EVERETT-GREEN EVELYN

IN THE DAYS OF CHIVALRY: A TALE OF THE TIMES OF THE BLACK PRINCE

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CHAPTER I. THE TWIN EAGLETS

Autumn was upon the world – the warm and gorgeous autumn of the south – autumn that turned the leaves upon the trees to every hue of russet, scarlet, and gold, that transformed the dark solemn aisles of the trackless forests of Gascony into what might well have been palaces of fairy beauty, and covered the ground with a thick and soundless carpet of almost every hue of the rainbow.

The sun still retained much of its heat and power, and came slanting in between the huge trunks of the forest trees in broad shafts of quivering light. Overhead the soft wind from the west made a ceaseless, dreamy music and here and there the solemn silence of the forest was broken by the sweet note of some singing bird or the harsh croak of the raven. At night the savage cry of the wolf too often disturbed the rest of the scattered dwellers in that vast forest, and made a belated traveller look well to the sharpness of his weapons and the temper of his bowstring; but by day and in the sunlight the forest was beautiful and quiet enough – something too quiet, perhaps, for the taste of the two handsome lads who were pacing the dim aisles together, their arms entwined and their curly heads in close proximity as they walked and talked.

The two lads were of exactly the same height, and bore a strong likeness one to the other. Their features were almost identical, but the colouring was different, so that no one who saw them in a good light would be likely to mistake or confuse them. Both had the oval face and delicate regular features which we English sometimes call "foreign-looking;" but then again they both possessed the broad shoulders, the noble height, the erect carriage, and frank, fearless bearing which has in it something distinctively English, and which had distinguished these lads from their infancy from the children of the country of their adoption. Then, though Raymond had the dark, liquid eyes of the south, Gaston's were as blue as the summer skies; and again, whilst Gaston's cheek was of a swarthy hue, Raymond's was as fair as that of an English maiden; and both had some golden gleams in their curly brown hair – hair that clustered round their heads in a thick, waving mass, and gave a leonine look to the bold, eager faces. "The lion cubs" had been one of the many nicknames given to the brothers by the people round, who loved them, yet felt that they would not always keep them in their quiet forest. "The twin eaglets" was another such name; and truly there was something of the keen wildness of the eagle's eye in the flashing blue eyes of Gaston. The eager, delicate features and the slightly aquiline noses of the pair added, perhaps, to this resemblance; and there had been many whispers of late to the effect that the eaglets would not remain long in the nest now, but would spread their wings for a wider flight.

Born and bred though they had been at the mill in the great forest that covered almost the whole of the district of Sauveterre, they were no true children of the mill. What had scions of the great house of the De Brocas to do with a humble miller of Gascony? The boys were true sons of their house – grafts of the parent stock. The Gascon peasants looked at them with pride, and murmured that the day would come when they would show the world the mettle of which they were made. Those were stirring times for Gascony – when Gascony was a fief of the English Crown, sorely coveted by the French monarch, but tenaciously held on to by the "Roy Outremer," as the great Edward was called; the King who, as was rumoured, was claiming as his own the whole realm of France. And Gascony, it must be remembered, did not in those days hold herself to be a part of France nor a part of the French monarchy. She held a much more important place than she would have done had she been a mere fief of the French Crown. She had a certain independence of her own – her own language, her

own laws, her own customs and she saw no humiliation in owning the sovereignty of England's King, since she bad passed under English rule through no act of conquest or aggression on England's part, but by the peaceful fashion of marriage, when nearly two centuries ago Eleanor of Aquitaine had brought to her lord, King Henry the Second, the fair lands of which Gascony formed a part. Gascony had grown and flourished apace since then, and was rich, prosperous, and content. Her lords knew how important she might be in days to come, when the inevitable struggle between the rival Kings of France and England should commence; and like an accomplished coquette, she made the most of her knowledge, and played her part well, watching her opportunity for demanding an increase of those rights and privileges of which she had not a few already.

But it was not of their country's position that the twin brothers were so eagerly talking as they wandered together along the woodland paths. It was little indeed that they knew of what was passing in the wide world that lay beyond their peaceful home, little that they heard of the strife of party or the suspicious jealousy of two powerful monarchs – jealousy which must, as all long-sighted men well knew, break into open warfare before long. It was of matters nearer to their own hearts that the brothers spoke as they sauntered through the woodland paths together; and Gaston's blue eyes flashed fire as he paused and tossed back the tangled curls from his broad brow.

"It is our birthright – our land, our castle. Do they not all say that in old days it was a De Brocas, not a Navailles, that ruled there? Father Anselm hath told us a thousand times how the English King issued mandate after mandate bidding him give up his ill-gotten gains, and restore the lands of his rival; and yet he failed to do it. I trow had I been in the place of our grandsire, I would not so tamely have sat down beneath so great an affront. I would have fought to the last drop of my blood to enforce my rights, and win back my lost inheritance Brother, why should not thou and I do that one day? Canst thou be content for ever with this tame life with honest Jean and Margot at the mill? Are we the sons of peasants? Does their blood run in our veins? Raymond, thou art as old as I – thou hast lived as long. Canst thou remember our dead mother? Canst thou remember her last charge to us?"

Raymond had nodded his head at the first question; he nodded it again now, a glance of strange eagerness stealing into his dark eyes. Although the two youths wore the dress of peasant boys – suits of undyed homespun only very slightly finer in make than was common in those parts – they spoke the English tongue, and spoke it with purity and ease. It needed no trained eye to see that it was something more than peasant blood that ran in their veins, albeit the peasant race of Gascony in those days was perhaps the freest, the finest, the most independent in the whole civilized world.

"I remember well," answered Raymond quickly; "nay, what then?"

"What then? Spoke she not of a lost heritage which it behoved us to recover? Spoke she not of rights which the sons of the De Brocas had power to claim – rights which the great Roy Outremer had given to them, and which it was for them to win back when the time should come? Dost thou remember? dost thou heed? And now that we are approaching to man's estate, shall we not think of these things? Shall we not be ready when the time comes?"

Raymond gave a quick look at his brother. His own eyes were full of eager light, but he hesitated a moment before asking:

"And thinkest thou, Gaston, that in speaking thus our mother would fain have had us strive to recover the castle and domain of Saut?"

"In good sooth yea," answered Gaston quickly. "Was it not reft from our grandsire by force? Has it not been kept from him ever since by that hostile brood of Navailles, whom all men hate for their cruelty and oppression? Brother, have we not heard of dark and hideous deeds done in that same castle – deeds that shame the very manhood of those that commit them, and make all honest folk curse them in their hearts? Raymond, thou and I have longed this many a day to sally forth to fight for the Holy Sepulchre against the Saracens; yet have we not a crusade here at home that calls us yet more nearly? Hast thou not thought of it, too, by day, and dreamed of it by night? To plant the De

Brocas ensign above the walls of Saut – that would indeed be a thing to live for. Methinks I see the banner already waving over the proud battlements."

Gaston's eyes flashed and glowed, and Raymond's caught an answering gleam, but still he hesitated awhile, and then said:

"I fain would think that some day such a thing might be; but, Brother, he is a powerful and wily noble, and they say that he is high in favour with the Roy Outremer. What chance have two striplings like ourselves against so strong a foe? To take a castle, men must be found, and money likewise, and we have neither; and all men stand in deadly terror of the wrath of the Sieur de Navailles. Do they not keep even our name a secret from him, lest he should swoop down upon the mill with his armed retainers and carry us off thence – so hates he the whole family that bears the name of De Brocas? What could we do against power such as his? I trow nothing. We should be but as pygmies before a giant."

Gaston's face had darkened. He could not gainsay his brother's reluctant words, but he chafed beneath them as a restive horse beneath the curb rein tightly drawn.

"Yet our mother bid us watch and be ready. She spoke often of our lost inheritance, and she knew all the peril, the danger."

Raymond's eyes sought his brother's face. He looked like one striving to recall a dim and almost lost memory.

"But thinkest thou, Gaston, that in thus speaking our mother was thinking of the strong fortress of Saut? I can scarce believe that she would call that our birthright. For we are not of the eldest branch of our house. There must be many whose title would prove far better than our own. We might perchance win it back to the house of De Brocas by act of conquest; but even so, I misdoubt me if we should hold it in peace. We have proud kinsfolk in England, they tell us, whose claim, doubtless, would rank before ours. They care not to cross the water to win back the lands themselves, yet I trow they would put their claim before the King did tidings reach them that their strong and wily foe had been ousted therefrom. We win not back lands for others to hold, nor would we willingly war against our own kindred. Methinks, my Brother, that our mother had other thoughts in her mind when she spoke of our rightful inheritance."

"Other thoughts! nay, now, what other thoughts?" asked Gaston, with quick impatience. "I have never dreamed but of Saut. I have called it in my thoughts our birthright ever since we could walk far enow to look upon its frowning battlements perched upon yon wooded crag."

And Gaston stretched out his hand in the direction in which the Castle of Saut lay, not many leagues distant.

"We have heard naught save of Saut ever since we could run alone. What but that could our mother's words have boded? Sure she looked to us to recover yon fortress as our father once meant to do?"

"I know not altogether, and yet I can scarce believe it was so. Would that our father had left some commands we might have followed. But, Brother, canst thou not recall that other name she spoke so many a time and oft as she lay a-dying? Sure it was some such name as Basildon or Basildene – the name of some fair spot, I trow, where she must once have lived. Gaston, canst thou remember the day when she called us to her, and joined our hands together, and spoke of us as 'the twin brothers of Basildene'? I have scarce thought of it from that hour to this, but it comes back now clearly to my mind. In sooth, it might well have been of Basildene she was thinking when she gave us that last charge. What could she have known or cared for Saut and its domain? She had fled hither from England, I know not why. She knew but little of the ways and the thoughts of those amongst whom she had come to dwell. It might well have been of her own land that she was thinking so oft. I verily believe that Basildene is our lost inheritance."

"Basildene!" said Gaston quickly, with a start as of recollection suddenly stirred to life; "sure I remember the name right well now that thy words bring it back to mind. Yet it is years since I have heard it spoke. Raymond, knowest thou where is this Basildene?"

"In England, I well believe," was the answer of the other brother. "Methinks it was the name of our mother's home. I seem to remember how she told us of it – the old house over the sea, where she had lived. Perchance it was once her own in very sooth, and some turbulent baron or jealous kinsman drove her forth from it, even as we of the house of De Brocas have been ousted from the Castle of Saut. Brother, if that be so, Basildene is more our inheritance than yon gloomy fortress can be. We are our mother's only children, and when she joined our hands together she called us the twins of Basildene. I trow that we have an inheritance of our very own, Gaston, away over the blue water yonder."

Gaston's eyes flashed with sudden ardour and purpose.

Often of late had the twins talked together of the future that lay before them, of the doughty deeds they would accomplish; yet so far nothing of definite purpose had entered into their minds. Gaston's dreams had been all of the ancient fortress of Saut, now for long years passed into the hands of the hostile family, the terrible and redoubtable Sieur de Navailles, who was feared throughout the length and breadth of the country round about his house. Raymond had been dimly conscious of other thoughts and purposes, but memory was only gradually recalling to his mind the half-forgotten days of childhood, when the twin eaglets had stood at their mother's knee to talk with her in her own tongue of the land across the water where was her home – the land to which their father had lately passed, upon some mission the children were too young to understand.

Now the faint dim memories had returned clear and strong. The long silence was broken. Eagerly the boys strove to recall the past, and bit by bit things pieced themselves together in their minds till they could not but marvel how they had so long forgotten. Yet it is often so in youth. Days pass by one after the other unnoticed and unmarked. Then all in a moment some new train of thought or purpose is awakened, a new element enters life, making it from that day something different; and by a single bound the child becomes a youth – the youth a man.

Some such change as this was passing over the twin brothers at this time. A deep-seated dissatisfaction with their present surroundings had long been growing up in their hearts. They were happy in a fashion in the humble home at the mill, with good Jean the miller, and Margot his wife who had been their nurse and a second mother to them all their lives; but they knew that a great gulf divided them from the Gascon peasants amongst whom they lived – a gulf recognized by all those with whom they came in contact, and in nowise bridged by the fact that the brothers shared in a measure the simple peasant life, and had known no other.

Their very name of De Brocas spoke of the race of nobles who had long held almost sovereign rights over a large tract of country watered by the Adour and its many tributary streams; and although at this time, the year of grace 1342, the name of De Brocas was no more heard, but that of the proud Sieur de Navailles who now reigned there instead, the old name was loved and revered amongst the people, and the boys were bred up in all the traditions of their race, till the eagle nature at last asserted itself, and they felt that life could no longer go on in its old accustomed groove. Had they not been taught from infancy that a great future lay before them? and what could that future be but the winning back of their old ancestral lands and rights?

Perhaps they would have spoken more of this deeply-seated hope had it not been so very chimerical – so apparently impossible of present fulfilment. To wrest from the proud and haughty Sieur de Navailles the vast territory and strong castle that had been held by him in open defiance of many mandates from a powerful King, was a task that even the sanguine and ambitious boys knew to be a hundred times too hard for them. If they had dreamed of it in their hearts, they had scarce named the hope even to each other. But today the brooding silence had been broken. The twins had taken counsel one with the other; and now burning thoughts of this other fair inheritance were in

the minds of both. What golden possibilities did not open out before them? How small a matter it seemed to cross the ocean and claim as their own that unknown Basildene! Both were certain that their mother had held it in her own right. Sure, if there were right or justice in the kingdom of the Roy Outremer, they would but have to show who and what they were, to become in very fact what their mother had loved to call them – the twin brothers of Basildene.

How their young hearts swelled with delighted expectation at the thought of leaving behind the narrow life of the mill, and going forth into the wide world to seek fame and fortune there! And England was no such foreign land to them, albeit they had never been above ten leagues from the mill where they had been born and brought up. Was not their mother an Englishwoman? Had she not taught them the language of her country, and begged them never to forget it? And could they not speak it now as well as they spoke the language of Gascony – better than they spoke the French of the great realm to which Gascony in a fashion belonged?

The thought of travel always brings with it a certain exhilaration, especially to the young and ardent, and thoughts of such a journey on such a quest could not but be tinged with all the rainbow hues of hope.

"We will go; we will go right soon!" cried Gaston. "Would that we could go tomorrow! Why have we lingered here so long, when we might have been up and doing years ago?"

"Nay, Brother, we were but children years ago. We are not yet sixteen. Yet methinks our manhood comes the faster to us for that noble blood runs in our veins. But we will speak to Father Anselm. He has always been our kindest friend. He will best counsel us whether to go forth, or whether to tarry yet longer at home – "

"I will tarry no longer; I pant to burst my bonds," cried the impetuous Gaston; and Raymond was in no whit less eager, albeit he had something more of his mother's prudence and self-restraint.

"Methinks the holy Father will bid us go forth," he said thoughtfully. "He has oft spoken to us of England and the Roy Outremer, and has ever bidden us speak our mother's tongue, and not forget it here in these parts where no man else speaks it. I trow he has foreseen the day when we should go thither to claim our birthright. Our mother told him many things that we were too young to hear. Perchance he could tell us more of Basildene than she ever did, if we go to him and question him thereupon."

Gaston nodded his head several times.

"Thou speakest sooth, Brother," said he. "We will go to him forthwith. We will take counsel with him, albeit – "

Gaston did not finish his sentence, for two reasons. One was that his brother knew so well what words were on his lips that speech was well-nigh needless; the other, that he was at that moment rudely interrupted. And although the brothers had no such thought at the time, it is probable that this interruption and its consequences had a very distinct bearing upon their after lives, and certainly it produced a marked effect upon the counsel they subsequently received from their spiritual father, who, but for that episode, might strongly have dissuaded the youths from going forth so young into the world.

The interruption came in the form of an angry hail from a loud and gruff voice, full of impatience and resentment.

"Out of my path, ye base-born peasants!" shouted a horseman who had just rounded the sharp angle taken by the narrow bridle path, and was brought almost to a standstill by the tall figures of the two stalwart youths, which took up the whole of the open way between the trees and their thick undergrowth. "Stand aside, ye idle loons! Know ye not how to make way for your betters? Then, in sooth, I will teach you a lesson;" and a thick hide lash came whirling through the air and almost lighted upon the shoulders of Gaston, who chanced to be the nearer.

But such an insult as that was not to be borne. Even a Gascon peasant might well have sprung upon a solitary adversary of noble blood had he ventured to assault him thus, without support from

his train of followers. As for Gaston, he hesitated not an instant, but with flashing eyes he sprang at the right arm of his powerful adversary, and had wrested the whip from him and tossed it far away before the words were well out of the angry lord's mouth.

With a great oath the man drew his sword; but the youth laughed him to scorn as he stepped back out of reach of the formidable weapon. He well knew his advantage. Light of foot, though all unarmed, he could defy any horseman in this wooded spot. No horse could penetrate to the right or left of the narrow track. Even if the knight dismounted, the twin brothers, who knew every turn and winding of these dim forest paths, could lead him a fine dance, and then break away and let him find his way out as best he could. Fearless and impetuous as Gaston ever was, at this moment his fierce spirit was stirred more deeply within him than it had ever been before, for in this powerful warrior who had dared to insult both him and his brother, ay, and their mother's fair fame too – he recognized the lineaments of the hated Sieur de Navailles.

The more cautious Raymond had done the same, and now he spoke in low though urgent accents.

"Have a care, Brother! Knowest thou who it be?"

"Know? ay, that I do. It is he who now holds by force and tyranny those fair lands which should be ours – lands which our forefathers held from generation to generation, which should be theirs now, were right and justice to be had, as one day it may be, when the Roy Outremer comes in person, as men say he will one day come, and all men may have access to his royal presence. And he, the tyrant, the usurper, dares to call us base born, to call us peasants, we who own a nobler name than he!

"The day will come, proud man, when thou shalt rue the hour when thou spakest thus to me – to me who am thy equal, ay, and more than thy equal, in birth, and who will some day come and prove it to thee at the sword's point!"

Many expressions had flitted over the rider's face as these bold words had been spoken – anger, astonishment, then an unspeakable fury, which made Gaston look well to the hand which held the shining sword; last of all an immense astonishment of a new kind, a perplexity not unmixed with dismay, and tinged with a lively curiosity. As the youth ceased speaking the knight sheathed his sword, and when he replied his voice was pitched in a very different key.

"I pray you pardon, young sirs," he said, glancing quickly from one handsome noble face to the other. "I knew not that I spoke to those of gentle birth. The dress deceived me. Tell me now, good youths, who and whence are ye? You have spoken in parables so far; tell me more plainly, what is your name and kindred?"

Raymond, who had heard somewhat of the enmity of the Sieur de Navailles, and knew that their identity as sons of the house of De Brocas had always been kept from his knowledge, here pressed his brother's arm as though to suggest the necessity for caution; but Gaston's hot blood was up. The talk they had been holding together had strung his nerves to the utmost pitch of tension. He was weary of obscurity, weary of the peasant life. He cared not how soon he threw off the mask. Asked a downright question, even by a foe, it was natural to him to make a straightforward answer, and he spoke without fear and without hesitation.

