as if we had been born to be mortal foes; and, as he never looked at me without a scowl of scorn, I, rather elate with my rising fortunes, replied with glances of fiery defiance.

I had lost no time in sending a messenger from Windsor to inform my grandsire and my mother of the result of my visit to Jack Fletcher, and of my intention to take an early opportunity of presenting myself in person at the homestead, to convince them not only that there was no mistake about my good luck, but also that I was certain, ere long, to rise higher.

Never, indeed, had there been a time when an Englishman

was likely to have more chances of distinguishing himself in continental war. Everybody was telling his neighbour how the king was about to lead an army, composed of Englishmen, to France, and how Philip of Valois – if he knew what manner of men the invaders were likely to be – would tremble at the prospect of their landing. I fully participated in the prevailing excitement, and listened eagerly as Simon Burley related the circumstances under which King Edward sent the defiance which made a renewal of the war inevitable.

It appears that the King of England was at Windsor, celebrating the feast of St. George, and flattering himself that peace was established, when he received intelligence that the treaty of Malestroit had been rudely broken by the summary execution of his Breton allies. The king, whose temper was fiery, no sooner heard of this breach of faith and outrage on justice, than his blood boiled with indignation, and he vowed he would make Philip of Valois repent his handiwork.

At that time Sir Hervé de Léon, a knight of Brittany, who had stood sternly up for the interest of Charles of Blois against the English king and the Earl of Montfort, happened to be a prisoner in England; and Edward in the excess of his rage, bethought him of retaliation. Fortunately, however, Henry, Earl of Derby, the king's kinsman, had the courage to remonstrate, and to persuade Edward that such a course would be unworthy of his dignity and of the reputation he enjoyed throughout Christendom.

"My lord," said Derby, "if Philip of Valois has, in his rashness,

had the villainy to put to death so many valiant knights, do not suffer your courage to be tainted by it; for, in truth, if you will but consider a little, your prisoner has nothing to do with this outrage. Have the goodness therefore to give him his liberty at a reasonable ransom."

Edward, after attentively listening to the earl, paused, reflected, indicated by gesture his concurrence in his kinsman's opinion, and ordered the captive knight to be brought to his presence.

"Ha! Sir Hervé – Sir Hervé," began the king, who by this time had recovered his serenity, "my adversary, Philip of Valois, has shown his treachery in too cruel a manner when he put to death so many knights. It has given me much displeasure, and it appears as if it were done in despite of us. If I were to take his conduct as my example, I ought to do the like to you, for you have done me more harm in Brittany than any other man."

"Sire – " said Sir Hervé, interrupting.

"Nay," continued Edward, "listen. I will preserve my honour unspotted, and allow you your liberty at a trifling ransom, out of my love for the Earl of Derby, who has requested it; but on this condition, that you perform what I am going to ask of you."

"Sire," said Sir Hervé, "I will do the best of my power to perform whatever you shall command."

"Ah, then, let us come to the point," continued the king. "I know, Sir Hervé, that you are one of the richest knights in Brittany, and if I were to press you, you would pay me forty

thousand crowns for your ransom. But you will go to Philip of Valois, my adversary, and tell him, from me, that, by putting so many knights to death in so dishonourable a manner, he has sore displeased me, and I say and maintain that he has, by this act, broken the truce, and that, from this moment, I consider it broken, and by you send him my defiance."

"Sire," replied Sir Hervé, "I will perform your message to the best of my abilities."

"In consideration of your carrying my message," added the king, "I will let you off for ten thousand crowns, which you will send to Bruges within five days after you have crossed the seas."

"Sire," said the knight, "I engage so to do; and God reward you and my lord of Derby for your kindness to me."

No delay could be laid to the charge of Sir Hervé de Léon in fulfilling his promise. Finding himself released from prison, he took leave of the king, and embarked at Southampton. His intention was to land at Harfleur, but the vessel in which he sailed encountered a violent storm. For fifteen days the knight was almost at the mercy of the winds and the waves; and he was under the necessity of throwing his horses overboard. At length the mariners landed at Crotoy, a town in Picardy, at the mouth of the Somme, and Sir Hervé with his suite journeyed on foot to Abbeville.

The voyage, however, had proved too much for the Breton knight, and at Abbeville he was so ill and so weakened by sea-sickness that he could not ride on horseback. But he did not forget

his promise; and, though his end was approaching, he travelled in a litter to Paris, and delivered to Philip of Valois, word for word, the message with which King Edward had intrusted him.

"And now," said King Edward, "let my adversary tremble."

"Ay, let Philip of Valois tremble," shouted hundreds of voices.

Everywhere throughout England there was bustle, and excitement, and preparation for war; and while men-at-arms and archers were mustering at Southampton, Godfrey de Harcourt, that great noble of Normandy, whom Philip of Valois menaced with death, reached England, to encourage the king with his promises and aid him with his counsels; and among the youth who surrounded the Prince of Wales there was much enthusiasm, and also much talk of performing feats of arms; and none among them was more enthusiastic than myself or more hopeful of doing something to win renown.

It was under such circumstances, one morning in May, that I rode through Windsor Forest to the homestead that had sheltered my childhood, to bid adieu to my grandsire and to my mother before crossing the sea. My grandsire shed a tear and my mother wept bitterly as we parted. But my heart was too elate with hope, and my brain too full of glowing aspirations, to allow their sadness to depress me. Already I was, in imagination, winning the spurs of knighthood, even leading armies to victory, and making my way to fame and fortune by heroic achievements.

So far everything appeared brilliant. But I was destined, ere the year closed, to discover that war was not wholly made up of

triumphs, and to have ample leisure to pine, in irksome solitude, for a sight of the quiet homestead which I had deemed so dull.

But let me not tell of the future. At the period of which I write there was little thought among us of disaster or of mishaps. The king, the prince, earls, barons, knights, squires, and yeomen were leaving their homes to take part in the great enterprise. All England was ringing with predictions of victory and conquest: and my young heart beat to the music of the hour, as I thought of Philip of Valois listening to the terms of King Edward's defiance, and trembling on his throne at the approach of King Edward's vengeance.

