# ГОВАРД ПАЙЛ

# MEN OF IRON

Говард Пайл

# Men of Iron

**Пайл Г.**

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# Howard Pyle
# Men of Iron

## INTRODUCTION

The year 1400 opened with more than usual peacefulness in England. Only a few months before, Richard II – weak, wicked, and treacherous – had been dethroned, and Henry IV declared King in his stead. But it was only a seeming peacefulness, lasting but for a little while; for though King Henry proved himself a just and a merciful man – as justice and mercy went with the men of iron of those days – and though he did not care to shed blood needlessly, there were many noble families who had been benefited by King Richard during his reign, and who had lost somewhat of their power and prestige from the coming in of the new King.

Among these were a number of great lords – the Dukes of Albemarle, Surrey, and Exeter, the Marquis of Dorset, the Earl of Gloucester, and others – who had been degraded to their former titles and estates, from which King Richard had lifted them. These and others brewed a secret plot to take King Henry's life, which plot might have succeeded had not one of their own number betrayed them.

Their plan had been to fall upon the King and his adherents, and to massacre them during a great tournament, to be held at Oxford. But Henry did not appear at the lists; whereupon, knowing that he had been lodging at Windsor with only a few attendants, the conspirators marched thither against him. In the mean time the King had been warned of the plot, so that, instead of finding him in the royal castle, they discovered through their scouts that he had hurried to London, whence he was even then marching against them at the head of a considerable army. So nothing was left them but flight. Some betook themselves one way, some another; some sought sanctuary here, some there; but one and another, they were all of them caught and killed.

The Earl of Kent – one time Duke of Surrey – and the Earl of Salisbury were beheaded in the market-place at Cirencester; Lord Le Despencer – once the Earl of Gloucester – and Lord Lumley met the same fate at Bristol; the Earl of Huntingdon was taken in the Essex fens, carried to the castle of the Duke of Gloucester, whom he had betrayed to his death in King Richard's time, and was there killed by the castle people. Those few who found friends faithful and bold enough to afford them shelter, dragged those friends down in their own ruin.

Just such a case was that of the father of the boy hero of this story, the blind Lord Gilbert Reginald Falworth, Baron of Falworth and Easterbridge, who, though having no part in the plot, suffered through it ruin, utter and complete.

He had been a faithful counsellor and adviser to King Richard, and perhaps it was this, as much and more than his roundabout connection with the plot, that brought upon him the punishment he suffered.

# CHAPTER 1

Myles Falworth was but eight years of age at that time, and it was only afterwards, and when he grew old enough to know more of the ins and outs of the matter, that he could remember by bits and pieces the things that afterwards happened; how one evening a knight came clattering into the court-yard upon a horse, red-nostrilled and smeared with the sweat and foam of a desperate ride – Sir John Dale, a dear friend of the blind Lord.

Even though so young, Myles knew that something very serious had happened to make Sir John so pale and haggard, and he dimly remembered leaning against the knight's iron-covered knees, looking up into his gloomy face, and asking him if he was sick to look so strange. Thereupon those who had been too troubled before to notice him, bethought themselves of him, and sent him to bed, rebellious at having to go so early.

He remembered how the next morning, looking out of a window high up under the eaves, he saw a great troop of horsemen come riding into the courtyard beneath, where a powdering of snow had whitened everything, and of how the leader, a knight clad in black armor, dismounted and entered the great hall door-way below, followed by several of the band.

He remembered how some of the castle women were standing in a frightened group upon the landing of the stairs, talking together in low voices about a matter he did not understand, excepting that the armed men who had ridden into the courtyard had come for Sir John Dale. None of the women paid any attention to him; so, shunning their notice, he ran off down the winding stairs, expecting every moment to be called back again by some one of them.

A crowd of castle people, all very serious and quiet, were gathered in the hall, where a number of strange men-at-arms lounged upon the benches, while two billmen in steel caps and leathern jacks stood guarding the great door, the butts of their weapons resting upon the ground, and the staves crossed, barring the door-way.

In the anteroom was the knight in black armor whom Myles had seen from the window. He was sitting at the table, his great helmet lying upon the bench beside him, and a quart beaker of spiced wine at his elbow. A clerk sat at the other end of the same table, with inkhorn in one hand and pen in the other, and a parchment spread in front of him.

Master Robert, the castle steward, stood before the knight, who every now and then put to him a question, which the other would answer, and the clerk write the answer down upon the parchment.

His father stood with his back to the fireplace, looking down upon the floor with his blind eyes, his brows drawn moodily together, and the scar of the great wound that he had received at the tournament at York – the wound that had made him blind – showing red across his forehead, as it always did when he was angered or troubled.

There was something about it all that frightened Myles, who crept to his father's side, and slid his little hand into the palm that hung limp and inert. In answer to the touch, his father grasped the hand tightly, but did not seem otherwise to notice that he was there. Neither did the black knight pay any attention to him, but continued putting his questions to Master Robert.

Then, suddenly, there was a commotion in the hall without, loud voices, and a hurrying here and there. The black knight half arose, grasping a heavy iron mace that lay upon the bench beside him, and the next moment Sir John Dale himself, as pale as death, walked into the antechamber. He stopped in the very middle of the room. "I yield me to my Lord's grace and mercy," said he to the black knight, and they were the last words he ever uttered in this world.

The black knight shouted out some words of command, and swinging up the iron mace in his hand, strode forward clanking towards Sir John, who raised his arm as though to shield himself from the blow. Two or three of those who stood in the hall without came running into the room with drawn swords and bills, and little Myles, crying out with terror, hid his face in his father's long gown.

The next instant came the sound of a heavy blow and of a groan, then another blow and the sound of one falling upon the ground. Then the clashing of steel, and in the midst Lord Falworth crying, in a dreadful voice, “Thou traitor! thou coward! thou murderer!”

Master Robert snatched Myles away from his father, and bore him out of the room in spite of his screams and struggles, and he remembered just one instant’s sight of Sir John lying still and silent upon his face, and of the black knight standing above him, with the terrible mace in his hand stained a dreadful red.

It was the next day that Lord and Lady Falworth and little Myles, together with three of the more faithful of their people, left the castle.

His memory of past things held a picture for Myles of old Diccon Bowman standing over him in the silence of midnight with a lighted lamp in his hand, and with it a recollection of being bidden to hush when he would have spoken, and of being dressed by Diccon and one of the women, bewildered with sleep, shuddering and chattering with cold.

He remembered being wrapped in the sheepskin that lay at the foot of his bed, and of being carried in Diccon Bowman’s arms down the silent darkness of the winding stair-way, with the great black giant shadows swaying and flickering upon the stone wall as the dull flame of the lamp swayed and flickered in the cold breathing of the night air.

Below were his father and mother and two or three others. A stranger stood warming his hands at a newly-made fire, and little Myles, as he peeped from out the warm sheepskin, saw that he was in riding-boots and was covered with mud. He did not know till long years afterwards that the stranger was a messenger sent by a friend at the King’s court, bidding his father fly for safety.

They who stood there by the red blaze of the fire were all very still, talking in whispers and walking on tiptoes, and Myles’s mother hugged him in her arms, sheepskin and all, kissing him, with the tears streaming down her cheeks, and whispering to him, as though he could understand their trouble, that they were about to leave their home forever.

Then Diccon Bowman carried him out into the strangeness of the winter midnight.

Outside, beyond the frozen moat, where the osiers, stood stark and stiff in their winter nakedness, was a group of dark figures waiting for them with horses. In the pallid moonlight Myles recognized the well-known face of Father Edward, the Prior of St. Mary’s.

After that came a long ride through that silent night upon the saddle-bow in front of Diccon Bowman; then a deep, heavy sleep, that fell upon him in spite of the galloping of the horses.

When next he woke the sun was shining, and his home and his whole life were changed.

# CHAPTER 2

From the time the family escaped from Falworth Castle that midwinter night to the time Myles was sixteen years old he knew nothing of the great world beyond Crosbey-Dale. A fair was held twice in a twelvemonth at the market-town of Wisebey, and three times in the seven years old Diccon Bowman took the lad to see the sights at that place. Beyond these three glimpses of the outer world he lived almost as secluded a life as one of the neighboring monks of St. Mary's Priory.

Crosbey-Holt, their new home, was different enough from Falworth or Easterbridge Castle, the former baronial seats of Lord Falworth. It was a long, low, straw-thatched farm-house, once, when the church lands were divided into two holdings, one of the bailiff's houses. All around were the fruitful farms of the priory, tilled by well-to-do tenant holders, and rich with fields of waving grain, and meadow-lands where sheep and cattle grazed in flocks and herds; for in those days the church lands were under church rule, and were governed by church laws, and there, when war and famine and waste and sloth blighted the outside world, harvests flourished and were gathered, and sheep were sheared and cows were milked in peace and quietness.

The Prior of St. Mary's owed much if not all of the church's prosperity to the blind Lord Falworth, and now he was paying it back with a haven of refuge from the ruin that his former patron had brought upon himself by giving shelter to Sir John Dale.

I fancy that most boys do not love the grinding of school life – the lessons to be conned, the close application during study hours. It is not often pleasant to brisk, lively lads to be so cooped up. I wonder what the boys of to-day would have thought of Myles's training. With him that training was not only of the mind, but of the body as well, and for seven years it was almost unremitting. "Thou hast thine own way to make in the world, sirrah," his father said more than once when the boy complained of the grinding hardness of his life, and to make one's way in those days meant a thousand times more than it does now; it meant not only a heart to feel and a brain to think, but a hand quick and strong to strike in battle, and a body tough to endure the wounds and blows in return. And so it was that Myles's body as well as his mind had to be trained to meet the needs of the dark age in which he lived.