"We are the sons of Arnald de Brocas. De Brocas is our name; we can prove it whenever such proof becomes needful. Our fathers held these fair lands long ere you or yours did. The day may come when a De Brocas may reign here once more, and the cursed brood of Navailles be rooted out for ever."

And without waiting to see the effect produced by such words upon the haughty horseman, the two brothers dashed off into the wood, and were speedily lost to sight.

CHAPTER II. FATHER ANSELM

The mill of Sainte-Foi, which was the home of the twin brothers of the De Brocas line, was situated upon a tributary stream of the river Adour, and was but a couple of leagues distant from the town of Sauveterre – one of those numerous "bastides" or "villes Anglaises" built by the great King Edward the First of England during his long regency of the province of Gascony in the lifetime of his father. It was one of those so-called "Filleules de Bordeaux" which, bound by strong ties to the royal city, the queen of the Garonne, stood by her and played so large a part in the great drama of the Hundred Years' War. Those cities had been built by a great king and statesman to do a great work, and to them were granted charters of liberties such as to attract into their walls large numbers of persons who helped originally in the construction of the new townships, and then resided there, and their children after them, proud of the rights and immunities they claimed, and loyally true to the cause of the English Kings, which made them what they were.

It is plain to the reader of the history of those days that Gascony could never have remained for three hundred years a fief of the English Crown, had it not been to the advantage of her people that she should so remain. Her attachment to the cause of the Roy Outremer, her willing homage to him, would never have been given for so long a period of time, had not the people of the land found that it was to their own advancement and welfare thus to accord this homage and fealty.

Nor is the cause for this advantage far to seek. Gascony was of immense value to England, and of increasing value as she lost her hold upon the more northerly portions of France. The wine trade alone was so profitable that the nobility, and even the royal family of England, traded on their own account. Bordeaux, with its magnificent harbour and vast trade, was a queen amongst maritime cities. The vast "landes" of the province made the best possible rearing ground for the chargers and cavalry horses to which England owed much of her warlike supremacy; whilst the people themselves, with their strength and independence of character, their traditions of personal and individual freedom which can be clearly traced back to the Roman occupation of the province, and their long attachment to England and her King, were the most valuable of allies; and although they must have been regarded to a certain extent as foreigners when on English soil, they still assimilated better and worked more easily with British subjects than any pure Frenchman had ever been found to do.

Small wonder then that so astute a monarch as the First Edward had taken vast pains to draw closer the bond which united this fair province to England. The bold Gascons well knew that they would find no such liberties as they now enjoyed did they once put themselves beneath the rule of the French King. His country was already overgrown and almost unmanageable. He might cast covetous eyes upon Gascony, but he would not pour into it the wealth that flowed steadily from prosperous England. He would not endow it with charters, each one more liberal than the last, or bind it to his kingdom by giving it a pre-eminence that would but arouse the jealousy of its neighbours. No: the shrewd Gaseous knew that full well, and knew when they were well off. They could often obtain an increase of liberty and an enlarged charter of rights by coquetting with the French monarch, and thus rousing the fears of the English King; but they had no wish for any real change, and lived happily and prosperously beneath the rule of the Roy Outremer; and amongst all the freemen of the Gascon world, none enjoyed such full privileges as those who lived within the walls of the "villes Anglaises," of which Sauveterre was one amongst the smaller cities.

The construction of these towns (now best seen in Libourne) is very simple, and almost always practically the same – a square in the centre formed by the public buildings, with eight streets radiating from it, each guarded by a gate. An outer ditch or moat protected the wall or palisade, and the towns were thus fortified in a simple but effective manner, and guarded as much by their own privileges as by any outer bulwarks. The inhabitants were bound together by close ties, and each smaller city looked to the parent city of Bordeaux, and was proud of the title of her daughter.

Sauveterre and its traditions and its communistic life were familiar enough, and had been familiar from childhood to the twin brothers.

Halfway between the mill and the town stood a picturesque and scattered hamlet, and to this hamlet was attached a church, of which a pious ecclesiastic, by name Father Anselm, had charge. He was a man of much personal piety, and was greatly beloved through all the countryside, where he was known in every hut and house for leagues around the doors of his humble home. He was, as was so frequently the case in those times, the doctor and the scribe, as well as the spiritual adviser, of his entire flock; and he was so much trusted and esteemed that all men told him their affairs and asked advice, not in the confessional alone, but as one man speaking to another in whom he has strong personal confidence.

The twin brothers knew that during the years when their dead mother had resided at the mill with honest Jean and Margot (they began greatly to wonder now why she had so lived in hiding and obscurity), she had been constantly visited by the holy Father, and that she had told him things about herself and her history which were probably known to no other human being beside. Brought up as the youths had been, and trained in a measure beneath the kindly eye of the priest, they would in any case have asked his counsel and blessing before taking any overt step in life; but all the more did they feel that they must speak to him now, since he was probably the only person within their reach who could tell them anything as to their own parentage and history that they did not know already.

"We will go to him upon the morrow," said Gaston with flashing eyes. "We will rise with the sun – or before it – and go to him ere his day's work is begun. He will surely find time to talk with us when he hears the errand upon which we come. I trow now that when he has sat at our board, and has bent upon our faces those glances I have not known how to read aright, he has been wondering how long it would be ere we should awake to the knowledge that this peasant life is not the life of the De Brocas race, guessing that we should come to him for counsel and instruction ere we spread our wings to flee away. They call us eaglets in sooth; and do eaglets rest for ever in their mountain eyry? Nay, they spread their wings as strength comes upon them, and soar upwards and onwards to see for themselves the great world around; even as thou and I will soar away, Brother, and seek other fortunes than will ever be ours here in Sauveterre."

With these burning feelings in their hearts, it was no wonder that the twins uttered a simultaneous exclamation of satisfaction and pleasure when, as they approached the mill, they were aware of the familiar figure of Father Anselm sitting at the open door of the living house, engaged, as it seemed, in an animated discussion with the worthy miller and his good wife.

The look which the Father bent upon the two youths as they approached betrayed a very deep and sincere affection for them; and when after supper they asked to speak with him in private, he readily acceded to their request, accepting the offer of a bed from the miller's wife, as already the sun had long set, and his own home was some distance away.

The faces of Jean and Margot were grave with anxious thought, and that of the priest seemed to reflect something of the same expression; for during the course of the simple meal which all had shared together, Gaston had told of the unlooked-for encounter with the proud Sieur de Navailles in the forest, and of the defiance he had met with from the twin eaglets. As the good miller and his wife heard how Gaston had openly declared his name and race to the implacable foe of his house, they wrung their hands together and uttered many lamentable exclamations. The present Lord of Saut was terribly feared throughout the neighbourhood in which he dwelt. His fierce and cruel temper had broken forth again and again in acts of brutality or oppression from which there was practically no redress. Free as the Gascon peasant was from much or the serfdom and feudal servitude of other lands, he was in some ways worse off than the serf, when he chanced to have roused the anger of some great man of the neighbourhood. The power of the nobles and barons – the irresponsible power they too often held – was one of the crying evils of the age, one which was being gradually extinguished by the growing independence of the middle classes. But such changes were slow of growth, and long

in penetrating beyond great centres; and it was a terrible thing for a brace of lads, unprotected and powerless as these twin brothers, to have brought upon themselves the hostility and perchance the jealousy of a man like the Sieur de Navailles. If he wished to discover their hiding place, he would have small difficulty in doing so; and let him but once find that out, and the lives of the boys would not be safe either by night or day. The retainers of the proud baron might swoop down at any moment upon the peaceful mill, and carry off the prey without let or hindrance; and this was why the secret of their birth and name had been so jealously kept from all (save a few who loved the house of De Brocas) by the devoted miller and his wife.

But Gaston little recked of the threatened peril. The fearless nature of his race was in him, and he would have scorned himself had he failed to speak out boldly when questioned by the haughty foe of his house. If the De Brocas had been ruined in all else, they had their fearless honour left them still.

But the priest's face was grave as he let the boys lead him into the narrow bedchamber where they slept – a room bare indeed of such things as our eyes would seek, but which for the times was commodious and comfortable enough. He was pondering in his mind what step must now be taken, for it seemed to him as though the place of safety in the mill in which their mother had left her sons could hide them no longer. Go they must, of that he felt well assured; but where? That was a question less easily answered offhand.

"Father," began Gaston eagerly, so soon as the door had closed behind the three, and Raymond had coaxed the dim taper into its feeble flicker – "Father, we have come to thee for counsel – for help. Father, chide us not, nor call us ingrate; but it has come to this with us – we can no longer brook this tame and idle life. We are not of the peasant stock; why must we live the peasant life? Father, we long to be up and doing – to spread our wings for a wider flight. We know that those who bear our name are not hiding their heads in lowly cots; we know that our sires have been soldiers and statesmen in the days that are past. Are we then to hide our heads here till the snows of age gather upon them? Are we, of all our race, to live and die obscure, unknown? Father, we cannot stand it; it shall not be! To thee we come to ask more of ourselves than yet we know. To thee our mother commended us in her last moments; to thee she bid us look in days to come when we needed guidance and help. Wherefore to thee we have come now, when we feel that there must surely be an end to all of this. Tell us, Father, of our sire; tell us of our kinsfolk. Where be they? Where may we seek them? I trow thou knowest all. Then tell us, I beseech thee tell us freely all there is to know."

The good priest raised his eyes and thoughtfully scanned the faces of the two eager youths. Gaston was actually shivering with repressed excitement; Raymond was more calm, but not, as it seemed, one whit less interested. What a strong and manly pair they looked! The priest's eyes lighted with pride as they rested on the stalwart figures and noble faces. It was hard to believe that these youths were not quite sixteen, though man's estate was then accounted reached at an age which we should call marvellously immature in these more modern days.

"My children," said the good old man, speaking slowly and with no small feeling, "I have long looked for this day to come – the day when ye twain should stand thus before me and put this selfsame question."

"You have looked for it!" said Gaston eagerly; "then, in very sooth, there is something to tell?"

"Yes, my children, there is a long story to tell; and it seemeth to me, even as it doth to you, that the time has now come to tell it. This day has marked an era in your lives. Methinks that from this night your childhood will pass for ever away, and the life of your manhood commence. May the Holy Mother of God, the Blessed Saints, and our gracious Saviour Himself watch over and guard you in all the perils and dangers of the life that lies before you!"

So solemn were the tones of the Father that the boys involuntarily sank upon their knees, making the sign of the Cross as they did so. The priest breathed a blessing over the two, and when they had risen to their feet, he made them sit one on each side of him upon the narrow pallet bed.

"The story is something long – the story which will tell ye twain who and what ye are, and why ye have been thus exiled and forced to dwell obscure in this humble home; but I will tell all I know, and ye will then see something of the cause.

"My children, ye know that ye have a noble name – that ye belong to the house of De Brocas, which was once so powerful and great in these fair lands around this home of yours. I wot that ye know already some thing of the history of your house, how that it was high in favour with the great King of England, that first Edward who so long dwelt amongst us, and made himself beloved by the people of these lands. It was in part fidelity to him that was the cause of your kinsfolk's ruin: for whilst they served him in other lands, following him across the sea when he was bidden to go thither, the treacherous foe of the house of Navailles wrested from them, little by little, all the lands they had owned here, and not even the many mandates from the Roy Outremer sufficed to gain them their rights again. It might have been done had the great Edward lived; but when he died and his son mounted the throne, men found at once how weak were the hands that held the sovereign power, and the Sieur de Navailles laughed in his beard at commands he knew there was no power to enforce. But listen again, my sons; that feeble King, despite many and great faults, was not without some virtues also; and he did not forget that the house of De Brocas had ruined itself in the cause of himself and his father."

"Did he do aught to show his gratitude?"

"Thou shalt hear, my son. The younger Edward had not been many years upon his father's throne before a great battle was fought by him against the Scottish race his father had vanquished and subdued. These rebel subjects revolted from under his hand, and he fought with them a battle on the field of Bannockburn, in which he was overthrown and defeated, and in which your grandsire, Arnald de Brocas, lost his life, fighting gallantly for England's King."

"Our grandsire?" cried both the boys in a breath. "Tell us more of him."

"It is little that I know, my children, save what I have just said. He served the King faithfully in life and death, and his sons reaped some reward for their father's fidelity. At first, whilst they were quite young, his three sons (of whom your father was the third) were sent to dwell with their mother's relatives – the De Campaines of Agen, of whom, doubtless, ye have heard; but as they grew to man's estate, they were recalled to the English Court, and received offices there, as many another noble Gascon has done before them."

"Have we then uncles in England?" asked Raymond eagerly. "Then, if we find but our way across the water, we may find a home with one of them? Is it not so, good Father?"

The priest did not exclaim at the idea of the boys journeying forth across the seas alone, but he shook his head thoughtfully as he continued his narrative as if there had been no interruption.

"The English King was not unmindful of the service done him by the father of these youths, and he promoted them to places of honour about his Court. First, they were all made serviens of his own royal person, and were brought up with his son, who is now the King; then, as I have heard, they greatly endeared themselves to the Prince by loyalty and faithful service. When he ascended the throne, and purged the Court of the false favourites from this and other lands who had done so much ill to that country, he was ably helped in the task before him by thy father and thy two uncles; and I can well believe that this was so, seeing that they were speedily advanced to posts of honour in the royal service."

"What posts?" asked the eager youths.

"The head of your branch of this noble house," continued the priest, "is your uncle Sir John de Brocas, who is the King's Master of the Horse, and the lord of many fair Manors and wide lands in England, and high in favour with his master. Second in the line is your uncle Master Bernard de Brocas, a clerk, and the Rector (as it is called in the realm of England) of St. Nicholas, in or near a town that is called Guildford – if I can frame my lips aright to the strange words. He too is high in favour with the Roy Outremer, and, as I have heard, is oft employed by him in these parts to quell

strife or redress grievances; but I know not how that may be. It is of thy father that I would fain speak to thee, Gaston, for thou art heir to his name and estate if thou canst make good the claim, as in time thou mayest yet. Listen whilst I tell all that I know. Thy father – Arnald – was the youngest of the three sons of him who died on the field of Bannockburn, and to him was given the post of Master of the Horse to Prince John of Eltham. I misdoubt me if that Prince is living yet; but of that I cannot speak with certainty. He was also valettus or serviens to the King, and might have carved out for himself as great a career as they, had it not been that he estranged himself from his kindred, and even offended the King himself, by the marriage that he made with Mistress Alice Sanghurst of Basildene."

The brothers exchanged quick glances as the name passed the priest's lips. Their memory had not then played them false.

"But why were they thus offended? Was not our mother rightful owner of Basildene? and is it not a fair heritage?"

"The reason for the ill will, my sons, I know not. Your mother did not fully understand it, and from her lips it was I heard all this tale. Perchance some nobler alliance was wished by the family and by the King himself, perchance the young man acted something hastily, and gave umbrage that might have been spared. I know not how that may have been. All I for certainty know is that your father, Arnald, brought hither his wife, flying from some menaced peril, fearful of capture and discovery; and that here in this lonely mill, amongst those who had ever loved the name of De Brocas, the sweet lady was able to hide her head, and to find a place of safe refuge. Jean, then a youth, had been in the service of Arnald, having been seized with a love of wandering in his boyhood, which had led him to cross the sea to England, where he had fallen in with your father and attached himself to his person. The elder Jean, his father, was miller then and right glad was he to welcome back his son, and give a shelter to the lady in her hour of need. Good Margot, as you know, was your nurse when you were born; she had married Jean a short time back, and her own babe had died the very week before you came into the world. She has always loved you as her own, and though your mother was taken from you, you have never lost a mother's love. Do not forget that, my children, in the years to come; and if the time should ever be when you can requite the faithful attachment of these two honest hearts, be sure that you let not the chance slip."

"We will not," answered the boys in a breath. "But the rest of your story, good Father."

"You shall hear it all, my sons. It was in the year of grace 1329 that your father first brought his wife here, and in the following year you twain were born. Your father stayed till he could fold you in his arms, and bestow upon you the blessing of a father; but then his duties to his master called him to England, and for a whole long year we heard no news of him. At the end of that time a messenger arrived with despatches for his lady. She sent to ask my help in reading these; and together we made out that the letter contained a summons for her to join her lord in England, where he would meet her at the port of Southampton, into which harbour many of our vessels laden with wine put in for safe anchorage. As for the children, said the letter, she must either bring or leave them, as seemed best to her at the time; and after long and earnest debate we resolved that she should go alone, and that you should be left to good Margot's tender care. I myself escorted our gentle lady to Bordeaux, and there it was easy to find safe and commodious transport for her across the sea. She left us, and we heard no more until more than a year had passed by, and she returned to us, sorely broken down in mind and body, to tell a sorrowful tale."

"Sorrowful? Had our proud uncles refused to receive her?" asked Gaston, with flashing eyes. "I trow if that be so – "

But the Father silenced him by a gesture.

"Wait and let me tell my tale, boy. Thou canst not judge till thou knowest all. She came back to us, and to me she told all her tale, piece by piece and bit by bit, not all at once, but as time and opportunity served. And this is what I learned. When your father summoned her back to join him, it was because her one brother was dead – dead without leaving children behind – and her father,

now growing old, wished to see her once again, and give over to her before he died the fair domain of Basildene, which she would now inherit, but to which she had had no title when she married your father. It seemed like enow to both of them that if Arnald de Brocas could lead a well-dowered bride to his brothers' halls, all might be well between them and so it came about when the old man died, and the lady had succeeded to the lands, that he started forth to tell the news, not taking her, as the weather was inclement, and she somewhat suffering from the damp and fog which they say prevail so much in England, but faring forth alone on his embassy, trusting to come with joy to fetch her anon."

"And did he not?" asked the boys eagerly.

"I will tell you what chanced in his absence. You must know that your grandsire on your mother's side had a kinsman, by name Peter Sanghurst, who had long cast covetous eyes upon Basildene. He was next of kin after your mother, and he, as a male, claimed to call the property his. He had failed to make good his claim by law; but so soon as he knew your mother to be alone in the house, he came down upon it with armed retainers and drove her forth ere she well knew what had befallen; and she, not knowing whither her lord had gone, nor how to find him, and being in sore danger from the malice of the wicked man who had wrested from her the inheritance, and would gladly have done her to death, knew not what better to do than to fly back here, leaving word for her lord where she was to be found; and thus it came that ere she had been gone from us a year, she returned in more desolate plight than at the first."

Gaston's face was full of fury, and Raymond's hands were clenched in an access of rage.

"And what did our father then? Sure he waged war with the vile usurper, and won back our mother's lands for her! Sure a De Brocas never rested quiet under so foul an insult!"

"My sons, your father had been taught patience in a hard school. He returned to Basildene, not having seen either of his brothers, who were both absent on the King's business, to find his wife fled, and the place in the firm grasp of the wily man, who well knew how to strengthen himself in the possession of ill-gotten gains. His first care was for your mother's safety, and he followed her hither before doing aught else. When he found her safe with honest Jean and Margot, and when they had taken counsel together, he returned to England to see what could be done to regain the lost inheritance and the favour of his kinsmen who had been estranged. You were babes of less than three summers when your father went away, and you never saw him more."