CHAPTER X
THE VOYAGE

About St. John the Baptist's Day, 1346, the King of England, having nominated his young son, Lionel of Clarence, lieutenant of the realm, and intrusted Queen Philippa to his kinsman, the Earl of Kent, embarked at Southampton, to cross the sea. On board the king's ship, the Katherine, was the Prince of Wales; and I, with other pages and several young gentlemen of high birth, had the privilege of being in attendance on the prince.

Godfrey de Harcourt, the great Norman lord I have already mentioned, accompanied King Edward on this occasion. Indeed, the king relied much upon Harcourt for such information as might enable him to penetrate into the country which recognised Philip of Valois as sovereign, and strike a shattering blow at his adversary's power.

It was King Edward's intention to land in Gascony; and his mighty armament, on board of which were most of the great earls and barons of England, put to sea with that view. The wind was favourable, and, as the ships went tilting over the waves, it was a fair sight to behold; for it seemed as if the whole water, as far as the eye could reach, was covered with cloth, from the number of sails that were given to the wind. On the third day, however, there was a marvellous change. In fact, the wind, changing suddenly,

drove us on the coast of Cornwall; and the mariners were fain to cast anchor, and remain there for six days and six nights.

It was now that Harcourt proposed to King Edward to change the destination of the armament, and to land in Normandy instead of Gascony.

"Sire," said Harcourt, "Normandy is one of the most fertile provinces in the world; and I will answer with my head that you may land in any part of it you please without hindrance, for no one will think of opposing you. You will find in Normandy rich towns and handsome castles without any means of defence, and your people will gain wealth enough to suffice them for twenty years to come. Your fleet may also follow you up the river Orne, as far as Caen."

"On my faith, cousin," said the king, "I believe you are in the right."

"What I state is true, sire," added Harcourt; "I, therefore, intreat you will listen, and give credit to what I have said."

After some consideration, King Edward determined on following Harcourt's sage advice; and, without delay, he gave orders that the fleet should steer direct for Normandy. At the same time, he ordered the flag of the Earl of Warwick, who was admiral, to be hoisted on board his own ship; and, the wind being favourable, he took the lead of the armament, and made straight for the Norman shore.

It was on the coast of Coutantin, of which Coutances is the chief town, that the English fleet came to anchor; and it was at

the port of La Hogue, not far from St. Sauveur le Vicomte, the dominion of Harcourt, that King Edward landed.

At that moment, as I well remember, there occurred a slight accident, which created much excitement, and which the king, with admirable presence of mind, turned to good account. Being impatient to reach the land which he claimed as his own, he no sooner observed that the Katherine was on the point of touching the strand, than he leaped from on board. As he set foot on the shore, however, he happened to slip, and fell with such force on his face, that the blood gushed from his nose.

A cry of horror instantly arose, and spread through the armament; and the knights about the king gathered round him with dismay on their countenances.

"Sire," said they, "let us intreat you to return to your ship, and not think of landing to-day, for this is an unlucky omen."

"Why an unlucky omen?" exclaimed the king, after a moment's hesitation. "I look upon it as most favourable, for it is a sign that the land is desirous of me."

As the king's words were reported, a loud shout indicated how much pleased the English were with his answer; and they began to disembark with the baggage, armour, and horses. That night the king and his army lay on the sands; and, next day, having conferred knighthood on the Prince of Wales, and appointed Godfrey de Harcourt and the Earl of Warwick marshals of his army, and the Earl of Arundel constable, he prepared to march.

Meanwhile messengers, despatched by the towns of

Normandy, were riding in haste towards Paris, to inform Philip of Valois that the English had landed; and all over the country rumour spread the news that the lion-hearted Plantagenet was once more on the soil of France, with a mighty host of archers and men-at-arms, led by Anglo-Norman nobles, whose genius and valour made them most formidable war-chiefs.

And so, no longer, as on former occasions, with a band of foreign hirelings, but with an army of Englishmen, sworn to conquer or die, and with his gallant son riding by his side, did King Edward begin his march into the dominions of his adversary – hope beckoning him onwards and genius guiding him on the way to victory.

I have said that I embarked to take part in the war in high spirits; and in spite of the exertion and fatigue of the disembarking, my enthusiasm had now risen to the highest pitch. But suddenly I was reminded that I had, at least, one enemy at hand, who was determined not to overlook my existence. I was just mounting my black steed to ride in the prince's train, and had my hand in the mane to vault into the saddle, when the Lord De Ov crossed my path, and contrived, in passing, to run his charger against mine in such a way as to leave no doubt that insult was intended; and then, turning round, he eyed me with a malevolence that no words could have expressed.

My blood naturally boiled at this unprovoked insult, and at another time I should certainly have given way to my temper. In the prince's presence, however, and in the circumstances in

which I was, anything like retaliation was out of the question, and I was forced to restrain my wrath and bite my glove.

Mounting in sullen mood, I calmed myself as I best could; and, as I followed the prince's banner, I could not help wondering for the twentieth time, but more than ever, what cause there could be for the malevolence which this young baron, so high in the world's esteem in comparison, exhibited towards me, an unprotected boy, from the day when accident threw us in each other's way.

I lived long enough both to experience his utmost malice, and to punish it. Better far for him would it have been to have allowed the past to sink into oblivion. It was his constant display of antipathy which eventually led to my penetrating the mystery that hung over my birth, and to discover that I had to settle with my Lord De Ov a heavy hereditary account; and it was his own insolent folly that precipitated the fate that befell him on that day when, in the face of heaven and earth, I avenged, at one blow, the wrongs of a father, and my own.

CHAPTER XI
MARCH OF THE INVADERS

It soon appeared that the alarm expressed by the French when they heard that the King of England had set his armed heel on the soil of Normandy was not unfounded or unreasonable.

