

Роберт Стивенсон

The Black Arrow



Роберт Льюис Стивенсон

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1888

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Novel which is set in the time of the Wars of the Roses, telling a tale of murder and revenge in medieval England.

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THE BLACK ARROW – A TALE OF THE TWO ROSES

Critic on the Hearth

No one but myself knows what I have suffered, nor what my books have gained, by your unsleeping watchfulness and admirable pertinacity. And now here is a volume that goes into the world and lacks your *imprimatur*: a strange thing in our joint lives; and the reason of it stranger still! I have watched with interest, with pain, and at length with amusement, your unavailing attempts to peruse *The Black Arrow*; and I think I should lack humour indeed, if I let the occasion slip and did not place your name in the fly-leaf of the only book of mine that you have never read – and never will read.

That others may display more constancy is still my hope. The tale was written years ago for a particular audience and (I may say) in rivalry with a particular author; I think I should do well to name him, Mr. Alfred R. Phillips. It was not without its reward at the time. I could not, indeed, displace Mr. Phillips from his well-won priority; but in the eyes of readers who thought less than nothing of *Treasure Island*, *The Black Arrow* was supposed to mark a clear advance. Those who read volumes and those who read story papers belong to different worlds. The verdict on *Treasure Island* was reversed in the other court; I wonder, will it be the same with its successor?

R. L. S.

SARANAC LAKE, April 8, 1888.

PROLOGUE – JOHN AMEND-ALL

On a certain afternoon, in the late springtime, the bell upon Tunstall Moat House was heard ringing at an unaccustomed hour. Far and near, in the forest and in the fields along the river, people began to desert their labours and hurry towards the sound; and in Tunstall hamlet a group of poor country-folk stood wondering at the summons.

Tunstall hamlet at that period, in the reign of old King Henry VI., wore much the same appearance as it wears to-day. A score or so of houses, heavily framed with oak, stood scattered in a long green valley ascending from the river. At the foot, the road crossed a bridge, and mounting on the other side, disappeared into the fringes of the forest on its way to the Moat House, and further forth to Holywood Abbey. Half-way up the village, the church stood among yews. On every side the slopes were crowned and the view bounded by the green elms and greening oak-trees of the forest.

Hard by the bridge, there was a stone cross upon a knoll, and here the group had collected – half a dozen women and one tall fellow in a russet smock – discussing what the bell betided. An express had gone through the hamlet half an hour before, and drunk a pot of ale in the saddle, not daring to dismount for the hurry of his errand; but he had been ignorant himself of what was forward, and only bore sealed letters from Sir Daniel Brackley to Sir Oliver Oates, the parson, who kept the Moat House in the master's absence.

But now there was the noise of a horse; and soon, out of the edge of the wood and over the echoing bridge, there rode up young Master Richard Shelton, Sir Daniel's ward. He, at the least, would know, and they hailed him and begged him to explain. He drew bridle willingly enough – a young fellow not yet eighteen, sun-browned and grey-eyed, in a jacket of deer's leather, with a black velvet collar, a green hood upon his head, and a steel cross-bow at his back. The express, it appeared, had brought great news. A battle was impending. Sir Daniel had sent for every man that could draw a bow or carry a bill to go post-haste to Kettleby, under pain of his severe displeasure; but for whom they were to fight, or of where the battle was expected, Dick knew nothing. Sir Oliver would come shortly himself, and Bennet Hatch was arming at that moment, for he it was who should lead the party.

"It is the ruin of this kind land," a woman said. "If the barons live at war, ploughfolk must eat roots."

"Nay," said Dick, "every man that follows shall have sixpence a day, and archers twelve."

"If they live," returned the woman, "that may very well be; but how if they die, my master?"

"They cannot better die than for their natural lord," said Dick.

"No natural lord of mine," said the man in the smock. "I followed the Walsinghams; so we all did down Brierly way, till two years ago, come Candlemas. And now I must side with Brackley! It was the law that did it; call ye that natural? But now, what with Sir Daniel and what with Sir Oliver – that knows more of law than honesty – I have no natural lord but poor King Harry the Sixth, God bless him! – the poor innocent that cannot tell his right hand from his left."

"Ye speak with an ill tongue, friend," answered Dick, "to miscall your good master and my lord the king in the same libel. But King Harry – praised be the saints! – has come again into his right mind, and will have all things peaceably ordained. And as for Sir Daniel, y' are very brave behind his back. But I will be no tale-bearer; and let that suffice."

"I say no harm of you, Master Richard," returned the peasant. "Y' are a lad; but when ye come to a man's inches, ye will find ye have an empty pocket. I say no more: the saints help Sir Daniel's neighbours, and the Blessed Maid protect his wards!"

"Clipsby," said Richard, "you speak what I cannot hear with honour. Sir Daniel is my good master, and my guardian."

"Come, now, will ye read me a riddle?" returned Clipsby. "On whose side is Sir Daniel?"

“I know not,” said Dick, colouring a little; for his guardian had changed sides continually in the troubles of that period, and every change had brought him some increase of fortune.

“Ay,” returned Clipsby, “you, nor no man. For, indeed, he is one that goes to bed Lancaster and gets up York.”

Just then the bridge rang under horse-shoe iron, and the party turned and saw Bennet Hatch come galloping – a brown-faced, grizzled fellow, heavy of hand and grim of mien, armed with sword and spear, a steel salet on his head, a leather jack upon his body. He was a great man in these parts; Sir Daniel’s right hand in peace and war, and at that time, by his master’s interest, bailiff of the hundred.

“Clipsby,” he shouted, “off to the Moat House, and send all other laggards the same gate. Bowyer will give you jack and salet. We must ride before curfew. Look to it: he that is last at the lych-gate Sir Daniel shall reward. Look to it right well! I know you for a man of naught. Nance,” he added, to one of the women, “is old Appleyard up town?”

“I’ll warrant you,” replied the woman. “In his field, for sure.”

So the group dispersed, and while Clipsby walked leisurely over the bridge, Bennet and young Shelton rode up the road together, through the village and past the church.

“Ye will see the old shrew,” said Bennet. “He will waste more time grumbling and prating of Harry the Fift than would serve a man to shoe a horse. And all because he has been to the French wars!”

The house to which they were bound was the last in the village, standing alone among lilacs; and beyond it, on three sides, there was open meadow rising towards the borders of the wood.

Hatch dismounted, threw his rein over the fence, and walked down the field, Dick keeping close at his elbow, to where the old soldier was digging, knee-deep in his cabbages, and now and again, in a cracked voice, singing a snatch of song. He was all dressed in leather, only his hood and tippet were of black frieze, and tied with scarlet; his face was like a walnut-shell, both for colour and wrinkles; but his old grey eye was still clear enough, and his sight unabated. Perhaps he was deaf; perhaps he thought it unworthy of an old archer of Agincourt to pay any heed to such disturbances; but neither the surly notes of the alarm bell, nor the near approach of Bennet and the lad, appeared at all to move him; and he continued obstinately digging, and piped up, very thin and shaky:

“Now, dear lady, if thy will be,
I pray you that you will rue on me.”

“Nick Appleyard,” said Hatch, “Sir Oliver commends him to you, and bids that ye shall come within this hour to the Moat House, there to take command.”

The old fellow looked up.

“Save you, my masters!” he said, grinning. “And where goeth Master Hatch?”

“Master Hatch is off to Kettley, with every man that we can horse,” returned Bennet. “There is a fight toward, it seems, and my lord stays a reinforcement.”

“Ay, verily,” returned Appleyard. “And what will ye leave me to garrison withal?”

“I leave you six good men, and Sir Oliver to boot,” answered Hatch.

“It’ll not hold the place,” said Appleyard; “the number sufficeth not. It would take two score to make it good.”

“Why, it’s for that we came to you, old shrew!” replied the other. “Who else is there but you that could do aught in such a house with such a garrison?”

“Ay! when the pinch comes, ye remember the old shoe,” returned Nick. “There is not a man of you can back a horse or hold a bill; and as for archery – St. Michael! if old Harry the Fift were back again, he would stand and let ye shoot at him for a farthen a shoot!”

“Nay, Nick, there’s some can draw a good bow yet,” said Bennet.

“Draw a good bow!” cried Appleyard. “Yes! But who’ll shoot me a good shoot? It’s there the eye comes in, and the head between your shoulders. Now, what might you call a long shoot, Bennet Hatch?”

“Well,” said Bennet, looking about him, “it would be a long shoot from here into the forest.”

“Ay, it would be a longish shoot,” said the old fellow, turning to look over his shoulder; and then he put up his hand over his eyes, and stood staring.

“Why, what are you looking at?” asked Bennet, with a chuckle. “Do, you see Harry the Fift?”

The veteran continued looking up the hill in silence. The sun shone broadly over the shelving meadows; a few white sheep wandered browsing; all was still but the distant jangle of the bell.

“What is it, Appleyard?” asked Dick.

“Why, the birds,” said Appleyard.

And, sure enough, over the top of the forest, where it ran down in a tongue among the meadows, and ended in a pair of goodly green elms, about a bowshot from the field where they were standing, a flight of birds was skimming to and fro, in evident disorder.

“What of the birds?” said Bennet.

“Ay!” returned Appleyard, “y’ are a wise man to go to war, Master Bennet. Birds are a good sentry; in forest places they be the first line of battle. Look you, now, if we lay here in camp, there might be archers skulking down to get the wind of us; and here would you be, none the wiser!”

“Why, old shrew,” said Hatch, “there be no men nearer us than Sir Daniel’s, at Kettley; y’ are as safe as in London Tower; and ye raise scares upon a man for a few chaffinches and sparrows!”

“Hear him!” grinned Appleyard. “How many a rogue would give his two crop ears to have a shoot at either of us? Saint Michael, man! they hate us like two polecats!”

“Well, sooth it is, they hate Sir Daniel,” answered Hatch, a little sobered.

“Ay, they hate Sir Daniel, and they hate every man that serves with him,” said Appleyard; “and in the first order of hating, they hate Bennet Hatch and old Nicholas the bowman. See ye here: if there was a stout fellow yonder in the wood-edge, and you and I stood fair for him – as, by Saint George, we stand! – which, think ye, would he choose?”

“You, for a good wager,” answered Hatch.

“My surcoat to a leather belt, it would be you!” cried the old archer. “Ye burned Grimstone, Bennet – they’ll ne’er forgive you that, my master. And as for me, I’ll soon be in a good place, God grant, and out of bow-shoot – ay, and cannon-shoot – of all their malices. I am an old man, and draw fast to homeward, where the bed is ready. But for you, Bennet, y’ are to remain behind here at your own peril, and if ye come to my years unhangd, the old true-blue English spirit will be dead.”

“Y’ are the shrewishest old dolt in Tunstall Forest,” returned Hatch, visibly ruffled by these threats. “Get ye to your arms before Sir Oliver come, and leave prating for one good while. An ye had talked so much with Harry the Fift, his ears would ha’ been richer than his pocket.”

An arrow sang in the air, like a huge hornet; it struck old Appleyard between the shoulder-blades, and pierced him clean through, and he fell forward on his face among the cabbages. Hatch, with a broken cry, leapt into the air; then, stooping double, he ran for the cover of the house. And in the meanwhile Dick Shelton had dropped behind a lilac, and had his crossbow bent and shouldered, covering the point of the forest.

Not a leaf stirred. The sheep were patiently browsing; the birds had settled. But there lay the old man, with a cloth-yard arrow standing in his back; and there were Hatch holding to the gable, and Dick crouching and ready behind the lilac bush.

“D’ye see aught?” cried Hatch.

“Not a twig stirs,” said Dick.