"He did not come again?"

"Nay, he came no more, for all too soon a call which no man may disobey came for him, and he died before the year was out."

"And had he accomplished naught?"

"So little that it must needs come to naught upon his death. He sent a trusty messenger – one of his stout Gascon henchmen – over to us with all needful tidings. But there was little of good to tell. He had seen his brother, Sir John, the head of the family, and had been received not unkindly by him; but in the matter of the recovery of Basildene the knight had but shaken his head, and had said that the King had too many great matters on hand just then to have leisure to consider so small a petition as the one concerning a Manor of no repute or importance. If Arnald had patience to wait, or to interest Prince John in the matter, something might in time be done; but Peter Sanghurst would strive to make good his claim by any means bad or good, and as he held possession it might be difficult indeed to oust him. The property belonged to one who had been a cause of much offence, and perchance that weighed with Sir John and made him less willing to bestir himself in the matter. But be that as it may, nothing had been done when Arnald de Brocas breathed his last; and his wife, when she heard the tale, looked at you two young children as you lay upon the grass at play, and she said with a sigh and a smile, 'Father, I will wait till my boys be grown, for what can one weak woman do alone? and then we will go together to the land that is mine by birth, and my boys shall win back for me and for themselves the lost inheritance of Basildene.'"

"And so we will!" cried Gaston, with flashing eyes; "and so we will! Here as I stand I vow that we will win it back from the false and coward kinsman who holds it now."

"Ay," answered Raymond, with equal ardour and enthusiasm, "that, Brother, will we do; and we will win for ourselves the name that she herself gave to us – The Twin Brothers of Basildene."

CHAPTER III. THE UNKNOWN WORLD

So that was the story of their past. That was why they two, with the blood of the De Brocas running in their veins, had lived all their past lives in the seclusion of a humble mill; why they had known nothing of their kinsfolk, albeit they had always known that they must have kindred of their own name and race; and why their mother upon her deathbed had spoken to them not of any inheritance that they might look to claim from descent through their father, but of Basildene, which was theirs in very right, as it had been hers before, till her ambitious and unscrupulous kinsman had driven her forth.

And now what should they do? Whither should they go; and what should be the object of the lives – the new lives of purpose and resolve which had awakened within them?

Gaston had given voice to this feeling in vowing them to the attempt to recover their lost heritage of Basildene, and Father Anselm did not oppose either that desire or the ardent wish of the youths to fare forth into the great world alone.

"My sons," he said a few days later, when he had come to see if the twins held yet to their first resolve. "You are something young as yet to sally forth into the unknown world and carve for yourselves your fortunes there; but nevertheless I trow the day has come, for this place is no longer a safe shelter for you. The Sieur de Navailles, as it is told me, is already searching for you. It cannot be long before he finds your hiding place, and then no man may call your lives safe by night or day. And not only would ye yourselves be in peril, but peril would threaten good Jean and Margot; and methinks you would be sorely loath that harm should come to them through the faithful kindness they have ever shown to you and yours."

"Sooner would we die than that one hair of their head should be touched!" cried both the boys impetuously; "and Margot lives in fear and trembling ever since we told her of the words we spoke to yon tyrant and usurper of Saut. We told her for her comfort that he would think us too poor and humble and feeble to vent his rage on us; but she shook her head at that, and feared no creature hearing the name of De Brocas would be too humble to be a mark for his spite. And then we told her that we would sally forth to see the world, as we had ever longed to do and though she wept to think that we must go, she did not bid us stay. She said, as thou hast done, good Father, that she had known that such day would surely come; and though it has come something early and something suddenly, she holds that we shall be safer facing the perils of the unknown world, than living here a mark for the spite and malice of the foe of our house. If no man holds us back, why go we not forth tomorrow?"

The priest's face was grave and even sorrowful, but he made no objection even to so rapid a move.

"My sons, if this thing is to be, it is small use to tarry and linger. I would not that the Sieur de Navailles should know that you have hidden your heads here so long; and a secret, however faithfully kept, that belongs to many, may not be a secret always. It is right that you should go, and with the inclement winter season hard upon us, with its dangers from heavy snows, tempests at sea, and those raids from wolves that make the peril of travellers when the cold once sets in, it behoves you, if go ye must, to go right speedily. And in the belief that I should find your minds made up and your preparations well-nigh complete, I have brought to you the casket given into my charge by your mother on her dying bed. Methinks that you will find therein gold enough to carry you safe to England, and such papers as shall suffice to prove to your proud kinsmen at the King's Court that ye are in very truth the sons of their brother, and that it is of just and lawful right that you make your claim to Basildene."

The brothers looked eagerly at the handsome case, wrought and inlaid with gold, in which certain precious parchments had lain ever since they had been carried in haste from England. The boys looked at these with a species of awe, for they had but very scant knowledge of letters, and such as they had acquired from the good Father was not enough to enable them to master the contents of

the papers. Learning was almost entirely confined to the ecclesiastics in those days, and many were the men of birth and rank who could scarce read or write their own name.

But the devices upon the parchments told a tale more easily understood. There was the golden lion rampant upon the black ground – the arms of the De Brocas family, as the Father told them; whilst the papers that referred to Basildene were adorned with a shield bearing a silver stag upon an azure ground. They would have no difficulty in knowing the deeds apart; and good Margot sewed them first into a bag of untanned leather, and then stitched them safely within the breast of Gaston's leathern jerkin. The golden pieces, and a few rings and trinkets that were all that remained to the boys of their lost inheritance, were sewn in like manner into Raymond's clothing, and there was little more to be done ere the brothers went forth into the unknown world.

As for their worldly possessions, they were soon numbered, and comprised little more than their clothing, their bows and arrows, and the poniards which hung at their girdles. As they were to proceed on foot to Bordeaux, and would probably journey in the same simple fashion when they reached the shores of England, they had no wish to hamper themselves with any needless encumbrances, and all that they took with them was a single change of under vest and hose, which they were easily able to carry in a wallet at their back. They sallied forth in the dress they commonly wore all through the inclement winter season – an under-dress of warm blue homespun, with a strong jerkin of leather, soft and well-dressed, which was as long as a short tunic, and was secured by the girdle below the waist which was worn by almost all ranks of the people in that age. The long hose were likewise guarded by a species of gaiter of the same strong stuff. And a peasant clad in his own leather garments was often a match for a mailed warrior, the tough substance turning aside sword point or arrow almost as effectually as a coat of steel, whilst the freedom and quickness of motion allowed by the simpler dress was an immense advantage to the wearer in attack or defence.

The good Father looked with tender glances at the brave bright boys as they stood forth on the morning of their departure, ready to sally out into the wide world with the first glimpse of dawn. He had spent the previous night at the mill, and many words of fatherly counsel and good advice had he bestowed upon the lads, now about to be subjected to temptations and perils far different from any they had known in their past life. And his words had been listened to with reverent heed, for the boys loved him dearly, and had been trained by him in habits of religious exercise, more common in those days than they became, alas in later times. They had with them an English breviary which had been one of their mother's most valued possessions, and they promised the Father to study it with reverent heed; for they were very familiar with the petitions, and could follow them without difficulty despite their rudimentary education. So that when they knelt before him for his last blessing, he was able to give it with a heart full of hope and tender confidence; and he felt sure that whether the lads went forth for weal or woe, he should (if they and he both lived through the following years) see their faces again in this selfsame spot. They would not forget old friends – they would seek them out in years to come; and if fate smiled upon their path, others would share in the sunshine of their good fortune.

And so the boys rose to their feet again to meet a proud, glad smile from the eyes of the kind old man; and though Margot's face was buried in her apron, and honest Jean was not ashamed to let the tears run down his weatherbeaten face, there was no attempt made to hinder or to sadden the eager lads. They kissed their good nurse with many protestations of love and gratitude, telling her of the days to come when they would return as belted knights, riding on fine horses, and with their esquires by their side, and how they would tell the story of how they had been born and bred in this very mill, and of all they owed to those who had sheltered them in their helpless infancy.

The farewells once over, with the inevitable sadness that such scenes must entail, the boys' spirits rose with wonderful celerity. True, they looked back with fond glances at the peaceful homestead where their childhood had been passed, as they reached the ridge of the undulating plain from which the last glimpse of the red roofs and tumbling water was to be had. Raymond even felt a mist rise before his eyes as he stood and gazed, and Gaston dashed his hand impatiently across his eyes as

though something hindered his vision; but his voice was steady and full of courage as he waved his right arm and cried aloud:

"We will come back! we will see this place again! Ah, Raymond, methinks I shall love it better then than I do today; for though it has been a timely place of shelter, it has not been – it never could be – our true home. Our home is Basildene, in the fair realm of England's King. I will rest neither day nor night until I have looked upon the home our mother dwelt in, and have won the right to call that home our own."

Then the brothers strode with light springy steps along the road which would in time lead them to the great seaport city of Bordeaux, towards which all the largest roads of the whole province converged.

The royal city of the Garonne was full forty leagues away – over a hundred British miles – and the boys had never visited it yet, albeit their dream had long been to travel thither on their feet, and see the wonders of which travellers spoke. A day's march of ten leagues or more was as nothing to them. Had the days been longer they would have done more, but travelling in the dark through these forest-clad countries was by no means safe, and the Father had bid them promise that they would always strive to seek shelter ere the shades of night fell; for great picks of wolves ravaged the forests of Gascony until a much later date, and though the season of their greatest boldness and fierceness had not yet come, they were customers not to be trifled with at any time, and a hunting knife and a crossbow would go but a small way in defence if a resolute attack were to be made by even half-a-dozen of the fierce beasts.

But the brothers thought not of peril as they strode through the clear crisp air, directing their course more by the sun than by any other guide, as they pursued their way engrossed in eager talk. They were passing through the great grazing pastures, the Landes of Gascony, which supplied England with so many of her best horses, and walking was easy and they covered the ground fast. Later on would come dark stretches of lonely forest, but here were smiling pasture and bright sunshine and the brothers talked together of the golden future before them, of their proud kinsmen at the King's Court, of the Roy Outremer himself, and of Basildene and that other treacherous kinsman there. As they travelled they debated within themselves whether it were better to seek first the countenance of their uncles on their father's side, or whether to make their way first to Basildene and see what manner of place it was, and what likelihood there seemed of ousting the intruder.

How to decide this point themselves the brothers did not know; but as it chanced, fortune was to decide it for them in her own fashion, and that before many suns had set.

Two days of travel had passed. The brothers had long left behind them every trace of what had been familiar to them in the old life. The evening of the third day was stealing fast upon them, and they were yet, as it seemed, in the heart of the vast forest which they had entered soon after noon, and which they had hoped to pass completely through before the daylight waned. They had been told that they might look, if they pushed on fast, to reach the town of Castres by nightfall; but the paths through the forest were intricate: they had several times felt uncertain as to whether they were going right. Now that the darkness was coming on so fast they were still more uncertain, and more than once they had heard behind and before them the unmistakable howl of the wolf.

The hardy twins would have thought nothing of sleeping in the open air even at this somewhat inclement season; but the proximity of the wolves was unpleasant. For two days the cold had been sharp, and though it was not probable that it had yet seriously interfered with the supplies of the wild beasts, yet it was plain that they had emerged from their summer retreats in the more remote parts of the forest, and were disposed to venture nearer to the habitable world on the outskirts. If the brothers slept out of doors at all, it would have to be in the fork of some tree, and in that elevated position they would be likely to feel the cold rather keenly, though down below in some hollow trunk they could make themselves a warm nest enough. Mindful of their promise to the priest, they resolved to

try yet to reach some hut or place of shelter, however rude, before the night absolutely closed in, and marched quickly forward with the practised tread of those born to forest life.

Suddenly Gaston, who was a couple of paces in the front, paused and laid a hand upon his brother's arm.

"Hist!" he said below his breath. "Methought I heard a cry."

Raymond stopped short and listened, too. Yes; there was certainly some tumult going on a little distance ahead of them. The brothers distinguished the sound of human voices raised in shrill piercing cries, and with that sound was mingled the fierce baying note that they had heard too often in their lives to mistake at any time.

"It is some traveller attacked by wolves!" cried the brothers in a breath, and without a single thought of their own peril the gallant boys tore headlong through the dark wood to the spot whence the tumult proceeded.

Guided by the sound of shouts, cries, and the howling of the beasts, the brothers were not long in nearing the scene of the strife.

"Shout aloud!" cried Gaston to his brother as they ran. "Make the cowardly brutes believe that a company is advancing against them. It is the best, the only chance. They will turn and fly if they think there be many against them."

Raymond was not slow to act upon this hint. The next moment the wood rang again to the shouts and calls of the brothers, voice answering to voice till it seemed as though a score of men were approaching. The brothers, moreover, knew and used the sharp fierce call employed by the hunters of the wolves in summoning their dogs to their aid – a call that they knew would be heard and heeded by the savage brutes, who would well know what it meant. And in effect the artifice was perfectly successful; for ere they had gained the spot upon which the struggle had taken place, they heard the breaking up of the wolf party, as the frightened beasts dashed headlong through the coverts, whilst their howling and barking died away in the distance, and a great silence succeeded.

"Thank Heaven for a timely rescue!" they heard a voice say in the English tongue; "for by my troth, good Malcolm, I had thought that thou and I would not live to tell this tale to others. But where are our good friends and rescuers? Verily, I have seen nothing, yet there must have been a good dozen or more. Light thy lantern, an thou canst, and let us look well round us, for by the mass I shall soon think we have been helped by the spirits of the forest."

"Nay, fair sir, but only by two travellers," said Gaston, advancing from the shadow of the giant trees, his brother closely following him. "We are ourselves benighted in this forest, having by some mischance lost our road to Castres, which we hoped to have sighted ere now. Hearing the struggle, and the shouts with which you doubtless tried to scare off the brutes, we came to see if we might not aid, and being well acquainted with the calls of the hunters of the wolves, succeeded beyond our hopes. I trust the cowardly and treacherous beasts have done you no injury?"

"By my troth, it is strange to hear my native tongue in these parts, and so fairly spoken withal. I trust we are not bewitched, or the sport of spirits. Who art thou, brave boy? and whence comest thou? How comes it that thou, being, as it seems, a native of these parts, speakest so well a strange language?"

"It was our mother's tongue," answered Gaston, speaking nevertheless guardedly, for he had been warned by the Father not to be too ready to tell his name and parentage to all the world. "We are bound for Bordeaux, and thence to England, to seek our mother's kindred, as she bid us ere she died."

"If that be so, then let us join forces and travel on together," said he whom they had thus succoured, a man well mounted on a fine horse, and with a mounted servant beside him, so that the brothers took him for a person of quality, which indeed he was, as they were soon to learn. "There is safety in numbers, and especially so in these inhospitable forest tracks, where so many perils beset the traveller. I have lost my other stout fellows in the windings of the wood, and it were safer to travel

four than two. Riding is slow work in this gloom. I trow ye will have no trouble in keeping pace with our good chargers."

The hardy Gascon boys certainly found no difficulty about that. Gaston walked beside the bridle rein of the master, whilst Raymond chatted amicably to the man, whose broad Scotch accent puzzled him a little, and led in time to stories of Border warfare, and to the tale of Bannockburn, told from a Scotchman's point of view; to all of which the boy listened with eager interest. As for Gaston, he was hearing of the King's Court, the gay tourneys, the gallant feats of arms at home and abroad which characterized the reign of the Third Edward. The lad drank in every item of intelligence, asking such pertinent questions, and appearing so well informed upon many points, that his interlocutor was increasingly surprised, and at last asked him roundly of his name and kindred.

Now the priest had warned the boys at starting not to speak with too much freedom to strangers of their private affairs, and had counselled them very decidedly not to lay claim at starting to the name of De Brocas, and thus draw attention to themselves at the outset. There was great laxity in the matter of names in ages when penmanship was a recondite art, and even in the documents of the period a name so well known as that of De Brocas was written Broc and Brook, Brocaz and Brocazt, and half-a-dozen more ways as well. Wherefore it mattered the less what the lads called themselves, and they had agreed that Broc, without the De before it, would be the best and safest patronymic for them in the present.

"We are twin brothers, may it please you, fair sir; English on our mother's side, though our father was a Gascon. Our father was much in England likewise, and, as we hear, held some office about the Court, though of its exact nature we know not. Both our parents died many long years since; but we have never ceased to speak the tongue of England, and to dream of one day going thither. Our names are Gaston and Raymond Broc, and we are going forth at last in search of the adventures which men say in these warlike days may be found by young and old, by rich and poor. Our faces are set towards England. What may befall us there kind Fortune only knows."

Something in the frank and noble bearing of the lad seemed to please the knightly stranger. He laid a friendly hand on Gaston's shoulder as the youth paced with springy strides beside him.

"I trow thou art a mettlesome knave, and I owe thee and thy brother something more than fair words for the service ye have rendered me this night. I have lost three or four of my followers by disease and accident since I left the shores of England. Boy, what sayest thou to taking service with me for a while – thou and thy brother likewise – and journeying to fair England as two of my young esquires? I like you well, and in these days it is no small thing to rank in one's train those to whom the language of Gascony is familiar. I trow ye be able to speak the French tongue likewise, since ye be so ready with our foreign English?"

"Ay, we can both speak and understand it," answered Gaston, whose cheeks had crimsoned with eager delight; "but we speak English better. Good Sir, we could desire nothing better than to follow you to the world's end; but we have not been trained to the use of arms, nor to knightly exercises. I know not if we could make shift to please you, be our service never so faithful."

"In such a case as that, sure I should be a hard master to please," returned the other, and Gaston knew from his voice that he was smiling. "But we need not settle it all out here in this dark wood. You must wait awhile to see what manner of man it is you speak of serving. And you may at least be my companions of voyage across the sea, though once on English shores you shall please yourselves whether or not you serve me farther. As for my name, it is James Audley, and I am one of the King's knights. I am now bound for Windsor – thou hast doubtless heard of Windsor, the mighty fortress where the King holds his Court many a time and oft. Well, it hath pleased his Majesty of late to strive to bring back those days of chivalry of which our bards sing and of which we hear from ancient legend – days that seem to be fast slipping away, and which it grieves our most excellent King to see die out in his time. Hast heard, boy, of the great King Arthur of whom men wrote and sung in days gone by? Has his fame reached as far as thy Gascon home?"

"Yea, verily," answered Gaston eagerly. "Our mother in long-past days would speak to us of that great King, and of his knights, and of the Round Table at which they sat together, their King in their midst – "

"Ay, truly thou knowest well the tale, and it is of this same Round Table I would speak. The King has thought good to hold such a Round Table himself, and has sent forth messages to numbers of his knights to hold themselves in readiness to attend it early in the year which will soon be upon us. Men say that he is building a wondrous round tower at his fortress of Windsor, wherein his Round Table will be placed and the feast celebrated. I know not with what truth they rumour this, but it is like enough, for his Majesty hath the love of his people and a kingly mind; and what he purposes he makes shift to carry out, and that right speedily. But be that as it may, there is no mistaking his royal summons to his Round Table, and I am hastening back across the water to be at Windsor on the appointed day; and if it will pleasure you twain to journey thither with me, I trow you will see things the like of which you have never dreamed before; and sure a better fashion of entering life could scarce be found than to follow one of the King's knights to one of the fairest assemblies of chivalry that the world has ever locked upon."