Indeed, the martial chief of the English invaders lost no time in making his presence felt, and adding to the terror which the news of his landing had inspired. After dividing his forces into three divisions, he advanced into the country, the centre host being under his own command and that of the Prince of Wales; while on either hand marched the marshals, ravaging as they went, and driving the natives before them as hunters chase the deer. Every evening, at sunset, the three forces met at the place appointed for encamping for the night; and every morning they parted to pursue their successes.

First among the places that yielded to the English was St. Lo, a rich trading town in Coutantin; and, this conquest achieved, they advanced on Caen, a flourishing and handsome city, with a noble castle and many fine churches, besides the monastery dedicated to St. Stephen, in which reposed the ashes of William the Norman. At Caen, Edward became aware that there was every prospect of resistance, for Robert de Blarguy, with three hundred Genoese, held the castle; while the Count of Tancarville

and the Count of Eu, Constable of France, occupied the town with a host of warriors, who, when joined by the townsmen, formed a formidable force.

It was necessary, under the circumstances, to proceed with caution; and the king quartered for the night in the fields outside the town, with the intention of attacking on the morrow. But the French were meanwhile on the alert; and, headed by the constable, the citizens boldly came forth into the field to do battle with the invaders. Nor did the English shrink from an encounter. No sooner, indeed, did day dawn, than the king and the Prince of Wales prepared for action, and set their men in order. The sight of the English produced an immediate effect; and when they began to approach, the townsmen took fright, turned their backs, and fled through the gates.

But it was too late to save themselves by flight; and the English, entering with them, forcibly took possession. This, however, was not done without considerable loss. Indeed, the men of Caen showered stones and every description of missile from the windows, and exerted themselves so vigorously that more than five hundred Englishmen lost their lives.

On hearing of the havoc that had been wrought among his soldiers, King Edward was highly exasperated; and, in his wrath, he thought of vengeance.

"On my faith," exclaimed he, "I am strongly inclined to put the inhabitants to the sword, and burn the town!"

Harcourt, however, interposed, and appeased the king's wrath.

"Sire," said he, "assuage somewhat of your anger, and be satisfied with what has already been done. You have a long journey to make, and there are in this town thousands of men who will defend themselves obstinately. It would cost you many lives, and put a stop to your expedition, without redounding to your honour. Philip de Valois is certain to come to give you battle, and you will have more than full employment for all your men."

"Sir Godfrey," replied the king, "you are marshal; therefore order as you please. For this time we will not interfere."

Delighted at the king's answer, Harcourt mounted his horse, ordered his banner to be displayed, rode through the town, and commanded that none of the English should, on pain of death, hurt any man or woman in Caen. This prevented slaughter; but many prisoners were taken, and the Constable of France and the Count of Tancarville were among the number.

At Caen the king and his army remained for three days; and the English, having made themselves masters of the place, did not fail to make free with what it contained. After the marshal's proclamation, which assured the inhabitants that their lives were safe, was understood, all fear on their part seemed to vanish. Many of them received the invaders into their houses as guests, and others freely opened their coffers, and parted with their gold in consideration of being protected.

Finding themselves masters, on such terms, of a town larger than any in England, except London, full of noble dames,

and damsels, and rich citizens, and stocked with draperies, merchandise, wines, and all manner of good things, the English indulged, without stint, their appetite for pleasure and plunder; and many of them amassed great wealth, which was sent, in barges, down the river to Estreham, to be conveyed to St. Sauveur, where lay the fleet, ready to convey the spoil and the prisoners to England.

CHAPTER XII
A SNARE

It is not unnatural that, when relating what the king said, and what his marshals did, and how his army moved, I should be in some danger of losing sight of my own figure, and even forgetting, in some degree, my own existence. However, I would not, by any means, have the reader conclude that, because silent as to my achievements, I, Arthur Winram, was wholly idle during the march of the English from La Hogue to Caen, or an idle spectator of the events that rendered that expedition memorable.

In fact, young, new to life, ardent and eager to appear a man, I entered with enthusiasm into the spirit of the enterprise. Far be it from me to sing my own praises; but, being in constant activity, I met with exploits of which I venture to say no warrior of my age could with justice boast. At Caen I was among the first who entered the gates, and barely escaped atoning for my audacity by being stoned to death in the narrow streets; and afterwards gained some experience, and a significant warning to be on my guard, during a mysterious adventure, which involved me in such danger that I well-nigh gave myself up for lost.

I have already mentioned that, after the king had consented to spare the place, Godfrey de Harcourt rode through the streets with his banner displayed, and commanded that no Englishman

should, on pain of death, injure an inhabitant, male or female, and that the proclamation led to the army mingling with the citizens. I was rather too young to profit much by the hospitality or the wealth of the men and women of Caen; but I was not insensible to the wild kind of freedom in which the invaders indulged, and did not fail, like my neighbours, to assume the air of a conqueror, and to roam about the city as if I had been lord of all I beheld.

It happened that, on the second day of the king's residence in Caen, I was examining, not without interest, the monastery of St. Stephen, in which repose the ashes of William the Norman, when I felt my shoulder slightly touched, and, turning quickly round, found beside me a man with a beetle brow, who, in answer to my question as to his business with me, intimated that he could not speak my language, but placed a missive in my hand.

Drawing back to guard against surprise – for his appearance was the reverse of prepossessing – I read the document with breathless amazement.

"If the English page, calling himself Arthur Winram" – so ran the words – "will, at nightfall, meet the bearer of this on the spot on which he receives it, he will be conducted to the presence of one who will clear away the mystery that hangs over his birth, and reveal the story of his parentage."

I trembled with excitement as these words met my eye, and did not, for an instant, hesitate about venturing on an interview. Having explained to the messenger, in as good French as I was master of, that I should meet him at the time appointed, I hurried

back to the prince's quarters, and passed the remainder of the day in vague surmises. I confess that sometimes I suspected a snare; but, considering my position, believing that no one could be interested in harming me, I dismissed my doubts as they rose, and asked, with a smile of contempt, whether, in pursuit of the information for which, from childhood, I had earnestly longed, I, vowed as I was to face all dangers in quest of fame and fortune, would shrink from a hazard which could not be great, and which probably was imaginary.