“I think shame to leave him lying,” said Bennet, coming forward once more with hesitating steps and a very pale countenance. “Keep a good eye on the wood, Master Shelton – keep a clear eye on the wood. The saints assoil us! here was a good shoot!”

Bennet raised the old archer on his knee. He was not yet dead; his face worked, and his eyes shut and opened like machinery, and he had a most horrible, ugly look of one in pain.

“Can ye hear, old Nick?” asked Hatch. “Have ye a last wish before ye wend, old brother?”

“Pluck out the shaft, and let me pass, a’ Mary’s name!” gasped Appleyard. “I be done with Old England. Pluck it out!”

“Master Dick,” said Bennet, “come hither, and pull me a good pull upon the arrow. He would fain pass, the poor sinner.”

Dick laid down his cross-bow, and pulling hard upon the arrow, drew it forth. A gush of blood followed; the old archer scrambled half upon his feet, called once upon the name of God, and then fell dead. Hatch, upon his knees among the cabbages, prayed fervently for the welfare of the passing spirit. But even as he prayed, it was plain that his mind was still divided, and he kept ever an eye upon the corner of the wood from which the shot had come. When he had done, he got to his feet again, drew off one of his mailed gauntlets, and wiped his pale face, which was all wet with terror.

“Ay,” he said, “it’ll be my turn next.”

“Who hath done this, Bennet?” Richard asked, still holding the arrow in his hand.

“Nay, the saints know,” said Hatch. “Here are a good two score Christian souls that we have hunted out of house and holding, he and I. He has paid his shot, poor shrew, nor will it be long, mayhap, ere I pay mine. Sir Daniel driveth over-hard.”

“This is a strange shaft,” said the lad, looking at the arrow in his hand.

“Ay, by my faith!” cried Bennet. “Black, and black-feathered. Here is an ill-favoured shaft, by my sooth! for black, they say, bodes burial. And here be words written. Wipe the blood away. What read ye?”

“*Appulyaird fro Jon Amend-All,*” read Shelton. “What should this betoken?”

“Nay, I like it not,” returned the retainer, shaking his head. “John Amend-All! Here is a rogue’s name for those that be up in the world! But why stand we here to make a mark? Take him by the knees, good Master Shelton, while I lift him by the shoulders, and let us lay him in his house. This will be a rare shog to poor Sir Oliver; he will turn paper colour; he will pray like a windmill.”

They took up the old archer, and carried him between them into his house, where he had dwelt alone. And there they laid him on the floor, out of regard for the mattress, and sought, as best they might, to straighten and compose his limbs.

Appleyard’s house was clean and bare. There was a bed, with a blue cover, a cupboard, a great chest, a pair of joint-stools, a hinged table in the chimney corner, and hung upon the wall the old soldier’s armoury of bows and defensive armour. Hatch began to look about him curiously.

“Nick had money,” he said. “He may have had three score pounds put by. I would I could light upon’t! When ye lose an old friend, Master Richard, the best consolation is to heir him. See, now, this chest. I would go a mighty wager there is a bushel of gold therein. He had a strong hand to get, and a hard hand to keep withal, had Appleyard the archer. Now may God rest his spirit! Near eighty year he was afoot and about, and ever getting; but now he’s on the broad of his back, poor shrew, and no more lacketh; and if his chattels came to a good friend, he would be merrier, methinks, in heaven.”

“Come, Hatch,” said Dick, “respect his stone-blind eyes. Would ye rob the man before his body? Nay, he would walk!”

Hatch made several signs of the cross; but by this time his natural complexion had returned, and he was not easily to be dashed from any purpose. It would have gone hard with the chest had not the gate sounded, and presently after the door of the house opened and admitted a tall, portly, ruddy, black-eyed man of near fifty, in a surplice and black robe.

“Appleyard” – the newcomer was saying, as he entered; but he stopped dead. “Ave Maria!” he cried. “Saints be our shield! What cheer is this?”

“Cold cheer with Appleyard, sir parson,” answered Hatch, with perfect cheerfulness. “Shot at his own door, and alighteth even now at purgatory gates. Ay! there, if tales be true, he shall lack neither coal nor candle.”

Sir Oliver groped his way to a joint-stool, and sat down upon it, sick and white.

“This is a judgment! O, a great stroke!” he sobbed, and rattled off a leash of prayers.

Hatch meanwhile reverently doffed his salet and knelt down.

“Ay, Bennet,” said the priest, somewhat recovering, “and what may this be? What enemy hath done this?”

“Here, Sir Oliver, is the arrow. See, it is written upon with words,” said Dick.

“Nay,” cried the priest, “this is a foul hearing! John Amend-All! A right Lollardy word. And black of hue, as for an omen! Sirs, this knave arrow likes me not. But it importeth rather to take counsel. Who should this be? Bethink you, Bennet. Of so many black ill-willers, which should he be that doth so hardily outface us? Simnel? I do much question it. The Walsinghams? Nay, they are not yet so broken; they still think to have the law over us, when times change. There was Simon Malmesbury, too. How think ye, Bennet?”

“What think ye, sir,” returned Hatch, “of Ellis Duckworth?”

“Nay, Bennet, never. Nay, not he,” said the priest. “There cometh never any rising, Bennet, from below – so all judicious chroniclers concord in their opinion; but rebellion travelleth ever downward from above; and when Dick, Tom, and Harry take them to their bills, look ever narrowly to see what lord is profited thereby. Now, Sir Daniel, having once more joined him to the Queen’s party, is in ill odour with the Yorkist lords. Thence, Bennet, comes the blow – by what procuring, I yet seek; but therein lies the nerve of this discomfiture.”

“An’t please you, Sir Oliver,” said Bennet, “the axles are so hot in this country that I have long been smelling fire. So did this poor sinner, Appleyard. And, by your leave, men’s spirits are so foully inclined to all of us, that it needs neither York nor Lancaster to spur them on. Hear my plain thoughts: You, that are a clerk, and Sir Daniel, that sails on any wind, ye have taken many men’s goods, and beaten and hanged not a few. Y’ are called to count for this; in the end, I wot not how, ye have ever the uppermost at law, and ye think all patched. But give me leave, Sir Oliver: the man that ye have dispossessed and beaten is but the angrier, and some day, when the black devil is by, he will up with his bow and clout me a yard of arrow through your inwards.”

“Nay, Bennet, y’ are in the wrong. Bennet, ye should be glad to be corrected,” said Sir Oliver. “Y’ are a prater, Bennet, a talker, a babbler; your mouth is wider than your two ears. Mend it, Bennet, mend it.”

“Nay, I say no more. Have it as ye list,” said the retainer.

The priest now rose from the stool, and from the writing-case that hung about his neck took forth wax and a taper, and a flint and steel. With these he sealed up the chest and the cupboard with Sir Daniel’s arms, Hatch looking on disconsolate; and then the whole party proceeded, somewhat timorously, to sally from the house and get to horse.

“Tis time we were on the road, Sir Oliver,” said Hatch, as he held the priest’s stirrup while he mounted.

“Ay; but, Bennet, things are changed,” returned the parson. “There is now no Appleyard – rest his soul! – to keep the garrison. I shall keep you, Bennet. I must have a good man to rest me on in this day of black arrows. ‘The arrow that flieth by day,’ saith the evangel; I have no mind of the context; nay, I am a sluggard priest, I am too deep in men’s affairs. Well, let us ride forth, Master Hatch. The jackmen should be at the church by now.”

So they rode forward down the road, with the wind after them, blowing the tails of the parson’s cloak; and behind them, as they went, clouds began to arise and blot out the sinking sun. They had passed three of the scattered houses that make up Tunstall hamlet, when, coming to a turn, they saw the church before them. Ten or a dozen houses clustered immediately round it; but to the back the

churchyard was next the meadows. At the lych-gate, near a score of men were gathered, some in the saddle, some standing by their horses' heads. They were variously armed and mounted; some with spears, some with bills, some with bows, and some bestriding plough-horses, still splashed with the mire of the furrow; for these were the very dregs of the country, and all the better men and the fair equipments were already with Sir Daniel in the field.

"We have not done amiss, praised be the cross of Holywood! Sir Daniel will be right well content," observed the priest, inwardly numbering the troop.

"Who goes? Stand! if ye be true!" shouted Bennet. A man was seen slipping through the churchyard among the yews; and at the sound of this summons he discarded all concealment, and fairly took to his heels for the forest. The men at the gate, who had been hitherto unaware of the stranger's presence, woke and scattered. Those who had dismounted began scrambling into the saddle; the rest rode in pursuit; but they had to make the circuit of the consecrated ground, and it was plain their quarry would escape them. Hatch, roaring an oath, put his horse at the hedge, to head him off; but the beast refused, and sent his rider sprawling in the dust. And though he was up again in a moment, and had caught the bridle, the time had gone by, and the fugitive had gained too great a lead for any hope of capture.

The wisest of all had been Dick Shelton. Instead of starting in a vain pursuit, he had whipped his crossbow from his back, bent it, and set a quarrel to the string; and now, when the others had desisted, he turned to Bennet and asked if he should shoot.

"Shoot! shoot!" cried the priest, with sanguinary violence.

"Cover him, Master Dick," said Bennet. "Bring me him down like a ripe apple."

The fugitive was now within but a few leaps of safety; but this last part of the meadow ran very steeply uphill; and the man ran slower in proportion. What with the greyness of the falling night, and the uneven movements of the runner, it was no easy aim; and as Dick levelled his bow, he felt a kind of pity, and a half desire that he might miss. The quarrel sped.

The man stumbled and fell, and a great cheer arose from Hatch and the pursuers. But they were counting their corn before the harvest. The man fell lightly; he was lightly afoot again, turned and waved his cap in a bravado, and was out of sight next moment in the margin of the wood.

"And the plague go with him!" cried Bennet. "He has thieves' heels; he can run, by St Banbury! But you touched him, Master Shelton; he has stolen your quarrel, may he never have good I grudge him less!"

"Nay, but what made he by the church?" asked Sir Oliver. "I am shrewdly afear'd there has been mischief here. Clipsby, good fellow, get ye down from your horse, and search thoroughly among the yews."

Clipsby was gone but a little while ere he returned carrying a paper.

"This writing was pinned to the church door," he said, handing it to the parson. "I found naught else, sir parson."

"Now, by the power of Mother Church," cried Sir Oliver, "but this runs hard on sacrilege! For the king's good pleasure, or the lord of the manor – well! But that every run-the-hedge in a green jerkin should fasten papers to the chancel door – nay, it runs hard on sacrilege, hard; and men have burned for matters of less weight. But what have we here? The light falls apace. Good Master Richard, y' have young eyes. Read me, I pray, this libel."

Dick Shelton took the paper in his hand and read it aloud. It contained some lines of very rugged doggerel, hardly even rhyming, written in a gross character, and most uncouthly spelt. With the spelling somewhat bettered, this is how they ran:

"I had four blak arrows under my belt,
Four for the greefs that I have felt,
Four for the number of ill menne

That have oppressid me now and then.

One is gone; one is wele sped;
Old Apulyaird is ded.

One is for Maister Bennet Hatch,
That burned Grimstone, walls and thatch.

One for Sir Oliver Oates,
That cut Sir Harry Shelton's throat.

Sir Daniel, ye shall have the fourt;
We shall think it fair sport.

Ye shall each have your own part,
A blak arrow in each blak heart.
Get ye to your knees for to pray:
Ye are ded theeves, by yea and nay!

“JON AMEND-ALL

of the Green Wood,

And his jolly felloweship.

“Item, we have mo arrowes and goode hempen cord for otheres of your following.”