Every morning, winter or summer, rain or shine he tramped away six long miles to the priory school, and in the evenings his mother taught him French.

Myles, being prejudiced in the school of thought of his day, rebelled not a little at that last branch of his studies. "Why must I learn that vile tongue?" said he.

"Call it not vile," said the blind old Lord, grimly; "belike, when thou art grown a man, thou'lt have to seek thy fortune in France land, for England is haply no place for such as be of Falworth blood." And in after-years, true to his father's prediction, the "vile tongue" served him well.

As for his physical training, that pretty well filled up the hours between his morning studies at the monastery and his evening studies at home. Then it was that old Diccon Bowman took him in hand, than whom none could be better fitted to shape his young body to strength and his hands to skill in arms. The old bowman had served with Lord Falworth's father under the Black Prince both in France and Spain, and in long years of war had gained a practical knowledge of arms that few could surpass. Besides the use of the broadsword, the short sword, the quarter-staff, and the cudgel, he taught Myles to shoot so skilfully with the long-bow and the cross-bow that not a lad in the country-side was his match at the village butts. Attack and defence with the lance, and throwing the knife and dagger were also part of his training.

Then, in addition to this more regular part of his physical training, Myles was taught in another branch not so often included in the military education of the day – the art of wrestling. It happened that a fellow lived in Crosbey village, by name Ralph-the-Smith, who was the greatest wrestler in the country-side, and had worn the champion belt for three years. Every Sunday afternoon, in fair

weather, he came to teach Myles the art, and being wonderfully adept in bodily feats, he soon grew so quick and active and firm-footed that he could cast any lad under twenty years of age living within a range of five miles.

"It is main ungentle armscraft that he learneth," said Lord Falworth one day to Prior Edward. "Saving only the broadsword, the dagger, and the lance, there is but little that a gentleman of his strain may use. Neth'less, he gaineth quickness and suppleness, and if he hath true blood in his veins he will acquire knightly arts shrewdly quick when the time cometh to learn them."

But hard and grinding as Myles's life was, it was not entirely without pleasures. There were many boys living in Crosbey-Dale and the village; yeomen's and farmers' sons, to be sure, but, nevertheless, lads of his own age, and that, after all, is the main requirement for friendship in boyhood's world. Then there was the river to bathe in; there were the hills and valleys to roam over, and the wold and woodland, with their wealth of nuts and birds'-nests and what not of boyhood's treasures.

Once he gained a triumph that for many a day was very sweet under the tongue of his memory. As was said before, he had been three times to the market-town at fair-time, and upon the last of these occasions he had fought a bout of quarterstaff with a young fellow of twenty, and had been the conqueror. He was then only a little over fourteen years old.

Old Diccon, who had gone with him to the fair, had met some cronies of his own, with whom he had sat gossiping in the ale-booth, leaving Myles for the nonce to shift for himself. By-and-by the old man had noticed a crowd gathered at one part of the fair-ground, and, snuffing a fight, had gone running, ale-pot in hand. Then, peering over the shoulders of the crowd, he had seen his young master, stripped to the waist, fighting like a gladiator with a fellow a head taller than himself. Diccon was about to force his way through the crowd and drag them asunder, but a second look had showed his practised eye that Myles was not only holding his own, but was in the way of winning the victory. So he had stood with the others looking on, withholding himself from any interference and whatever upbraiding might be necessary until the fight had been brought to a triumphant close. Lord Falworth never heard directly of the redoubtable affair, but old Diccon was not so silent with the common folk of Crosbey-Dale, and so no doubt the father had some inkling of what had happened. It was shortly after this notable event that Myles was formally initiated into squirehood. His father and mother, as was the custom, stood sponsors for him. By them, each bearing a lighted taper, he was escorted to the altar. It was at St. Mary's Priory, and Prior Edward blessed the sword and girded it to the lad's side. No one was present but the four, and when the good Prior had given the benediction and had signed the cross upon his forehead, Myles's mother stooped and kissed his brow just where the priest's finger had drawn the holy sign. Her eyes brimmed bright with tears as she did so. Poor lady! perhaps she only then and for the first time realized how big her fledgling was growing for his nest. Henceforth Myles had the right to wear a sword.

Myles had ended his fifteenth year. He was a bonny lad, with brown face, curling hair, a square, strong chin, and a pair of merry laughing blue eyes; his shoulders were broad; his chest was thick of girth; his muscles and thews were as tough as oak.

The day upon which he was sixteen years old, as he came whistling home from the monastery school he was met by Diccon Bowman.

"Master Myles," said the old man, with a snuffle in his voice – "Master Myles, thy father would see thee in his chamber, and bade me send thee to him as soon as thou didst come home. Oh, Master Myles, I fear me that belike thou art going to leave home to-morrow day."

Myles stopped short. "To leave home!" he cried.

"Aye," said old Diccon, "belike thou goest to some grand castle to live there, and be a page there and what not, and then, haply, a gentleman-at-arms in some great lord's pay."

"What coil is this about castles and lords and gentlemen-at-arms?" said Myles. "What talkest thou of, Diccon? Art thou jesting?"

"Nay," said Diccon, "I am not jesting. But go to thy father, and then thou wilt presently know all. Only this I do say, that it is like thou leavest us to-morrow day."

And so it was as Diccon had said; Myles was to leave home the very next morning. He found his father and mother and Prior Edward together, waiting for his coming.

"We three have been talking it over this morning," said his father, "and so think each one that the time hath come for thee to quit this poor home of ours. An thou stay here ten years longer, thou'lt be no more fit to go then than now. To-morrow I will give thee a letter to my kinsman, the Earl of Mackworth. He has thriven in these days and I have fallen away, but time was that he and I were true sworn companions, and plighted together in friendship never to be sundered. Methinks, as I remember him, he will abide by his plighted troth, and will give thee his aid to rise in the world. So, as I said, to-morrow morning thou shalt set forth with Diccon Bowman, and shall go to Castle Devlen, and there deliver this letter which prayeth him to give thee a place in his household. Thou mayst have this afternoon to thyself to make read such things as thou shalt take with thee. And bid me Diccon to take the gray horse to the village and have it shod."

Prior Edward had been standing looking out of the window. As Lord Falworth ended he turned.

"And, Myles," said he, "thou wilt need some money, so I will give thee as a loan forty shillings, which some day thou mayst return to me an thou wilt. For this know, Myles, a man cannot do in the world without money. Thy father hath it ready for thee in the chest, and will give it thee to-morrow ere thou goest."

Lord Falworth had the grim strength of manhood's hard sense to upbear him in sending his son into the world, but the poor lady mother had nothing of that to uphold her. No doubt it was as hard then as it is now for the mother to see the nestling thrust from the nest to shift for itself. What tears were shed, what words of love were spoken to the only man-child, none but the mother and the son ever knew.

The next morning Myles and the old bowman rode away, and no doubt to the boy himself the dark shadows of leave-taking were lost in the golden light of hope as he rode out into the great world to seek his fortune.

# CHAPTER 3

WHAT MYLES remembered of Falworth loomed great and grand and big, as things do in the memory of childhood, but even memory could not make Falworth the equal of Devlen Castle, when, as he and Diccon Bowman rode out of Devlentown across the great, rude stone bridge that spanned the river, he first saw, rising above the crowns of the trees, those huge hoary walls, and the steep roofs and chimneys clustered thickly together, like the roofs and chimneys of a town.

The castle was built upon a plateau-like rise of ground, which was enclosed by the outer wall. It was surrounded on three sides by a loop-like bend of the river, and on the fourth was protected by a deep, broad, artificial moat, almost as wide as the stream from which it was fed. The road from the town wound for a little distance along by the edge of this moat. As Myles and the old bowman galloped by, with the answering echo of their horses' hoof-beats rattling back from the smooth stone face of the walls, the lad looked up, wondering at the height and strength of the great ancient fortress. In his air-castle building Myles had pictured the Earl receiving him as the son of his one-time comrade in arms – receiving him, perhaps, with somewhat of the rustic warmth that he knew at Crosbey-Dale; but now, as he stared at those massive walls from below, and realized his own insignificance and the greatness of this great Earl, he felt the first keen, helpless ache of homesickness shoot through his breast, and his heart yearned for Crosbey-Holt again.

Then they thundered across the bridge that spanned the moat, and through the dark shadows of the great gaping gate-way, and Diccon, bidding him stay for a moment, rode forward to bespeak the gate-keeper.

The gate-keeper gave the two in charge of one of the men-at-arms who were lounging upon a bench in the archway, who in turn gave them into the care of one of the house-servants in the outer court-yard. So, having been passed from one to another, and having answered many questions, Myles in due time found himself in the outer waiting-room sitting beside Diccon Bowman upon a wooden bench that stood along the wall under the great arch of a glazed window.

For a while the poor country lad sat stupidly bewildered. He was aware of people coming and going; he was aware of talk and laughter sounding around him; but he thought of nothing but his aching homesickness and the oppression of his utter littleness in the busy life of this great castle.