Such being the view which I took of the adventure to which I was invited, I awaited in a restless mood the hour for going forth to hear the secret by which, I could not doubt, my destiny, in some measure, hung. At length, the sun having set, I prepared to be gone; and arraying myself, without any weapon save a small dagger, which, having sheathed, I placed in my bosom to be ready to my hand in case of need, I walked forth with the feelings natural to a man about to solve a mysterious question that has for years baffled his intelligence, and preyed on his imagination.

Making my way through streets filled with warriors flushed with wine, I bent my steps to the monastery of St. Stephen, and there I found, true to his time and appointment, the man with the beetle brow. Without speaking, he made a sign for me to follow; and I, having by this time cast the last remnant of hesitation to the winds, accepted his guidance, and walked on, under the influence of a curiosity which silenced the last whispers of prudence.

It was still early, but daylight had wholly departed; and, the

moon not having yet risen, Caen was gradually enveloped in darkness, as my guide, after leading me through streets with which I was unacquainted, at length halted before the door of a house which had nothing to distinguish it from the ordinary dwellings of citizens in that town and others of the province of which it formed part. Having rung at the gate, we were readily admitted; and I, after being conducted up a stair, found myself in an apartment somewhat brilliantly lighted, and, as I thought, richly furnished. On a table, where stood a lamp that threw its brilliancy all over the room, were a flask and two drinking-cups; and on a couch, hard by, reclined a woman who rose as I entered, and welcomed me with a smile, which, of itself, would have sufficed to banish suspicion of anything like foul play being intended.

At this moment, when long years have intervened, I perfectly remember the impression which the first sight of that woman produced on me.

She was young – not more than twenty – and exquisitely beautiful, with a tall, graceful figure, hair dark as the raven's wing, dark, dark eyes, that seemed to pierce instantly to the heart, and features which, in later years, would have led me to suppose her a native of Italy. At that time, however, I was much too ignorant of countries and races to be capable of making any such distinctions; and as I stood silent, I certainly was not stupified, but I was lost in wonder.

"You know not the language of the country in which we

are?" said she, with a voice and manner which completed the fascination.

"It grieves me, lady," I replied, "that I am not so familiar with it as to hold converse freely with the natives; but I know enough to understand and to make myself understood."

"It matters not," she said hastily; "for I know enough of the English tongue to spare you the inconvenience of speaking, or listening to, mine. Your name, or rather the name by which men call you, is Arthur Winram?"

"True," answered I, "I pass by that name; but I have reason to believe that I am entitled to bear one to which the world would pay more respect."

"On that point you shall be enlightened anon," said she, as she motioned me to a seat, and then added, gravely and in a tone of emotion, "but the tale I have to tell is one of bloodshed; and you will require all your courage to hear it to an end. Be pleased, therefore, to steel your heart for the trial."

As she spoke she raised the flask on the table, filled the cups that stood with it, took one herself, and made a sign for me to take the other. I obeyed; I put forth my hand; I took the cup; I raised it to my lips; and, as my blood was feverish with suspense, and my thirst, in consequence, intense, I drank copiously. I had scarcely done so when a marvellous change came over me. My head began to swim; the objects in the room seemed to dance before my face. Gradually my eyes grew dim; the figure of the woman faded from my sight; and I sank back overcome and unconscious.

CHAPTER XIII
THE BROKEN BRIDGES

After remaining three days in Caen, and despatching the Earl of Huntingdon to England in command of that fleet which carried not only the spoil of the Norman towns but a multitude of prisoners, among whom were some sixty knights, including the Count of Tancarville and the Count of Eu, Constable of France, King Edward led forth his army to pursue his career of conquest.

It soon appeared that the great Plantagenet would have to encounter a difficulty which, perhaps, he had little anticipated. At first, indeed, the progress of the English was as easy and as uninterrupted as before their arrival at Caen. Having taken the town of Louviers, and made themselves masters of much of the wealth the place contained, they marched into the county of Evreux; and Edward, with a view of drawing near to Rouen, where he hoped to attract many Norman men-at-arms to his standard, approached the banks of the Seine. But at this stage he found his operations unexpectedly checked. In fact, the French, acting under orders from Philip de Valois, whose alarm and rage knew no bounds, had deliberately and carefully broken down the bridges to prevent Edward crossing to the right bank; and it was not till he reached Poissy, in the Isle of France, not more than seven leagues from Paris, that he could see any way of

overcoming the difficulty which his adversary had thrown in his way.

The bridge of Poissy, like the others on the Seine, had been destroyed by the French; but the beams and other parts were left by the river, and the king resolved on its reconstruction. Accordingly, he took up his residence for a few days in the convent of Poissy; and while his marshals pursued their ravages almost to the gates of Paris, burning St. Germain and St. Cloud by the way, he celebrated the feast of the Virgin Mary, sitting at table in scarlet robes, without sleeves, trimmed with furs and ermines.

The festival of St. Mary over, the marshals having returned, and the bridge having been repaired, Edward again donned his mail, passed the Seine on the 15th of August, and turned his face toward Calais, which it was his object to reach. But after taking the town and castle of Poix the king found himself in a still more awkward dilemma than that from which he had freed himself; for the Somme, a broad and deep river, presented an apparently insuperable obstacle to his progress; and he pushed forward to Airaines, a town four leagues from Amiens, with the melancholy conviction that his own situation and that of his army was critical in the extreme.

Every bridge on the Somme had been broken down, and not a jot of information as to a ford could be obtained for love or money. Before Edward was the river, apparently impassable; behind him a mighty army bent on his destruction; for Philip

of Valois had taken the field, and around his banner had gathered half the feudal warriors of Europe. From Bohemia, from Germany, from Luxembourg, from Hainault, from Savoy, and from Lorraine, they had rushed under kings and princes of fame, and were coming on the track of the English like hunters pressing on to the lion's death. It was vain to think of a refuge, for the invaders were in a hostile country, with no place of sufficient strength to afford a chance of security. But the king's heart did not fail him even in that day of trial.