“Now, well-a-day for charity and the Christian graces!” cried Sir Oliver, lamentably. “Sirs, this is an ill world, and groweth daily worse. I will swear upon the cross of Holywood I am as innocent of that good knight's hurt, whether in act or purpose, as the babe unchristened. Neither was his throat cut; for therein they are again in error, as there still live credible witnesses to show.”

“It boots not, sir parson,” said Bennet. “Here is unseasonable talk.”

“Nay, Master Bennet, not so. Keep ye in your due place, good Bennet,” answered the priest. “I shall make mine innocence appear. I will, upon no consideration, lose my poor life in error. I take all men to witness that I am clear of this matter. I was not even in the Moat House. I was sent of an errand before nine upon the clock” -

“Sir Oliver,” said Hatch, interrupting, “since it please you not to stop this sermon, I will take other means. Goffe, sound to horse.”

And while the tucket was sounding, Bennet moved close to the bewildered parson, and whispered violently in his ear.

Dick Shelton saw the priest's eye turned upon him for an instant in a startled glance. He had some cause for thought; for this Sir Harry Shelton was his own natural father. But he said never a word, and kept his countenance unmoved.

Hatch and Sir Oliver discussed together for a while their altered situation; ten men, it was decided between them, should be reserved, not only to garrison the Moat House, but to escort the priest across the wood. In the meantime, as Bennet was to remain behind, the command of the reinforcement was given to Master Shelton. Indeed, there was no choice; the men were loutish fellows, dull and unskilled in war, while Dick was not only popular, but resolute and grave beyond his age. Although his youth had been spent in these rough, country places, the lad had been well taught in letters by Sir Oliver, and Hatch himself had shown him the management of arms and the first principles of command. Bennet had always been kind and helpful; he was one of those who are cruel as the grave to those they call their enemies, but ruggedly faithful and well willing to their

friends; and now, while Sir Oliver entered the next house to write, in his swift, exquisite penmanship, a memorandum of the last occurrences to his master, Sir Daniel Brackley, Bennet came up to his pupil to wish him God-speed upon his enterprise.

“Ye must go the long way about, Master Shelton,” he said; “round by the bridge, for your life! Keep a sure man fifty paces afore you, to draw shots; and go softly till y’ are past the wood. If the rogues fall upon you, ride for ’t; ye will do naught by standing. And keep ever forward, Master Shelton; turn me not back again, an ye love your life; there is no help in Tunstall, mind ye that. And now, since ye go to the great wars about the king, and I continue to dwell here in extreme jeopardy of my life, and the saints alone can certify if we shall meet again below, I give you my last counsels now at your riding. Keep an eye on Sir Daniel; he is unsure. Put not your trust in the jack-priest; he intendeth not amiss, but doth the will of others; it is a hand-gun for Sir Daniel! Get your good lordship where ye go; make you strong friends; look to it. And think ever a pater-noster-while on Bennet Hatch. There are worse rogues afoot than Bennet. So, God-speed!”

“And Heaven be with you, Bennet!” returned Dick. “Ye were a good friend to me-ward, and so I shall say ever.”

“And, look ye, master,” added Hatch, with a certain embarrassment, “if this Amend-All should get a shaft into me, ye might, mayhap, lay out a gold mark or mayhap a pound for my poor soul; for it is like to go stiff with me in purgatory.”

“Ye shall have your will of it, Bennet,” answered Dick. “But, what cheer, man! we shall meet again, where ye shall have more need of ale than masses.”

“The saints so grant it, Master Dick!” returned the other. “But here comes Sir Oliver. An he were as quick with the long-bow as with the pen, he would be a brave man-at-arms.”

Sir Oliver gave Dick a sealed packet, with this superscription: “To my ryght worchypful master, Sir Daniel Brackley, knyght, be thys delyvered in haste.”

And Dick, putting it in the bosom of his jacket, gave the word and set forth westward up the village.

BOOK I – THE TWO LADS

CHAPTER I – AT THE SIGN OF THE SUN IN KETTLEY

Sir Daniel and his men lay in and about Kettley that night, warmly quartered and well patrolled. But the Knight of Tunstall was one who never rested from money-getting; and even now, when he was on the brink of an adventure which should make or mar him, he was up an hour after midnight to squeeze poor neighbours. He was one who trafficked greatly in disputed inheritances; it was his way to buy out the most unlikely claimant, and then, by the favour he carried with great lords about the king, procure unjust decisions in his favour; or, if that was too roundabout, to seize the disputed manor by force of arms, and rely on his influence and Sir Oliver's cunning in the law to hold what he had snatched. Kettley was one such place; it had come very lately into his clutches; he still met with opposition from the tenants; and it was to overawe discontent that he had led his troops that way.

By two in the morning, Sir Daniel sat in the inn room, close by the fireside, for it was cold at that hour among the fens of Kettley. By his elbow stood a pottle of spiced ale. He had taken off his visored headpiece, and sat with his bald head and thin, dark visage resting on one hand, wrapped warmly in a sanguine-coloured cloak. At the lower end of the room about a dozen of his men stood sentry over the door or lay asleep on benches; and somewhat nearer hand, a young lad, apparently of twelve or thirteen, was stretched in a mantle on the floor. The host of the Sun stood before the great man.

"Now, mark me, mine host," Sir Daniel said, "follow but mine orders, and I shall be your good lord ever. I must have good men for head boroughs, and I will have Adam-a-More high constable; see to it narrowly. If other men be chosen, it shall avail you nothing; rather it shall be found to your sore cost. For those that have paid rent to Walsingham I shall take good measure – you among the rest, mine host."

"Good knight," said the host, "I will swear upon the cross of Holywood I did but pay to Walsingham upon compulsion. Nay, bully knight, I love not the rogue Walsinghams; they were as poor as thieves, bully knight. Give me a great lord like you. Nay; ask me among the neighbours, I am stout for Brackley."

"It may be," said Sir Daniel, dryly. "Ye shall then pay twice."

The innkeeper made a horrid grimace; but this was a piece of bad luck that might readily befall a tenant in these unruly times, and he was perhaps glad to make his peace so easily.

"Bring up yon fellow, Selden!" cried the knight.

And one of his retainers led up a poor, cringing old man, as pale as a candle, and all shaking with the fen fever.

"Sirrah," said Sir Daniel, "your name?"

"An't please your worship," replied the man, "my name is Condall – Condall of Shoreby, at your good worship's pleasure."

"I have heard you ill reported on," returned the knight. "Ye deal in treason, rogue; ye trudge the country leasing; y' are heavily suspicioned of the death of severals. How, fellow, are ye so bold? But I will bring you down."

"Right honourable and my reverend lord," the man cried, "here is some hodge-podge, saving your good presence. I am but a poor private man, and have hurt none."

"The under-sheriff did report of you most vilely," said the knight. "'Seize me,' saith he, 'that Tyndal of Shoreby.'"

"Condall, my good lord; Condall is my poor name," said the unfortunate.

“Condall or Tyndal, it is all one,” replied Sir Daniel, coolly. “For, by my sooth, y’ are here and I do mightily suspect your honesty. If ye would save your neck, write me swiftly an obligation for twenty pound.”

“For twenty pound, my good lord!” cried Condall. “Here is midsummer madness! My whole estate amounteth not to seventy shillings.”

“Condall or Tyndal,” returned Sir Daniel, grinning, “I will run my peril of that loss. Write me down twenty, and when I have recovered all I may, I will be good lord to you, and pardon you the rest.”

“Alas! my good lord, it may not be; I have no skill to write,” said Condall.

“Well-a-day!” returned the knight. “Here, then, is no remedy. Yet I would fain have spared you, Tyndal, had my conscience suffered. Selden, take me this old shrew softly to the nearest elm, and hang me him tenderly by the neck, where I may see him at my riding. Fare ye well, good Master Condall, dear Master Tyndal; y’ are post-haste for Paradise; fare ye then well!”

“Nay, my right pleasant lord,” replied Condall, forcing an obsequious smile, “an ye be so masterful, as doth right well become you, I will even, with all my poor skill, do your good bidding.”

“Friend,” quoth Sir Daniel, “ye will now write two score. Go to! y’ are too cunning for a livelihood of seventy shillings. Selden, see him write me this in good form, and have it duly witnessed.”

And Sir Daniel, who was a very merry knight, none merrier in England, took a drink of his mulled ale, and lay back, smiling.

Meanwhile, the boy upon the floor began to stir, and presently sat up and looked about him with a scare.

“Hither,” said Sir Daniel; and as the other rose at his command and came slowly towards him, he leaned back and laughed outright. “By the rood!” he cried, “a sturdy boy!”

The lad flushed crimson with anger, and darted a look of hate out of his dark eyes. Now that he was on his legs, it was more difficult to make certain of his age. His face looked somewhat older in expression, but it was as smooth as a young child’s; and in bone and body he was unusually slender, and somewhat awkward of gait.

“Ye have called me, Sir Daniel,” he said. “Was it to laugh at my poor plight?”

“Nay, now, let laugh,” said the knight. “Good shrew, let laugh, I pray you. An ye could see yourself, I warrant ye would laugh the first.”

“Well,” cried the lad, flushing, “ye shall answer this when ye answer for the other. Laugh while yet ye may!”

“Nay, now, good cousin,” replied Sir Daniel, with some earnestness, “think not that I mock at you, except in mirth, as between kinsfolk and singular friends. I will make you a marriage of a thousand pounds, go to! and cherish you exceedingly. I took you, indeed, roughly, as the time demanded; but from henceforth I shall ungrudgingly maintain and cheerfully serve you. Ye shall be Mrs. Shelton – Lady Shelton, by my troth! for the lad promiseth bravely. Tut! ye will not shy for honest laughter; it purgeth melancholy. They are no rogues who laugh, good cousin. Good mine host, lay me a meal now for my cousin, Master John. Sit ye down, sweetheart, and eat.”

“Nay,” said Master John, “I will break no bread. Since ye force me to this sin, I will fast for my soul’s interest. But, good mine host, I pray you of courtesy give me a cup of fair water; I shall be much beholden to your courtesy indeed.”

“Ye shall have a dispensation, go to!” cried the knight. “Shalt be well shriven, by my faith! Content you, then, and eat.”

But the lad was obstinate, drank a cup of water, and, once more wrapping himself closely in his mantle, sat in a far corner, brooding.

In an hour or two, there rose a stir in the village of sentries challenging and the clatter of arms and horses; and then a troop drew up by the inn door, and Richard Shelton, splashed with mud, presented himself upon the threshold.

“Save you, Sir Daniel,” he said.

“How! Dickie Shelton!” cried the knight; and at the mention of Dick’s name the other lad looked curiously across. “What maketh Bennet Hatch?”

“Please you, sir knight, to take cognisance of this packet from Sir Oliver, wherein are all things fully stated,” answered Richard, presenting the priest’s letter. “And please you farther, ye were best make all speed to Risingham; for on the way hither we encountered one riding furiously with letters, and by his report, my Lord of Risingham was sore bested, and lacked exceedingly your presence.”

“How say you? Sore bested?” returned the knight. “Nay, then, we will make speed sitting down, good Richard. As the world goes in this poor realm of England, he that rides softliest rides surest. Delay, they say, begetteth peril; but it is rather this itch of doing that undoes men; mark it, Dick. But let me see, first, what cattle ye have brought. Selden, a link here at the door!”

And Sir Daniel strode forth into the village street, and, by the red glow of a torch, inspected his new troops. He was an unpopular neighbour and an unpopular master; but as a leader in war he was well-beloved by those who rode behind his pennant. His dash, his proved courage, his forethought for the soldiers’ comfort, even his rough gibes, were all to the taste of the bold blades in jack and salet.