And indeed Gaston thought so too. His breath was taken away by the prospect. He was dazzled by the very thought of such a thing, and his words of eager thanks were spoken with the falterings of strong emotion.

The road had widened out here, and the travellers had got free of the forest. Lights sparkled pleasantly in front of them, and Raymond had come up in time to hear the offer just made. The eager delight of the two lads seemed to please the brave Sir James, who was not much more than a youth himself, as we should reckon things now, though four-and-twenty appeared a more advanced age then.

As the travellers at last found themselves within the precincts of a fairly comfortable hostelry, and the horsemen dismounted at the door and entered the inn, Sir James pushed the two lads into the lighted room before him, and looked them well over with a pair of searching but kindly blue eyes. He was himself a fine man, of noble stature and princely hearing. His face was pleasant, though it could be stern too on occasion, and the features were regular and good. The boys had never seen such a kingly-looking man, and their hearts went out to him at once. As for him, he looked from one bright face to the other, and nodded his head with a smile.

"Methinks you will make a pair of gallant squires," he said. "So long as it pleases you to remain in my service, you may call yourselves my men, and receive from my hands what my other servants do."

CHAPTER IV. THE MASTER OF THE HORSE

What a wonderful experience it was for the twin brothers to find themselves for the first time in their lives upon the great ocean of which they had so many times heard! As the little vessel, with her cargo of wine, plunged merrily through the white-crested waves, bearing her freight northward through the stormy Bay of Biscay to the white shores of Albion, the brothers loved to stand in the pointed prow of the brave little craft, feeling the salt spray dashing in their faces, and listening to the swirl of water round the ship's sides as she raced merrily on her way. Now indeed, were they well embarked upon a career of adventure and glory. Were they not habited like the servants of an English knight – their swords by their sides (if need be), their master's badge upon their sleeves? Were they not bound for the great King's Court – for the assembly of the Round Table, of which, as it seemed, all men were now talking? Would they not see their own kinsmen, feel their way perhaps to future friendship with those who bore their own name? For the present they were dubbed Brook by the English servants with whom they associated, though more frequently they went by their Christian names alone.

It was the fashion in these times to think well of the Gascon race. The King set the example, knowing how useful such men were like to be to him in days to come; and these lads, who spoke English almost as their mother tongue, and were so full of spirit, grace, and vivacity, rapidly rose in favour both with Sir James himself and with his retinue. No auspices could well have been more favourable for the lads upon their first entrance into the great world, and they only wished that Father Anselm could hear of their good fortune.

They had settled now to let the visit to Basildene stand over for a time. They had but the vaguest idea where to seek their mother's home. The priest could not help them to any information on this point, and the way to Windsor was open. Their kinsfolk there could possibly give them news of Basildene, even did they decide to keep their own true name a secret for a time. There could be no doubt as to the wisdom of learning something of their mother's country and the ways of its sons before they launched themselves upon a difficult and possibly dangerous quest.

With what strange feelings did the brothers first set eyes upon the shores of England, as the little sloop slid merrily into the smoother Solent, after a rough but not unpleasant passage! How they gazed about them as they neared the quays of Southampton, and wondered at the contrast presented by this seaport with the stately and beautiful city of Bordeaux, which they had seen a fortnight back! Certainly this English port could not compare with her a single moment, yet the boys' hearts bounded with joyful exhilaration as they first set foot on English soil. Was not the first step of their wild dream safely and prosperously accomplished? Might they not augur from this a happy and prosperous career till their aim and object was accomplished?

Their master had some business to transact in and about Southampton which detained him there many days; but the Gaston lads found no fault with this arrangement, for everything they saw was new and full of interest; they were well lodged and well fed without cost to themselves, and had full license to go where they would and do what they would, as their master had no present use for their services.

Gaston and Raymond had no desire to idle away their time without profit to themselves, and after taking counsel with honest Malcolm, who had a great liking for the boys, they put themselves under the instruction of a capable swordsman, who undertook to teach them the art of using those weapons with skill and grace. As their natural quickness of eye and strength of hand made them quickly proficient in this exercise, they became anxious to try their skill at the more difficult sport of tilting, then so much in vogue with both knights and gentlemen – a sport which the King greatly encouraged as likely to be excellent training for those charges of his picked horsemen which so often turned the fortunes of the day in his favour in the sterner game of war.

Both the Gascon youths were good horsemen; not that they had ever owned a horse themselves, or had ridden upon a saddle after the fashion of knights and their esquires, but they had lived amongst the droves of horses that were bred upon the wide pasture lands of their own country, and from childhood it had been their favourite pastime to get upon the back of one of these beautiful, unbroken creatures, and go careering wildly over the sweeping plain. That kind of rough riding was as good a training as they could have had, and when once they had grown used to the feel of a saddle between their knees, and had learned the right use of rein and spur, they became almost at once excellent and fearless riders, and enjoyed shivering a lance or carrying off a ring or a handkerchief from a pole as well as any of their comrades. So that the month they passed in the seaport town was by no means wasted on them, and when they took to horse once again to accompany Sir James on his way to Windsor, they felt that they had made great strides, and were very different from the country-bred Gascon youths of two months back.

There was one more halt made in London, that wonderful city of which time fails us to speak here; and in that place a new surprise awaited the young esquires, for they and their comrades who wore Sir James Audley's livery were all newly equipped in two new suits of clothes, and these of such a sumptuous description as set the boys agape with wonder.

Truly as we read of the bravery in which knights and dames and their servants of old days were attired, one marvels where the money came from to clothe them all. It could have been no light thing to be a great man in such times, and small wonder was it that those who lived in and about the Court, whose duty it was to make a brave show in the eyes of royalty, were so often rewarded for trifling services by the gifts of Manors, benefices, or wardships; for the cost of keeping up such state as was required was great indeed, and could not have been done without some adequate compensation.

Sir James had always been a favourite with the King, as he was with the Prince of Wales – the Black Prince of the days to come. He had at various times received marks of the royal favour by substantial grants, and was resolved to appear at this festival of the Round Table in such guise as should be fitting to his rank and revenues.

Thus it came about that the Gascon youths found themselves furnished with tunics of blue and silver, richly embroidered with their master's cognizances, and trimmed with costly fur, with long mantles of blue cloth fastened with golden clasps, with rich girdles, furnished with gipciere and anelace, and hose and long embroidered shoes, such as they began to see were the fashion of the day in England. Their stout nags, which had carried them bravely thus far, were now exchanged for handsome animals of a better breed, horses trained to knightly exercises, and capable of carrying their masters bravely through any game of battle or tourney such as the King loved to organize when he had his knights round him. It was often that the esquires as well as the knights competed in these contests of skill and strength, or followed their masters into some great melee, and it was a point of honour with the latter that their followers should be well and suitably equipped for the sport.

"By my faith, but I wish good Margot and the holy Father could see us now," quoth Gaston, laughing, as Sir James and his followers sallied forth one bright December morning to take their last stage on the journey to Windsor.

They had traversed the main distance the day previously, for Sir James had no wish to arrive weary and travel stained at the King's Court. Orders had been given for every man to don his best riding dress and look well to the trappings of his steed, and it was a gallant-looking company indeed that sallied out from the door of the wayside hostelry and took the road towards the great Castle, glimpses of which began from time to time to be visible through the trees.

"I trow they would scarce know us! There be moments, Raymond, when I scarce know myself for the same. It seems as though years had passed since we left the old home, and by the Mass I feel as though I were a new being since then!"

"Yea, verily, and I also," answered Raymond, looking round him with eager eyes. "Gaston, look well about thee; for by what Malcolm says, these very woods through which we shall pass, and the

Manor of old Windsor hard by, are the property of our uncle Sir John de Brocas, the King's Master of the Horse; and by what I hear, methinks we shall see him in the flesh ere the day has passed."

"Ha!" exclaimed Gaston, with interest; "if that be so let us heed him well, for much of our future may hang on him. He is in the King's favour, they say, and if he did but plead our cause with the Roy Outremer, we might well look to call Basildene our home ere long."

"We must call him no longer the Roy Outremer," said Raymond, with a smile. "If we are to be the brothers of Basildene, we must be English subjects and he our liege lord."

"True," answered Gaston readily; "and methinks, if he be what all men say, it will be no hardship to own ourselves his subjects. I would ten thousand times sooner call myself so than be servant to yon weak and treacherous King of France."

At that moment an interruption occurred to delay the little cavalcade for a few moments. The road they were traversing led them past a solid gateway, which showed that upon one side at least the property was that of a private individual; and just as they were approaching this gateway the portal swung open, and out of it rode a fine-looking man of middle age and imposing aspect, followed by three youths richly attired, and by some dozen mounted attendants. The leader of the party wore a dress that was evidently the livery of some office – a tunic of blue and a cape of white Brussels cloth. His cap was of white and blue, and the King's badge of a silver swan was fastened in the front.

As he rode out, the esquires round Gaston and Raymond drew rein and whispered one to another:

"It is the King's Master of the Horse!"

Eagerly and curiously the two lads gazed at the face and figure of the kinsman now before them, whilst Sir James spurred his horse forward, a smile lighting up the grave face of the King's servant.

"Marry well met, good Sir James!" was the hearty greeting of the latter, as the two men grasped hands. "I warrant you will be welcome at the Castle, whither, I doubt not, your steps are bent. It was but two days since that his Majesty was asking news of you, no man knowing rightly whither you had gone, nor upon what errand. There be fine musterings already at the Court, and every day brings some fresh faces to the gathering assembly. I trow that such a sight as will shortly be witnessed within those walls has scarce been seen by England before."

"Nay, nor since the days of good King Arthur, if all be true that I have heard," answered Sir James. "Be these gallant youths your sons, Sir John? Verily time flies! I have not been in these parts for full three years. I scarce know them once again."

"Yes, these be my three sons," answered the father, with a proud glance at the handsome youths, who came up at a sign from him to be presented to the knight. "It may well be many long years since you saw them, for they have often been away from my side, travelling in foreign parts with my good brother, and learning the lessons of life as I have been able to see occasion. This is John, my first born. Oliver and Bernard follow after him. I trust in years to come they will live to win their spurs in the King's service. They are often about the Court, and the Prince has chosen them amongst his serviens. But they have not yet seen war, albeit I trow they will not be missing when the day for fighting shall come, which I verily believe will not be long now."

The youths made their salute to the knight, and then dropped behind. Sir James rode in advance, still in earnest converse with the Master of the Horse; whilst the attendants of the two bands, some of whom were acquainted, mixed together indiscriminately, and rode after their masters in amicable converse.

Sir John's three sons rode a few paces behind the knights, and as it chanced the Gascon brothers were the next behind them, studying these cousins of theirs with natural interest and curiosity. They had heard their names distinctly as their father had presented them to his friend, and gladly would they have fallen into converse with them had they felt certain that the advance would be taken in good part. As it was, they were rather fearful of committing breaches of good manners, and restrained themselves, though their quick, eager glances towards each other betrayed what they were feeling.

All of a sudden something unseen by the rider caused Gaston's horse to take fright. It was a very spirited and rather troublesome animal, which had been passed on by two or three riders as too restive for them, and had been ridden more successfully by Gaston than by any of its former masters. But the creature wanted close watching, and Gaston had been for a time off his guard. The knowing animal had doubtless discovered this, and had hoped to take advantage of this carelessness to get rid of his rider and gain the freedom of the forest himself. With a sudden plunge and hound, which almost unseated Gaston, the horse made a dash for the woodland aisles; and when he felt that his rider had regained his seat and was reining him in with a firm and steady hand, the fiery animal reared almost erect upon his hind legs, wildly pawing the air, and uttering fierce snorts of anger and defiance. But Gaston's blood was up now, and he was not going to be mastered by his steed, least of all in presence of so many witnesses. Shouting to Raymond, who had dismounted and appeared about to spring at the horse's head, to keep away, he brought the angry creature down by throwing himself upon his neck; and though there were still much plunging and fierce kicking and struggling to be encountered before the day was won, Gaston showed himself fully equal to the demands made upon his horsemanship; and before many moments had passed, had the satisfaction of riding the horse quietly back to the little cavalcade, which had halted to witness the struggle.

"That was good riding, and a fine animal," remarked the Master of the Horse, whose eyes were well trained to note the points of any steed. "I trow that lad will make a soldier yet. Who is he, good Sir James?"

"One Gaston Brook, a lad born and brought up in Gascony, together with his twin brother who rides by his side. They came to my help in the forest round Castres; and as I was in need of service, and they were faring forth to seek their fortunes, I bid them, an it pleased them, follow me. One parent was a native of Gascony, their mother I trow, since their name is English. I did hear somewhat of their simple tale, but it has fled my memory since."

"They are proper youths," said Sir John, not without a passing gleam of interest in any persons who hailed from his own country. "Half Gascon and half English makes a fine breed. The lads may live to do good service yet."

Meantime the three sons of Sir John had entered into conversation with the two youthful esquires, and were making friends as fast as circumstances would allow. They were some years older than the Gascon brothers – that is to say that John was close upon twenty, and Oliver and Bernard followed, each a year younger than his predecessor. They had seen far more of the world than these country-bred lads, and had been reared more or less in the atmosphere of the Court; still they were bright, high spirited, and unaffected youths, who were ready enough to make advances to any comrades of their own standing across whose path they might be thrown.

Gaston and Raymond had about them an air of breeding which won them notice wherever they went. Their speech was refined for the times, and their handsome figures and faces gained them speedy and favourable attention. Very soon the five youths were chatting and laughing together as though they were old friends. The sons of Sir John heard all about the encounter in the forest, and how the wolves had been scared away; whilst the Gascon brothers, on their side, heard about the vast round tower built by the King for his Round Table to assemble at, and how busily everybody had been employed in hastening on the work and getting everything in readiness for the great festival that was at hand.

"Shall we see the feast?" asked Gaston eagerly. "Men say it will be a sight not to be forgotten."

"We shall see it like enough," answered John, "but only belted knights will sit at the board. Why, even the Prince of Wales himself will not sit down at the table, but will only stand to serve his father; for his spurs are not yet won, though he says he will not be long in winning them if kind fortune will but give him the chance he craves. A great assembly of esquires will be in attendance on their masters, and I trow ye twain might well be amongst these, as we hope ourselves to be. Your master is one of the bidden knights, and will sit not very far from the King himself. If you can make

shift to steal in through the press and stand behind his chair, I doubt not but what ye will see all right well; and perchance the King himself may take note of you. He has a marvellous quick eye, and so has the Prince; and he is ever on the watch for knightly youths to serve him as valettus – as we do."

"We are going to win our spurs together," cried Bernard, who in some ways was the leading spirit amongst the brothers, as he was afterwards the most noted man of his house. "We have talked of it a thousand times, and the day will come ere long. The King has promised that when next he is called forth to fight the recreant King of France, he will take the Prince with him, and he has promised that we shall go with him. The day will come when he will lay claim once more to that crown of France which by rights is his to wear, and we shall all sally forth to drive the coward Louis from the throne, and place the crown on Edward's royal brow."

Bernard's eyes flashed fire at the bare thought of the unchecked career of victory he saw for England's arms when once she had set foot on the long-talked-of expedition which was to make Edward king over the realm of France.

"And we will fight for him too!" cried Gaston and Raymond in a breath; "and so, I trow, will all Gascony. We love the English rule there. We love the Roy Outremer, as he is called there. If he would but come to our land, instead of to treacherous Flanders or feeble, storm-torn Brittany, for his soldiers and for his starting place, I trow his arms would meet with naught but victory. The Sieur d'Albret, men whisper, has been to the Court, and has looked with loving eyes upon one of the King's daughters for his son. That hope would make him faithful to the English cause, and he is the greatest Lord in Gascony, where all men fear his name."

"Thou shalt tell all that to the King or to the Prince," said John in a low tone to Raymond, as they fell a little behind, for the road grew rough and narrow. "I trow he will be glad to learn all he may from those who know what the people of the land speak and think – the humbler folks, of whom men are growing now to take more account, at least here in England, since it is they, men now say, who must be asked ere even the King himself may dare to go to war. For money must be found through them, and they will not always grant it unless they be pleased with what has already been done. The great nobles say hard things of them they call the 'Commons;' they say that England's doom will surely come if she is to be answerable to churls and merchant folk for what her King and barons choose to do. But for my part it seems but just that those who pay the heavy burden of these long wars should know somewhat about them, and should even have the power to check them did they think the country oppressed beyond what she could bear. A bad king might not care for the sufferings of his people. A weak king might be but the tool of his barons – as we have heard the King's father was – and hear nothing but what they chose for him to know. For my own part, I think it right and just enough that the people should have their voice in these things. They always grant the King a liberal supply; and if they demand from him the redress of grievances and the granting of certain privileges in return, I can see in that naught that is unfair; nor would England be happier and more prosperous, methinks, were she governed by a tyrant who might grind her down to the dust."

John de Brocas was a very thoughtful youth, very different in appearance from his younger brothers, who were fine stalwart young men, well versed in every kind of knightly exercise, and delighting in nothing so much as the display of their energies and skill. John was cast in quite a different mould, and possibly it was something of a disappointment to the father that his first born should be so unlike himself and his other sons. John had had weak health from his cradle, which might account in part for his studious turn of mind; and the influence of his uncle's training may have had still greater effect. As the damp air of Windsor did not appear to agree with the boy, he had been sent, when seven years old, to his uncle's Rectory of St. Nicholas, and brought up in the more healthy and bracing air of Guildford. Master Bernard de Brocas, though by no means a man of exclusively scholarly tastes, was for the days he lived in a learned man, and feeling sure that his eldest nephew would never make a soldier, he tried to train him for a statesman and for an ecclesiastic – the two

offices being in those days frequently combined. The great statesmen were nearly always men in the Church's employ, and the scholarship and learning of the age were almost entirely in their keeping.

John showed no disposition to enter the Church – probably the hope of winning his spurs was not yet dead within him; but he took very kindly to book lore, and had often shown a shrewdness and aptness in diplomatic negotiation which had made Master Bernard prophesy great things for him.

Raymond had never heard such matters discussed before, and knew little enough about the art of government. He looked with respect at his companion, and John, catching the glance, smiled pleasantly in reply.

"I trow thou wouldest sooner be with the rest, hearing of the King's Round Table and the knightly jousts to follow. Let me not weary thee with my graver words. Go join the others an thou wilt."

"Nay, I will stay with thee," answered Raymond, who was greatly attracted by John's pale and thoughtful face, and could not but pity him for his manifest lack of strength and muscle. The youth was tall and rode well, but he was slight to the verge of attenuation, and the hollow cheek and unnaturally bright eyes sunk in deep caverns told a tale that was not hard to read. Young De Brocas might make a student, a clerk, a man of letters, but he would never be a soldier; and that in itself appeared to Raymond the greatest deprivation that could befall a man. But he liked his companion none the less for this sense of pity.