"Here," said he, on reaching Airaines, "we halt for three days; during that time we must find or make a way to pass the Somme; and once on the other side we will, please God and St. George, show our adversaries how, when closely pressed, the lion can turn to bay."

But three days passed, and, in spite of all the efforts of the marshals, matters remained as they had been, save that the enemy drew rapidly nearer, and the English army seemed doomed; and many muttered, "All is lost."

CHAPTER XIV
A RUSH FOR LIBERTY

I must now leave the King of England and his army at Airaines, retrace my steps to Caen, and relate what befell me in that city when I so unexpectedly, and under such mysterious circumstances, sank in unconsciousness.

It is not in my power to say how long I remained insensible of the position in which I was. I awoke, however, with a feeling of sickliness, which was speedily succeeded by one of horror. It was pitch dark; my limbs felt cramped and confined; and when I strove to recover my feeling of freedom, I discovered, to my consternation, that I was bound hand and foot. I almost lost my senses on making this discovery; but, fortunately, drowsiness crept over me, and I again yielded to slumber. It was well that such was the case, as it probably saved me from despair and delirium.

When I again awoke it was broad daylight, and I was better able to judge of my predicament. I immediately perceived that I was reclining on straw in a small chamber, lighted by a window that was high from the floor, and that there was no appearance of any door by which an escape might be attempted. Nor was this all. My hands and feet were firmly bound with cords. I was evidently a prisoner, and perhaps destined for a victim.

My reflections at that moment, as may be supposed, were not of the most agreeable kind; and I thought with a deep sigh, of my grandsire's grange, and, almost with remorse, of my mother's warning. Not unnaturally I cursed the fortune which, after deluding my fancy with promises of a golden future, reduced me suddenly to the condition of a captive, without even leaving me the power of striking a blow for my deliverance.

As I reflected and murmured, I was interrupted by the voices of persons who seemed to converse in a low tone, and presently a concealed door was opened, and the man with the beetle brow entered the chamber. I closed my eyes, breathed hard, and pretended to be sunk in slumber. But I was all attention, and felt a return of hope.

"He sleeps," said the man, looking towards the door.

"Good," exclaimed his companion; "and the sooner he sleeps the sleep that knows no breaking so much the better."

"My lord," said the man resolutely, "I have told you I will not have his blood on my hands."

"What need?" was the reply; "if he is left here long enough, time and hunger will do their work."

I shuddered at the idea, but without attracting their notice; and as they turned to depart, I partially opened my eyes. My suspicions as to the author of my incarceration were instantly confirmed as I caught a glance of the person who destined me for the most cruel of deaths. But I felt calmly vindictive, and, almost ere the bolts were turned upon me, had resolved to keep my own

counsel, and to await with patience the day of vengeance.

Matters having reached this stage, I bent all my ingenuity to discover some possibility of setting myself free, and determined to exercise no particular scruples as to the means. Fortunately, my dagger had been left where I had placed it on the previous evening, and I contrived, by great exertion, to bring the handle near my mouth, with the object of seizing it in my teeth, and drawing it from the sheath. After several trials I succeeded, and commenced to saw the cords with which my hands were bound, but for a long time found my efforts quite futile. I must have passed hours making effort after effort in vain, and was on the point of abandoning the attempt in despair, when I was inspired with renewed energy by a circumstance that attracted my attention as I lay on my back, toiling diligently, but to no purpose.

While occupied, as I have stated, and ever and anon pausing to ponder on the necessity of yielding to fate, my eye caught sight of a spider, which while spinning its web, had suspended itself by a long and slender thread from the roof above my head, and, with great perseverance, endeavoured to swing itself from one rafter to another. I watched its efforts, and became interested in the unconquerable determination it displayed. Repeated defeats only led to renewed energy. Six times it had essayed to reach its point, and on each occasion it failed and fell back. Admiring the insect's determination, and drawing a parallel between myself and it, I resolved to regulate my conduct by its ultimate success or failure. As I did so it made a seventh effort, attained its object,

and fixed its web; and, encouraged by the augury, I renewed mine with such vigour that I soon succeeded. I almost went mad with joy and excitement as I found my hands free; I lost not a moment in cutting the cords that bound my feet; and I stood upright on the floor, somewhat cramped, indeed, but with my dagger in my grasp, and on my face a stern smile, as I stretched out my limbs, and felt that I had energy enough left to strike a desperate blow for liberty and life.

It was necessary, however, to act with caution, and carefully to examine my position; and I did so. I found that the window, besides being high from the floor, was too well secured with iron to admit of my escaping by it; and, moreover, I strongly suspected that the chamber in which I found myself was at so great a height from the ground, that, even if I could have forced myself through it, I should have been unable to descend, save with something like a certainty of breaking my neck. Accordingly, I at once abandoned that idea, and concluded that, as I could not hope to escape by stratagem, I must lose no time in attempting to do so by force.

But, in order to attempt force with any prospect of accomplishing my object, I felt that it was necessary to await my opportunity; and I recalled to mind the proverb of the Arabs as to patience being the price of all success. In this frame of mind – calm, but perfectly resolute – I took my place by the door, and prepared, as soon as it was opened, to close with my gaoler, to force my way downward, dagger in hand, and take my chance –

no matter what odds I might encounter – of making my way to the street, and thence to the prince's quarters.

For hours I had to wait and wearily passed the time. At length, however, when the day was departing, and I knew by the decreasing light that evening had fallen, I suddenly heard steps. I drew slightly aside, and rejoiced to think that the dusk befriended me. As I drew aside, the bolt turned, the door opened, and the man with the beetle brow entered with something – perhaps food – in his hand. I had no time, however, to observe minutely. As he glanced towards the spot I had occupied, and perceived that I was no longer there, he uttered an exclamation of surprise. But already the prospect of escape had inspired me with extraordinary energy. Almost ere the exclamation had left his tongue, I sprang upon him as the mastiff on the bull, and, with a mighty exertion of strength, I prostrated him on the floor.