“Nay, by the rood!” he cried, “what poor dogs are these? Here be some as crooked as a bow, and some as lean as a spear. Friends, ye shall ride in the front of the battle; I can spare you, friends. Mark me this old villain on the piebald! A two-year mutton riding on a hog would look more soldierly! Ha! Clipsby, are ye there, old rat? Y’ are a man I could lose with a good heart; ye shall go in front of all, with a bull’s eye painted on your jack, to be the better butt for archery; sirrah, ye shall show me the way.”

“I will show you any way, Sir Daniel, but the way to change sides,” returned Clipsby, sturdily. Sir Daniel laughed a guffaw.

“Why, well said!” he cried. “Hast a shrewd tongue in thy mouth, go to! I will forgive you for that merry word. Selden, see them fed, both man and brute.”

The knight re-entered the inn.

“Now, friend Dick,” he said, “fall to. Here is good ale and bacon. Eat, while that I read.”

Sir Daniel opened the packet, and as he read his brow darkened. When he had done he sat a little, musing. Then he looked sharply at his ward.

“Dick,” said he, “Y’ have seen this penny rhyme?”

The lad replied in the affirmative.

“It bears your father’s name,” continued the knight; “and our poor shrew of a parson is, by some mad soul, accused of slaying him.”

“He did most eagerly deny it,” answered Dick.

“He did?” cried the knight, very sharply. “Heed him not. He has a loose tongue; he babbles like a jack-sparrow. Some day, when I may find the leisure, Dick, I will myself more fully inform you of these matters. There was one Duckworth shrewdly blamed for it; but the times were troubled, and there was no justice to be got.”

“It befell at the Moat House?” Dick ventured, with a beating at his heart.

“It befell between the Moat House and Holywood,” replied Sir Daniel, calmly; but he shot a covert glance, black with suspicion, at Dick’s face. “And now,” added the knight, “speed you with your meal; ye shall return to Tunstall with a line from me.”

Dick’s face fell sorely.

“Prithee, Sir Daniel,” he cried, “send one of the villains! I beseech you let me to the battle. I can strike a stroke, I promise you.”

“I misdoubt it not,” replied Sir Daniel, sitting down to write. “But here, Dick, is no honour to be won. I lie in Kettley till I have sure tidings of the war, and then ride to join me with the conqueror. Cry not on cowardice; it is but wisdom, Dick; for this poor realm so tosseth with rebellion, and the king’s name and custody so changeth hands, that no man may be certain of the morrow. Toss-pot and Shuttle-wit run in, but my Lord Good-Counsel sits o’ one side, waiting.”

With that, Sir Daniel, turning his back to Dick, and quite at the farther end of the long table, began to write his letter, with his mouth on one side, for this business of the Black Arrow stuck sorely in his throat.

Meanwhile, young Shelton was going on heartily enough with his breakfast, when he felt a touch upon his arm, and a very soft voice whispering in his ear.

“Make not a sign, I do beseech you,” said the voice, “but of your charity tell me the straight way to Holywood. Beseech you, now, good boy, comfort a poor soul in peril and extreme distress, and set me so far forth upon the way to my repose.”

“Take the path by the windmill,” answered Dick, in the same tone; “it will bring you to Till Ferry; there inquire again.”

And without turning his head, he fell again to eating. But with the tail of his eye he caught a glimpse of the young lad called Master John stealthily creeping from the room.

“Why,” thought Dick, “he is a young as I. ‘Good boy’ doth he call me? An I had known, I should have seen the varlet hanged ere I had told him. Well, if he goes through the fen, I may come up with him and pull his ears.”

Half an hour later, Sir Daniel gave Dick the letter, and bade him speed to the Moat House. And, again, some half an hour after Dick’s departure, a messenger came, in hot haste, from my Lord of Risingham.

“Sir Daniel,” the messenger said, “ye lose great honour, by my sooth! The fight began again this morning ere the dawn, and we have beaten their van and scattered their right wing. Only the main battle standeth fast. An we had your fresh men, we should tilt you them all into the river. What, sir knight! Will ye be the last? It stands not with your good credit.”

“Nay,” cried the knight, “I was but now upon the march. Selden, sound me the tucket. Sir, I am with you on the instant. It is not two hours since the more part of my command came in, sir messenger. What would ye have? Spurring is good meat, but yet it killed the charger. Bustle, boys!”

By this time the tucket was sounding cheerily in the morning, and from all sides Sir Daniel’s men poured into the main street and formed before the inn. They had slept upon their arms, with chargers saddled, and in ten minutes five-score men-at-arms and archers, cleanly equipped and briskly disciplined, stood ranked and ready. The chief part were in Sir Daniel’s livery, murrey and blue, which gave the greater show to their array. The best armed rode first; and away out of sight, at the tail of the column, came the sorry reinforcement of the night before. Sir Daniel looked with pride along the line.

“Here be the lads to serve you in a pinch,” he said.

“They are pretty men, indeed,” replied the messenger. “It but augments my sorrow that ye had not marched the earlier.”

“Well,” said the knight, “what would ye? The beginning of a feast and the end of a fray, sir messenger;” and he mounted into his saddle. “Why! how now!” he cried. “John! Joanna! Nay, by the sacred rood! where is she? Host, where is that girl?”

“Girl, Sir Daniel?” cried the landlord. “Nay, sir, I saw no girl.”

“Boy, then, dotard!” cried the knight. “Could ye not see it was a wench? She in the murrey-coloured mantle – she that broke her fast with water, rogue – where is she?”

“Nay, the saints bless us! Master John, ye called him,” said the host. “Well, I thought none evil. He is gone. I saw him – her – I saw her in the stable a good hour ago; ‘a was saddling a grey horse.”

“Now, by the rood!” cried Sir Daniel, “the wench was worth five hundred pound to me and more.”

“Sir knight,” observed the messenger, with bitterness, “while that ye are here, roaring for five hundred pounds, the realm of England is elsewhere being lost and won.”

“It is well said,” replied Sir Daniel. “Selden, fall me out with six cross-bowmen; hunt me her down. I care not what it cost; but, at my returning, let me find her at the Moat House. Be it upon your head. And now, sir messenger, we march.”

And the troop broke into a good trot, and Selden and his six men were left behind upon the street of Kettleby, with the staring villagers.

CHAPTER II—IN THE FEN

It was near six in the May morning when Dick began to ride down into the fen upon his homeward way. The sky was all blue; the jolly wind blew loud and steady; the windmill-sails were spinning; and the willows over all the fen rippling and whitening like a field of corn. He had been all night in the saddle, but his heart was good and his body sound, and he rode right merrily.

The path went down and down into the marsh, till he lost sight of all the neighbouring landmarks but Kettley windmill on the knoll behind him, and the extreme top of Tunstall Forest far before. On either hand there were great fields of blowing reeds and willows, pools of water shaking in the wind, and treacherous bogs, as green as emerald, to tempt and to betray the traveller. The path lay almost straight through the morass. It was already very ancient; its foundation had been laid by Roman soldiery; in the lapse of ages much of it had sunk, and every here and there, for a few hundred yards, it lay submerged below the stagnant waters of the fen.

About a mile from Kettley, Dick came to one such break in the plain line of causeway, where the reeds and willows grew dispersedly like little islands and confused the eye. The gap, besides, was more than usually long; it was a place where any stranger might come readily to mischief; and Dick bethought him, with something like a pang, of the lad whom he had so imperfectly directed. As for himself, one look backward to where the windmill sails were turning black against the blue of heaven – one look forward to the high ground of Tunstall Forest, and he was sufficiently directed and held straight on, the water washing to his horse's knees, as safe as on a highway.

Half-way across, and when he had already sighted the path rising high and dry upon the farther side, he was aware of a great splashing on his right, and saw a grey horse, sunk to its belly in the mud, and still spasmodically struggling. Instantly, as though it had divined the neighbourhood of help, the poor beast began to neigh most piercingly. It rolled, meanwhile, a blood-shot eye, insane with terror; and as it sprawled wallowing in the quag, clouds of stinging insects rose and buzzed about it in the air.

"Alack!" thought Dick, "can the poor lad have perished? There is his horse, for certain – a brave grey! Nay, comrade, if thou criest to me so piteously, I will do all man can to help thee. Shalt not lie there to drown by inches!"

And he made ready his crossbow, and put a quarrel through the creature's head.

Dick rode on after this act of rugged mercy, somewhat sobered in spirit, and looking closely about him for any sign of his less happy predecessor in the way. "I would I had dared to tell him further," he thought; "for I fear he has miscarried in the slough."

And just as he was so thinking, a voice cried upon his name from the causeway side, and, looking over his shoulder, he saw the lad's face peering from a clump of reeds.

"Are ye there?" he said, reining in. "Ye lay so close among the reeds that I had passed you by. I saw your horse bemired, and put him from his agony; which, by my sooth! an ye had been a more merciful rider, ye had done yourself. But come forth out of your hiding. Here be none to trouble you."

"Nay, good boy, I have no arms, nor skill to use them if I had," replied the other, stepping forth upon the pathway.

"Why call me 'boy'?" cried Dick. "Y' are not, I trow, the elder of us twain."

"Good Master Shelton," said the other, "prithee forgive me. I have none the least intention to offend. Rather I would in every way beseech your gentleness and favour, for I am now worse bested than ever, having lost my way, my cloak, and my poor horse. To have a riding-rod and spurs, and never a horse to sit upon! And before all," he added, looking ruefully upon his clothes – "before all, to be so sorrily besmirched!"

"Tut!" cried Dick. "Would ye mind a ducking? Blood of wound or dust of travel – that's a man's adornment."

“Nay, then, I like him better plain,” observed the lad. “But, prithee, how shall I do? Prithee, good Master Richard, help me with your good counsel. If I come not safe to Holywood, I am undone.”

“Nay,” said Dick, dismounting, “I will give more than counsel. Take my horse, and I will run awhile, and when I am weary we shall change again, that so, riding and running, both may go the speedier.”

So the change was made, and they went forward as briskly as they durst on the uneven causeway, Dick with his hand upon the other’s knee.

“How call ye your name?” asked Dick.

“Call me John Matcham,” replied the lad.

“And what make ye to Holywood?” Dick continued.

“I seek sanctuary from a man that would oppress me,” was the answer. “The good Abbot of Holywood is a strong pillar to the weak.”

“And how came ye with Sir Daniel, Master Matcham?” pursued Dick.

“Nay,” cried the other, “by the abuse of force! He hath taken me by violence from my own place; dressed me in these weeds; ridden with me till my heart was sick; gibed me till I could ‘a’ wept; and when certain of my friends pursued, thinking to have me back, claps me in the rear to stand their shot! I was even grazed in the right foot, and walk but lamely. Nay, there shall come a day between us; he shall smart for all!”

“Would ye shoot at the moon with a hand-gun?” said Dick. “’Tis a valiant knight, and hath a hand of iron. An he guessed I had made or meddled with your flight, it would go sore with me.”

“Ay, poor boy,” returned the other, “y’ are his ward, I know it. By the same token, so am I, or so he saith; or else he hath bought my marriage – I wot not rightly which; but it is some handle to oppress me by.”

“Boy again!” said Dick.

“Nay, then, shall I call you girl, good Richard?” asked Matcham.

“Never a girl for me,” returned Dick. “I do abjure the crew of them!”

“Ye speak boyishly,” said the other. “Ye think more of them than ye pretend.”

“Not I,” said Dick, stoutly. “They come not in my mind. A plague of them, say I! Give me to hunt and to fight and to feast, and to live with jolly foresters. I never heard of a maid yet that was for any service, save one only; and she, poor shrew, was burned for a witch and the wearing of men’s clothes in spite of nature.”

Master Matcham crossed himself with fervour, and appeared to pray.