Meantime old Diccon Bowman was staring about him with huge interest, every now and then nudging his young master, calling his attention now to this and now to that, until at last the lad began to awaken somewhat from his despondency to the things around. Besides those servants and others who came and went, and a knot of six or eight men-at-arms with bills and pole-axes, who stood at the farther door-way talking together in low tones, now and then broken by a stifled laugh, was a group of four young squires, who lounged upon a bench beside a door-way hidden by an arras, and upon them Myles's eyes lit with a sudden interest. Three of the four were about his own age, one was a year or two older, and all four were dressed in the black-and-yellow uniform of the house of Beaumont.

Myles plucked the bowman by the sleeve. "Be they squires, Diccon?" said he, nodding towards the door.

"Eh?" said Diccon. "Aye; they be squires."

"And will my station be with them?" asked the boy.

"Aye; an the Earl take thee to service, thou'lt haply be taken as squire."

Myles stared at them, and then of a sudden was aware that the young men were talking of him. He knew it by the way they eyed him askance, and spoke now and then in one another's ears. One of the four, a gay young fellow, with long riding-boots laced with green laces, said a few words, the others gave a laugh, and poor Myles, knowing how ungainly he must seem to them, felt the blood rush to his cheeks, and shyly turned his head.

Suddenly, as though stirred by an impulse, the same lad who had just created the laugh arose from the bench, and came directly across the room to where Myles and the bowman sat.

"Give thee good-den," said he. "What be'st thy name and whence comest thou, an I may make bold so to ask?"

"My name is Myles Falworth," said Myles; "and I come from Crosbey-Dale bearing a letter to my Lord."

"Never did I hear of Crosbey-Dale," said the squire. "But what seekest here, if so be I may ask that much?"

"I come seeking service," said Myles, "and would enter as an esquire such as ye be in my Lord's household."

Myles's new acquaintance grinned. "Thou'lt make a droll squire to wait in a Lord's household," said he. "Hast ever been in such service?"

"Nay," said Myles, "I have only been at school, and learned Latin and French and what not. But Diccon Bowman here hath taught me use of arms."

The young squire laughed outright. "By'r Lady, thy talk doth tickle me, friend Myles," said he. "Think'st thou such matters will gain thee footing here? But stay! Thou didst say anon that thou hadst a letter to my Lord. From whom is it?"

"It is from my father," said Myles. "He is of noble blood, but fallen in estate. He is a kinsman of my Lord's, and one time his comrade in arms."

"Sayst so?" said the other. "Then mayhap thy chances are not so ill, after all." Then, after a moment, he added: "My name is Francis Gascoyne, and I will stand thy friend in this matter. Get thy letter ready, for my Lord and his Grace of York are within and come forth anon. The Archbishop is on his way to Dalworth, and my Lord escorts him so far as Uppingham. I and those others are to go along. Dost thou know my Lord by sight?"

"Nay," said Myles, "I know him not."

"Then I will tell thee when he cometh. Listen!" said he, as a confused clattering sounded in the court-yard without. "Yonder are the horses now. They come presently. Busk thee with thy letter, friend Myles."

The attendants who passed through the anteroom now came and went more hurriedly, and Myles knew that the Earl must be about to come forth. He had hardly time to untie his pouch, take out the letter, and tie the strings again when the arras at the door-way was thrust suddenly aside, and a tall thin squire of about twenty came forth, said some words to the young men upon the bench, and then withdrew again. Instantly the squires arose and took their station beside the door-way. A sudden hush fell upon all in the room, and the men-at-arms stood in a line against the wall, stiff and erect as though all at once transformed to figures of iron. Once more the arras was drawn back, and in the hush Myles heard voices in the other room.

"My Lord cometh," whispered Gascoyne in his ear, and Myles felt his heart leap in answer.

The next moment two noblemen came into the anteroom followed by a crowd of gentlemen, squires, and pages. One of the two was a dignitary of the Church; the other Myles instantly singled out as the Earl of Mackworth.

# CHAPTER 4

He was a tall man, taller even than Myles's father. He had a thin face, deep-set bushy eyebrows, and a hawk nose. His upper lip was clean shaven, but from his chin a flowing beard of iron-gray hung nearly to his waist. He was clad in a riding-gown of black velvet that hung a little lower than the knee, trimmed with otter fur and embroidered with silver goshawks – the crest of the family of Beaumont.

A light shirt of link mail showed beneath the gown as he walked, and a pair of soft undressed leather riding-boots were laced as high as the knee, protecting his scarlet hose from mud and dirt. Over his shoulders he wore a collar of enamelled gold, from which hung a magnificent jewelled pendant, and upon his fist he carried a beautiful Iceland falcon.

As Myles stood staring, he suddenly heard Gascoyne's voice whisper in his ear, "Yon is my Lord; go forward and give him thy letter."

Scarcely knowing what he did, he walked towards the Earl like a machine, his heart pounding within him and a great humming in his ears. As he drew near, the nobleman stopped for a moment and stared at him, and Myles, as in a dream, kneeled, and presented the letter. The Earl took it in his hand, turned it this way and that, looked first at the bearer, then at the packet, and then at the bearer again.

"Who art thou?" said he; "and what is the matter thou wouldst have of me?"

"I am Myles Falworth," said the lad, in a low voice; "and I come seeking service with you."

The Earl drew his thick eyebrows quickly together, and shot a keen look at the lad. "Falworth?" said he, sharply – "Falworth? I know no Falworth!"

"The letter will tell you," said Myles. "It is from one once dear to you."

The Earl took the letter, and handing it to a gentleman who stood near, bade him break the seal. "Thou mayst stand," said he to Myles; "needst not kneel there forever." Then, taking the opened parchment again, he glanced first at the face and then at the back, and, seeing its length, looked vexed. Then he read for an earnest moment or two, skipping from line to line. Presently he folded the letter and thrust it into the pouch at his side. "So it is, your Grace," said he to the lordly prelate, "that we who have luck to rise in the world must ever suffer by being plagued at all times and seasons. Here is one I chanced to know a dozen years ago, who thinks he hath a claim upon me, and saddles me with his son. I must e'en take the lad, too, for the sake of peace and quietness." He glanced around, and seeing Gascoyne, who had drawn near, beckoned to him. "Take me this fellow," said he, "to the buttery, and see him fed; and then to Sir James Lee, and have his name entered in the castle books. And stay, sirrah," he added; "bid me Sir James, if it may be so done, to enter him as a squire-at-arms. Methinks he will be better serving so than in the household, for he appeareth a soothly rough cub for a page."

Myles did look rustic enough, standing clad in frieze in the midst of that gay company, and a murmur of laughter sounded around, though he was too bewildered to fully understand that he was the cause of the merriment. Then some hand drew him back – it was Gascoyne's – there was a bustle of people passing, and the next minute they were gone, and Myles and old Diccon Bowman and the young squire were left alone in the anteroom.

Gascoyne looked very sour and put out. "Murrain upon it!" said he; "here is good sport spoiled for me to see thee fed. I wish no ill to thee, friend, but I would thou hadst come this afternoon or to-morrow."

"Methinks I bring trouble and dole to every one," said Myles, somewhat bitterly. "It would have been better had I never come to this place, methinks."

His words and tone softened Gascoyne a little. "Ne'er mind," said the squire; "it was not thy fault, and is past mending now. So come and fill thy stomach, in Heaven's name."

Perhaps not the least hard part of the whole trying day for Myles was his parting with Diccon. Gascoyne and he had accompanied the old retainer to the outer gate, in the archway of which they now stood; for without a permit they could go no farther. The old bowman led by the bridle-rein the

horse upon which Myles had ridden that morning. His own nag, a vicious brute, was restive to be gone, but Diccon held him in with tight rein. He reached down, and took Myles's sturdy brown hand in his crooked, knotted grasp.

"Farewell, young master," he croaked, tremulously, with a watery glimmer in his pale eyes. "Thou wilt not forget me when I am gone?"

"Nay," said Myles; "I will not forget thee."

"Aye, aye," said the old man, looking down at him, and shaking his head slowly from side to side; "thou art a great tall sturdy fellow now, yet have I held thee on my knee many and many's the time, and dandled thee when thou wert only a little weeny babe. Be still, thou devil's limb!" he suddenly broke off, reining back his restive raw-boned steed, which began again to caper and prance. Myles was not sorry for the interruption; he felt awkward and abashed at the parting, and at the old man's reminiscences, knowing that Gascoyne's eyes were resting amusedly upon the scene, and that the men-at-arms were looking on. Certainly old Diccon did look droll as he struggled vainly with his vicious high-necked nag. "Nay, a murrain on thee! an' thou wilt go, go!" cried he at last, with a savage dig of his heels into the animal's ribs, and away they clattered, the led-horse kicking up its heels as a final parting, setting Gascoyne fairly alaughing. At the bend of the road the old man turned and nodded his head; the next moment he had disappeared around the angle of the wall, and it seemed to Myles, as he stood looking after him, as though the last thread that bound him to his old life had snapped and broken. As he turned he saw that Gascoyne was looking at him.

"Dost feel downhearted?" said the young squire, curiously.

"Nay," said Myles, brusquely. Nevertheless his throat was tight and dry, and the word came huskily in spite of himself.

# CHAPTER 5

THE EARL of Mackworth, as was customary among the great lords in those days, maintained a small army of knights, gentlemen, men-at-arms, and retainers, who were expected to serve him upon all occasions of need, and from whom were supplied his quota of recruits to fill such levies as might be made upon him by the King in time of war.

The knights and gentlemen of this little army of horse and foot soldiers were largely recruited from the company of squires and bachelors, as the young novitiate soldiers of the castle were called.