"I would fain hear more of England – England's laws, England's ways. I have heard that in this land men may obtain justice better than in any other. I have heard that justice is here administered to poor as well as rich. I would learn more of this. I would learn more of you. Tell me first of yourself. I know well the name of De Brocas. We come from the very place where once you held sway. The village (as you would call it) of Brocas was not so very far away. Tell me of yourself, your father, your uncle. I know all their names right well. I would hear all that you can tell."

John's face lighted with interest. He was willing enough to tell of himself, his two brothers, two sisters, and their many homes in and about the Castle of Windsor. Besides his post as Master of the Horse, John explained to Raymond, his father held the office of Chief Forester of Windsor Forest (equivalent to the modern Ranger), and besides the Manor of Old Windsor, possessed property and Manors at Old and New Bray, Didworth and Clewer. He was high in the King's favour and confidence, and, as may well be believed, led a busy and responsible life. Upon him devolved the care of all those famous studs of horses on which the King relied when he sent his armies into the field; and if his expenditure in these matters has been condemned in more recent days, the best answer will be found in the disasters and the ruinous expenditure of the later campaigns of the reign, when the King, thinking that he had reduced his French possessions to complete order, and that his magnificent cavalry would not longer be wanted to career over the plains of France, broke up and sold off his studs; so that when his calculation as to the future proved mistaken, he had no longer any organized supply of war horses to draw upon.

Raymond's interest in John's talk so won the heart of that youth that a warm friendship sprang up rapidly between them, whilst the younger brothers appeared to take almost the same liking for Gaston. By-and-by it became known that the Castle was crowded almost beyond its capacity for accommodation; and as much of the responsibility of seeing to the lodging of guests fell upon Sir John de Brocas, he gave up his house at Clewer for the time being for the use of some of the guests of humbler rank, his son John acting as host there; and to this house the Gaston brothers were asked, amongst many other youthful esquires of like degree. Thus it came about that the merry yuletide season was spent by them actually beneath their uncle's roof, although he had no idea that he was entertaining kinsmen unawares.

Mindful of the good priest's warning, and knowing their ignorance of the new life and the new people amongst whom their fortunes had led them, the twins still carefully preserved the secret of their identity. They knew too little of the cause of estrangement between their father and his brothers

to have any confidence how his sons would be received. They were both of opinion that by far their wisest course was to wait quietly and patiently, and watch what befell them; and the only question which Raymond ever dared to put to John in the days that followed which savoured of their own affairs, was an inquiry as to whether he had ever heard of a place called Basildene.

"Basildene?" repeated John slowly. "Yes, I have heard the name. It is the name of a Manor not very many miles from my uncle's house in Guildford. Dost thou know aught of it?"

"Nay; I knew not rightly if there were such a spot. But I have heard the name. Knowest thou to whom it belongs?"

"Yes, I know that too. It belongs to one Peter Sanghurst, of whom no man speaks aught but evil."

CHAPTER V. THE KING AND THE PRINCE

King Edward's assembly of knights that met at his first Round Table was as typical a gathering as could well have been found of that age of warlike chivalry. The King's idea was likewise typical of the age he lived in. He had begun to see something of that decline of chivalry which was the natural outcome of a real advance in general civilization, and of increasing law and order, however slow its progress might be. Greatly deploring any decay in a system so much beloved and cherished by knights and warriors, and not seeing that its light might merely be paling in the rise of something more truly bright and beneficent, the King resolved to do everything in his power to give an impetus to all chivalrous undertakings by assembling together his knights after the fashion of the great King Arthur, and with them to take counsel how the ways and usages of chivalry might best be preserved, the old spirit kept alive, and the interests of piety and religion (with which it should ever be blended) be truly considered.

How far this festival succeeded in its object can scarcely be told now. The days of chivalry (in the old acceptation of the term) were drawing to a close, and an attempt to galvanize into life a decaying institution is seldom attended with any but very moderate success. From the fact that we hear so little of the King's Round Table, and from the few times it ever met, one is led to conclude that the results were small and disappointing. But the brilliance of the first assembly cannot be doubted; and for the twins of Gascony it was a wonderful day, and marked an epoch in their lives; for on that occasion they saw for the first time the mighty King, whose name had been familiar to them from childhood, and had actual speech with the Prince of Wales, that hero of so many battlefields, known to history as the Black Prince.

So great was the crowd of esquires who waited upon the knights sitting around the huge Round Table, that the Gascon brothers only struggled for a few minutes into the gay assemblage to look at what was going on there. The table was itself a curiosity – a huge ring round which, in beautifully carved seats, the knights sat, each seat fitting into the next, with an arm to divide them, the backs forming a complete circle round the table. The King's seat was adorned with a richer carving, and had a higher back, than the others, but that was its only distinction. Within the circle of the table were pages flitting about, attending on the guests; and the esquires who thronged the corridors or supplemented the attentions of the pages were considerably more numerous than the occasion required, so that these were to be seen gathering in groups here and there about the building in the vicinity of the feast, discussing the proceedings or talking of public or private matters.

Very wonderful was all this to Gaston and Raymond, but not quite so bewildering as it would have been a month ago. They had been about the Court some little time now, and were growing used to the fine dresses, the English ways of speech, and the manners and customs which had perplexed them not a little at first. They were greatly entertained by watching the shifting throng of courtiers, and their one glimpse at the royal countenance of the King had been fraught with keen pleasure and satisfaction; but so far as they knew it, they had not yet seen the Prince of Wales, and they had not caught sight either of their cousins Oliver or Bernard, though they had found John sitting in the embrasure of a window in the corridor, watching the scene with the same interest which they felt in it themselves.

When they saw him they joined him, and asked the names of some of the gay personages flitting about. John good-naturedly amused them with a number of anecdotes of the Court; and as the three were thus chatting together, they were suddenly joined by another group of three, who advanced along the corridor talking in low tones but with eager excitement.

"Here comes the Prince," said John, rising to his feet, and the twin brothers turned eagerly round.

They knew in an instant which of the three was the Prince, for his companions were John's two brothers, Oliver and Bernard. Young Edward was at that time not quite fourteen, but so strong, so upright, so well grown, and of such a kingly presence, that it was hard to believe he had scarcely left his childhood behind. His tunic was of cloth of gold, with the royal arms embroidered upon it. He wore a golden collar round his neck, and his golden girdle held a dagger with a richly-jewelled hilt. A short velvet mantle lined with ermine hung over his shoulder, and was fastened by a clasp richly chased and set with rubies. His face was flushed as if with some great purpose, and his eyes shone brightly with excitement.

"It shall never be true – I will not believe it!" he was saying, in urgent accents. "Let chivalry once die out, and so goes England's glory. May I die ere I live to see that day! Better a thousand times death in some glorious warfare, in some knightly deed of daring, than to drag out a life of ease and sloth with the dying records of the glorious past alone to cheer and sustain one. Good John, thou art a man of letters – thou canst read the signs of the times – prithee tell me that there be no truth in this dark whisper. Sure the days of chivalry are not half lived through yet!"

"Nor will be so long as you are spared to England, gentle Prince," answered John, with his slight peculiar smile. "You and your royal Sire together will keep alive the old chivalry at which was dealt so sore a blow in your grandsire's days. A reign like that of weakness and folly and treachery leaves its mark behind; but England's chivalry has lived through it – "

"Ay, and she shall awake to new and fuller life!" cried the ardent boy. "What use in being born a prince if something cannot thus be done to restore what has been lost? And why should princes stand idle when the world is all in arms? Comrades, do ye long as I do to show the world that though we have not yet won our knighthood's spurs, we are yet ready and willing to sally forth, even as did the knights of old, upon some quest of peril or adventure? Why is it that I, who should by rights be one to show what may be done by a boy's arm with a stout heart behind, am ever held back from peril and danger, have never seen fighting save in the tilt yard, or wound worse than what splintered spear may chance to inflict? I burn to show the world what a band of youths can do who go forth alone on some errand of true chivalry. Comrades, give me your ears. Let me speak to you of the purpose in my heart. This day has my father, in the hearing of all men, lamented the wane of chivalry, has spoken brave words of encouragement to those who will strive with him to let it be no hollow name amongst us. Then who more fit than his own son to go forth now – at once, by stealth if need be – upon such a quest of peril and glory? nay, not for the glory – that may or may not be ours – but upon a mission of chivalrous service to the weak and helpless? This thing I purpose to do myself, together with some few chosen comrades. Brothers of Brocas, will ye go with me?"

"We will! we will!" cried the three brothers in a breath.

"We will!" echoed the twins of Gascony, forgetting all but their eager desire to share the peril and the glory of the Prince's enterprise, whatever it might be.

Young Edward heard the sound of the strange voices, and turned a quick glance of inquiry upon the youths. He saw that they wore the livery of Sir James Audley, who was a great favourite even then with the Prince. The true kingly courtesy of the Plantagenets was ingrained in the nature of this princely boy, and he looked with a smile at the two eager faces before him.

"And who be ye, fair gentlemen?" he asked. "Methinks the badge you wear is answer almost enough. I know your good lord well, and love him well, and sure there be none of his esquires, be they never so young, who would disgrace their master by fleeing in an hour of peril. Wherefore if ye would fain be of the band I seek to muster round me, I will bid you ready welcome. I seek none that be above twenty years of age.

"Good John, you shall be the wise man of our party. These lads have not lived many more years than I have myself, or I am much mistaken."

"We are twin brothers," said Gaston frankly, "and we are nigh upon sixteen. We have been with Sir James a matter of two months. We – "

"They met him in the woods of Gascony," cried Oliver, "and rescued him from the attacks of a pack of fierce wolves. I trow they would bear themselves bravely be your quest what it may."

"Are you Gascons?" asked the Prince, looking with keener interest at the two youths; for he shared some of his father's instincts of government, and was always well disposed towards Gascon subjects.

"We are half Gascon and half English, may it please you, fair Prince," answered Gaston readily, "and we will follow you to the death."

"I well believe it, my good comrades," answered the Prince quickly; "and right glad shall we be of your company and assistance. For our errand lies amidst dark forests with their hidden perils and dangers, and I wot that none know better what such dangers are nor how they may be escaped than our brethren of Gascony."

"Then you know on what quest we are bent, sweet Prince?"

Edward nodded his head as he looked over his shoulder. "Ay, that I do right well, and that will I tell you incontinently if no eavesdroppers be about. Ye know that of late days brave knights and gentlemen have been mustering to our Court from all parts of this land? Now amongst these is one Sir Hugh Vavasour, who comes from his house of Woodcrych, not half a day's ride from our Royal Palace of Guildford; and with him he has brought his son, one Alexander, with whom I yestere'en fell into converse. I say not that I liked the youth himself. He seemed to me something over bold, yet lacking in those graces of chivalry that are so dear to us. Still it was in talking with him that I heard this thing which has set my blood boiling in my veins."

"What thing is that, fair Prince?" asked John.

And then the young Edward told his tale. It was such a tale as was only too often heard in olden days, though it did not always reach the ears of royalty. The long and expensive, and as yet somewhat fruitless, wars in which Edward had been engaged almost ever since he came to the throne, had greatly impoverished his subjects, and with poverty there arose those other evils inseparable from general distress – robbery, freebooting, crime in its darkest and ugliest aspects; bands of hungry men, ruined and beggared, partly perhaps through misfortune, but partly through their own fault, wandering about the country ravaging and robbing, leaving desolation behind them, and too often, if opposed, committing acts of brutal cruelty upon defenceless victims, as a warning to others.

A band such as this was just now scouring the woods around Guildford. Young Vavasour had heard of depredations committed close against the walls of his own home, and had heard of many outrages which had been suffered by the poor folks around. Cattle had been driven off, their hardly-gathered fuel had vanished in the night; sometimes lonely houses were attacked, and the miserable inhabitants, if they offered resistance, stabbed to the heart by the marauders. One or two girls had been missed from their homes, and were said to have fallen a prey to the robber band. All these things, and the latter item especially, stirred the hot blood in the young Prince's veins, and he was all on fire to do some doughty deed that should at once exterminate such evildoers from the face of the earth, strike terror into the hearts of other bands, and show that the spirit of chivalry was yet alive in the kingdom, and that the King's son was the first to fly to the succour of the distressed and the feeble.

"For I will go myself and hunt these miscreants as though they were dogs or wolves – beasts of prey that needs must be put down with a strong hand. I will not tell my father the tale, else might he appoint warriors of his own to see to the matter, and the glory be theirs and not ours. No, this is a matter for my arm to settle. I will collect around me a band of our bravest youths – they shall all be youths like myself. Our good John knows well the country around our Palace of Guildford – in truth I know it indifferently well myself. We will sally forth together – my father will grant me leave to go thither with a body of youths of my own choosing – and thence we will scour the forests, scatter or slay these vile disturbers of the peace, restore the lost maidens to their homes, and make recompense to our poor subjects for all they have suffered at their hands."

It was just the scheme to fascinate the imagination and fire the ardour of a number of high-spirited and generous boys. The proximity of the Royal Palace of Guildford gave them every facility for carrying out the plan speedily and yet secretly, and the Prince had quickly enlisted a score of well-trained, well-equipped lads to follow him on his chivalrous quest. Sir James gave ready consent to his petition that the Gascon twins might join his train for a few days. The King, when he gave his sanction to the proposed expedition to Guildford, believed that his son was going there bent on sport or some boyish pastime, and scarce bestowed a second thought upon the matter. The royal children had each their own attendants and establishment, following wherever their youthful master or mistress went; and to the eldest son of the King a very decided liberty was given, of which his father had never yet had cause to repent.

Thus it came about that three days after the King's great feast of the Round Table had ended, the Prince of Wales, with a following of twenty young comrades, in addition to his ordinary staff of attendants, rode forth from the Castle of Windsor in the tardy winter's dawn, and before night had fallen the gay and gallant little band had reached the Palace of Guildford, which had received due notice of the approach of the King's son. Those who were sharp-eyed amongst the spectators of this departure might have noted that the Prince and his immediate followers each wore round his arm a band of black ribbon with a device embroidered upon it. The device was an eagle worked in gold, and was supposed to be emblematic of the swiftness and the strength that were to characterize the expedition of the Prince, when he should swoop down upon the dastardly foes, and force them to yield up their ill-gotten gains. These badges had been worked by the clever fingers of Edward's sisters, the youthful princesses Isabella and Joanna. Joanna, as the wardrobe rolls of the period show, was a most industrious little maiden with her needle, and must have spent the best part of her time in her favourite pastime of embroidery, judging by the amount of silk and other material required by her for her own private use. Both the sisters were devotedly attached to their handsome brother, and were the sharers of his confidences. They knew all about this secret expedition, and sympathized most fully with it. It was Joanna's ready wit which had suggested the idea of the badge, which idea was eagerly caught up by Edward; for to go forth with a token woven by the fair hands of ladies would give to the exploit a spice of romantic chivalry that would certainly add to its zest. So for the past three days the royal sisters had been plying their needles with the utmost diligence, and each of the gallant little band knew that he wore upon his arm a token embroidered for him by the hands of a youthful princess.

Of the Royal Palace of Guildford nothing now remains – even the site is not known with any certainty, though it is supposed to have occupied the spot where Guildford Park farm now stands. Its extensive park covered a large area of ground, and was a favoured hunting ground for many of the illustrious Plantagenets.

It need hardly be said with what interest and curiosity the twin brothers gazed about them as they neared the little town of Guildford, where their uncle, Master Bernard de Brocas, possessed a gradually increasing property. They felt that this journey was the first step towards Basildene; and utterly ignorant as they were of its exact locality, they wondered if they might not be passing it by whenever some ancient Manor House reared its chimneys or gables above the bare encircling trees, and their hearts beat high at the thought that they were drawing near to their own lost inheritance.

The Palace was warmly lighted in honour of the arrival of the Prince of Wales; and as the little cavalcade dismounted at the door and entered the noble hall, a figure, habited after the fashion of the ecclesiastics of the day, stepped forth to greet the scion of royalty, and the twin brothers heard their comrades mutter,

"It is the good Rector, Master Bernard de Brocas."

The young Prince plainly knew the Rector well, and after just bending his knee to ask the blessing, as was his reverent custom, he led him into the banqueting hall, where a goodly meal lay spread, placing him in a seat at his own right hand, and asking him many things as the meal progressed,

leading the talk deftly to the robbers' raids, and seeking, without betraying his purpose, to find out where these miscreants might most readily be found.

The good Rector had heard much about them, but knew little enough of their movements. One day they were heard of in one place, and again they would vanish, and no man would know whither they had gone till they appeared in another. Everywhere they left behind them desolated homes, and bloodshed and ruin followed in their track. Master Bernard had heard too many such tales from all parts of the kingdom to heed overmuch what went on in this particular spot. He knew that the winter's privation and cold acted upon savage men almost as it did upon wolves and ravenous beasts, and that in a country harassed and overtaxed such things must needs be. He never suspected the cause of the Prince's eagerness. He believed that the youths had come down bent on sport, and that they would take far more interest in the news he had to give them, that a wild boar had recently been seen in the forest aisles of the Royal Park, and that the huntsmen would be ready to sally forth to slay it at a single word from the Prince.

Edward's eyes lighted at this. It seemed to him a fortunate coincidence. Also he would be glad enough to see the killing of the boar, though he was more interested in the expedition it would involve into the heart of the forest.

"Prithee give orders, good Master Bernard, that the huntsmen be ready tomorrow morning at dawn of day. I trow there be horses and to spare to mount us all, as our own beasts will be something weary from the journey they have taken today. We will be ready ere the sun is up, and if kind fortune smiles upon us, I trust I shall have the good fortune to have a pair of fine tusks to offer to my sisters when they join us here, as they shortly hope to do."

Master Bernard, who was a man of no small importance all through this neighbourhood, hastened away to give the needful orders. He had come from his own Rectory hard by to receive the Prince and his comrades, and he suspected that the King would be well pleased for him to remain beneath the roof of the castle so long as this gay and youthful party did so.

When night came and the youths sought the rooms which had been made ready for them, the Prince signed to a certain number of his comrades to repair with him to his chamber, as though he desired their services at his toilet. Amongst those thus summoned were the three sons of Sir John de Brocas, and also the Gascon twins, for whom young Edward appeared to have taken a great liking, and who on their part warmly returned this feeling. Shutting the door carefully, and making sure that none but friends were round him, the Prince unfolded his plan.