“What make ye?” Dick inquired.

“I pray for her spirit,” answered the other, with a somewhat troubled voice.

“For a witch’s spirit?” Dick cried. “But pray for her, an ye list; she was the best wench in Europe, was this Joan of Arc. Old Appleyard the archer ran from her, he said, as if she had been Mahoun. Nay, she was a brave wench.”

“Well, but, good Master Richard,” resumed Matcham, “an ye like maids so little, y’ are no true natural man; for God made them twain by intention, and brought true love into the world, to be man’s hope and woman’s comfort.”

“Faugh!” said Dick. “Y’ are a milk-sopping baby, so to harp on women. An ye think I be no true man, get down upon the path, and whether at fists, back-sword, or bow and arrow, I will prove my manhood on your body.”

“Nay, I am no fighter,” said Matcham, eagerly. “I mean no tittle of offence. I meant but pleasantry. And if I talk of women, it is because I heard ye were to marry.”

“I to marry!” Dick exclaimed. “Well, it is the first I hear of it. And with whom was I to marry?”

“One Joan Sedley,” replied Matcham, colouring. “It was Sir Daniel’s doing; he hath money to gain upon both sides; and, indeed, I have heard the poor wench bemoaning herself pitifully of the match. It seems she is of your mind, or else distasted to the bridegroom.”

“Well! marriage is like death, it comes to all,” said Dick, with resignation. “And she bemoaned herself? I pray ye now, see there how shuttle-witted are these girls: to bemoan herself before that she had seen me! Do I bemoan myself? Not I. An I be to marry, I will marry dry-eyed! But if ye know her, prithee, of what favour is she? fair or foul? And is she shrewish or pleasant?”

“Nay, what matters it?” said Matcham. “An y’ are to marry, ye can but marry. What matters foul or fair? These be but toys. Y’ are no milksop, Master Richard; ye will wed with dry eyes, anyhow.”

“It is well said,” replied Shelton. “Little I reckon.”

“Your lady wife is like to have a pleasant lord,” said Matcham.

“She shall have the lord Heaven made her for,” returned Dick. “It trow there be worse as well as better.”

“Ah, the poor wench!” cried the other.

“And why so poor?” asked Dick.

“To wed a man of wood,” replied his companion. “O me, for a wooden husband!”

“I think I be a man of wood, indeed,” said Dick, “to trudge afoot the while you ride my horse; but it is good wood, I trow.”

“Good Dick, forgive me,” cried the other. “Nay, y’ are the best heart in England; I but laughed. Forgive me now, sweet Dick.”

“Nay, no fool words,” returned Dick, a little embarrassed by his companion’s warmth. “No harm is done. I am not touchy, praise the saints.”

And at that moment the wind, which was blowing straight behind them as they went, brought them the rough flourish of Sir Daniel’s trumpeter.

“Hark!” said Dick, “the tucket soundeth.”

“Ay,” said Matcham, “they have found my flight, and now I am unhorsed!” and he became pale as death.

“Nay, what cheer!” returned Dick. “Y’ have a long start, and we are near the ferry. And it is I, methinks, that am unhorsed.”

“Alack, I shall be taken!” cried the fugitive. “Dick, kind Dick, beseech ye help me but a little!”

“Why, now, what aileth thee?” said Dick. “Methinks I help you very patiently. But my heart is sorry for so spiritless a fellow! And see ye here, John Matcham – sith John Matcham is your name – I, Richard Shelton, tide what betideth, come what may, will see you safe in Holywood. The saints so do to me again if I default you. Come, pick me up a good heart, Sir White-face. The way betters here; spur me the horse. Go faster! faster! Nay, mind not for me; I can run like a deer.”

So, with the horse trotting hard, and Dick running easily alongside, they crossed the remainder of the fen, and came out upon the banks of the river by the ferryman’s hut.

CHAPTER III – THE FEN FERRY

The river Till was a wide, sluggish, clayey water, oozing out of fens, and in this part of its course it strained among some score of willow-covered, marshy islets.

It was a dingy stream; but upon this bright, spirited morning everything was become beautiful. The wind and the martens broke it up into innumerable dimples; and the reflection of the sky was scattered over all the surface in crumbs of smiling blue.

A creek ran up to meet the path, and close under the bank the ferryman's hut lay snugly. It was of wattle and clay, and the grass grew green upon the roof.

Dick went to the door and opened it. Within, upon a foul old russet cloak, the ferryman lay stretched and shivering; a great hulk of a man, but lean and shaken by the country fever.

"Hey, Master Shelton," he said, "be ye for the ferry? Ill times, ill times! Look to yourself. There is a fellowship abroad. Ye were better turn round on your two heels and try the bridge."

"Nay; time's in the saddle," answered Dick. "Time will ride, Hugh Ferryman. I am hot in haste."

"A wilful man!" returned the ferryman, rising. "An ye win safe to the Moat House, y' have done lucky; but I say no more." And then catching sight of Matcham, "Who be this?" he asked, as he paused, blinking, on the threshold of his cabin.

"It is my kinsman, Master Matcham," answered Dick.

"Give ye good day, good ferryman," said Matcham, who had dismounted, and now came forward, leading the horse. "Launch me your boat, I prithee; we are sore in haste."

The gaunt ferryman continued staring.

"By the mass!" he cried at length, and laughed with open throat.

Matcham coloured to his neck and winced; and Dick, with an angry countenance, put his hand on the lout's shoulder.

"How now, churl!" he cried. "Fall to thy business, and leave mocking thy betters."

Hugh Ferryman grumblingly undid his boat, and shoved it a little forth into the deep water. Then Dick led in the horse, and Matcham followed.

"Ye be mortal small made, master," said Hugh, with a wide grin; "something o' the wrong model, belike. Nay, Master Shelton, I am for you," he added, getting to his oars. "A cat may look at a king. I did but take a shot of the eye at Master Matcham."

"Sirrah, no more words," said Dick. "Bend me your back."

They were by that time at the mouth of the creek, and the view opened up and down the river. Everywhere it was enclosed with islands. Clay banks were falling in, willows nodding, reeds waving, martens dipping and piping. There was no sign of man in the labyrinth of waters.

"My master," said the ferryman, keeping the boat steady with one oar, "I have a shrew guess that John-a-Fenne is on the island. He bears me a black grudge to all Sir Daniel's. How if I turned me up stream and landed you an arrow-flight above the path? Ye were best not meddle with John Fenne."

"How, then? is he of this company?" asked Dick.

"Nay, mum is the word," said Hugh. "But I would go up water, Dick. How if Master Matcham came by an arrow?" and he laughed again.

"Be it so, Hugh," answered Dick.

"Look ye, then," pursued Hugh. "Sith it shall so be, unsling me your cross-bow – so: now make it ready – good; place me a quarrel. Ay, keep it so, and look upon me grimly."

"What meaneth this?" asked Dick.

"Why, my master, if I steal you across, it must be under force or fear," replied the ferryman; "for else, if John Fenne got wind of it, he were like to prove my most distressful neighbour."

"Do these churls ride so roughly?" Dick inquired. "Do they command Sir Daniel's own ferry?"

“Nay,” whispered the ferryman, winking. “Mark me! Sir Daniel shall down. His time is out. He shall down. Mum!” And he bent over his oars.

They pulled a long way up the river, turned the tail of an island, and came softly down a narrow channel next the opposite bank. Then Hugh held water in midstream.

“I must land you here among the willows,” he said.

“Here is no path but willow swamps and quagmires,” answered Dick.

“Master Shelton,” replied Hugh, “I dare not take ye nearer down, for your own sake now. He watcheth me the ferry, lying on his bow. All that go by and owe Sir Daniel goodwill, he shooteth down like rabbits. I heard him swear it by the rood. An I had not known you of old days – ay, and from so high upward – I would ‘a’ let you go on; but for old days’ remembrance, and because ye had this toy with you that’s not fit for wounds or warfare, I did risk my two poor ears to have you over whole. Content you; I can no more, on my salvation!”

Hugh was still speaking, lying on his oars, when there came a great shout from among the willows on the island, and sounds followed as of a strong man breasting roughly through the wood.

“A murrain!” cried Hugh. “He was on the upper island all the while!” He pulled straight for shore. “Threat me with your bow, good Dick; threat me with it plain,” he added. “I have tried to save your skins, save you mine!”

The boat ran into a tough thicket of willows with a crash. Matcham, pale, but steady and alert, at a sign from Dick, ran along the thwarts and leaped ashore; Dick, taking the horse by the bridle, sought to follow, but what with the animal’s bulk, and what with the closeness of the thicket, both stuck fast. The horse neighed and trampled; and the boat, which was swinging in an eddy, came on and off and pitched with violence.

“It may not be, Hugh; here is no landing,” cried Dick; but he still struggled valiantly with the obstinate thicket and the startled animal.

A tall man appeared upon the shore of the island, a long-bow in his hand. Dick saw him for an instant, with the corner of his eye, bending the bow with a great effort, his face crimson with hurry.

“Who goes?” he shouted. “Hugh, who goes?”

“Tis Master Shelton, John,” replied the ferryman.

“Stand, Dick Shelton!” bawled the man upon the island. “Ye shall have no hurt, upon the rood! Stand! Back out, Hugh Ferryman.”

Dick cried a taunting answer.

“Nay, then, ye shall go afoot,” returned the man; and he let drive an arrow.

The horse, struck by the shaft, lashed out in agony and terror; the boat capsized, and the next moment all were struggling in the eddies of the river.

When Dick came up, he was within a yard of the bank; and before his eyes were clear, his hand had closed on something firm and strong that instantly began to drag him forward. It was the riding-rod, that Matcham, crawling forth upon an overhanging willow, had opportunely thrust into his grasp.

“By the mass!” cried Dick, as he was helped ashore, “that makes a life I owe you. I swim like a cannon-ball.” And he turned instantly towards the island.

Midway over, Hugh Ferryman was swimming with his upturned boat, while John-a-Fenne, furious at the ill-fortune of his shot, bawled to him to hurry.

“Come, Jack,” said Shelton, “run for it! Ere Hugh can hale his barge across, or the pair of ’em can get it righted, we may be out of cry.”

And adding example to his words, he began to run, dodging among the willows, and in marshy places leaping from tussock to tussock. He had no time to look for his direction; all he could do was to turn his back upon the river, and put all his heart to running.

Presently, however, the ground began to rise, which showed him he was still in the right way, and soon after they came forth upon a slope of solid turf, where elms began to mingle with the willows.

But here Matcham, who had been dragging far into the rear, threw himself fairly down.

“Leave me, Dick!” he cried, pantingly; “I can no more.”

Dick turned, and came back to where his companion lay.

“Nay, Jack, leave thee!” he cried. “That were a knave’s trick, to be sure, when ye risked a shot and a ducking, ay, and a drowning too, to save my life. Drowning, in sooth; for why I did not pull you in along with me, the saints alone can tell!”

“Nay,” said Matcham, “I would ‘a’ saved us both, good Dick, for I can swim.”

“Can ye so?” cried Dick, with open eyes. It was the one manly accomplishment of which he was himself incapable. In the order of the things that he admired, next to having killed a man in single fight came swimming. “Well,” he said, “here is a lesson to despise no man. I promised to care for you as far as Holywood, and, by the rood, Jack, y’ are more capable to care for me.”

“Well, Dick, we’re friends now,” said Matcham.

“Nay, I never was unfriends,” answered Dick. “Y’ are a brave lad in your way, albeit something of a milksop, too. I never met your like before this day. But, prithee, fetch back your breath, and let us on. Here is no place for chatter.”

“My foot hurts shrewdly,” said Matcham.