Not an instant did I now hesitate. I placed my dagger between my teeth, sprang through the open door, descended the narrow stairs almost at a bound, darted by the woman whom I had seen on the previous evening, and, to make matters short, pushed through a window that was before me, and managed so dexterously to drop to the ground, that, albeit the distance was considerable, I was shaken, indeed, but unhurt.

My escape had been effected with so much more ease than I anticipated, that I could hardly believe in its having really taken place. However, as I gathered myself up, I became convinced; and, after muttering thanks to God and the saints for their

protection, I made my way through the dark to the prince's quarters. My first impulse, in spite of the vow I had formed, was to hasten to the prince and tell all. But I had been long enough at court to have learned to think twice before opening my mouth on such a subject; and five minutes' reflection enabled me to perceive that I should never be believed. I, therefore, renewed my resolution not to publish my wrongs till my name was great enough to give weight to my words, and, in the meantime, to watch my enemy closely.

As I reached the prince's quarters, I, somewhat to my dismay, ran against Sir Thomas Norwich, a warrior who had won renown under the Earl of Derby in Gascony. As this knight now held a high post in the prince's service, and occupied a high place in the king's favour, he was looked upon by squires and pages as a personage whose good opinion was more to be desired than fine gold.

"Boy," said he, "where, in the name of all the saints, have you been?"

Unprepared for the question, I remained silent, and, doubtless, looked very guilty.

"Come," continued he severely; "I fear me that, young as you are, you have been following the multitude to do evil; and let me warn you that it is a game which ever, in the end, brings those who play at it to grief."

"Nay, sir knight," protested I earnestly, "I was tempted into an adventure which – "

"An adventure!" repeated Sir Thomas, shaking his head sternly. "Beware, boy. In the days of my youth I had many an adventure, and credit me, nothing can be more true than that the end of that mirth is sadness."

"Let me explain."

"Nay, nay. Enough of this. The king marches at sunrise; and see that you are in readiness to follow the prince's banner."

It was after my narrow escape, and not in the most celestial mood, that I accompanied the invading army, and took part in the various enterprises till we reached Airaines, and found that the Somme was between us and the province towards which we looked for safety.

CHAPTER XV
HUNTING A KING

It is necessary, having conducted the English army, and myself, to Airaines, to go back for a few weeks to describe the effect which the march of the invaders produced on Philip of Valois, and to explain how he assembled a host so formidable as to daunt even King Edward's brave warriors.

No sooner did Philip learn how the English were ravaging Coutantin than he flew into one of his violent rages, and swore, in his wrath, that they should not escape punishment – that they should pay dearly for the mischief they were doing. Forthwith he summoned not only his own barons and knights, but John of Hainault, and the fighting men of that country, and despatched messengers to John, the blind King of Bohemia, to Charles of Bohemia, John's son, who had been elected Emperor of Germany, to the Count of Flanders, to the Duke of Lorraine, to the Count of Savoy, and to the Count of Namur, to hasten to his aid with all their forces. Faithful to their ally in his distress and danger, they flocked to the capital of France like eagles to the carnage, and, encamping about St. Denis, awaited the approach of the invaders whom they had gathered to crush.

Meanwhile, Philip of Valois remained at Paris, expecting that King Edward would come thither to offer battle. However,

when the marshals of England, marking their course by burning castles, pushed up to the very gates, and rumours ran that the English were about to pass the Seine, Philip began to stir; and, having ordered all the penthouses of Paris to be pulled down, he prepared to join the army which had assembled to fight for the crown which he unworthily wore.

When the Parisians, who, by this time, were in feverish alarm, learned that Philip was on the point of leaving the capital, their terror knew no bounds, and they raised a great outcry. In their distress they sent deputies to intreat him not to abandon them at such a crisis. On being admitted to his presence, the deputies fell on their knees.

"Ah, sire, and noble king," cried they, wringing their hands, "what are you about to do? Are you about to leave your fine city of Paris?"

"My good people," replied Philip, somewhat touched, "be not afraid."

"Sire," urged the deputies, "the English are but two leagues from Paris, and when they know you have quitted us they will advance, and we are unable to resist them. We pray you, therefore, to remain and defend us."

"Fear not," replied Philip; "I tell you the English will not approach nearer than they have done; and as for me, I must go to St. Denis, for I am impatient, above all things, to pursue the English, and to fight with them." Accordingly, Philip of Valois that day left Paris, and, on reaching St. Denis, he found

himself at the head of a noble army, with an emperor, a king, and a multitude of princes as his captains, and, what was deemed of immense importance, a numerous body of Genoese cross-bowmen, who, it was hoped, would prove more than a match for those English archers, whose achievements had made them the terror of their country's foes.

Much annoyed and rather startled was Philip to hear that King Edward had actually left Poissy, and crossed the Seine. However, having given orders to break down all the bridges on the Somme, and vigilantly to guard every spot at which it was possible to pass the river, he marched from St. Denis at the head of his army, which gradually swelled as he went to the number of a hundred thousand men, and pushed forward determinedly till he was within three leagues of Amiens. At this stage, Philip learned that Edward was at Airaines, and took up his quarters for the night at Amiens. Next day, however, he resumed the chase, and about noon appeared at Airaines. But, to his disappointment, he found that the English had left the place that morning, and that they had proceeded to Oisemont, a town in Picardy, five leagues from that which he had just quitted.

"Never mind," said Philip, haughtily, "Edward cannot escape us; we will shut him up between Abbeville and the Somme, and either take him prisoner, or force him to fight at such a disadvantage that he must lose."