He had learned from the Master Huntsman, whom he had seen for a few minutes before going to his room, that the boar lay concealed for the most part in some thick underwood lying in the very heart of the forest many miles distant, right away to the southwest in the direction of Woodcrych. This part of the forest was fairly well known to the Prince from former hunting expeditions, and he and John both remembered well the hut of a lonely woodman that lay hidden in the very depths of the wood near this spot. It had occurred to Edward as likely that old Ralph would be better acquainted with the habits of the robbers than any other person could be. He was too poor to be made a mark for their rapacity, yet from his solitary life in the forest he might likely enough come across their tracks, and be able to point out their hiding places. Therefore the Prince's plan was that he and the picked companions he should choose should slip away from the main body of the huntsmen, and make their way to this lonely cabin, joining their comrades later when they had discovered all that they could do from the old man. The shouts of the huntsmen and the baying of the dogs would guide them to the scene of the chase, and if the rest who remained all the while with the foresters and the dogs missed the Prince from amongst their ranks, they were not to draw attention to the fact, but were rather to strive to conceal it from the Master Huntsman, who might grow uneasy if he found the young Edward missing. It was of importance that all inquiries respecting the robbers should be conducted with secrecy, for if the Prince's curiosity on the subject were once to be known, suspicion

might be aroused, or a regular expedition against them organized, the glory and credit of which would not belong in anything but empty name to the Prince.

It was not, perhaps, unnatural that the six lads who had first conned over the plan together should be selected as the ones to make this preliminary inquiry. John was chosen for his seniority and the prudence of his counsels, his brothers for their bravery and fleetness of foot, and the Gascon twins for their close acquaintance with forest tracks, and their greater comprehension of the methods employed in following the trail of foes or fugitives through tangled woods. They would likely enough understand the old man's counsel better than any of the others; and as the sport of hunting the boar was more esteemed by the other youths than the expedition to the woodman's hut, no jealousy was aroused by the Prince's choice, and the scheme was quickly made known to the whole of the party.

The morrow proved a first-rate day for a hunting party in the forest. A light crisp snow lay on the ground, melting where exposed to the sun's rays, but forming a sparkling white carpet elsewhere. It was not deep enough to inconvenience either men or horses, and would scarce have fallen to any depth beneath the trees of the forest; but there was just sufficient to be an excellent guide in tracking down the quarry, and all felt confident that the wily old boar had seen his last sunrise.

Merrily rode the party forth through the great gateway and across the fine park in the direction of the forest. The Prince and his five chosen comrades rode together, sometimes speaking in low tones, sometimes joining in the gay converse on the subject of hunting which went on around them. But the Prince's thoughts were far less with sport than with the wrongs of his father's subjects, and the cruel outrages which they had suffered unredressed and almost unpitied. His heart burned within him to think that in merry England, as he liked to call it, and in the days of chivalry, such things were possible; and to put down cruelty and rapacity with a strong hand seemed of infinitely more importance to him than the pursuit of a fine sport.

Thus musing, and thus talking in low tones to the thoughtful John, the Prince dropped a little behind the muster of huntsmen. His chosen comrades followed his example, and straggled rather aimlessly after the main body, till at last a turn in the forest shut these completely from their view.

"Now," said the Prince, turning to his five selected comrades, "this, if I mistake not, is our road. We will soon see if we cannot get upon the track of the miscreants whom I am burning to punish and destroy!"

CHAPTER VI. THE PRINCE'S EXPLOIT

The woodman's cottage was quickly reached. It was a little rush-thatched cabin of mud, lying in the very heart of the dim wood. The party had to dismount and tie up their horses at some short distance from the place; but they had the good fortune to find the occupant at home, or rather just outside his cabin, gathering a few dried sticks to light his fire.

He was a grizzled, uncouth-looking old man, but a certain dignity was imparted to him by a look of deep and unspeakable melancholy upon his face, which gave it pathos and character of its own. The rustic face is apt to become vacant, bovine, or coarse. Solitude often reduces man almost to the level of the beasts. This old man, who for many years had lived hidden away in this vast forest, might well have lost all but the semblance of humanity; but such was not the case. His eyes had light in them; his very melancholy showed that the soul was not dead. As he saw the bright-faced boys approaching him, he first gave a great start of surprise, eagerly scanning one face after another; then, as he did so the light of hope died out from his eyes, and the old despairing look came back.

Something of this was observed by the Prince and his followers, but they were at present too much bent upon their own mission to have thought to spare for any other concerns. They formed a circle round him, and asked him of the robbers – if he ever saw them; if he knew their haunts; if they had been near these parts during the past days?

For a moment it seemed as though the old man was disappointed by the questions asked him. He muttered something they did not rightly comprehend about robbers worse than these, and a quick fierce look passed across his face, and then died out again. The young Prince was courteous and patient: he allowed the old man's slow wits time to get to work; and when he did begin to speak he spoke to some purpose, and the boys listened and questioned with the most eager attention.

It took some time to extract the necessary information, not from any reluctance to speak on the old man's part, but from his inability to put his thoughts into words. Still when this was by degrees achieved, the information was of the highest possible importance.

The robbers, said the old man, were at that very moment not far away. He had seen them sally forth on one of their nocturnal raids about dusk the previous evening; and they had returned home laden with spoil two hours before the dawn. He was of the opinion that they had carried off some captive with them, for he had heard sounds as of bitter though stifled weeping as they passed his hut on their return. Did he know where they lay by day? Oh yes, right well he did! They had a hiding place in a cave down in a deep dingle, so overgrown with brushwood that only those who knew the path thither could hope to penetrate within it. Once there, they felt perfectly safe, and would sleep away the day after one of their raids, remaining safely hidden there till supplies were exhausted, when they sallied forth again. The old woodman showed them the tracks of the party that had passed by that morning, and to the eyes of the Gascon brothers these tracks were plain enough, and they undertook to follow them unerringly to the lair. The old woodman had no desire to be mixed up in the matter. If he were to be seen in the company of the trackers, he firmly believed that he should be skinned alive before many days had passed. He plainly did not put much faith in the power of these lads to overcome a large band of desperate men, and strongly advised them to go home and think no more of the matter. But his interest was only very partially aroused, and it was plain that there was something on his own mind which quite outweighed with him the subject of the forest outlaws.

John would fain have questioned him about himself, being a youth of kindly spirit; but the moment was not propitious, for the Prince was all on fire with a new idea.

"Comrades," he said gravely and firmly, "the hour has come when we must put our manhood to the proof. This very day, without the loss of a needless moment, we must fall, sword in hand, upon yon dastard crew, and do to them as they have done. You have heard this honest man's tale. Upon the day following a midnight raid they lie close in their cave asleep – no doubt drunken with

the excesses they indulge in, I warrant, when they have replenished their larder anew. This, then, is the day they must be surprised and slain. If we wait we may never have such another chance. My brothers in arms, are you ready to follow me? Shall the eagles fail for lack of courage when the prey is almost within sight?"

An unanimous sound of dissent ran through the group. All were as eager as the Prince for the battle and the victory; but the face of John wore an anxious look.

"We must not go alone," he said. "We must summon our comrades to join us. They are bound on the quest as much as we."

"True," answered the Prince, looking round him. "It were madness, I trow, for the six of us to make the attack alone. Yet did not Jonathan and his armour bearer fall unawares upon a host and put them to flight? Methinks some holy Father has told such a tale to me. Still thou art right, good John. We must not risk losing all because it has been given to godly men in times of old to work a great deliverance. See here, friends, what we will do. Our comrades cannot be very far away. Hark! Surely it is the baying of the hound I hear yonder over that wooded ridge! Good Bernard, do thou to horse, gallop to them as fast as thou canst, and tell them of the hap upon which we have fallen. Bid them follow fast with thee, but leave the dogs and horses behind with the huntsmen, lest their noise betray our approach. Master Huntsman may seek to withhold them from the quest, but when he knows that I, the Prince, with but four of my comrades to help me, have gone on in advance, and that we are even then approaching the robbers' cave, he will not only bid them all go, but will come himself doubtless, with the best of his followers, and give us what help he may. Lose no time. To horse, and away! And when thou hast called the band together, come back in all haste to this spot. The forest trackers will be put upon the trail, and will follow us surely and swiftly. You will find us there before you, lying in ambush, having fully reconnoitred. Be not afraid for us. Honest John will see that we run not into too great peril ere we have help. Is it understood? Good! Then lose not a moment. And for the rest of us, we will follow these sturdy Gascons, who will secretly lead us to the haunt of the outlaws."

Bernard was off almost before the last words had been spoken, and very soon they heard from the sounds that he had mounted his horse and was galloping in the direction in which, from the faint baying of the hounds, he knew the hunting party to be.

John looked somewhat anxious as the Prince signed to Gaston and Raymond to lead the way upon the robbers' track; but he knew the determined nature of the Prince, and did not venture open remonstrance. Yet Edward's quick eye caught the uneasy glance, and he replied to it with frank goodwill.

"Nay, fear not, honest John; I will run into no reckless peril, for my sweet mother hath ever been forward to counsel me that recklessness is not true bravery. Some peril there must needs be – without it there could be no glory; but that danger shall not be added to by any hardihood such as my royal Sire would chide in me. Trust me; I will be prudent, as I trust I may yet show that I can be bold. We will use all due caution in approaching this hiding place, and if it will pleasure thee, I will promise not to leave thy side before our friends come to our aid."

John was glad enough of this promise. As the eldest of this ardent band, and the one who would be most harshly taken to task did any harm come of the enterprise, he was anxious above all things to insure the safety of the Prince. If Edward would remain beside him, he could certainly make sure of one thing – that he himself did not survive his royal master, but died at his side fighting for his safety. The younger spirits thought only of the glory of victory. John, with his feebler physique and more thoughtful mind, saw another possible ending to the day's adventure. Still his heart did not fail; only his unspoken prayer was that no harm should befall the brave young Prince, who was so eager to show the world that chivalry was not yet dead.

The brothers from Gascony had no trouble whatever in finding and keeping the trail the robbers had left behind them. Slowly but surely they pursued their way through the labyrinth of the gloomy forest. Neither John nor any of his companions had ever been here before. The dense wood was

gloomy enough to be almost terrible. Craggy rocks were visible from time to time as the party proceeded, and the thickness of the forest was so great that almost all light was excluded.

At last a spot was reached where the forest-bred boys paused. They looked back at those who were following, and beckoned them silently forward. So quietly had the party moved that the stillness of the forest had scarce been broken. Mute and breathless, John and his companion stole up. They found that they had now reached the edge of a deep ravine, so thickly wooded as to appear impassable to human foot. But just where they stood there were traces of a narrow pathway, well concealed by the sweeping boughs of a drooping willow; and that this was the dell and the path of which the old woodman had spoken the little party did not doubt for a moment.

"It is doubtless the place," said the Prince, in a whisper. "Let us softly reconnoitre whilst our forces are assembling."

"I and my brother will make the round of the dell," answered Gaston, in a like cautious tone. "Sweet Prince, stay you hither, where the rest will doubtless find us. It boots not for us to make too much stir. Sound carries well in this still frosty air."

The Prince made a sign of assent, and Gaston and Raymond crept away in different directions to make the circuit of this secluded hollow, and try to ascertain how the land lay, and what was the chance of capturing the band unawares. In particular they desired to note whether there were any other pathway into it, and whether, if the robbers were taken by surprise and desirous of flight, there was any way of gaining the forest save by the overgrown path the exploring party had already found.

The dell proved to be a cup-like hollow of no very great extent. On the side by which the party had approached it the ground shelved down gradually, thickly covered with bushes and undergrowth; but on the opposite side, as the Gascon boys discovered, the drop was almost sheer, and though trees grew up to the very edge of the dell, nothing could grow upon the precipitous sandy sides.

"We have them like rats in a trap," cried Gaston, with sparkling eyes, as he once more joined the Prince, his brother with him. "They can only escape up these steep banks thickly overgrown, and we know that there is but this one path. On the other side it is a sheer drop; a goat could not find foothold. If we can but take them by surprise, and post an ambush ready to fall upon escaped stragglers who reach the top, there will not be one left to tell the tale when the deed is done."

The Prince set his teeth, and the battle light which in after days men learned to regard with awe shone brightly in his eyes.

"Good," he said briefly: "they shall be served as they have served others – taken in their slumber, taken in the midst of their security. Nay, even so it will not be for them as it has been for their victims, for doubtless they will have their arms beside them, and will spring from their slumber to fight like wild wolves trapped; but I trow the victory will lie with us, and he who fears may stay away. Are we not all clad in leather, and armed to repulse the savage attacks of the wild boar of the woods? Thus equipped, need we fear these human wild beasts? Methinks we shall sweep this day from the face of the earth a fouler scourge than ever beasts of the forest prove."

"Hist!" whispered Oliver de Brocas cautiously; "methinks I hear a sound approaching. It is our fellows joining us."

Oliver was right. The trail had now been cautiously followed by the huntsmen and their young charges, and the next moment the whole twenty stood at the head of the pathway, together with the Master Huntsman, and some half-dozen stout fellows all armed with murderous-looking hunting knives, and betraying by their looks the same eagerness for the fight as the band of youthful warriors.

It was vain to plead with the Prince to be one of those told off to remain in ambush in order to intercept and slay any fugitive who might escape the melee below. No, the young heir of England was resolved to be foremost in the fray; and the utmost that he would consent to was that the party should be led down by the Master Huntsman himself, whilst he walked second, John behind him, the rest pressing on in single file, one after the other, as quickly as might be. Down went the gallant little band – with the exception of two stalwart huntsmen and four of the younger amongst the boys, who

were left to guard the head of the path – not knowing the risk they ran: whether they would find an alert and well-armed foe awaiting them at the bottom, or whether they might fall upon the enemy unawares. Very silent and cautious were their movements. The Huntsman and the Gascon brothers moved noiselessly as cats, and even the less trained youths were softly cautious in their movements. Downwards they pressed in breathless excitement, till they found themselves leaving the thick scrub behind and emerging upon a rocky platform of rude shape. Here the Master Huntsman made an imperative sign to the Prince to stop, whilst he crept forward a few paces upon hands and knees, and peeped over the edge.

After gazing for a moment at something unseen to those behind, he made a cautious sign to the Prince to approach. Edward at once did so, and Gaston and Raymond followed him, their agile, cat-like movements being as circumspect as those of the leader himself.

What they saw as they peeped down into the heart of the dell was a welcome spectacle indeed. Some distance below them, but in full view, was the opening into what looked like a large cavern, and at the entrance to this cavern lay two stout ruffians, armed to the teeth, but both in a sound sleep, their mouths open, their breath coming noisily between their parted lips. There were no dogs to be seen. Nothing broke the intense stillness that prevailed. It was plainly as the old woodman had said. Their nocturnal raid had been followed by a grand carouse on the return home, and now the party, overcome by fatigue and strong drink, and secure in the fancied privacy of their isolated retreat, had retired to rest within the cave, leaving two fellows on guard, to be sure, but plainly without the smallest apprehension of attack.

"Good!" whispered the Prince, with eyes that shone like his father's in the hour of action; and softly rising to his feet, he made a sign to his comrades to draw their long knives and follow him in a compact body.

"No quarter," he whispered, as he surveyed with pride the brave faces round him: "they have shown no mercy; let no mercy be shown to them. Those who rob the poor, who slay the defenceless, who commit brutal outrages upon the persons of women and children, deserve naught but death. Let them fight like men; we will slay them in fair fight, but we will give no quarter. We will, if God fights for us, sweep the carrion brood from off the very face of the earth!"

And then, to the dismay of the Master Huntsman, who had hoped to step upon the sleeping sentries unawares, and rid themselves of at least two of the foe before the alarm was given, the Prince raised his voice in a shrill battle cry, and dashing down the slope with his comrades at his heels, flung himself upon the taller of the guards and plunged his knife into the fellow's throat.

Gaston and Raymond had simultaneously sprung upon the other, and with a sharp cry of astonishment and rage he too fell lifeless to the ground.

But the Prince's shout, the man's cry, and the sound of clashing arms aroused from their deep slumbers the robber crew within the cavern, and with the alertness that comes of such a lawless life, every man of them sprang to his feet and seized his weapon almost before he was awake.

The Master Huntsman, however, had not waited to see the end of the struggle upon the platform outside. At the very moment that the Prince buried his weapon in the sentry's throat, this bold fellow, with three of his underlings at his side, had sprung inside the cave itself, and luckily enough it was upon the prostrate figure of the chief of the band that his eye first lighted. Before the man could spring to his feet, a blow from that long shining knife had found its way to his heart. The other hunters had set each upon his man, and taken unawares, those attacked were slain ere they had awakened sufficiently to realize what was happening. Thus the number had been diminished by six before the rest came swarming out, as bees from a disturbed hive.

It was well indeed then for the brave boys, who had thought themselves the match for armed men, that these latter were dazed with deep potations and but half armed after throwing aside their weapons ere lying down to rest. Well was it also that they had amongst them the Master Huntsman and his trusty satellites, who had the strength of men, as well as the trained eye, quick hand, and

steady nerve that belong to their calling in life. Then, again, the dress of these huntsmen was so like in character to that worn by many of the band, that the robbers themselves suspected each other of treachery, and many turned one upon the other, and smote his fellow to the earth. Yet notwithstanding all these things in their favour, the Prince's youthful followers were hardly beset, and to his rage and grief young Edward saw more than one bright young head lying in the dust of the sandy platform.

But this sight filled him with such fury that he was like a veritable tiger amongst the assailants who still came flocking out of the cave. His battle cry rang again and again through the vaulted cavern, his shining blade seemed everywhere, dealing death and destruction. Boy though he was, he appeared endued with the strength of a man, and that wonderful hereditary fighting instinct, which was so marked in his own sire, seemed handed down to him. He took in the whole scope of the scene with a single glance. Wherever there was an opening to deal a fatal blow, that blow was dealt by the Prince's trusty blade. It almost seemed as though he bore a charmed life in that grim scene of bloodshed and confusion, though perhaps he owed his safety more to the faithful support of the two Gascon brothers, who together with John de Brocas followed the Prince wherever he went, and averted from his head many a furious stroke that else might have settled his mortal career for ever.

But the robbers began to see that this boy was their chiefest foe. If they could but slay him, the rest might perchance take flight. Already their own ranks were terribly thinned, and they saw that mischief was meant by the deadly fury with which their assailants came on at them. They were but half armed, and the terror and bewilderment of the moment put them at great disadvantage; but amongst those who still retained their full senses, and could distinguish friend from foe, were three brothers of tall stature and mighty strength, and these three, taking momentary counsel together, resolved to fling themselves upon the little knot surrounding the person of the Prince, and slay at all cost the youthful leader who appeared to exercise so great a power over the rest of the gallant little band.

It was a terrible moment for good John de Brocas, already wearied and ready to drop with the exertions of the fight – exertions to which he was but little habituated – when he saw bearing down upon them the gigantic forms, as they looked to him, of these three black-browed brothers. The Prince had separated himself somewhat from the rest of the band. He and his three immediate followers had been pursuing some fugitives, who had fallen a prey to their good steel blades. They were just about to return to the others, round whom the fight still raged, though with far less fierceness than at first, when these new adversaries set upon them from behind. John was the only one who had seen the approach, and he only just in time to give one warning shout. Before the Prince could turn, an axe was whirling in the air above his head; and had not John flung himself at that instant upon the Prince, covering his person and dragging him aside at the same moment, a glorious page in England's history would never have been written. But John's prompt action saved the young Edward's life, though a frightful gash was inflicted upon his own shoulder, which received the weight of the robber's blow. With a gasping moan he sank to the ground, and knew no more of what passed, whilst Gaston and Raymond each sprang upon one of their assailants with a yell of fury, and the Prince flung himself upon the fellow who had so nearly caused his death, and for all he knew had slain the trusty John before his very eyes.