This company of esquires consisted of from eighty to ninety lads, ranging in age from eight to twenty years. Those under fourteen years were termed pages, and served chiefly the Countess and her waiting gentlewomen, in whose company they acquired the graces and polish of the times, such as they were. After reaching the age of fourteen the lads were entitled to the name of esquire or squire.

In most of the great houses of the time the esquires were the especial attendants upon the Lord and Lady of the house, holding such positions as body-squires, cup-bearers, carvers, and sometimes the office of chamberlain. But Devlen, like some other of the princely castles of the greatest nobles, was more like a military post or a fortress than an ordinary household. Only comparatively few of the esquires could be used in personal attendance upon the Earl; the others were trained more strictly in arms, and served rather in the capacity of a sort of body-guard than as ordinary squires. For, as the Earl rose in power and influence, and as it so became well worth while for the lower nobility and gentry to enter their sons in his family, the body of squires became almost cumbersomely large. Accordingly, that part which comprised the squires proper, as separate from the younger pages, was divided into three classes – first, squires of the body, who were those just past pagehood, and who waited upon the Earl in personal service; second, squires of the household, who, having regular hours assigned for exercise in the manual of arms, were relieved from personal service excepting upon especial occasions; and thirdly and lastly, at the head of the whole body of lads, a class called bachelors – young men ranging from eighteen to twenty years of age. This class was supposed to exercise a sort of government over the other and younger squires – to keep them in order as much as possible, to marshal them upon occasions of importance, to see that their arms and equipments were kept in good order, to call the roll for chapel in the morning, and to see that those not upon duty in the house were present at the daily exercise at arms. Orders to the squires were generally transmitted through the bachelors, and the head of that body was expected to make weekly reports of affairs in their quarters to the chief captain of the body.

From this overlordship of the bachelors there had gradually risen a system of fagging, such as is or was practised in the great English public schools – enforced services exacted from the younger lads – which at the time Myles came to Devlen had, in the five or six years it had been in practice, grown to be an absolute though unwritten law of the body – a law supported by all the prestige of long-continued usage. At that time the bachelors numbered but thirteen, yet they exercised over the rest of the sixty-four squires and pages a rule of iron, and were taskmasters, hard, exacting, and oftentimes cruel.

The whole company of squires and pages was under the supreme command of a certain one-eyed knight, by name Sir James Lee; a soldier seasoned by the fire of a dozen battles, bearing a score of wounds won in fight and tourney, and withered by hardship and labor to a leather-like toughness. He had fought upon the King's side in all the late wars, and had at Shrewsbury received a wound that unfitted him for active service, so that now he was fallen to the post of Captain of Esquires at Devlen Castle – a man disappointed in life, and with a temper imbittered by that failure as well as by cankering pain.

Yet Perhaps no one could have been better fitted for the place he held than Sir James Lee. The lads under his charge were a rude, rough, unruly set, quick, like their elders, to quarrel, and to quarrel

fiercely, even to the drawing of sword or dagger. But there was a cold, iron sternness about the grim old man that quelled them, as the trainer with a lash of steel might quell a den of young wolves. The apartments in which he was lodged, with his clerk, were next in the dormitory of the lads, and even in the midst of the most excited brawlings the distant sound of his harsh voice, "Silence, messieurs!" would bring an instant hush to the loudest uproar.

It was into his grim presence that Myles was introduced by Gascoyne. Sir James was in his office, a room bare of ornament or adornment or superfluous comfort of any sort – without even so much as a mat of rushes upon the cold stone pavement to make it less cheerless. The old one-eyed knight sat gnawing his bristling mustaches. To anyone who knew him it would have been apparent that, as the castle phrase went, "the devil sat astride of his neck," which meant that some one of his blind wounds was aching more sorely than usual.

His clerk sat beside him, with account-books and parchment spread upon the table, and the head squire, Walter Blunt, a lad some three or four years older than Myles, and half a head taller, black-browed, powerfully built, and with cheek and chin darkened by the soft budding of his adolescent beard, stood making his report.

Sir James listened in grim silence while Gascoyne told his errand.

"So, then, pardee, I am bid to take another one of ye, am I?" he snarled. "As though ye caused me not trouble enow; and this one a cub, looking a very boor in carriage and breeding. Mayhap the Earl thinketh I am to train boys to his dilly-dally household service as well as to use of arms."

"Sir," said Gascoyne, timidly, "my Lord sayeth he would have this one entered direct as a squire of the body, so that he need not serve in the household."

"Sayest so?" cried Sir James, harshly. "Then take thou my message back again to thy Lord. Not for Mackworth – no, nor a better man than he – will I make any changes in my government. An I be set to rule a pack of boys, I will rule them as I list, and not according to any man's bidding. Tell him, sirrah, that I will enter no lad as squire of the body without first testing an he be fit at arms to hold that place." He sat for a while glowering at Myles and gnawing his mustaches, and for the time no one dared to break the grim silence. "What is thy name?" said he, suddenly. And then, almost before Myles could answer, he asked the head squire whether he could find a place to lodge him.

"There is Gillis Whitlock's cot empty," said Blunt. "He is in the infirmary, and belike goeth home again when he cometh thence. The fever hath gotten into his bones, and – "

"That will do," said the knight, interrupting him impatiently. "Let him take that place, or any other that thou hast. And thou, Jerome," said he to his clerk, "thou mayst enter him upon the roll, though whether it be as page or squire or bachelor shall be as I please, and not as Mackworth biddeth me. Now get ye gone."

"Old Bruin's wound smarteth him sore," Gascoyne observed, as the two lads walked across the armory court. He had good-naturedly offered to show the new-comer the many sights of interest around the castle, and in the hour or so of ramble that followed, the two grew from acquaintances to friends with a quickness that boyhood alone can bring about. They visited the armory, the chapel, the stables, the great hall, the Painted Chamber, the guard-house, the mess-room, and even the scullery and the kitchen, with its great range of boilers and furnaces and ovens. Last of all Myles's new friend introduced him to the armor-smithy.

"My Lord hath sent a piece of Milan armor thither to be repaired," said he. "Belike thou would like to see it."

"Aye," said Myles, eagerly, "that would I."

The smith was a gruff, good-natured fellow, and showed the piece of armor to Myles readily and willingly enough. It was a beautiful bascinet of inlaid workmanship, and was edged with a rim of gold. Myles scarcely dared touch it; he gazed at it with an unconcealed delight that warmed the smith's honest heart.

"I have another piece of Milan here," said he. "Did I ever show thee my dagger, Master Gascoyne?"

"Nay," said the squire.

The smith unlocked a great oaken chest in the corner of the shop, lifted the lid, and brought thence a beautiful dagger with the handle of ebony and silver-gilt, and a sheath of Spanish leather, embossed and gilt. The keen, well-tempered blade was beautifully engraved and inlaid with niello-work, representing a group of figures in a then popular subject – the dance of Death. It was a weapon at once unique and beautiful, and even Gascoyne showed an admiration scarcely less keen than Myles's openly-expressed delight.

"To whom doth it belong?" said he, trying the point upon his thumb nail.

"There," said the smith, "is the jest of the whole, for it belongeth to me. Sir William Beauclerk bade me order the weapon through Master Gildersworthy, of London town, and by the time it came hither, lo! he had died, and so it fell to my hands. No one here payeth the price for the trinket, and so I must e'en keep it myself, though I be but a poor man."

"How much dost thou hold it for?" said Gascoyne.

"Seventeen shillings buyeth it," said the armorer, carelessly.

"Aye, aye," said Gascoyne, with a sigh; "so it is to be poor, and not be able to have such things as one loveth and would fain possess. Seventeen shillings is nigh as much by half again as all my yearly wage."

Then a sudden thought came to Myles, and as it came his cheeks glowed as hot as fire "Master Gascoyne," said he, with gruff awkwardness, "thou hast been a very good, true friend to me since I have come to this place, and hast befriended me in all ways thou mightest do, and I, as well I know, but a poor rustic clod. Now I have forty shillings by me which I may spend as I list, and so I do beseech thee that thou wilt take yon dagger of me as a love-gift, and have and hold it for thy very own."

Gascoyne stared open-mouthed at Myles. "Dost mean it?" said he, at last.

"Aye," said Myles, "I do mean it. Master Smith, give him the blade."

At first the smith grinned, thinking it all a jest; but he soon saw that Myles was serious enough, and when the seventeen shillings were produced and counted down upon the anvil, he took off his cap and made Myles a low bow as he swept them into his pouch. "Now, by my faith and troth," quoth he, "that I do call a true lordly gift. Is it not so, Master Gascoyne?"

"Aye," said Gascoyne, with a gulp, "it is, in soothly earnest." And thereupon, to Myles's great wonderment, he suddenly flung his arms about his neck, and, giving him a great hug, kissed him upon the cheek. "Dear Myles," said he, "I tell thee truly and of a verity I did feel warm towards thee from the very first time I saw thee sitting like a poor oaf upon the bench up yonder in the anteroom, and now of a sooth I give thee assurance that I do love thee as my own brother. Yea, I will take the dagger, and will stand by thee as a true friend from this time forth. Mayhap thou mayst need a true friend in this place ere thou livest long with us, for some of us esquires be soothly rough, and knocks are more plenty here than broad pennies, so that one new come is like to have a hard time gaining a footing."

"I thank thee," said Myles, "for thy offer of love and friendship, and do tell thee, upon my part, that I also of all the world would like best to have thee for my friend."

