HENTY GEORGE ALFRED

BOTH SIDES THE BORDER: A TALE OF HOTSPUR AND GLENDOWER

George Henty

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Содержание

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Preface

The four opening years of the fifteenth century were among the most stirring in the history of England. Owen Glendower carried fire and slaughter among the Welsh marches, captured most of the strong places held by the English, and foiled three invasions, led by the king himself. The northern borders were invaded by Douglas; who, after devastating a large portion of Northumberland, Cumberland, and Durham, was defeated and taken prisoner at the battle of Homildon, by the Earl of Northumberland, and his son Hotspur. Then followed the strange and unnatural coalition between the Percys, Douglas of Scotland, Glendower of Wales, and Sir Edmund Mortimer–a coalition that would assuredly have overthrown the king, erected the young Earl of March as a puppet monarch under the tutelage of the Percys, and secured the independence of Wales, had the royal forces arrived one day later at Shrewsbury, and so allowed the confederate armies to unite.

King Henry's victory there, entailing the death of Hotspur and the capture of Douglas, put an end to this formidable insurrection; for, although the Earl of Northumberland twice subsequently raised the banner of revolt, these risings were easily crushed; while Glendower's power waned, and order, never again to be broken, was at length restored in Wales. The continual state of unrest and chronic warfare, between the inhabitants of both sides of the border, was full of adventures as stirring and romantic as that in which the hero of the story took part.

G. A. Henty.

Chapter 1: A Border Hold

A lad was standing on the little lookout turret, on the top of a border fortalice. The place was evidently built solely with an eye to defence, comfort being an altogether secondary consideration. It was a square building, of rough stone, the walls broken only by narrow loopholes; and the door, which was ten feet above the ground, was reached by broad wooden steps, which could be hauled up in case of necessity; and were, in fact, raised every night.

The building was some forty feet square. The upper floor was divided into several chambers, which were the sleeping places of its lord and master, his family, and the women of the household. The floor below, onto which the door from without opened, was undivided save by two rows of stone pillars that supported the beams of the floor above. In one corner the floor, some fifteen feet square, was raised somewhat above the general level. This was set aside for the use of the master and the family. The rest of the apartment was used as the living and sleeping room of the followers, and hinds, of the fortalice.

The basement–which, although on a level with the ground outside, could be approached only by a trapdoor and ladder from the room above–was the storeroom, and contained sacks of barley and oatmeal, sides of bacon, firewood, sacks of beans, and trusses of hay for the use of the horses and cattle, should the place have to stand a short siege. In the centre was a well.

The roof of the house was flat, and paved with square blocks of stone; a parapet three feet high surrounded it. In the centre was the lookout tower, rising twelve feet above it; and over the door another turret, projecting some eighteen inches beyond the wall of the house, slits being cut in the stone floor through which missiles could be dropped, or boiling lead poured, upon any trying to assault the entrance. Outside was a courtyard, extending round the house. It was some ten yards across, and surrounded by a wall twelve feet high, with a square turret at each corner.

Everything was roughly constructed, although massive and solid. With the exception of the door, and the steps leading to it, no wood had been used in the construction. The very beams were of rough stone, the floors were of the same material. It was clearly the object of the builders to erect a fortress that could defy fire, and could only be destroyed at the cost of enormous labour.

This was indeed a prime necessity, for the hold stood in the wild country between the upper waters of the Coquet and the Reed river. Harbottle and Longpikes rose but a few miles away, and the whole country was broken up by deep ravines and valleys, fells and crags. From the edge of the moorland, a hundred yards from the outer wall, the ground dropped sharply down into the valley, where the two villages of Yardhope lay on a little burn running into the Coquet.

In other directions the moor extended for a distance of nearly a mile. On this two or three score of cattle, and a dozen shaggy little horses, were engaged in an effort to keep life together, upon the rough herbage that grew among the heather and blocks of stones, scattered everywhere.

Presently the lad caught sight of the flash of the sun, which had but just risen behind him, on a spearhead at the western edge of the moor. He ran down at once, from his post, to the principal room.

"They are coming, Mother," he exclaimed. "I have just seen the sun glint on a spearhead."

"I trust that they are all there," she said, and then turned to two women by the fire, and bade them put on more wood and get the pots boiling.

"Go up again, Oswald; and, as soon as you can make out your father's figure, bring me down news. I have not closed an eye for the last two nights, for 'tis a more dangerous enterprise than usual on which they have gone."

"Father always comes home all right, Mother," the boy said confidently, "and they have a strong band this time. They were to have been joined by Thomas Gray and his following, and Forster of Currick, and John Liddel, and Percy Hope of Bilderton. They must have full sixty spears. The Bairds are like to pay heavily for their last raid hither."

Dame Forster did not reply, and Oswald ran up again to the lookout. By this time the party for whom he was watching had reached the moor. It consisted of twelve or fourteen horsemen, all clad in dark armour, carrying very long spears and mounted on small, but wiry, horses. They were driving before them a knot of some forty or fifty cattle, and three of them led horses carrying heavy burdens. Oswald's quick eye noticed that four of the horsemen were not carrying their spears.