“Nay, I had forgot your foot,” returned Dick. “Well, we must go the gentlier. I would I knew rightly where we were. I have clean lost the path; yet that may be for the better, too. An they watch the ferry, they watch the path, belike, as well. I would Sir Daniel were back with two score men; he would sweep me these rascals as the wind sweeps leaves. Come, Jack, lean ye on my shoulder, ye poor shrew. Nay, y’ are not tall enough. What age are ye, for a wager? – twelve?”

“Nay, I am sixteen,” said Matcham.

“Y’ are poorly grown to height, then,” answered Dick. “But take my hand. We shall go softly, never fear. I owe you a life; I am a good repayer, Jack, of good or evil.”

They began to go forward up the slope.

“We must hit the road, early or late,” continued Dick; “and then for a fresh start. By the mass! but y’ ’ave a rickety hand, Jack. If I had a hand like that, I would think shame. I tell you,” he went on, with a sudden chuckle, “I swear by the mass I believe Hugh Ferryman took you for a maid.”

“Nay, never!” cried the other, colouring high.

“A’ did, though, for a wager!” Dick exclaimed. “Small blame to him. Ye look liker maid than man; and I tell you more – y’ are a strange-looking rogue for a boy; but for a hussy, Jack, ye would be right fair – ye would. Ye would be well favoured for a wench.”

“Well,” said Matcham, “ye know right well that I am none.”

“Nay, I know that; I do but jest,” said Dick. “Ye’ll be a man before your mother, Jack. What cheer, my bully! Ye shall strike shrewd strokes. Now, which, I marvel, of you or me, shall be first knighted, Jack? for knighted I shall be, or die for ’t. ‘Sir Richard Shelton, Knight’: it soundeth bravely. But ‘Sir John Matcham’ soundeth not amiss.”

“Prithee, Dick, stop till I drink,” said the other, pausing where a little clear spring welled out of the slope into a gravelled basin no bigger than a pocket. “And O, Dick, if I might come by anything to eat! – my very heart aches with hunger.”

“Why, fool, did ye not eat at Kettley?” asked Dick.

“I had made a vow – it was a sin I had been led into,” stammered Matcham; “but now, if it were but dry bread, I would eat it greedily.”

“Sit ye, then, and eat,” said Dick, “while that I scout a little forward for the road.” And he took a wallet from his girdle, wherein were bread and pieces of dry bacon, and, while Matcham fell heartily to, struck farther forth among the trees.

A little beyond there was a dip in the ground, where a streamlet soaked among dead leaves; and beyond that, again, the trees were better grown and stood wider, and oak and beech began to take the place of willow and elm. The continued tossing and pouring of the wind among the leaves sufficiently concealed the sounds of his footsteps on the mast; it was for the ear what a moonless

night is to the eye; but for all that Dick went cautiously, slipping from one big trunk to another, and looking sharply about him as he went. Suddenly a doe passed like a shadow through the underwood in front of him, and he paused, disgusted at the chance. This part of the wood had been certainly deserted, but now that the poor deer had run, she was like a messenger he should have sent before him to announce his coming; and instead of pushing farther, he turned him to the nearest well-grown tree, and rapidly began to climb.

Luck had served him well. The oak on which he had mounted was one of the tallest in that quarter of the wood, and easily out-topped its neighbours by a fathom and a half; and when Dick had clambered into the topmost fork and clung there, swinging dizzily in the great wind, he saw behind him the whole fenny plain as far as Kettley, and the Till wandering among woody islets, and in front of him, the white line of high-road winding through the forest. The boat had been righted – it was even now midway on the ferry. Beyond that there was no sign of man, nor aught moving but the wind. He was about to descend, when, taking a last view, his eye lit upon a string of moving points about the middle of the fen. Plainly a small troop was threading the causeway, and that at a good pace; and this gave him some concern as he shinned vigorously down the trunk and returned across the wood for his companion.

CHAPTER IV – A GREENWOOD COMPANY

Matcham was well rested and revived; and the two lads, winged by what Dick had seen, hurried through the remainder of the outwood, crossed the road in safety, and began to mount into the high ground of Tunstall Forest. The trees grew more and more in groves, with heathy places in between, sandy, gorsy, and dotted with old yews. The ground became more and more uneven, full of pits and hillocks. And with every step of the ascent the wind still blew the shriller, and the trees bent before the gusts like fishing-rods.

They had just entered one of the clearings, when Dick suddenly clapped down upon his face among the brambles, and began to crawl slowly backward towards the shelter of the grove. Matcham, in great bewilderment, for he could see no reason for this flight, still imitated his companion's course; and it was not until they had gained the harbour of a thicket that he turned and begged him to explain.

For all reply, Dick pointed with his finger.

At the far end of the clearing, a fir grew high above the neighbouring wood, and planted its black shock of foliage clear against the sky. For about fifty feet above the ground the trunk grew straight and solid like a column. At that level, it split into two massive boughs; and in the fork, like a mast-headed seaman, there stood a man in a green tabard, spying far and wide. The sun glistened upon his hair; with one hand he shaded his eyes to look abroad, and he kept slowly rolling his head from side to side, with the regularity of a machine.

The lads exchanged glances.

"Let us try to the left," said Dick. "We had near fallen foully, Jack."

Ten minutes afterwards they struck into a beaten path.

"Here is a piece of forest that I know not," Dick remarked. "Where goeth me this track?"

"Let us even try," said Matcham.

A few yards further, the path came to the top of a ridge and began to go down abruptly into a cup-shaped hollow. At the foot, out of a thick wood of flowering hawthorn, two or three roofless gables, blackened as if by fire, and a single tall chimney marked the ruins of a house.

"What may this be?" whispered Matcham.

"Nay, by the mass, I know not," answered Dick. "I am all at sea. Let us go warily."

With beating hearts, they descended through the hawthorns. Here and there, they passed signs of recent cultivation; fruit trees and pot herbs ran wild among the thicket; a sun-dial had fallen in the grass; it seemed they were treading what once had been a garden. Yet a little farther and they came forth before the ruins of the house.

It had been a pleasant mansion and a strong. A dry ditch was dug deep about it; but it was now choked with masonry, and bridged by a fallen rafter. The two farther walls still stood, the sun shining through their empty windows; but the remainder of the building had collapsed, and now lay in a great cairn of ruin, grimed with fire. Already in the interior a few plants were springing green among the chinks.

"Now I bethink me," whispered Dick, "this must be Grimstone. It was a hold of one Simon Malmesbury; Sir Daniel was his bane! 'Twas Bennet Hatch that burned it, now five years ago. In sooth, 'twas pity, for it was a fair house."

Down in the hollow, where no wind blew, it was both warm and still; and Matcham, laying one hand upon Dick's arm, held up a warning finger.

"Hist!" he said.

Then came a strange sound, breaking on the quiet. It was twice repeated ere they recognised its nature. It was the sound of a big man clearing his throat; and just then a hoarse, untuneful voice broke into singing.

“Then up and spake the master, the king of the outlaws:
‘What make ye here, my merry men, among the greenwood shaws?’
And Gamelyn made answer – he looked never adown:
‘O, they must need to walk in wood that may not walk in town!’”

The singer paused, a faint clink of iron followed, and then silence.

The two lads stood looking at each other. Whoever he might be, their invisible neighbour was just beyond the ruin. And suddenly the colour came into Matcham’s face, and next moment he had crossed the fallen rafter, and was climbing cautiously on the huge pile of lumber that filled the interior of the roofless house. Dick would have withheld him, had he been in time; as it was, he was fain to follow.

Right in the corner of the ruin, two rafters had fallen crosswise, and protected a clear space no larger than a pew in church. Into this the lads silently lowered themselves. There they were perfectly concealed, and through an arrow-loopole commanded a view upon the farther side.

Peering through this, they were struck stiff with terror at their predicament. To retreat was impossible; they scarce dared to breathe. Upon the very margin of the ditch, not thirty feet from where they crouched, an iron caldron bubbled and steamed above a glowing fire; and close by, in an attitude of listening, as though he had caught some sound of their clambering among the ruins, a tall, red-faced, battered-looking man stood poised, an iron spoon in his right hand, a horn and a formidable dagger at his belt. Plainly this was the singer; plainly he had been stirring the caldron, when some incautious step among the lumber had fallen upon his ear. A little further off, another man lay slumbering, rolled in a brown cloak, with a butterfly hovering above his face. All this was in a clearing white with daisies; and at the extreme verge, a bow, a sheaf of arrows, and part of a deer’s carcase, hung upon a flowering hawthorn.

Presently the fellow relaxed from his attitude of attention, raised the spoon to his mouth, tasted its contents, nodded, and then fell again to stirring and singing.

“O, they must need to walk in wood that may not walk in town,” he croaked, taking up his song where he had left it.

“O, sir, we walk not here at all an evil thing to do.
But if we meet with the good king’s deer to shoot a shaft into.”

Still as he sang, he took from time to time, another spoonful of the broth, blew upon it, and tasted it, with all the airs of an experienced cook. At length, apparently, he judged the mess was ready; for taking the horn from his girdle, he blew three modulated calls.

The other fellow awoke, rolled over, brushed away the butterfly, and looked about him.

“How now, brother?” he said. “Dinner?”

“Ay, sot,” replied the cook, “dinner it is, and a dry dinner, too, with neither ale nor bread. But there is little pleasure in the greenwood now; time was when a good fellow could live here like a mitred abbot, set aside the rain and the white frosts; he had his heart’s desire both of ale and wine. But now are men’s spirits dead; and this John Amend-All, save us and guard us! but a stuffed booby to scare crows withal.”

“Nay,” returned the other, “y’ are too set on meat and drinking, Lawless. Bide ye a bit; the good time cometh.”

“Look ye,” returned the cook, “I have even waited for this good time sith that I was so high. I have been a grey friar; I have been a king’s archer; I have been a shipman, and sailed the salt seas; and I have been in greenwood before this, forsooth! and shot the king’s deer. What cometh of it? Naught! I were better to have bided in the cloister. John Abbot avaieth more than John Amend-All. By ’r Lady! here they come.”

One after another, tall, likely fellows began to stroll into the lawn. Each as he came produced a knife and a horn cup, helped himself from the caldron, and sat down upon the grass to eat. They were very variously equipped and armed; some in rusty smocks, and with nothing but a knife and an old bow; others in the height of forest gallantry, all in Lincoln green, both hood and jerkin, with dainty peacock arrows in their belts, a horn upon a baldrick, and a sword and dagger at their sides. They came in the silence of hunger, and scarce growled a salutation, but fell instantly to meat.

There were, perhaps, a score of them already gathered, when a sound of suppressed cheering arose close by among the hawthorns, and immediately after five or six woodmen carrying a stretcher debauched upon the lawn. A tall, lusty fellow, somewhat grizzled, and as brown as a smoked ham, walked before them with an air of some authority, his bow at his back, a bright boar-spear in his hand.

“Lads!” he cried, “good fellows all, and my right merry friends, y’ have sung this while on a dry whistle and lived at little ease. But what said I ever? Abide Fortune constantly; she turneth, turneth swift. And lo! here is her little firstling – even that good creature, ale!”

There was a murmur of applause as the bearers set down the stretcher and displayed a goodly cask.

“And now haste ye, boys,” the man continued. “There is work toward. A handful of archers are but now come to the ferry; murrey and blue is their wear; they are our butts – they shall all taste arrows – no man of them shall struggle through this wood. For, lads, we are here some fifty strong, each man of us most foully wronged; for some they have lost lands, and some friends; and some they have been outlawed – all oppressed! Who, then, hath done this evil? Sir Daniel, by the rood! Shall he then profit? shall he sit snug in our houses? shall he till our fields? shall he suck the bone he robbed us of? I trow not. He getteth him strength at law; he gaineth cases; nay, there is one case he shall not gain – I have a writ here at my belt that, please the saints, shall conquer him.”