The Prince soon made sure of his man. The fellow, having missed his stroke, was taken at a disadvantage, and was unable to free his axe or draw his dagger before the Prince had stabbed him to the heart. Gaston and Raymond were sore beset with their powerful adversaries, and would scarce have lived to tell the tale of that fell struggle had not help been nigh at hand from the Master Huntsman. But he, missing the Prince from the cave's mouth, and seeing the peril he was in, now came running up, shouting to his men to follow him, and the three giant brothers were soon lying together stark and dead, whilst poor John was tenderly lifted and carried out of the melee.

The fighting was over now. The robbers had had enough of it. Some few had escaped, or had sought to do so; but by far the greater number lay dead on or about the rocky platform, where the fiercest of the fighting had been. They had slain each other as well as having been slain by the Prince's

band, and the place was now a veritable shambles, at which some of the lads began to look with shuddering horror.

Several of their own number were badly hurt. Three lay dead and cold. Victory had indeed been theirs, but something of the sense of triumph was dashed as they bore away the bodies of their comrades and looked upon the terrible traces of the fray.

But the Prince had escaped unscathed – that was the point of paramount importance in the minds of many – and he was now engrossed in striving to relieve the sufferings of his wounded comrades by seeing their wounds skilfully bound up by the huntsmen, and obtaining for them draughts of clear cold water from a spring that bubbled up within the cavern itself.

Gaston and Raymond had escaped with minor hurts; but John's case was plainly serious, and the flow of blood had been very great before any help could reach him. He was quite unconscious, and looked like death as he lay on the floor of the cave; and after fruitless efforts to revive him, the Prince commanded a rude litter to be made wherein he might be transported to the Palace by the huntsmen who had not taken part in the struggle, and were therefore least weary. The horses were not very far away, and the rest of the wounded and the rescued captives could make shift to walk that far, and afterwards gain the Palace by the help of their sturdy steeds.

Thus it came about that Master Bernard de Brocas, who had believed the Prince and his party to be engaged in the harmless and (to them) safe sport of tracking and hunting a boar in the forest, was astounded beyond all power of speech by seeing a battered and ghastly procession enter the courtyard two hours before dusk, bearing in their midst a litter upon which lay the apparently inanimate form of his eldest nephew, his brother's first-born and heir.

CHAPTER VII. THE RECTOR'S HOUSE

"It was well thought and boldly executed, my son," said the King of England, as he looked with fatherly pride at his bright-faced boy. "Thou wilt win thy spurs ere long, I doubt not, an thou goest on thus. But it must be an exploit more worthy thy race and state that shall win thee the knighthood which thou dost rightly covet. England's Prince must be knighted upon some glorious battlefield – upon a day of victory that I trow will come ere long for thee and me. And now to thy mother, boy, and ask her pardon for the fright thou madest her to suffer, when thy sisters betrayed to her the wild chase upon which thou and thy boy comrades were bent. Well was it for all that our trusty huntsmen were with you, else might England be mourning sore this day for a life cut off ere it had seen its first youthful prime. Yet, boy, I have not heart to chide thee; all I ask is that when thou art bent on some quest of glory or peril another time, thou wilt tell thy father first. Trust him not to say thee nay; it is his wish that thou shouldst prove a worthy scion of thy house. He will never stand in thy path if thy purpose be right and wise."

The Prince accepted this paternal admonition with all becoming grace and humility, and bent his knee before his mother, to be raised and warmly embraced both by her and the little princesses, who had come in all haste to the Palace of Guildford before the good Rector had had time to send a message of warning to the King. Queen Philippa had heard from her daughters of the proposed escapade on the part of the little band surrounding the Prince, and the fear lest the bold boy might expose himself to real peril had induced the royal family to hasten to Guildford only two days after the Prince had gone thither. They had met a messenger from Master Bernard as they had neared the Palace, and the King, after assuring himself of the safety of his son, made kindly inquiries after those of his companions who had been with him on his somewhat foolhardy adventure.

John de Brocas was lying dangerously ill in one of the apartments of the Palace. The King was greatly concerned at hearing how severely he had been hurt; and when the story came to be told more in its details, and it appeared that to John's fidelity and the stanch support of Audley's two youthful esquires the heir of England owed his life, Edward and his Queen both paid a visit to the room where the sick youth lay, and with their own hands bestowed liberal rewards upon the twin brothers, who had stood beside the Prince in the stress of the fight, and had both received minor hurts in shielding him.

Sir James Audley was himself in the King's train; but he was about to leave the south for a secret mission in Scotland, entrusted to him by his sovereign. He was going to travel rapidly and without any large escort, and for the present he had no further need for the services of the Gascon twins. Neither of the lads would be fit for the saddle for more than a week to come, and they had already made good use of their time in England, and had interested both the King and the Prince in them, and had also earned liberal rewards. In their heart of hearts they were anxious to remain in the neighbourhood of Guildford, for they knew that there they were not far from Basildene. Wherefore when they understood that their master had no present occasion for any further service from them, they were not a little excited and pleased by the thought that they were now in a position to prosecute their own quest in such manner as seemed best to them.

They had made a wonderfully good beginning to their life of adventure. They had won the favour not only of their own kinsfolk, but of the King and the Prince. They had money and clothes and arms. They had the prospect of service with Sir James in the future, when he should have returned from his mission and require a larger train. Everything seemed to be falling in with their own desires; and it was with faces of eager satisfaction that they turned to each other when the knight had left them alone again, after a visit to the long rush-carpeted room, by the glowing hearth of which they were sitting when he had come to seek them soon after the King had visited John's couch.

John lay in a semi-conscious state upon the tall canopied bed, beneath a heavy pall of velvet, that gave a funereal aspect to the whole room. He had been aroused by the King's visit, and had

spoken a few words in reply to the kind ones addressed to him; but afterwards he had sunk back into the lethargy of extreme weakness, and the brothers were to all intents and purposes alone in the long dormitory they had shared with John, and with two more comrades who had also received slight hurts, but who had now been summoned to attend the Prince on the return journey to Windsor, which was to be taken leisurely and by short stages.

Oliver and Bernard de Brocas had likewise gone, and John was, they knew, to be moved as soon as possible to Master Bernard's rectory, not far away. The kindly priest had said something about taking the brothers there also till they were quite healed of their wounds and bruises, and John invariably asked for Raymond if ever he awoke to consciousness. What was to be the end of it all the twins had no idea, but it certainly seemed as though for the present they were to be the guests of their own uncle, who knew nothing of the tie that existed betwixt them.

"Shall we say aught to him, Gaston?" asked Raymond, in a low whisper, as the pair sat over the glowing fire together. "He is a good man and a kind one, and perchance if he knew us for kinsmen he might – "

"Might be kinder than before?" questioned Gaston, with a proud smile. "Is it that thou wouldst say, brother? Ay, it is possible, but it is also likely enough that he would at once look coldly and harshly upon us. Raymond, I have learned many lessons since we left our peaceful home, and one of these is that men love not unsuccess. It is the prosperous, the favoured of fortune, upon whom the smiles of the great are bent. Perchance it was because he succeeded not well that by his own brothers our father was passed by. Raymond, I have seen likewise this – if our kinsmen are kind, they are also proud. They have won kingly favour, kingly rewards; all men speak well of them; they are placed high in the land. Doubtless they could help us if they would; but are we to come suing humbly to them for favours, when they would scarce listen to our father when he lived? Shall we run into the peril of having their smiles turned to frowns by striving to claim kinship with them, when perchance they would spurn us from their doors? And if in days to come we rise to fame and fortune, as by good hap we may, shall we put it in their power to say that it is to their favour we owe it all? No – a thousand times no! I will carve out mine own fortune with mine own good sword and mine own strong arm. I will be beholden to none for that which some day I will call mine own. The King himself has said that I shall make a valiant knight. I have fought by the Prince's side once; I trow that in days to come I shall do the like again. When my knighthood's spurs are won, then perchance I will to mine uncle and say to him, 'Sire, I am thy brother Arnald's son – thine own nephew;' but not till then will I divulge the secret. Sir John de Brocas – no, nor Master Bernard either – shall never say that they have made Sir Gaston's fortune for him!"

The lad's eyes flashed fire; the haughty look upon his face was not unlike the one sometimes to be seen upon that of the King's Master of the Horse.

Raymond listened with a smile to these bold words, and then said quietly:

"Perhaps thou art right, Gaston; but I trust thou bearest no ill will towards our two uncles?"

Gaston's face cleared, and he smiled frankly enough.

"Nay, Brother, none in the world. It is only as I think sometimes of the story of our parents' wrongs that my hot blood seems to rise against them. They have been kind to us. I trow we need not fear to take such kindness as may be offered to us as strangers; but to come as suppliant kinsmen, humble and unknown, I neither can nor will. Let us keep our secret; let us carve out our own fortunes. A day shall come when we may stand forth before all the world as of the old line of De Brocas, but first we will win for ourselves the welcome we would fain receive."

"Ay, and we will seek our lost inheritance of Basildene," added Raymond. "That shall be our next quest, Gaston. I would fain look upon our mother's home. Methinks it lies not many miles from here."

"I misdoubt me if Basildene be aught of great moment," said Gaston, shaking back his curly hair. "Like enough it is but a Manor such as we have seen by the score as we have ridden through this

land. It may be no such proud inheritance when we do find it, Raymond. It is of our lost possessions in Gascony that I chiefly think. What can any English house, of which even here scarce any man has heard, be as compared with our vast forest lands of Gascony – our Castle of Saut – of Orthez – where the false Sieur de Navailles rules with the rod of iron? It is there that I would be; it is there that I would rule. When the Roy Outremer wages war with the French King, and I fight beneath his banner and win his favour, as I will do ere many years have passed, and when he calls me to receive my rewards at his kingly hands, then will I tell him of yon false and cruel tyrant there, and how our people groan beneath his harsh rule. I will ask but his leave to win mine own again, and then I will ride forth with my own knights in my train, and there shall be once again a lord of the old race ruling at Saut, and the tyrant usurper shall be brought to the very dust!"

"Ay," answered Raymond, with a smile that made his face look older for the moment than that of his twin brother, "thou, Gaston, shalt reign in Saut, and I will try to win and to reign at Basildene, content with the smaller inheritance. Methinks the quiet English Manor will suit me well. By thy side for a while will I fight, too, winning, if it may be, my spurs of knighthood likewise; but when the days of fighting be past, I would fain find a quiet haven in this fair land – in the very place where our mother longed to end her days."

It may be seen, from the foregoing fragment of talk, that already the twin brothers were developing in different directions. So long as they had lived in the quiet of the humble home, they had scarce known a thought or aspiration not shared alike by both; but the experiences of the past months had left a mark upon them, and the mark was not altogether the same in the case of each. They had shared all adventures, all perils, all amusements; their hearts were as much bound up as ever one with the other; but they were already looking at life differently, forming a different ideal of the future. The soldier spirit was coming out with greater intensity in one nature than in the other. Gaston had no ambition, no interest beyond that of winning fame and glory by the sword. Raymond was just beginning to see that there were other aims and interests in life, and to feel that there might even come a day when these other interests should prove more to him than any laurels of battle.

In the days that followed, this feeling grew more and more upon him. His hurt was more slow to heal than Gaston's, and long after his brother was riding out daily into the forest with the keepers to slay a fat buck for the prelate's table or fly a falcon for practice or sport, Raymond remained within the house, generally the companion of the studious John; and as the latter grew strong enough to talk, he was always imparting new ideas to the untutored but receptive mind of the Gascon boy.

They had quickly removed from the Royal Palace to the more cozy and comfortable quarters within the Rectory, which belonged to Master Bernard in right of his office. John was as much at home in his uncle's house as in his father's, having spent much of his youth with the priest. Indeed it may be questioned whether he felt as much at ease anywhere as he did in this sheltered and retired place, and Raymond began to feel the subtle charm of the life there almost at once.

The Rector possessed what was for that age a fine collection of books. These were of course all manuscripts, and very costly of their kind, some being beautifully illuminated and others very lengthy. These manuscripts and books were well known to John, who had read the majority of them, and was never weary of reading them again and again. Some were writings of the ancient fathers; others were the works of pagan writers and philosophers who had lived in the dark ages of the world's history, yet who had had thoughts and aspirations in advance of their day, and who had striven without the light of Christianity to construct a code of morals that should do the work for humanity which never could have been done till the Light came into the world with the Incarnation.

As Raymond sat day by day beside John's couch, hearing him read out of these wonderful books, learning himself to read also with a sense of quickened pleasure that it was a surprise to experience, he began to realize that there was a world around and about him of which he had had no conception hitherto, to feel his mental horizon widening, and to see that life held weightier questions than any that could be settled at the sword's point.

"In truth I have long held that myself," answered John, to whom some such remark had been made; and upon the pale face of the student there shone a light which Raymond had seen there before, and marked with a dim sense of awe. "We hear men talk of the days of chivalry, and mourn because they seem to be passing away. Yet methinks there may be a holier and a higher form of chivalry than the world has yet seen that may rise upon the ashes of what has gone before, and lead men to higher and better things. Raymond, I would that I might live to see such a day – a day when battle and bloodshed should be no longer men's favourite pastime, but when they should come to feel as our Blessed Lord has bidden us feel, brothers in love, for that we love Him, and that we walk forward hand in hand towards the light, warring no more with our brethren of the faith, but only with such things as are contrary to His Word, and are hindering His purpose concerning the earth."

Raymond listened with but small comprehension to a thought so vastly in advance of the spirit of the day; but despite his lack of true understanding, he felt a quick thrill of sympathy as he looked into John's luminous eyes, and he spoke with reverence in his tone even though his words seemed to dissent from those of his companion.

"Nay, but how would the world go on without wars and gallant feats of arms? And sure in a good cause men must fight with all their might and main? Truly I would gladly seek for paynim and pagan foes if they might be found; but men go not to the Holy Land as once they did. There be foes nigher at home against whom we have to turn our arms. Good John, thou surely dost not call it a wicked thing to fight beneath the banner of our noble King when he goes forth upon his wars?"

John smiled one of those thoughtful, flickering smiles that puzzled his companion and aroused his speculative curiosity.

"Nay, Raymond," he answered, speaking slowly, as though it were no easy matter to put his thought in such words as would be comprehensible to his companion, "it is not that I would condemn any man or any cause. We are placed in the midst of warlike and stirring times, and it may be that some great purpose is being worked out by all these wars and tumults in which we bear our share. It is only as I lie here and think (I have, as thou knowest, been here many times before amongst these books and parchments, able for little but study and thought) that there comes over me a strange sense of the hollowness of these earthly strivings and search after fame and glory, a solemn conviction – I scarce know how to frame it in words – that there must be other work to be done in the world, stronger and more heroic deeds than men will ever do with swords and spears. Methinks the holy saints and martyrs who went before us knew something of that work; and though it be not given to us to dare and suffer as they did, yet there come to me moments when I feel assured that God may still have works of faith and patience for us to do for Him here, which (albeit the world will never know it) may be more blessed in His eyes than those great deeds the fame of which goes through the world. Perchance were I a man of thews and sinews like my brothers, I might think only of the glory of feats of arms and the stress and strife of the battle. But being as I am, I cannot but think of other matters; and so thinking and dreaming, there has come to me the sense that if I may never win the knighthood and the fame which may attend on others, I may yet be called upon to serve the Great King in some other way. Raymond, I think that I could gladly die content if I might but feel that I had been called to some task for Him, and having been called had been found faithful."

John's eyes were shining brightly as he spoke. Raymond felt a slight shiver run through his frame as he answered impulsively:

"Thou hast done a deed already of which any belted knight might well be proud. It was thou who saved the life of the Prince of Wales by taking upon thy shoulder the blow aimed at his head. The King himself has spoken in thy praise. How canst thou speak as though no fame or glory would be thine?"

A look of natural pride and pleasure stole for a moment over John's pale face; but the thoughtful brightness in his eyes deepened during the silence that followed, and presently he said musingly:

"I am glad to think of that. I like to feel that my arm has struck one good blow for my King and country; though, good Raymond, to thee and to Gaston, as much as to me, belongs the credit of saving the young Prince. Yet though I too love deeds of glory and chivalry, and rejoice to have borne a part in one such struggle undertaken in defence of the poor and the weak, I still think there be higher tasks, higher quests, yet to be undertaken by man in this world."

"What quest?" asked Raymond wonderingly, as John paused, enwrapped, as it seemed, in his own thoughts.

It was some time before the question was answered, and then John spoke dreamily and slow, as though his thoughts were far away from his wondering listener.

"The quest after that whose glory shall not be of this world alone; the quest that shall raise man heavenward to his Maker. Is that thought new in the heart of man? I trow not. We have heard of late much of that great King Arthur, the founder of chivalry, and of his knights. Were feats of arms alone enough for them? or those exploits undertaken in the cause of the helpless or oppressed, great and noble as these must ever be? Did not one or more of their number feel that there was yet another and a holier quest asked of a true knight? Did not Sir Galahad leave all else to seek after the Holy Grail? Thou knowest all the story; have we not read it often together? And seems it not to thee to point us ever onward and upward, away from things of earth towards the things of heaven, showing that even chivalry itself is but an earthly thing, unless it have its final hopes and aspirations fixed far above this earth?"

John's face was illumined by a strange radiance. It seemed to Raymond as though something of the spirit of the Knight of the Grail shone out from those hollow eyes. A subtle sympathy fired his own soul, and taking his cousin's thin hand in his he cried quickly and impetuously:

"Such a knight as that would I fain be. Good John, tell me, I pray thee, where such a quest may be found."

At that literal question, put with an air of the most impulsive good faith, John's face slightly changed. The rapt look faded from his eyes, and a reflective smile took its place, as the young man gazed long and earnestly into the bright face of the eager boy.

"Why shouldst thou come to me to know, good lad?" he questioned. "It is of others that thou wilt learn these matters better than of me. Do they not call me the man of books – of dreams – of fancies?"

"I know not and I care not," answered Raymond impetuously. "It is of thee and of thee only that I would learn."

"And I scarce know how to answer thee," replied the youth, "though gladly would I help thee to fuller, clearer knowledge if I knew how. I trow that many men would smile at me were I to put my thoughts into words, for it seems to me that for us who call ourselves after the sacred name of Christ there can be no higher or holier service than the service in which He himself embarked, and bid His followers do likewise – feeding the hungry, ministering to the sick, cheering the desolate, binding up the broken heart, being eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. He that would be the greatest, let him be the servant of all. Those were His own words. Yet how little do we think of them now."

Raymond sat silent and amazed. Formerly such words would have seemed comprehensible enough to him; but of late he had seen life under vastly different aspects than any he had known in his quiet village home. The great ones of the earth did not teach men thus to think or speak. Not to serve but to rule was the aim and object of life.