Such was the manner In which Myles formed the first great friendship of his life, a friendship that was destined to last him through many years to come. As the two walked back across the great quadrangle, upon which fronted the main buildings of the castle, their arms were wound across one another's shoulders, after the manner, as a certain great writer says, of boys and lovers.

# CHAPTER 6

A boy's life is of a very flexible sort. It takes but a little while for it to shape itself to any new surroundings in which it may be thrown, to make itself new friends, to settle itself to new habits; and so it was that Myles fell directly into the ways of the lads of Devlen. On his first morning, as he washed his face and hands with the other squires and pages in a great tank of water in the armory court-yard, he presently found himself splashing and dashing with the others, laughing and shouting as loud as any, and calling some by their Christian names as though he had known them for years instead of overnight. During chapel he watched with sympathetic delight the covert pranks of the youngsters during the half-hour that Father Emmanuel droned his Latin, and with his dagger point he carved his own name among the many cut deep into the back of the bench before him. When, after breakfast, the squires poured like school-boys into the great armory to answer to the roll-call for daily exercise, he came storming in with the rest, beating the lad in front of him with his cap.

Boys are very keen to feel the influence of a forceful character. A lad with a strong will is quick to reach his proper level as a greater or lesser leader among the others, and Myles was of just the masterful nature to make his individuality felt among the Devlen squires. He was quick enough to yield obedience upon all occasions to proper authority, but would never bend an inch to the usurpation of tyranny. In the school at St. Mary's Priory at Crosbey-Dale he would submit without a murmur or offer of resistance to chastisement by old Father Ambrose, the regular teacher; but once, when the fat old monk was sick, and a great long-legged strapping young friar, who had temporarily taken his place, undertook to administer punishment, Myles, with a wrestling trip, flung him sprawling backward over a bench into the midst of a shoal of small boys amid a hubbub of riotous confusion. He had been flogged soundly for it under the supervision of Prior Edward himself; but so soon as his punishment was over, he assured the prior very seriously that should like occasion again happen he would act in the same manner, flogging or no flogging.

It was this bold, outspoken spirit that gained him at once friends and enemies at Devlen, and though it first showed itself in what was but a little matter, nevertheless it set a mark upon him that singled him out from the rest, and, although he did not suspect it at the time, called to him the attention of Sir James Lee himself, who regarded him as a lad of free and frank spirit.

The first morning after the roll-call in the armory, as Walter Blunt, the head bachelor, rolled up the slip of parchment, and the temporary silence burst forth into redoubled noise and confusion, each lad arming himself from a row of racks that stood along the wall, he beckoned Myles to him.

"My Lord himself hath spoken to Sir James Lee concerning thee," said he. "Sir James maintaineth that he will not enter thee into the body till thou hast first practised for a while at the pels, and shown what thou canst do at broadsword. Hast ever fought at the pel?"

"Aye," answered Myles, "and that every day of my life sin I became esquire four years ago, saving only Sundays and holy days."

"With shield and broadsword?"

"Sometimes," said Myles, "and sometimes with the short sword."

"Sir James would have thee come to the tilt-yard this morn; he himself will take thee in hand to try what thou canst do. Thou mayst take the arms upon yonder rack, and use them until otherwise bidden. Thou seest that the number painted above it on the wall is seventeen; that will be thy number for the nonce."

So Myles armed himself from his rack as the others were doing from theirs. The armor was rude and heavy, used to accustom the body to the weight of the iron plates rather than for any defence. It consisted of a cuirass, or breastplate of iron, opening at the side with hinges, and catching with hooks and eyes; epauliers, or shoulder-plates; arm-plates and leg-pieces; and a bascinet, or open-faced

helmet. A great triangular shield covered with leather and studded with bosses of iron, and a heavy broadsword, pointed and dulled at the edges, completed the equipment.

The practice at the pels which Myles was bidden to attend comprised the chief exercise of the day with the esquires of young cadet soldiers of that time, and in it they learned not only all the strokes, cuts, and thrusts of sword-play then in vogue, but also toughness, endurance, and elastic quickness. The pels themselves consisted of upright posts of ash or oak, about five feet six inches in height, and in girth somewhat thicker than a man's thigh. They were firmly planted in the ground, and upon them the strokes of the broadsword were directed.

At Devlen the pels stood just back of the open and covered tilting courts and the archery ranges, and thither those lads not upon household duty were marched every morning excepting Fridays and Sundays, and were there exercised under the direction of Sir James Lee and two assistants. The whole company was divided into two, sometimes into three parties, each of which took its turn at the exercise, delivering at the word of command the various strokes, feints, attacks, and retreats as the instructors ordered.

After five minutes of this mock battle the perspiration began to pour down the faces, and the breath to come thick and short; but it was not until the lads could absolutely endure no more that the order was given to rest, and they were allowed to fling themselves panting upon the ground, while another company took its place at the triple row of posts.

As Myles struck and hacked at the pel assigned to him, Sir James Lee stood beside him watching him in grim silence. The lad did his best to show the knight all that he knew of upper cut, under cut, thrust, and back-hand stroke, but it did not seem to him that Sir James was very well satisfied with his skill.

"Thou fightest like a clodpole," said the old man. "Ha, that stroke was but ill-recovered. Strike me it again, and get thou in guard more quickly."

Myles repeated the stroke.

"Pest!" cried Sir James. "Thou art too slow by a week. Here, strike thou the blow at me."

Myles hesitated. Sir James held a stout staff in his hand, but otherwise he was unarmed.

"Strike, I say!" said Sir James. "What stayest thou for? Art afeard?"

It was Myles's answer that set the seal of individuality upon him. "Nay," said he, boldly, "I am not afeard. I fear not thee nor any man!" So saying, he delivered the stroke at Sir James with might and main. It was met with a jarring blow that made his wrist and arm tingle, and the next instant he received a stroke upon the bascinet that caused his ears to ring and the sparks to dance and fly before his eyes.

"Pardee!" said Sir James, grimly. "An I had had a mace in my hand, I would have knocked thy cockerel brains out that time. Thou mayst take that blow for answering me so pertly. And now we are quits. Now strike me the stroke again an thou art not afeard."

Myles's eyes watered in spite of himself, and he shut the lids tight to wink the dimness away. Nevertheless he spoke up undauntedly as before. "Aye, marry, will I strike it again," said he; and this time he was able to recover guard quickly enough to turn Sir James's blow with his shield, instead of receiving it upon his head.

"So!" said Sir James. "Now mind thee of this, that when thou strikest that lower cut at the legs, recover thyself more quickly. Now, then, strike me it at the pel."

Gascoyne and other of the lads who were just then lying stretched out upon the grass beneath, a tree at the edge of the open court where stood the pels, were interested spectators of the whole scene. Not one of them in their memory had heard Sir James so answered face to face as Myles had answered him, and, after all, perhaps the lad himself would not have done so had he been longer a resident in the squires' quarters at Devlen.

"By 'r Lady! thou art a cool blade, Myles," said Gascoyne, as they marched back to the armory again. "Never heard I one bespeak Sir James as thou hast done this day."

“And, after all,” said another of the young squires, “old Bruin was not so ill-pleased, methinks. That was a shrewd blow he fetched thee on the crown, Falworth. Marry, I would not have had it on my own skull for a silver penny.”

# CHAPTER 7

## So little does it take to make a body's reputation

That night all the squires' quarters buzzed with the story of how the new boy, Falworth, had answered Sir James Lee to his face without fear, and had exchanged blows with him hand to hand. Walter Blunt himself was moved to some show of interest.

"What said he to thee, Falworth?" asked he.

"He said naught," said Myles, brusquely. "He only sought to show me how to recover from the under cut."

"It is passing strange that he should take so much notice of thee as to exchange blows with thee with his own hand. Haply thou art either very quick or parlous slow at arms."

"It is quick that he is," said Gascoyne, speaking up in his friend's behalf. "For the second time that Falworth delivered the stroke, Sir James could not reach him to return; so I saw with mine own eyes."

But that very sterling independence that had brought Myles so creditably through this adventure was certain to embroil him with the rude, half-savage lads about him, some of whom, especially among the bachelors, were his superiors as well in age as in skill and training. As said before, the bachelors had enforced from the younger boys a fagging sort of attendance on their various personal needs, and it was upon this point that Myles first came to grief. As it chanced, several days passed before any demand was made upon him for service to the heads of the squirehood, but when that demand was made, the bachelors were very quick to see that the boy who was bold enough to speak up to Sir James Lee was not likely to be a willing fag for them.

"I tell thee, Francis," he said, as Gascoyne and he talked over the matter one day – "I tell thee I will never serve them. Prithee, what shame can be fouler than to do such menial service, saving for one's rightful Lord?"

"Marry!" quoth Gascoyne; "I reason not of shame at this or that. All I know is that others serve them who are haply as good and maybe better than I be, and that if I do not serve them I get knocked i' th' head therefore, which same goeth soothly against my stomach."

"I judge not for thee," said Myles. "Thou art used to these castle ways, but only I know that I will not serve them, though they be thirty against me instead of thirteen."

"Then thou art a fool," said Gascoyne, dryly.