Flattering himself with anticipations of a great triumph, Philip of Valois, before continuing the hunt after his royal foe, remained

at Airaines to wait for his nobles and barons who were expected, while his scouts, who were all over the country in search of intelligence, brought tidings of the foe with whom he was so eager to come up; and he passed the night regaling his fancy with the idea of terminating the war, once and for ever, in his favour, at a blow, or perhaps without striking a blow. Next morning he rose from his couch to act on the information he had obtained.

It was now Thursday, the 24th of August; and Philip of Valois, mounting his steed, ordered his banner to be displayed, and led his army forth from Airaines, confidently expecting to find the English king and his followers on the banks of the Somme, and either to take them captive, as a birdcatcher does sparrows, or to scatter them, as a hawk does pigeons. Suddenly, as he rode along in front of his array, one of the scouts met him with a face which indicated that he brought news not likely to be welcome.

"Well," asked Philip, "where are these English? Speak, sirrah!"

"Sire," answered the scout, "the English have passed the Somme."

CHAPTER XVI
GOBIN AGACE

In a former chapter I mentioned that, among the places taken by the King of England, during his victorious and exciting march through France, was Poix, a town of Picardy, about six leagues from Amiens. The Lord of Poix was absent; and the captain of his castle, not having the means of holding out, surrendered almost without resistance, and allowed the fortress to be entered by the English soldiers at a time when they were flushed with victory and wine.

It happened that, when the castle was taken, there were within its walls two demoiselles, daughters of the Lord of Poix, and very handsome. Great was the danger of these ladies at this moment; for the invaders, as I have said, were then highly excited with their triumphs, and in no humour to pay excessive respect to female virtue. Fortunately for the ladies of Poix, I had been one of the first to foot the walls of the castle and make my way into the interior; and, aware of the danger in which the demoiselles were placed, I posted myself before them, and, vowing to protect them, prepared, sword in hand, to defend their honour with my life. I confess, however, that I felt, to my consternation, that my influence in their behalf was not likely long to prevail under the circumstances.

"A murrain take the madcap page!" cried one man-at-arms, frowning on me fiercely.

"Make way," shouted another, with a hoarse laugh, "and let me advance to console the fair ones in their jeopardy."

"Only over my body," answered I, as my blood boiled with indignation, and I brandished my sword.

"Down with the jackanapes!" exclaimed the first speaker, making a thrust at me with a spear.

I parried the attack, and my stubborn courage was not without its effect. Nevertheless, it was evident that my resistance could not long avail to save the noble demoiselles from insult, and I was just giving way to despair, when Sir John Chandos, a knight of great fame, made his appearance. Not without difficulty, he appeased the soldiers, and, having rescued the young ladies from their dangerous position, conducted them to the king. At his request I accompanied him to the royal presence, and Edward received them with chivalrous courtesy.

"We do not make war on women," said the king; "and I am bound to protect you against all dangers. But, if there is any stronghold to which you wish to be conducted, name the place, and thither you shall be escorted without delay."

"To Corbie," was the reply.

"It shall be as you wish," said Edward; and then turning to Sir Thomas Norwich, he added with a smile, "Sir Thomas, be yours the honour of escorting the noble demoiselles to the castle whither they wish to proceed."

"Sire," replied the knight, "I will, to the best of my ability, fulfil your command."

I was, much to my satisfaction, ordered to accompany Sir Thomas Norwich on this expedition; and, finding myself acting as a protector of noble damsels of grace and beauty, began to consider myself a great hero of romance, and was, on our return, indulging in the luxury of building castles in the air, when we encountered a party of armed peasants. After a short skirmish we overcame, with little difficulty, the rustic militia, and took them in a body as captives to the English camp.

Now this led to important consequences. While running my eye over the prisoners, I remarked one stout fellow, whose countenance struck me as being more intelligent than that of his comrades; and, not without a vague hope of extracting from him such information as might be welcome to the prince, and of service to the king, I singled him out from the party, and entered into conversation.

"What is your name?" asked I.

"Gobin Agace," was his answer.

"You are our prisoner," observed I significantly.

"Yes," said he; "but you may have heard the story of the mouse that gnawed the toils in which the lion was caught, and set the lion free."

"And how does that concern the business now in hand?"

"Much," answered the peasant; "for such a service as the mouse rendered to the lion, I can, I believe, render to your king."

"Ha! by St. George, I perceive!" exclaimed I, much gratified. "Being a native of this country, you have such knowledge of the fords on the Somme as would secure you an ample reward."

"In that respect," said the young peasant, "I could render your king a service that would be worth my weight in gold; and, if you will lead me to his presence, I will convince you that I am not speaking as a braggart might."

It was evening when we reached Oisemont, where King Edward was now quartered, and rode into the town with our captives. We were just in time. Immediately after, the king held a council; and, having ordered the prisoners to be brought before him that they might be questioned, he addressed them courteously.

"Good fellows," said he, "do any of you know a ford on the Somme, below Abbeville, where I and my army could pass without danger? Whoever," added Edward, "will show us such a ford shall have his own liberty, and that of any twenty of his fellow-captives whom he may select."

At this point Gobin Agace, whom I had instructed, stepped forward and bent his head.

"Sire," began he, "I do know such a ford, and I promise, under peril of life, that I will conduct you to a place where you and your whole army may pass the Somme without any risk."

"Go on," said the king, inspired with a new hope by the peasant's words.

"There are certain fordable places," continued Gobin Agace,

"where you may pass, twelve men abreast, twice in the day, and not have water above your knees. When the tide is in, the river is full and deep, and no one can cross it; but, when the tide is out, the river is so low that it may be passed on horseback or on foot without danger. You must, therefore, set out early, so as to be at the ford before sunrise."

"And what call you this ford?" asked the king.

"Sire," replied the peasant, "the bottom of the ford is very hard, of white gravel and stones over which all your carriages may safely pass, and thence it is called Blanche-taque."

"Friend," said the king joyfully, "if what you have told me is found to be true, I will give you and all your companions their liberty, and I will besides make you a present of one hundred nobles."

It now seemed that the safety of the King of England and his army depended on the accuracy of Gobin Agace's information as to Blanche-taque; and Edward gave orders that, at daybreak, every man should be ready, at the first sound of the trumpet, to march towards the Somme, and make the grand experiment.