"Wouldst have me enter the cloister, then?" he asked, a look of distaste and shrinking upon his face; for the quiet, colourless life (as it seemed to him) of those who entered the service of the Church was little to the taste of the ardent boy. But John's answer was a bright smile and a decided negative; whereupon Raymond breathed more freely.

"Nay; I trow we have priests and monks enow, holy and pious men as they are. It has often been asked of me if I will not follow in the steps of my good uncle here; but I have never felt the wish.

It seems to me that the habit of the monk or the cassock of the priest too often seems to separate betwixt him and his fellow man, and that it were not good for the world for all its holiest men to don that habit and divide themselves from their brethren. Sir Galahad's spotless heart beat beneath his silver armour. Would he have been to story and romance the star and pattern he now is had he donned the monkish vesture and turned his armed quest into a friar's pilgrimage?"

"Nay, verily not."

"I think with thee, and therefore say I, Let not all those who would fain lead the spotless life think to do so by withdrawing from the world. Rather let them carry about the spotless heart beneath the coat of mail or the gay habit. Their quest need not be the less exalted – "

"But what is that quest to be?" cried Raymond eagerly; "that is what I fain would know. Good John, give me some task to perform. What wouldst thou do thyself in my place?"

"Thou wouldst laugh were I to tell thee."

"Try me and see."

"I will. If I were sound and whole tomorrow, I should forth into the forest whence we came, and I should seek and find that aged woodman, who seemed so sorely bowed down with sorrow, and I should bid him unfold his tale to me, and see if in any wise I might help him. He is poor, helpless, wretched, and by the words he spoke, I knew that he had suffered heavy sorrow. Perchance that sorrow might be alleviated could one but know the story of it. His face has haunted my fevered dreams. To me it seems as though perchance this were an errand of mercy sent to me to do. Deeds of knightly prowess I trow will never now be mine. It must be enough for me to show my chivalry by acts of love and care for the helpless, the sorrowful, the oppressed."

Raymond's eyes suddenly glowed. Something of the underlying poetry of the thought struck an answering chord in his heart, though the words themselves had been plain and bald enough.

"I will perform that task for thee, good John," he said. "I well remember the place, ay, and the old man and his sorrowful mien. I will thither tomorrow, and will bring thee word again. If he may be helped by any act of mine, be assured that act shall not be lacking."

John pressed his comrade's hand and thanked him; but Raymond little knew to what this quest, of apparently so little moment, was to lead, nor what a link it was to form with the story of the lost inheritance of Basildene.

CHAPTER VIII. THE VISIT TO THE WOODMAN

"Raymond, I am glad of this chance to speak alone together, for since thou hast turned into a man of books and letters I have scarce seen thee. I am glad of this errand into these dark woods. It seems like times of old come back again – and yet not that either. I would not return to those days of slothful idleness, not for all the gold of the King's treasury. But I have wanted words with thee alone, Brother. Knowest thou that we are scarce ten miles (as they measure distance here in England) from Basildene?"

Raymond turned an eager face upon his brother.

"Hast seen it, Gaston?"

"Nay. It has not been my hap to go that way; but I have heard enough and to spare about it. I fear me that our inheritance is but a sorry one, Raymond, and that it will be scarce worth the coil that would be set afoot were we to try to make good our claim."

"Tell me, what hast thou heard?" asked Raymond eagerly.

"Why, that it is but an ancient Manor, of no great value or extent, and that the old man who dwells there with his son is little different from a sorcerer, whom it is not safe to approach – at least not with intent to meddle. Men say that he is in league with the devil, and that he has sold his soul for the philosopher's stone, that changes all it touches to gold. They say, too, that those who offend him speedily sicken of some fell disease that no medicine can cure. Though he must have wondrous wealth, he has let his house fall into gloomy decay. No man approaches it to visit him, and he goes nowhither himself. His son, Peter, who seems as little beloved as his father, goes hither and thither as he will. But it is whispered that he shares in his father's dealings with the Evil One, and that he will reap the benefit of the golden treasure which has been secured to them. However that may be, all men agree that the Sanghursts of Basildene are not to be meddled with with impunity."

Raymond's face was very thoughtful. Such a warning as this, lightly as it would be regarded in the present century, meant something serious then; and Raymond instinctively crossed himself as he heard Gaston's words. But after a moment's pause of thoughtful silence he said gravely:

"Yet perhaps on this very account ought we the rather to strive to win our inheritance out of such polluted hands. Have we not others to think of in this thing? Are there not those living beneath the shelter of Basildene who must be suffering under the curse that wicked man is like to bring upon it? For their sakes, Gaston, ought we not to do all in our power to make good our rights? Are they to be left to the mercy of one whose soul is sold to Satan?"

Gaston looked quickly into his brother's flushed face, and wondered at the sudden enthusiasm beaming out of his eyes. But he had already recognized that a change was passing over Raymond, even as a change of a different kind was coming upon himself. He did not entirely understand it, neither did he resent it; and now he threw his arm across his brother's shoulder in the old caressing fashion of their boyhood.

"Nay, I know not how that may be. There may be found those who dare to war against the powers of darkness, and with the help of the holy and blessed saints they may prevail. But that is not the strife after which my heart longs. Raymond, I fear me I love not Basildene, I love not the thought of making it our own. It is for the glory of the battlefield and the pomp and strife of true warfare that I long. There are fairer lands to be won by force of arms than ever Basildene will prove, if all men speak sooth. Who and what are we, to try our fortunes and tempt destruction by drawing upon ourselves the hatred of this wicked old man, who may do us to death in some fearful fashion, when else we might be winning fame and glory upon the plains of France? Let us leave Basildene alone, Brother; let us follow the fortunes of the great King, and trust to his noble generosity for the reward of valour."

Raymond made no immediate reply, though he pressed his brother's hand and looked lovingly into his face. Truth to tell, his affections were winding themselves round his mother's country and

inheritance, just as Gaston's were turning rather to his father's land, and the thought of the rewards to be won there. Then, within Raymond's heart were growing up those new thoughts and aspirations engendered by long talks with John; and it seemed to him that possibly the very quest of which he was in search might be found in freeing Basildene of a heavy curse. Ardent, sensitive, full of vivid imagination – as the sons of the forest mostly are – Raymond felt that there was more in the truest and deepest chivalry than the mere feats of arms and acts of dauntless daring that so often went by that name. Hazy and indistinct as his ideas were, tinged with much of the mysticism, much of the superstition of the age, they were beginning to assume definite proportions, and to threaten to colour the whole future course of his life; and beneath all the dimness and confusion one settled, leading idea was slowly unfolding itself, and forming a foundation for the superstructure that was to follow – the idea that in self-denial, self-sacrifice, the subservience of selfish ambition to the service of the oppressed and needy, chivalry in its highest form was to be found.

But in his brother's silence Gaston thought he read disappointment, and with another affectionate gesture he hastened to add:

"But if thy heart goes out to our mother's home, we will yet win it back, when time has changed us from striplings to tried warriors. See, Brother, I will tell thee what we will do. Men say that it can scarce be a year from now ere the war breaks out anew betwixt France and England, and then will come our opportunity. We will follow the fortunes of the King. We will win our spurs fighting at the side of the Prince. We will do as our kindred have done before us, and make ourselves honoured and respected of all men. It may be that we shall then be lords of Saut once more. But be that as it may, we shall be strong, rich, powerful – as our uncles are now. Then, if thou wilt so have it, we will think again of Basildene; and if we win it back, it shall be thine, and thine alone. Fight thou by my side whilst we are yet too young to bring to good any private matter of our own. Then will I, together with thee, think again of our boyhood's dream; and it may be that we shall yet live to be called the Twin Brothers of Basildene!"

Raymond smiled at the sound of that name, as he had smiled at Gaston's eager words before. Full of ardent longings and unbounded enthusiasm, as were most well-born youths in those adventurous days, he was just a little less confident than Gaston of the brilliant success that was to attend upon their feats of arms. Still there was much of the fighting instinct in the boy, and there was certainly no hope of regaining Basildene in the present. So that he agreed willingly to his brother's proposition, although he resolved before he left these parts to look once with his own eyes upon the home that had sheltered his mother's childhood and youth.

And then they plunged into the thickest of the forest, and could talk no more till they had reached the little clearing that lay around the woodman's hut. The old man was not far away, as they heard by the sound of a falling axe a little to the right of them. Following this sound, they quickly came upon the object of their search – the grizzled old man, with the same look of unutterable woe stamped upon his face.

Gaston, who knew only one-half of the errand upon which they had come, produced the pieces of silver that the Rector and John had sent, with a message of thanks to the old woodman for his help in directing the Prince and his company to the robbers' cave at such a favourable moment. The old man appeared bewildered at first by the sight of the money and the words of thanks; but recollection came back by degrees, though he seemed as one who in constant brooding upon a single theme has come to lose all sense of other things, and scarce to observe the flight of time, or to know one day from another.

This strange, wild melancholy, which had struck John at once, now aroused in Raymond a sense of sympathetic interest. He had come to try to seek the cause of the old man's sorrow, and he did not mean to leave with his task unfulfilled.

Perhaps John could have found no fitter emissary than this Gascon lad, with his simple forest training, his quick sympathy and keen intelligence, and his thorough knowledge of the details of peasant life, which in all countries possess many features in common.

It was hard at first to get the old man to care to understand what was said, or to take the trouble to reply. The habit of silence is one of the most difficult to break; but patience and perseverance generally win the day: and when it dawned upon this strange old man that it was of himself and his own loss and grief that these youths had come to speak, a new look crossed his weatherbeaten face, and a strange gleam of mingled fury and despair shone in the depths of his hollow eyes.

"My sorrow!" he exclaimed, in a voice from which the dreary cadence had now given place to a clearer, firmer ring: "is it of that you ask, young sirs? Has it been told to you the cruel wrong that I have suffered?"

Then suddenly clinching his right hand and shaking it wildly above his head, he broke into vehement and almost unintelligible invective, railing with frenzied bitterness against some foe, speaking so rapidly, and with such strange inflections of voice, that it was but a few words that the brothers could distinguish out of the whole of the impassioned speech. One of those words was "my son – my boy," followed by the names of Sanghurst and Basildene.

It was these names that arrested the attention of the brothers, causing them to start and exchange quick glances. Raymond waited till the old man had finished his railing, and then he asked gently:

"Had you then a son? Where is he now?"

"A son! ay, that had I – the light and brightness of my life!" cried the old man, with a sudden burst of rude eloquence that showed him to have been at some former time something better than his present circumstances seemed to indicate. "Young sirs, I know not who you are; I know not why you ask me of my boy. But your faces are kind, and perchance there may be help in the world, though I have found it not. I know not how time has fled since that terrible sorrow fell upon me. Perchance not many years by the calendar, but in misery and suffering a lifetime. Listen, and I will tell you all. I was not ever as you see me now. I was no lonely woodman buried in the heart of the forest. I was second huntsman to Sir Hugh Vavasour of Woodcrych, in favour with my master and well contented with my lot. I had a wife whom I loved, and she had born me a lovely boy, who was the very light of my eyes and the joy of my heart. I should weary you did I tell you of all his bold pranks and merry ways. He was, I verily believe, the loveliest child that God's sun has ever looked down upon. When it pleased Him to take my wife away from me after seven happy years, I strove not to murmur; for I had still the child, and every day that passed made him more winsome, more loving, more mettlesome and bold. Even the master would draw rein as he passed my door to have a word with the boy; and little Mistress Joan gave me many a silver groat to buy him a fairing with, and keep him always dressed in the smartest little suit of forester's green. The priest noticed him too, and would have him to his house to teach him many things, and told me he would live to carve out a fortune for himself. I thought naught too good for him. I would have wondered little if even the King had sent for him to make of him a companion for his son.

"Perchance I was foolish in the boastings I made. But the beauty and the wisdom of the boy struck all alike – and thence came his destruction."

"His destruction?" echoed both brothers in a breath. "What! is he then dead?"

"He is worse than dead," answered the father, in a hollow, despairing voice; "he has been bewitched – undone by foul sorcery, bound over hand and foot, and given to the keeping of Satan. Even the priest can do nothing for us. He is lost, body and soul, for ever."

The brothers exchanged wondering glances as they made the sign of the cross, the old man watching the gesture with a bitter smile in his eye. Then Raymond spoke again:

"But what was it that happened? we do not yet understand."

"I will tell you all. If you know this part of the world, young sirs, you have doubtless heard of the old Manor of Basildene, where dwells one, Peter Sanghurst by name, who is nothing more nor

less than a wizard, who should be hunted to death without pity. Men have told me (I know not with what truth) that these wizards, who give themselves over to the devil, are required by their master from time to time to furnish him with new victims, and these victims are generally children – fair and promising children, who can first be trained in the black arts of their earthly master, and are then handed over, body and soul, to the devil, to be his slaves and his victims for ever."

The old man was speaking slowly now, with a steady yet despairing ferocity that was terrible to hear. His sunken eyes gleamed in their sockets, and his hands, that were tightly clinched over the handle of his axe, trembled with the emotion that had him in its clutches.

"I was sent upon a mission by my master. I was absent from my home some seven days. When I came back my boy was gone. I had left him in the care of the keeper of the hounds. He was an honest man, and told me all the tale. Perchance you know that Sir Hugh Vavasour is what men call a spendthrift. His estates will not supply him with the money he needs. He is always in debt, he is always in difficulties. From that it comes that he cares little what manner of men are his comrades or friends, provided only that they can supply his needs when his own means fail. This is why, when all men else hate and loathe the very name of Sanghurst, he calls himself their friend. He knows that the old man has the secret by which all things may be turned into gold, and therefore he welcomes his son to Woodcrych. And men say that Mistress Joan is to be given in marriage to his son one day, because he will take her without dowry; for she is the fairest creature in the world, and he has vowed that she shall wed him and none else."

The brothers were intensely interested by this tale, but were growing a little confused by all the names introduced, and they wanted the story of the woodman's son complete.

"Then was it the old man who took your boy, or was it his son? Are they not both called Peter?"

"Ay, they have both the same name – the same name and the same nature: evil, cruel, remorseless. I know not how nor where the old man first set eyes upon my boy; but he must have seen him, and have coveted possession of him for his devilish practices; for upon the week that I was absent from home, he left the solitude of his house, and came with the master himself to the house where the boy was. And then Sir Hugh explained to honest Stephen, who had charge of him, that Master Peter Sanghurst had offered the lad a place in his service, where he would learn many things that would stand him in good stead all the days of his life. It sounded fair in all faith. But Stephen stoutly refused to let the boy go till I returned; whereupon Sir Hugh struck him a blow across the face with his heavy whip, and young Peter Sanghurst, leaping to the ground, seized the child and placed him in front of him upon the horse, and the three galloped off laughing aloud, whilst the boy in vain implored to be set down to run home. When I came back he had gone, and all men said that the old man had thus stolen him to satisfy the greed for souls of his master the devil."

"And hast thou not seen him since?" asked the boys breathlessly. "What didst thou do when thou camest back?"

For a moment it seemed as though the old man would break out again into those wild imprecations of frenzied anger which the brothers had heard him utter before; but by a violent effort he checked the vehement flow of words that rose to his lips, and replied with a calmness far more really impressive:

"I did all that a poor helpless man might do when his feudal lord was on the side of the enemy, and met every prayer and supplication either with mockery or blows. I soon saw it all too well. Sir Hugh was under the spell of the wicked old man. What was my boy's soul to him? what my agony? Nothing – nothing. The wizard had coveted the beautiful boy. He had doubtless made it worth my master's while to sell him to him; and what could I do? I tried everything I knew; but who would listen to me? Master Bernard de Brocas of Guildford, whom I met upon the road and begged to listen to my tale, promised he would see if something might not be done. I waited and waited in anguish, and hope, and despair, and there came a day when his palfrey stopped at my door, and he came forward himself to speak with me. He told me he had spoken to the Master of Basildene, and that

he had promised to restore me my son if I was resolved to have him back; but he had told the good priest that he knew the boy would never be content to stay in a woodland cottage with an unlettered father, when he had learned what life elsewhere was like. But I laughed this warning to scorn, and demanded my boy back."

"And did he come?"

A strange look swept over the old man's face. His hands were tightly clinched. His voice was very low, and full of suppressed awe and fury.

"Ay, he came back – he came back that same night – but so changed in those few months that I scarce knew him. And ah, how he clung to me when he was set down at my door! How he sobbed on my breast, entreating me to hold him fast – to save him – to protect him! What fearful tales of unhallowed sights and sounds did his white lips pour into my ears! How my own blood curdled at the tale, and how I vowed that never, never, never would I let him go from out my arms again! I held him fast. I took him within doors. I fastened the door safely. I fed him, comforted him, and laid him in mine own bed, lying wakeful beside him for fear even then that he should be taken from me; and thus the hours sped by. But the rest – ah, how can I tell it? It wrings my very heart. O my child, my son – my own heart's joy!"

The old man threw up his arms with a wild gesture of despair, and there was something in his face so terrible that the twins dared ask him no question; but after that one cry and gesture, the stony look returned upon his face, and he went on of his own accord.

"Midnight had come. I knew it by the position of the moon in the heavens. My boy had been sleeping like one dead beside me, never moving or stirring, scarce breathing; and I had at last grown soothed and drowsy likewise. I had just fallen into a light sleep, when I was aroused by feeling Roger stir beside me, and hastily sit up in the bed. His eyes were wide open, and in the moonlight they seemed to shine with unnatural brilliance. It was as if he were listening – listening with every fibre of his being, listening to a voice which he could hear and I could not; for he made quick answers. 'I hear, Sire,' he said, in a strange, muffled voice. And he rose suddenly to his feet and cried, 'I come, Master, I come.' Then a great rage and fear possessed me, for I knew that my boy was being called by some foul spirit, and that he was bewitched. I sprang up and seized him in my arms. 'Thou shalt not go!' I cried aloud. 'He has given thee back to me. I am thy father. Thy place is here. I will not let thee go!' But I might have been speaking to a dead corpse for all the understanding I received. My boy's eyes were opened, but he saw me not. His ears, that heard other voices, were deaf to mine. He struggled fiercely against my fatherly embrace; and when I felt the strength that had come into that frame, so worn and feeble but a few short hours ago, then I knew that it was the devil himself who had entered into my child, and that it was his voice that was luring him back to his destruction. O my God! May I never have to live again through the agony of that hour in which I fought with the devil for my child, and fought in vain. Like one possessed (as indeed he was) did he wrestle with me, crying out wildly all the while that he was coming – that he would quickly come; hearing nothing that I could hear, seeing nothing that I could see, and all the time struggling with me with a strength that I knew must at last prevail, albeit he was but a tender child and I a man in the prime of manhood's strength. But the devil was in him that night. It was not my boy's own hand that struck the blow which forced me to leave my hold, and sent me staggering back against the wall. No, it was but the evil spirit within him; and even as I released him from my embrace, he glided to the door, undid the fastenings, and still calling out that he was coming, that he would be there anon, he slipped out into the still forest, and vanished amongst the trees."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.