Now in this matter of service there was one thing above all others that stirred Myles Falworth's ill-liking. The winter before he had come to Devlen, Walter Blunt, who was somewhat of a Sybarite in his way, and who had a repugnance to bathing in the general tank in the open armory court in frosty weather, had had Dick Carpenter build a trough in the corner of the dormitory for the use of the bachelors, and every morning it was the duty of two of the younger squires to bring three pails of water to fill this private tank for the use of the head esquires. It was seeing two of his fellow-esquires fetching and carrying this water that Myles disliked so heartily, and every morning his bile was stirred anew at the sight.

"Sooner would I die than yield to such vile service," said he.

He did not know how soon his protestations would be put to the test.

One night – it was a week or two after Myles had come to Devlen – Blunt was called to attend the Earl at livery. The livery was the last meal of the day, and was served with great pomp and ceremony about nine o'clock at night to the head of the house as he lay in bed. Curfew had not yet rung, and the lads in the squires' quarters were still wrestling and sparring and romping boisterously in

and out around the long row of rude cots in the great dormitory as they made ready for the night. Six or eight flaring links in wrought-iron brackets that stood out from the wall threw a great ruddy glare through the barrack-like room – a light of all others to romp by. Myles and Gascoyne were engaged in defending the passage-way between their two cots against the attack of three other lads, and Myles held his sheepskin coverlet rolled up into a ball and balanced in his hand, ready for launching at the head of one of the others so soon as it should rise from behind the shelter of a cot. Just then Walter Blunt, dressed with more than usual care, passed by on his way to the Earl's house. He stopped for a moment and said, "Mayhaps I will not be in until late to-night. Thou and Falworth, Gascoyne, may fetch water to-morrow."

Then he was gone. Myles stood staring after his retreating figure with eyes open and mouth agape, still holding the ball of sheepskin balanced in his hand. Gascoyne burst into a helpless laugh at his blank, stupefied face, but the next moment he laid his hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Myles," he said, "thou wilt not make trouble, wilt thou?"

Myles made no answer. He flung down his sheepskin and sat him gloomily down upon the side of the cot.

"I said that I would sooner die than fetch water for them," said he.

"Aye, aye," said Gascoyne; "but that was spoken in haste."

Myles said nothing, but shook his head.

But, after all, circumstances shape themselves. The next morning when he rose up through the dark waters of sleep it was to feel some one shaking him violently by the shoulder.

"Come!" cried Gascoyne, as Myles opened his eyes – "come, time passeth, and we are late."

Myles, bewildered with his sudden awakening, and still fuddled with the fumes of sleep, huddled into his doublet and hose, hardly knowing what he was doing; tying a point here and a point there, and slipping his feet into his shoes. Then he hurried after Gascoyne, frowzy, half-dressed, and even yet only half-awake. It was not until he was fairly out into the fresh air and saw Gascoyne filling the three leathern buckets at the tank, that he fully awakened to the fact that he was actually doing that hateful service for the bachelors which he had protested he would sooner die than render.

The sun was just rising, gilding the crown of the donjon-keep with a flame of ruddy light. Below, among the lesser buildings, the day was still gray and misty. Only an occasional noise broke the silence of the early morning: a cough from one of the rooms; the rattle of a pot or a pan, stirred by some sleepy scullion; the clapping of a door or a shutter, and now and then the crowing of a cock back of the long row of stables – all sounding loud and startling in the fresh dewy stillness.

"Thou hast betrayed me," said Myles, harshly, breaking the silence at last. "I knew not what I was doing, or else I would never have come hither. Ne'theless, even though I be come, I will not carry the water for them."

"So be it," said Gascoyne, tartly. "An thou canst not stomach it, let be, and I will e'en carry all three myself. It will make me two journeys, but, thank Heaven, I am not so proud as to wish to get me hard knocks for naught." So saying, he picked up two of the buckets and started away across the court for the dormitory.

Then Myles, with a lowering face, snatched up the third, and, hurrying after, gave him his hand with the extra pail. So it was that he came to do service, after all.

"Why tarried ye so long?" said one of the older bachelors, roughly, as the two lads emptied the water into the wooden trough. He sat on the edge of the cot, blowzed and untrussed, with his long hair tumbled and disordered.

His dictatorial tone stung Myles to fury. "We tarried no longer than need be," answered he, savagely. "Have we wings to fly withal at your bidding?"

He spoke so loudly that all in the room heard him; the younger squires who were dressing stared in blank amazement, and Blunt sat up suddenly in his cot.

"Why, how now?" he cried. "Answerest thou back thy betters so pertly, sirrah? By my soul, I have a mind to crack thy head with this clog for thy unruly talk."

He glared at Myles as he spoke, and Myles glared back again with right good-will. Matters might have come to a crisis, only that Gascoyne and Wilkes dragged their friend away before he had opportunity to answer.

"An ill-conditioned knave as ever I did see," growled Blunt, glaring after him.

"Myles, Myles," said Gascoyne, almost despairingly, "why wilt thou breed such mischief for thyself? Seest thou not thou hast got thee the ill-will of every one of the bachelors, from Wat Blunt to Robin de Ramsey?"

"I care not," said Myles, fiercely, recurring to his grievance. "Heard ye not how the dogs upbraided me before the whole room? That Blunt called me an ill-conditioned knave."

"Marry!" said Gascoyne, laughing, "and so thou art."

Thus it is that boldness may breed one enemies as well as gain one friends. My own notion is that one's enemies are more quick to act than one's friends.

# CHAPTER 8

Every one knows the disagreeable, lurking discomfort that follows a quarrel – a discomfort that imbitters the very taste of life for the time being. Such was the dull distaste that Myles felt that morning after what had passed in the dormitory. Every one in the proximity of such an open quarrel feels a reflected constraint, and in Myles's mind was a disagreeable doubt whether that constraint meant disapproval of him or of his late enemies.

It seemed to him that Gascoyne added the last bitter twang to his unpleasant feelings when, half an hour later, they marched with the others to chapel.

"Why dost thou breed such trouble for thyself, Myles?" said he, recurring to what he had already said. "Is it not foolish for thee to come hither to this place, and then not submit to the ways thereof, as the rest of us do?"

"Thou talkest not like a true friend to chide me thus," said Myles, sullenly; and he withdrew his arm from his friend's.

"Marry, come up!" said Gascoyne; "an I were not thy friend, I would let thee jog thine own way. It aches not my bones to have thine drubbed."

Just then they entered the chapel, and words that might have led to a quarrel were brought to a close.

Myles was not slow to see that he had the ill will of the head of their company. That morning in the armory he had occasion to ask some question of Blunt; the head squire stared coldly at him for a moment, gave him a short, gruff answer, and then, turning his back abruptly, began talking with one of the other bachelors. Myles flushed hot at the other's insulting manner, and looked quickly around to see if any of the others had observed what had passed. It was a comfort to him to see that all were too busy arming themselves to think of anything else; nevertheless, his face was very lowering as he turned away.

"Some day I will show him that I am as good a man as he," he muttered to himself. "An evil-hearted dog to put shame upon me!"

The storm was brewing and ready to break.

That day was exceptionally hot and close, and permission had been asked by and granted to those squires not on duty to go down to the river for a bath after exercise at the pels. But as Myles replaced his arms in the rack, a little page came with a bidding to come to Sir James in his office.

"Look now," said Myles, "here is just my ill-fortune. Why might he not have waited an hour longer rather than cause me to miss going with ye?"

"Nay," said Gascoyne, "let not that grieve thee, Myles. Wilkes and I will wait for thee in the dormitory – will we not, Edmund? Make thou haste and go to Sir James."

Sir James was sitting at the table studying over a scroll of parchment, when Myles entered his office and stood before him at the table.

"Well, boy," said he, laying aside the parchment and looking up at the lad, "I have tried thee fairly for these few days, and may say that I have found thee worthy to be entered upon the rolls as esquire of the body."

"I give thee thanks, sir," said Myles.

The knight nodded his head in acknowledgement, but did not at once give the word of dismissal that Myles had expected. "Dost mean to write thee a letter home soon?" said he, suddenly.

"Aye," said Myles, gaping in great wonderment at the strangeness of the question.

"Then when thou dost so write," said Sir James, "give thou my deep regards to thy father." Then he continued, after a brief pause. "Him did I know well in times gone by, and we were right true friends in hearty love, and for his sake I would befriend thee – that is, in so much as is fitting."

"Sir," said Myles; but Sir James held up his hand, and he stopped short in his thanks.

"But, boy," said he, "that which I sent for thee for to tell thee was of more import than these. Dost thou know that thy father is an attainted outlaw?"

"Nay," cried Myles, his cheeks blazing up as red as fire; "who sayeth that of him lieth in his teeth."

"Thou dost mistake me," said Sir James, quietly. "It is sometimes no shame to be outlawed and banned. Had it been so, I would not have told thee thereof, nor have bidden thee send my true love to thy father, as I did but now. But, boy, certes he standest continually in great danger – greater than thou wottest of. Were it known where he lieth hid, it might be to his undoing and utter ruin. Methought that belike thou mightest not know that; and so I sent for thee for to tell thee that it behoovest thee to say not one single word concerning him to any of these new friends of thine, nor who he is, nor what he is."

"But how came my father to be so banned?" said Myles, in a constrained and husky voice, and after a long time of silence.

"That I may not tell thee just now," said the old knight, "only this – that I have been bidden to make it known to thee that thy father hath an enemy full as powerful as my Lord the Earl himself, and that through that enemy all his ill-fortune – his blindness and everything – hath come. Moreover, did this enemy know where thy father lieth, he would slay him right speedily."

"Sir," cried Myles, violently smiting his open palm upon the table, "tell me who this man is, and I will kill him!"