CHAPTER XVII
HOW WE FORDED THE SOMME

Deep and somewhat depressing was the anxiety felt throughout the English army as the night of Wednesday closed over Oisemont; and brief, if any, was the sleep enjoyed by most of the brave islanders whose situation was so critical. Edward, who, both as king and Englishman, was almost overwhelmed with a sense of responsibility as he thought of the duty he owed to the brave men who had placed themselves in jeopardy to assert his rights, scarcely closed his eyes, but waited with impatience the break of day to make the attempt on which seemed to hang the fate of his army and his own reputation as a war-chief.

Rising at midnight, and intent on putting his fortune to the test, the king ordered his trumpets to sound; and, ere the first streak of day glimmered in the sky, he set out from Oisemont at the head of the van, and under the guidance of Gobin Agace, reached the ford of Blanche-taque just as the sun rose. But at that time the tide was so full that the idea of attempting a passage was not to be entertained; and the light of day revealed on the opposite bank a strong force, which had been posted there under one of the lords of Normandy, named Godemar du Fay, with positive orders not, on any account, to allow the English to ford the river.

In fact, Philip of Valois, on arriving at Amiens, had

despatched Godemar du Fay, with a thousand horsemen, six thousand footmen, and a body of Genoese, to render the passage of the Somme absolutely impossible; and Godemar had, on his march towards Blanche-taque, been joined by a multitude of peasants and the townsmen of Abbeville, and found himself at the head of twelve thousand men, who occupied a strong position, and presented an imposing front. Edward, however, was not in the least degree daunted. On seeing how matters were he merely indicated his intention of waiting for that part of his army which had not yet come up, and then attempting the passage at all hazards – the feat on which everything now appeared to depend.

Accordingly, when the various divisions of the English reached the Somme, and the tide had in some measure fallen, the king intimated to his marshals that the hour had come for putting all to the test; and shouting, "Let all who love me follow me," he spurred his charger and dashed into the stream. The Prince of Wales and his knights followed; and the French horsemen, at the same time, left the opposite bank, and met them hand to hand.

A fierce combat now began in the water, and many gallant deeds were performed on both sides. But the French – albeit they fought well – exerted themselves in vain. The king and the prince, heading their knights, bore down all opposition; and, almost ere they had obtained a footing on the bank, the superior prowess of the English was so evident, that the French almost immediately gave way and began to disperse. Moreover, Godemar himself, after remaining for a moment aghast at what was passing before

him, concluded – and not without reason – that all was lost; and, while the English were still struggling through the ford, he completely lost hope of holding his ground, gave way to panic, turned his horse's head, and headed the flight.

Having solemnly rendered thanks to God for conducting himself and his army so far in safety, Edward summoned Gobin Agace, gave him and his companions leave to depart, and, in recognition of the service he had rendered, presented him with a hundred nobles and a good horse.

The Somme being thus passed, the king, with a lighter heart, pursued his march, intending to take up his quarters at the town of Noyelle. Learning, however, that it belonged to the Countess of Aumerle, sister of his old friend, Robert of Artois, he sent to assure her that she should not be disturbed, and pursued his way till he came, on Friday, to a village in Ponthieu. Understanding that Philip of Valois was still pursuing with the intention of giving battle, Edward, no longer wishing to avoid an encounter, resolved to encamp, and await what fortune God should send.

"Let us post ourselves here," he said to his people, "for we will not go farther till we have seen our enemies. I have reason to wait for them on this spot, as I am now on the lawful inheritance of my grandmother, and I am resolved to defend it against my adversary, Philip of Valois."

Orders for encamping on the plain near the village having been issued, Edward, remembering the infinitely superior number of the army which followed the banner of his foe, and

determined to take every precaution to ensure a victory, in the event of a battle, commanded his marshals to select the most advantageous ground, and to inclose a large park, which had a wood in the rear, within which to place all the baggage-waggons and horses. No time was lost in executing the king's orders; and the English, with a degree of hope unfelt for days, then set about furbishing and repairing their armour, so as to be prepared for the conflict which was not likely to be for many hours delayed.

Meanwhile, Edward, no longer avoiding but courting an encounter, sent his scouts towards Abbeville to learn whether or not there was any sign that Philip of Valois was about to take the field; and the scouts, on returning, said there was no appearance of any movement on the enemy's part. The king then dismissed his men to their quarters with orders to be ready betimes next morning; and, after giving a supper to the earls and barons who accompanied him, he retired to his oratory, and, falling on his knees before the altar, prayed to God that, in the event of combating his adversary on the morrow, he might come off with honour.

By midnight all was quiet, for thorough discipline prevailed throughout the camp, and men stretched themselves to rest; and refreshed their energies with slumber; and I, Arthur Winram, as I spread the skin of a wild beast on the grass hard by the prince's pavilion, and threw myself on the ground, and closed my eyes to dream of marvellous adventures in love and war, said to myself —

"Now let me sleep while there is yet time. Mayhap, ere the sun of to-morrow sets, I may sleep the sleep that knows no breaking."

CHAPTER XVIII
THE EVE OF BATTLE

It is well known that Robert, King of Sicily, was a great astrologer and full of deep science, and that he had often cast the nativities of Edward of England and Philip of Valois; and that, having found by his astrology and the influence of the stars that, if they met in hostile encounter, Philip would assuredly be defeated, the Sicilian king had frankly intimated to his royal kinsman the result of his investigations, and strongly advised him to beware of hazarding a battle.

For years this prediction had exercised much influence on Philip's mind; but on this occasion, the Valois, finding himself at the head of an army so much superior in number to that of his gifted adversary, was ready to throw all hesitation to the winds, and eager for nothing so much as an early opportunity of coming to close conflict. Much, therefore, was he disappointed on hearing that the English had given him the slip and passed the Somme.

"Now," demanded Philip, turning to his marshals, "what is to be done?"

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