Lawless the cook was by this time already at his second horn of ale. He raised it, as if to pledge the speaker.

“Master Ellis,” he said, “y’ are for vengeance – well it becometh you! – but your poor brother o’ the greenwood, that had never lands to lose nor friends to think upon, looketh rather, for his poor part, to the profit of the thing. He had liever a gold noble and a pottle of canary wine than all the vengeance in purgatory.”

“Lawless,” replied the other, “to reach the Moat House, Sir Daniel must pass the forest. We shall make that passage dearer, pardy, than any battle. Then, when he hath got to earth with such ragged handful as escapeth us – all his great friends fallen and fled away, and none to give him aid – we shall beleaguer that old fox about, and great shall be the fall of him. ’Tis a fat buck; he will make a dinner for us all.”

“Ay,” returned Lawless, “I have eaten many of these dinners beforehand; but the cooking of them is hot work, good Master Ellis. And meanwhile what do we? We make black arrows, we write rhymes, and we drink fair cold water, that discomfortable drink.”

“Y’ are untrue, Will Lawless. Ye still smell of the Grey Friars’ buttery; greed is your undoing,” answered Ellis. “We took twenty pounds from Appleyard. We took seven marks from the messenger last night. A day ago we had fifty from the merchant.”

“And to-day,” said one of the men, “I stopped a fat pardoner riding apace for Holywood. Here is his purse.”

Ellis counted the contents.

“Five score shillings!” he grumbled. “Fool, he had more in his sandal, or stitched into his tippet. Y’ are but a child, Tom Cuckow; ye have lost the fish.”

But, for all that, Ellis pocketed the purse with nonchalance. He stood leaning on his boar-spear, and looked round upon the rest. They, in various attitudes, took greedily of the venison pottage, and liberally washed it down with ale. This was a good day; they were in luck; but business pressed, and they were speedy in their eating. The first-comers had by this time even despatched their dinner. Some

lay down upon the grass and fell instantly asleep, like boa-constrictors; others talked together, or overhauled their weapons: and one, whose humour was particularly gay, holding forth an ale-horn, began to sing:

“Here is no law in good green shaw,
Here is no lack of meat;
'Tis merry and quiet, with deer for our diet,
In summer, when all is sweet.

Come winter again, with wind and rain —
Come winter, with snow and sleet,
Get home to your places, with hoods on your faces,
And sit by the fire and eat.”

All this while the two lads had listened and lain close; only Richard had unslung his cross-bow, and held ready in one hand the windac, or grappling-iron that he used to bend it. Otherwise they had not dared to stir; and this scene of forest life had gone on before their eyes like a scene upon a theatre. But now there came a strange interruption. The tall chimney which over-topped the remainder of the ruins rose right above their hiding-place. There came a whistle in the air, and then a sounding smack, and the fragments of a broken arrow fell about their ears. Some one from the upper quarters of the wood, perhaps the very sentinel they saw posted in the fir, had shot an arrow at the chimney-top.

Matcham could not restrain a little cry, which he instantly stifled, and even Dick started with surprise, and dropped the windac from his fingers. But to the fellows on the lawn, this shaft was an expected signal. They were all afoot together, tightening their belts, testing their bow-strings, loosening sword and dagger in the sheath. Ellis held up his hand; his face had suddenly assumed a look of savage energy; the white of his eyes shone in his sun-brown face.

“Lads,” he said, “ye know your places. Let not one man’s soul escape you. Appleyard was a whet before a meal; but now we go to table. I have three men whom I will bitterly avenge – Harry Shelton, Simon Malmesbury, and” – striking his broad bosom – “and Ellis Duckworth, by the mass!”

Another man came, red with hurry, through the thorns.

“’Tis not Sir Daniel!” he panted. “They are but seven. Is the arrow gone?”

“It struck but now,” replied Ellis.

“A murrain!” cried the messenger. “Methought I heard it whistle. And I go dinnerless!”

In the space of a minute, some running, some walking sharply, according as their stations were nearer or farther away, the men of the Black Arrow had all disappeared from the neighbourhood of the ruined house; and the caldron, and the fire, which was now burning low, and the dead deer’s carcase on the hawthorn, remained alone to testify they had been there.

CHAPTER V – “BLOODY AS THE HUNTER”

The lads lay quiet till the last footstep had melted on the wind. Then they arose, and with many an ache, for they were weary with constraint, clambered through the ruins, and recrossed the ditch upon the rafter. Matcham had picked up the windac and went first, Dick following stiffly, with his cross-bow on his arm.

“And now,” said Matcham, “forth to Hollywood.”

“To Hollywood!” cried Dick, “when good fellows stand shot? Not I! I would see you hanged first, Jack!”

“Ye would leave me, would ye?” Matcham asked.

“Ay, by my sooth!” returned Dick. “An I be not in time to warn these lads, I will go die with them. What! would ye have me leave my own men that I have lived among. I trow not! Give me my windac.”

But there was nothing further from Matcham’s mind.

“Dick,” he said, “ye sware before the saints that ye would see me safe to Hollywood. Would ye be forsworn? Would you desert me – a perjurer?”

“Nay, I sware for the best,” returned Dick. “I meant it too; but now! But look ye, Jack, turn again with me. Let me but warn these men, and, if needs must, stand shot with them; then shall all be clear, and I will on again to Hollywood and purge mine oath.”

“Ye but deride me,” answered Matcham. “These men ye go to succour are the I same that hunt me to my ruin.”

Dick scratched his head.

“I cannot help it, Jack,” he said. “Here is no remedy. What would ye? Ye run no great peril, man; and these are in the way of death. Death!” he added. “Think of it! What a murrain do ye keep me here for? Give me the windac. Saint George! shall they all die?”

“Richard Shelton,” said Matcham, looking him squarely in the face, “would ye, then, join party with Sir Daniel? Have ye not ears? Heard ye not this Ellis, what he said? or have ye no heart for your own kindly blood and the father that men slew? ‘Harry Shelton,’ he said; and Sir Harry Shelton was your father, as the sun shines in heaven.”

“What would ye?” Dick cried again. “Would ye have me credit thieves?”

“Nay, I have heard it before now,” returned Matcham. “The fame goeth currently, it was Sir Daniel slew him. He slew him under oath; in his own house he shed the innocent blood. Heaven wearies for the avenging on’t; and you – the man’s son – ye go about to comfort and defend the murderer!”

“Jack,” cried the lad “I know not. It may be; what know I? But, see here: This man hath bred me up and fostered me, and his men I have hunted with and played among; and to leave them in the hour of peril – O, man, if I did that, I were stark dead to honour! Nay, Jack, ye would not ask it; ye would not wish me to be base.”

“But your father, Dick?” said Matcham, somewhat wavering. “Your father? and your oath to me? Ye took the saints to witness.”

“My father?” cried Shelton. “Nay, he would have me go! If Sir Daniel slew him, when the hour comes this hand shall slay Sir Daniel; but neither him nor his will I desert in peril. And for mine oath, good Jack, ye shall absolve me of it here. For the lives’ sake of many men that hurt you not, and for mine honour, ye shall set me free.”

“I, Dick? Never!” returned Matcham. “An ye leave me, y’ are forsworn, and so I shall declare it.”

“My blood heats,” said Dick. “Give me the windac! Give it me!”

“I’ll not,” said Matcham. “I’ll save you in your teeth.”

“Not?” cried Dick. “I’ll make you!”

“Try it,” said the other.

They stood, looking in each other’s eyes, each ready for a spring. Then Dick leaped; and though Matcham turned instantly and fled, in two bounds he was over-taken, the windac was twisted from his grasp, he was thrown roughly to the ground, and Dick stood across him, flushed and menacing, with doubled fist. Matcham lay where he had fallen, with his face in the grass, not thinking of resistance.

Dick bent his bow.

“I’ll teach you!” he cried, fiercely. “Oath or no oath, ye may go hang for me!”

And he turned and began to run. Matcham was on his feet at once, and began running after him.

“What d’ye want?” cried Dick, stopping. “What make ye after me? Stand off!”

“Will follow an I please,” said Matcham. “This wood is free to me.”

“Stand back, by ’r Lady!” returned Dick, raising his bow.

“Ah, y’ are a brave boy!” retorted Matcham. “Shoot!”

Dick lowered his weapon in some confusion.

“See here,” he said. “Y’ have done me ill enough. Go, then. Go your way in fair wise; or, whether I will or not, I must even drive you to it.”

“Well,” said Matcham, doggedly, “y’ are the stronger. Do your worst. I shall not leave to follow thee, Dick, unless thou makest me,” he added.

Dick was almost beside himself. It went against his heart to beat a creature so defenceless; and, for the life of him, he knew no other way to rid himself of this unwelcome and, as he began to think, perhaps untrue companion.

“Y’ are mad, I think,” he cried. “Fool-fellow, I am hasting to your foes; as fast as foot can carry me, go I thither.”

“I care not, Dick,” replied the lad. “If y’ are bound to die, Dick, I’ll die too. I would liever go with you to prison than to go free without you.”

“Well,” returned the other, “I may stand no longer prating. Follow me, if ye must; but if ye play me false, it shall but little advance you, mark ye that. Shalt have a quarrel in thine inwards, boy.”

So saying, Dick took once more to his heels, keeping in the margin of the thicket and looking briskly about him as he went. At a good pace he rattled out of the dell, and came again into the more open quarters of the wood. To the left a little eminence appeared, spotted with golden gorse, and crowned with a black tuft of firs.

“I shall see from there,” he thought, and struck for it across a heathy clearing.

He had gone but a few yards, when Matcham touched him on the arm, and pointed. To the eastward of the summit there was a dip, and, as it were, a valley passing to the other side; the heath was not yet out; all the ground was rusty, like an unscoured buckler, and dotted sparingly with yews; and there, one following another, Dick saw half a score green jerkins mounting the ascent, and marching at their head, conspicuous by his boar-spear, Ellis Duckworth in person. One after another gained the top, showed for a moment against the sky, and then dipped upon the further side, until the last was gone.

Dick looked at Matcham with a kindlier eye.

“So y’ are to be true to me, Jack?” he asked. “I thought ye were of the other party.”

Matcham began to sob.

“What cheer!” cried Dick. “Now the saints behold us! would ye snivel for a word?”

“Ye hurt me,” sobbed Matcham. “Ye hurt me when ye threw me down. Y’ are a coward to abuse your strength.”

“Nay, that is fool’s talk,” said Dick, roughly. “Y’ had no title to my windac, Master John. I would ‘a’ done right to have well basted you. If ye go with me, ye must obey me; and so, come.”

Matcham had half a thought to stay behind; but, seeing that Dick continued to scour full-tilt towards the eminence and not so much as looked across his shoulder, he soon thought better of that, and began to run in turn. But the ground was very difficult and steep; Dick had already a long start,

and had, at any rate, the lighter heels, and he had long since come to the summit, crawled forward through the firs, and ensconced himself in a thick tuft of gorse, before Matcham, panting like a deer, rejoined him, and lay down in silence by his side.

Below, in the bottom of a considerable valley, the short cut from Tunstall hamlet wound downwards to the ferry. It was well beaten, and the eye followed it easily from point to point. Here it was bordered by open glades; there the forest closed upon it; every hundred yards it ran beside an ambush. Far down the path, the sun shone on seven steel salets, and from time to time, as the trees opened, Selden and his men could be seen riding briskly, still bent upon Sir Daniel's mission. The wind had somewhat fallen, but still tussled merrily with the trees, and, perhaps, had Appleyard been there, he would have drawn a warning from the troubled conduct of the birds.