Sir James smiled grimly. "Thou talkest like a boy," said he. "Wait until thou art grown to be a man. Mayhap then thou mayst repent thee of these bold words, for one time this enemy of thy father's was reckoned the foremost knight in England, and he is now the King's dear friend and a great lord."

"But," said Myles, after another long time of heavy silence, "will not my Lord then befriend me for the sake of my father, who was one time his dear comrade?"

Sir James shook his head. "It may not be," said he. "Neither thou nor thy father must look for open favor from the Earl. An he befriended Falworth, and it came to be known that he had given him aid or succor, it might belike be to his own undoing. No, boy; thou must not even look to be taken into the household to serve with gentlemen as the other squires do serve, but must even live thine own life here and fight thine own way."

Myles's eyes blazed. "Then," cried he, fiercely, "it is shame and attaint upon my Lord the Earl, and cowardice as well, and never will I ask favor of him who is so untrue a friend as to turn his back upon a comrade in trouble as he turneth his back upon my father."

"Thou art a foolish boy," said Sir James with a bitter smile, "and knowest naught of the world. An thou wouldst look for man to befriend man to his own danger, thou must look elsewhere than on this earth. Was I not one time Mackworth's dear friend as well as thy father? It could cost him naught to honor me, and here am I fallen to be a teacher of boys. Go to! thou art a fool."

Then, after a little pause of brooding silence, he went on to say that the Earl was no better or worse than the rest of the world. That men of his position had many jealous enemies, ever seeking their ruin, and that such must look first of all each to himself, or else be certainly ruined, and drag down others in that ruin. Myles was silenced, but the bitterness had entered his heart, and abided with him for many a day afterwards.

Perhaps Sir James read his feelings in his frank face, for he sat looking curiously at him, twirling his grizzled mustache the while. "Thou art like to have hard knocks of it, lad, ere thou hast gotten thee safe through the world," said he, with more kindness in his harsh voice than was usual. "But get thee not into fights before thy time." Then he charged the boy very seriously to live at peace with his fellow-squires, and for his father's sake as well as his own to enter into none of the broils that were so frequent in their quarters.

It was with this special admonition against brawling that Myles was dismissed, to enter, before five minutes had passed, into the first really great fight of his life.

Besides Gascoyne and Wilkes, he found gathered in the dormitory six or eight of the company of squires who were to serve that day upon household duty; among others, Walter Blunt and three other bachelors, who were changing their coarse service clothes for others more fit for the household.

"Why didst thou tarry so long, Myles?" said Gascoyne, as he entered. "Methought thou wert never coming."

"Where goest thou, Falworth?" called Blunt from the other end of the room, where he was lacing his doublet.

Just now Myles had no heart in the swimming or sport of any sort, but he answered, shortly, "I go to the river to swim."

"Nay," said Blunt, "thou goest not forth from the castle to-day. Hast thou forgot how thou didst answer me back about fetching the water this morning? This day thou must do penance, so go thou straight to the armory and scour thou up my breastplate."

From the time he had arisen that morning everything had gone wrong with Myles. He had felt himself already outrated in rendering service to the bachelors, he had quarrelled with the head of the esquires, he had nearly quarrelled with Gascoyne, and then had come the bitterest and worst of all, the knowledge that his father was an outlaw, and that the Earl would not stretch out a hand to aid him or to give him any countenance. Blunt's words brought the last bitter cut to his heart, and they stung him to fury. For a while he could not answer, but stood glaring with a face fairly convulsed with passion at the young man, who continued his toilet, unconscious of the wrath of the new recruit.

Gascoyne and Wilkes, accepting Myles's punishment as a thing of course, were about to leave the dormitory when Myles checked them.

"Stop, Francis!" he cried, hoarsely. "Thinkest thou that I will stay behind to do yon dog's dirty work? No; I go with ye."

A moment or two of dumb, silent amazement followed his bold words; then Blunt cried, "Art thou mad?"

"Nay," answered Myles in the same hoarse voice, "I am not mad. I tell thee a better man than thou shouldst not stay me from going an I list to go.

"I will break thy cockerel head for that speech," said Blunt, furiously. He stooped as he spoke, and picked up a heavy clog that lay at his feet.

It was no insignificant weapon either. The shoes of those days were sometimes made of cloth, and had long pointed toes stuffed with tow or wool. In muddy weather thick heavy clogs or wooden soles were strapped, like a skate, to the bottom of the foot. That clog which Blunt had seized was perhaps eighteen or twenty inches long, two or two and a half inches thick at the heel, tapering to a point at the toe. As the older lad advanced, Gascoyne stepped between him and his victim.

"Do not harm him, Blunt," he pleaded. "Bear thou in mind how new-come he is among us. He knoweth not our ways as yet."

"Stand thou back, Gascoyne," said Blunt, harshly, as he thrust him aside. "I will teach him our ways so that he will not soon forget them."

Close to Myles's feet was another clog like that one which Blunt held. He snatched it up, and set his back against the wall, with a white face and a heart beating heavily and tumultuously, but with courage steeled to meet the coming encounter. There was a hard, grim look in his blue eyes that, for a moment perhaps, quelled the elder lad. He hesitated. "Tom! Wat! Ned!" he called to the other bachelors, "come hither, and lend me a hand with this knave."

"An ye come nigh me," panted Myles, "I will brain the first within reach."

Then Gascoyne dodged behind the others, and, without being seen, slipped out of the room for help.

The battle that followed was quick, sharp, and short. As Blunt strode forward, Myles struck, and struck with might and main, but he was too excited to deliver his blow with calculation. Blunt

parried it with the clog he held, and the next instant, dropping his weapon, gripped Myles tight about the body, pinning his arms to his sides.

Myles also dropped the clog he held, and, wrenching out his right arm with a sudden heave, struck Blunt full in the face, and then with another blow sent him staggering back. It all passed in an instant; the next the three other bachelors were upon him, catching him by the body, the arms, the legs. For a moment or two they swayed and stumbled hither and thither, and then down they fell in a struggling heap.

Myles fought like a wild-cat, kicking, struggling, scratching; striking with elbows and fists. He caught one of the three by his collar, and tore his jacket open from the neck to the waist; he drove his foot into the pit of the stomach of another, and knocked him breathless. The other lads not in the fight stood upon the benches and the beds around, but such was the awe inspired by the prestige of the bachelors that not one of them dared to lend hand to help him, and so Myles fought his fierce battle alone.

But four to one were odds too great, and though Myles struggled as fiercely as ever, by-and-by it was with less and less resistance.

Blunt had picked up the clog he had dropped when he first attacked the lad, and now stood over the struggling heap, white with rage, the blood running from his lip, cut and puffed where Myles had struck him, and murder looking out from his face, if ever it looked out of the face of any mortal being.

“Hold him a little,” said he, fiercely, “and I will still him for you.”

Even yet it was no easy matter for the others to do his bidding, but presently he got his chance and struck a heavy, cruel blow at Myles’s head. Myles only partly warded it with his arm. Hitherto he had fought in silence, now he gave a harsh cry.

“Holy Saints!” cried Edmund Wilkes. “They will kill him.”

Blunt struck two more blows, both of them upon the body, and then at last they had the poor boy down, with his face upon the ground and his arms pinned to his sides, and Blunt, bracing himself for the stroke, with a grin of rage raised a heavy clog for one terrible blow that should finish the fight.

# CHAPTER 9

"How now, messieurs?" said a harsh voice, that fell upon the turmoil like a thunder-clap, and there stood Sir James Lee. Instantly the struggle ceased, and the combatants scrambled to their feet.

The older lads stood silent before their chief, but Myles was deaf and blind and mad with passion, he knew not where he stood or what he said or did. White as death, he stood for a while glaring about him, catching his breath convulsively. Then he screamed hoarsely.

"Who struck me? Who struck me when I was down? I will have his blood that struck me!" He caught sight of Blunt. "It was he that struck me!" he cried. "Thou foul traitor! thou coward!" and thereupon leaped at his enemy like a wild-cat.

"Stop!" cried Sir James Lee, clutching him by the arm.

Myles was too blinded by his fury to see who it was that held him. "I will not stop!" he cried, struggling and striking at the knight. "Let me go! I will have his life that struck me when I was down!"

The next moment he found himself pinned close against the wall, and then, as though his sight came back, he saw the grim face of the old one-eyed knight looking into his.

"Dost thou know who I am?" said a stern, harsh voice.

Instantly Myles ceased struggling, and his arms fell at his side. "Aye," he said, in a gasping voice, "I know thee." He swallowed spasmodically for a moment or two, and then, in the sudden revulsion of feeling, burst out sobbing convulsively.

Sir James marched the two off to his office, he himself walking between them, holding an arm of each, the other lads following behind, awe-struck and silent. Entering the office, Sir James shut the door behind him, leaving the group of squires clustered outside about the stone steps, speculating in whispers as to what would be the outcome of the matter.

After Sir James had seated himself, the two standing facing him, he regarded them for a while in silence. "How now, Walter Blunt," said he at last, "what is to do?"

"Why, this," said Blunt, wiping his bleeding lip. "That fellow, Myles Falworth, hath been breeding mutiny and revolt ever sin he came hither among us, and because he was thus mutinous I would punish him therefor."

"In that thou liest!" burst out Myles. "Never have I been mutinous in my life."

"Be silent, sir," said Sir James, sternly. "I will hear thee anon."

"Nay," said Myles, with his lips twitching and writhing, "I will not be silent. I am friendless here, and ye are all against me, but I will not be silent, and brook to have lies spoken of me."

Even Blunt stood aghast at Myles's boldness. Never had he heard any one so speak to Sir James before. He did not dare for the moment even to look up. Second after second of dead stillness passed, while Sir James sat looking at Myles with a stern, terrifying calmness that chilled him in spite of the heat of his passion.

"Sir," said the old man at last, in a hard, quiet voice, "thou dost know naught of rules and laws of such a place as this. Nevertheless, it is time for thee to learn them. So I will tell thee now that if thou openest thy lips to say only one single word more except at my bidding, I will send thee to the black vault of the donjon to cool thy hot spirits on bread and water for a week." There was something in the measured quietness of the old knight's tone that quelled Myles utterly and entirely. A little space of silence followed. "Now, then, Blunt," said Sir James, turning to the bachelor, "tell me all the ins and outs of this business without any more underdealing."

This time Blunt's story, though naturally prejudiced in his own favor, was fairly true. Then Myles told his side of the case, the old knight listening attentively.

"Why, how now, Blunt," said Sir James, when Myles had ended, "I myself gave the lads leave to go to the river to bathe. Wherefore shouldst thou forbid one of them?"

"I did it but to punish this fellow for his mutiny," said the bachelor. "Methought we at their head were to have oversight concerning them."

"So ye are," said the knight; "but only to a degree. Ere ye take it upon ye to gainsay any of my orders or permits, come ye first to me. Dost thou understand?"

"Aye," answered Blunt, sullenly.

"So be it, and now get thee gone," said the knight; "and let me hear no more of beating out brains with wooden clogs. An ye fight your battles, let there not be murder in them. This is twice that the like hath happed; gin I hear more of such doings – " He did utter his threat, but stopped short, and fixed his one eye sternly upon the head squire. "Now shake hands, and be ye friends," said he, abruptly.

Blunt made a motion to obey, but Myles put his hand behind him.

"Nay, I shake not hands with any one who struck me while I was down."

"So be it," said the knight, grimly. "Now thou mayst go, Blunt. Thou, Falworth, stay; I would bespeak thee further."

"Tell me," said he, when the elder lad had left them, "why wilt thou not serve these bachelors as the other squires do? Such is the custom here. Why wilt thou not obey it?"

"Because," said Myles, "I cannot stomach it, and they shall not make me serve them. An thou bid me do it, sir, I will do it; but not at their command."

"Nay," said the knight, "I do not bid thee do them service. That lieth with thee, to render or not, as thou seest fit. But how canst thou hope to fight single-handed against the commands of a dozen lads all older and mightier than thou?"

"I know not," said Myles; "but were they an hundred, instead of thirteen, they should not make me serve them."

"Thou art a fool!" said the old knight, smiling faintly, "for that be'st not courage, but folly. When one setteth about righting a wrong, one driveth not full head against it, for in so doing one getteth naught but hard knocks. Nay, go deftly about it, and then, when the time is ripe, strike the blow. Now our beloved King Henry, when he was the Earl of Derby, what could he have gained had he stood so against the old King Richard, brooking the King face to face? I tell thee he would have been knocked on the head as thou wert like to have been this day. Now were I thee, and had to fight a fight against odds, I would first get me friends behind me, and then – " He stopped short, but Myles understood him well enough.

"Sir," said he, with a gulp, "I do thank thee for thy friendship, and ask thy pardon for doing as I did anon."

"I grant thee pardon," said the knight, "but tell thee plainly, an thou dost face me so again, I will truly send thee to the black cell for a week. Now get thee away."

All the other lads were gone when Myles came forth, save only the faithful Gascoyne, who sacrificed his bath that day to stay with his friend; and perhaps that little act of self-denial moved Myles more than many a great thing might have done.

"It was right kind of thee, Francis," said he, laying his hand affectionately on his friend's shoulder. "I know not why thou lovest me so."

"Why, for one thing, this matter," answered his friend; "because methinks thou art the best fighter and the bravest one of all of us squires."

Myles laughed. Nevertheless Gascoyne's words were a soothing balm for much that had happened that day. "I will fight me no more just now," said he; and then he told his friend all that Sir James had advised about biding his time.

Gascoyne blew a long whistle. "Beshrew me!" quoth he, "but methinks old Bruin is on thy side of the quarrel, Myles. An that be so, I am with thee also, and others that I can name as well."

"So be it," said Myles. "Then am I content to abide the time when we may become strong enough to stand against them."

# CHAPTER 10

Perhaps there is nothing more delightful in the romance of boyhood than the finding of some secret hiding-place whither a body may creep away from the bustle of the world's life, to nestle in quietness for an hour or two. More especially is such delightful if it happen that, by peeping from out it, one may look down upon the bustling matters of busy every-day life, while one lies snugly hidden away unseen by any, as though one were in some strange invisible world of one's own.

Such a hiding-place as would have filled the heart of almost any boy with sweet delight Myles and Gascoyne found one summer afternoon. They called it their Eyry, and the name suited well for the roosting-place of the young hawks that rested in its windy stillness, looking down upon the shifting castle life in the courts below.

Behind the north stable, a great, long, rambling building, thick-walled, and black with age, lay an older part of the castle than that peopled by the better class of life – a cluster of great thick walls, rudely but strongly built, now the dwelling-place of stable-lads and hinds, swine and poultry. From one part of these ancient walls, and fronting an inner court of the castle, arose a tall, circular, heavy-buttressed tower, considerably higher than the other buildings, and so mantled with a dense growth of aged ivy as to stand a shaft of solid green. Above its crumbling crown circled hundreds of pigeons, white and pied, clapping and clattering in noisy flight through the sunny air. Several windows, some closed with shutters, peeped here and there from out the leaves, and near the top of the pile was a row of arched openings, as though of a balcony or an airy gallery.

Myles had more than once felt an idle curiosity about this tower, and one day, as he and Gascoyne sat together, he pointed his finger and said, "What is yon place?"

"That," answered Gascoyne, looking over his shoulder – "that they call Brutus Tower, for why they do say that Brutus he built it when he came hither to Britain. I believe not the tale mine own self; ne'theless, it is marvellous ancient, and old Robin-the-Fletcher telleth me that there be stairways built in the wall and passage-ways, and a maze wherein a body may get lost, an he know not the way aright, and never see the blessed light of day again."

"Marry," said Myles, "those same be strange sayings. Who liveth there now?"

"No one liveth there," said Gascoyne, "saving only some of the stable villains, and that half-witted goose-herd who flung stones at us yesterday when we mocked him down in the paddock. He and his wife and those others dwell in the vaults beneath, like rabbits in any warren. No one else hath lived there since Earl Robert's day, which belike was an hundred years agone. The story goeth that Earl Robert's brother – or step-brother – was murdered there, and some men say by the Earl himself. Sin that day it hath been tight shut."

Myles stared at the tower for a while in silence. "It is a strange-seeming place from without," said he, at last, "and mayhap it may be even more strange inside. Hast ever been within, Francis?"

"Nay," said Gascoyne; "said I not it hath been fast locked since Earl Robert's day?"

"By'r Lady," said Myles, "an I had lived here in this place so long as thou, I wot I would have been within it ere this."

"Beshrew me," said Gascoyne, "but I have never thought of such a matter." He turned and looked at the tall crown rising into the warm sunlight with a new interest, for the thought of entering it smacked pleasantly of adventure. "How wouldst thou set about getting within?" said he, presently.

"Why, look," said Myles; "seest thou not yon hole in the ivy branches? Methinks there is a window at that place. An I mistake not, it is in reach of the stable eaves. A body might come up by the fagot pile to the roof of the hen-house, and then by the long stable to the north stable, and so to that hole."

Gascoyne looked thoughtfully at the Brutus Tower, and then suddenly inquired, "Wouldst go there?"

"Aye," said Myles, briefly.

"So be it. Lead thou the way in the venture, I will follow after thee," said Gascoyne.

As Myles had said, the climbing from roof to roof was a matter easy enough to an active pair of lads like themselves; but when, by-and-by, they reached the wall of the tower itself, they found the hidden window much higher from the roof than they had judged from below – perhaps ten or twelve feet – and it was, besides, beyond the eaves and out of their reach.

Myles looked up and looked down. Above was the bushy thickness of the ivy, the branches as thick as a woman's wrist, knotted and intertwined; below was the stone pavement of a narrow inner court between two of the stable buildings.

"Methinks I can climb to yon place," said he.

"Thou'lt break thy neck an thou tryest," said Gascoyne, hastily.

"Nay," quoth Myles, "I trust not; but break or make, we get not there without trying. So here goeth for the venture."

"Thou art a hare-brained knave as ever drew breath of life," quoth Gascoyne, "and will cause me to come to grief some of these fine days. Ne'theless, an thou be Jack Fool and lead the way, go, and I will be Tom Fool and follow anon. If thy neck is worth so little, mine is worth no more."

It was indeed a perilous climb, but that special providence which guards reckless lads befriended them, as it has thousands of their kind before and since. So, by climbing from one knotted, clinging stem to another, they were presently seated snugly in the ivied niche in the window. It was barred from within by a crumbling shutter, the rusty fastening of which, after some little effort upon the part of the two, gave way, and entering the narrow opening, they found themselves in a small triangular passage-way, from which a steep flight of stone steps led down through a hollow in the massive wall to the room below.

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.