"Now, mark," Dick whispered. "They be already well advanced into the wood; their safety lieth rather in continuing forward. But see ye where this wide glade runneth down before us, and in the midst of it, these two score trees make like an island? There were their safety. An they but come sound as far as that, I will make shift to warn them. But my heart misgiveth me; they are but seven against so many, and they but carry cross-bows. The long-bow, Jack, will have the uppermost ever."

Meanwhile, Selden and his men still wound up the path, ignorant of their danger, and momentarily drew nearer hand. Once, indeed, they paused, drew into a group, and seemed to point and listen. But it was something from far away across the plain that had arrested their attention – a hollow growl of cannon that came, from time to time, upon the wind, and told of the great battle. It was worth a thought, to be sure; for if the voice of the big guns were thus become audible in Tunstall Forest, the fight must have rolled ever eastward, and the day, by consequence, gone sore against Sir Daniel and the lords of the dark rose.

But presently the little troop began again to move forward, and came next to a very open, heathy portion of the way, where but a single tongue of forest ran down to join the road. They were but just abreast of this, when an arrow shone flying. One of the men threw up his arms, his horse reared, and both fell and struggled together in a mass. Even from where the boys lay they could hear the rumour of the men's voices crying out; they could see the startled horses prancing, and, presently, as the troop began to recover from their first surprise, one fellow beginning to dismount. A second arrow from somewhat farther off glanced in a wide arch; a second rider bit the dust. The man who was dismounting lost hold upon the rein, and his horse fled galloping, and dragged him by the foot along the road, bumping from stone to stone, and battered by the fleeing hoofs. The four who still kept the saddle instantly broke and scattered; one wheeled and rode, shrieking, towards the ferry; the other three, with loose rein and flying raiment, came galloping up the road from Tunstall. From every clump they passed an arrow sped. Soon a horse fell, but the rider found his feet and continued to pursue his comrades till a second shot despatched him. Another man fell; then another horse; out of the whole troop there was but one fellow left, and he on foot; only, in different directions, the noise of the galloping of three riderless horses was dying fast into the distance.

All this time not one of the assailants had for a moment shown himself. Here and there along the path, horse or man rolled, undespached, in his agony; but no merciful enemy broke cover to put them from their pain.

The solitary survivor stood bewildered in the road beside his fallen charger. He had come the length of that broad glade, with the island of timber, pointed out by Dick. He was not, perhaps, five hundred yards from where the boys lay hidden; and they could see him plainly, looking to and fro in deadly expectation. But nothing came; and the man began to pluck up his courage, and suddenly unslung and bent his bow. At the same time, by something in his action, Dick recognised Selden.

At this offer of resistance, from all about him in the covert of the woods there went up the sound of laughter. A score of men, at least, for this was the very thickest of the ambush, joined in this cruel and untimely mirth. Then an arrow glanced over Selden's shoulder; and he leaped and ran a little back. Another dart struck quivering at his heel. He made for the cover. A third shaft leaped

out right in his face, and fell short in front of him. And then the laughter was repeated loudly, rising and reechoing from different thickets.

It was plain that his assailants were but baiting him, as men, in those days, baited the poor bull, or as the cat still trifles with the mouse. The skirmish was well over; farther down the road, a fellow in green was already calmly gathering the arrows; and now, in the evil pleasure of their hearts, they gave themselves the spectacle of their poor fellow-sinner in his torture.

Selden began to understand; he uttered a roar of anger, shouldered his cross-bow, and sent a quarrel at a venture into the wood. Chance favoured him, for a slight cry responded. Then, throwing down his weapon, Selden began to run before him up the glade, and almost in a straight line for Dick and Matcham.

The companions of the Black Arrow now began to shoot in earnest. But they were properly served; their chance had past; most of them had now to shoot against the sun; and Selden, as he ran, bounded from side to side to baffle and deceive their aim. Best of all, by turning up the glade he had defeated their preparations; there were no marksmen posted higher up than the one whom he had just killed or wounded; and the confusion of the foresters' counsels soon became apparent. A whistle sounded thrice, and then again twice. It was repeated from another quarter. The woods on either side became full of the sound of people bursting through the underwood; and a bewildered deer ran out into the open, stood for a second on three feet, with nose in air, and then plunged again into the thicket.

Selden still ran, bounding; ever and again an arrow followed him, but still would miss. It began to appear as if he might escape. Dick had his bow armed, ready to support him; even Matcham, forgetful of his interest, took sides at heart for the poor fugitive; and both lads glowed and trembled in the ardour of their hearts.

He was within fifty yards of them, when an arrow struck him and he fell. He was up again, indeed, upon the instant; but now he ran staggering, and, like a blind man, turned aside from his direction.

Dick leaped to his feet and waved to him.

"Here!" he cried. "This way! here is help! Nay, run, fellow – run!"

But just then a second arrow struck Selden in the shoulder, between the plates of his brigandine, and, piercing through his jack, brought him, like a stone, to earth.

"O, the poor heart!" cried Matcham, with clasped hands.

And Dick stood petrified upon the hill, a mark for archery.

Ten to one he had speedily been shot – for the foresters were furious with themselves, and taken unawares by Dick's appearance in the rear of their position – but instantly, out of a quarter of the wood surprisingly near to the two lads, a stentorian voice arose, the voice of Ellis Duckworth.

"Hold!" it roared. "Shoot not! Take him alive! It is young Shelton – Harry's son."

And immediately after a shrill whistle sounded several times, and was again taken up and repeated farther off. The whistle, it appeared, was John Amend-All's battle trumpet, by which he published his directions.

"Ah, foul fortune!" cried Dick. "We are undone. Swiftly, Jack, come swiftly!"

And the pair turned and ran back through the open pine clump that covered the summit of the hill.

CHAPTER VI – TO THE DAY’S END

It was, indeed, high time for them to run. On every side the company of the Black Arrow was making for the hill. Some, being better runners, or having open ground to run upon, had far outstripped the others, and were already close upon the goal; some, following valleys, had spread out to right and left, and outflanked the lads on either side.

Dick plunged into the nearest cover. It was a tall grove of oaks, firm under foot and clear of underbrush, and as it lay down hill, they made good speed. There followed next a piece of open, which Dick avoided, holding to his left. Two minutes after, and the same obstacle arising, the lads followed the same course. Thus it followed that, while the lads, bending continually to the left, drew nearer and nearer to the high road and the river which they had crossed an hour or two before, the great bulk of their pursuers were leaning to the other hand, and running towards Tunstall.

The lads paused to breathe. There was no sound of pursuit. Dick put his ear to the ground, and still there was nothing; but the wind, to be sure, still made a turmoil in the trees, and it was hard to make certain.

“On again,” said Dick; and, tired as they were, and Matcham limping with his injured foot, they pulled themselves together, and once more pelted down the hill.

Three minutes later, they were breasting through a low thicket of evergreen. High overhead, the tall trees made a continuous roof of foliage. It was a pillared grove, as high as a cathedral, and except for the hollies among which the lads were struggling, open and smoothly swarded.

On the other side, pushing through the last fringe of evergreen, they blundered forth again into the open twilight of the grove.

“Stand!” cried a voice.

And there, between the huge stems, not fifty feet before them, they beheld a stout fellow in green, sore blown with running, who instantly drew an arrow to the head and covered them. Matcham stopped with a cry; but Dick, without a pause, ran straight upon the forester, drawing his dagger as he went. The other, whether he was startled by the daring of the onslaught, or whether he was hampered by his orders, did not shoot; he stood wavering; and before he had time to come to himself, Dick bounded at his throat, and sent him sprawling backward on the turf. The arrow went one way and the bow another with a sounding twang. The disarmed forester grappled his assailant; but the dagger shone and descended twice. Then came a couple of groans, and then Dick rose to his feet again, and the man lay motionless, stabbed to the heart.

“On!” said Dick; and he once more pelted forward, Matcham trailing in the rear. To say truth, they made but poor speed of it by now, labouring dismally as they ran, and catching for their breath like fish. Matcham had a cruel stitch, and his head swam; and as for Dick, his knees were like lead. But they kept up the form of running with undiminished courage.

Presently they came to the end of the grove. It stopped abruptly; and there, a few yards before them, was the high road from Risingham to Shoreby, lying, at this point, between two even walls of forest.

At the sight Dick paused; and as soon as he stopped running, he became aware of a confused noise, which rapidly grew louder. It was at first like the rush of a very high gust of wind, but soon it became more definite, and resolved itself into the galloping of horses; and then, in a flash, a whole company of men-at-arms came driving round the corner, swept before the lads, and were gone again upon the instant. They rode as for their lives, in complete disorder; some of them were wounded; riderless horses galloped at their side with bloody saddles. They were plainly fugitives from the great battle.

The noise of their passage had scarce begun to die away towards Shoreby, before fresh hoofs came echoing in their wake, and another deserter clattered down the road; this time a single rider

and, by his splendid armour, a man of high degree. Close after him there followed several baggage-waggons, fleeing at an ungainly canter, the drivers flailing at the horses as if for life. These must have run early in the day; but their cowardice was not to save them. For just before they came abreast of where the lads stood wondering, a man in hacked armour, and seemingly beside himself with fury, overtook the waggons, and with the truncheon of a sword, began to cut the drivers down. Some leaped from their places and plunged into the wood; the others he sabred as they sat, cursing them the while for cowards in a voice that was scarce human.

All this time the noise in the distance had continued to increase; the rumble of carts, the clatter of horses, the cries of men, a great, confused rumour, came swelling on the wind; and it was plain that the rout of a whole army was pouring, like an inundation, down the road.

Dick stood sombre. He had meant to follow the highway till the turn for Holywood, and now he had to change his plan. But above all, he had recognised the colours of Earl Risingham, and he knew that the battle had gone finally against the rose of Lancaster. Had Sir Daniel joined, and was he now a fugitive and ruined? or had he deserted to the side of York, and was he forfeit to honour? It was an ugly choice.

“Come,” he said, sternly; and, turning on his heel, he began to walk forward through the grove, with Matcham limping in his rear.

For some time they continued to thread the forest in silence. It was now growing late; the sun was setting in the plain beyond Kettley; the tree-tops overhead glowed golden; but the shadows had begun to grow darker and the chill of the night to fall.

“If there were anything to eat!” cried Dick, suddenly, pausing as he spoke.

Matcham sat down and began to weep.

“Ye can weep for your own supper, but when it was to save men’s lives, your heart was hard enough,” said Dick, contemptuously. “Y’ave seven deaths upon your conscience, Master John; I’ll ne’er forgive you that.”

“Conscience!” cried Matcham, looking fiercely up. “Mine! And ye have the man’s red blood upon your dagger! And wherefore did ye slay him, the poor soul? He drew his arrow, but he let not fly; he held you in his hand, and spared you! ’Tis as brave to kill a kitten, as a man that not defends himself.”

Dick was struck dumb.

“I slew him fair. I ran me in upon his bow,” he cried.

“It was a coward blow,” returned Matcham. “Y’are but a lout and bully, Master Dick; ye but abuse advantages; let there come a stronger, we will see you truckle at his boot! Ye care not for vengeance, neither – for your father’s death that goes unpaid, and his poor ghost that clamoureth for justice. But if there come but a poor creature in your hands that lacketh skill and strength, and would befriend you, down she shall go!”

Dick was too furious to observe that “she.”

“Marry!” he cried, “and here is news! Of any two the one will still be stronger. The better man throweth the worse, and the worse is well served. Ye deserve a belting, Master Matcham, for your ill-guidance and unthankfulness to meward; and what ye deserve ye shall have.”

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