"They are three short of their number," he said to himself, "and those four must all be sorely wounded. Well, it might have been worse."

Oswald had been brought up to regard forays and attacks as ordinary incidents of life. Watch and ward were always kept in the little fortalice, especially when the nights were dark and misty, for there was never any saying when a party of Scottish borderers might make an attack; for the truces, so often concluded between the border wardens, had but slight effect on the prickers, as the small chieftains on both sides were called, who maintained a constant state of warfare against each other.

The Scotch forays were more frequent than those from the English side of the border; not because the people were more warlike, but because they were poorer, and depended more entirely upon plunder for their subsistence. There was but little difference of race between the peoples on the opposite side of the border. Both were largely of mixed Danish and Anglo-Saxon blood; for, when William the Conqueror carried fire and sword through Northumbria, great numbers of the inhabitants moved north, and settled in the district beyond the reach of the Norman arms.

On the English side of the border the population were, in time, leavened by Norman blood; as the estates were granted by William to his barons. These often married the heiresses of the dispossessed families, while their followers found wives among the native population.

The frequent wars with the Scots, in which every man capable of bearing arms in the Northern Counties had to take part; and the incessant border warfare, maintained a most martial spirit among the population, who considered retaliation for injuries received to be a natural and lawful act. This was, to some extent, heightened by the fact that the terms of many of the truces specifically permitted those who had suffered losses on either side to pursue their plunderers across the border. These raids were not accompanied by bloodshed, except when resistance was made; for between the people, descended as they were from a common stock, there was no active animosity, and at ordinary times there was free and friendly intercourse between them.

There were, however, many exceptions to the rule that unresisting persons were not injured. Between many families on opposite sides of the border there existed blood feuds, arising from the fact that members of one or the other had been killed in forays; and in these cases bitter and bloody reprisals were made, on either side. The very border line was ill defined, and people on one side frequently settled on the other, as is shown by the fact that several of the treaties contained provisions that those who had so moved might change their nationality, and be accounted as Scotch or Englishmen, as the case might be.

Between the Forsters and the Bairds such a feud had existed for three generations. It had begun in a raid by the latter. The Forster of that time had repulsed the attack, and had with his own hand killed one of the Bairds. Six months later he was surprised and killed on his own hearthstone, at a time when his son and most of his retainers were away on a raid. From that time the animosity between the two families had been unceasing, and several lives had been lost on both sides. The Bairds with a large party had, three months before, carried fire and sword through the district bordering on the main road, as far as Elsdon on the east, and Alwinton on the north. News of their coming had, however, preceded them. The villagers of Yardhope had just time to take refuge at Forster's hold, and had repulsed the determined attacks made upon it; until Sir Robert Umfraville brought a strong party to their assistance, and drove the Bairds back towards the frontier.

The present raid, from which the party was returning, had been organized partly to recoup those who took part in it for the loss of their cattle on that occasion, and partly to take vengeance upon the Bairds. As was the custom on both sides of the border, these expeditions were generally

composed of members of half a dozen families, with their followers; the one who was, at once, most energetic and best acquainted with the intricacies of the country, and the paths across fells and moors, being chosen as leader.

Presently, Oswald Forster saw one of the party wave his hand; and at his order four or five of the horsemen rode out, and began to drive the scattered cattle and horses towards the house. Oswald at once ran down.

"Father is all right, Mother. He has just given orders to the men, and they are driving all the animals in, so I suppose that the Bairds must be in pursuit. I had better tell the men to get on their armour."

Without waiting for an answer, he told six men, who were eating their breakfast at the farther end of the room, to make an end of their meal, and get on their steel caps and breast and back pieces, and take their places in the turret over the gate into the yard. In a few minutes the animals began to pour in, first those of the homestead, then the captured herd, weary and exhausted with their long and hurried journey; then came the master, with his followers.

Mary Forster and her son stood at the top of the steps, ready to greet him. The gate into the yard was on the opposite side to that of the doorway of the fortalice, in order that assailants who had carried it should have to pass round under the fire of the archers in the turrets, before they could attack the building itself.

She gave a little cry as her husband came up. His left arm was in a sling, his helmet was cleft through, and a bandage showed beneath it.

"Do not be afraid, wife," he said cheerily. "We have had hotter work than we expected; but, so far as I am concerned, there is no great harm done. I am sorry to say that we have lost Long Hal, and Rob Finch, and Smedley. Two or three others are sorely wounded, and I fancy few have got off altogether scatheless.

"All went well, until we stopped to wait for daybreak, three miles from Allan Baird's place. Some shepherd must have got sight of us as we halted, for we found him and his men up and ready. They had not had time, however, to drive in the cattle; and seeing that we should like enough have the Bairds swarming down upon us, before we could take Allan's place, we contented ourselves with gathering the cattle and driving them off. There were about two hundred of them.

"We went fast, but in two hours we saw the Bairds coming in pursuit; and as it was clear that they would overtake us, hampered as we were with the cattle, we stood and made defence. There was not much difference in numbers, for the Bairds had not had time to gather in all their strength. The fight was a stiff one. On our side Percy Hope was killed, and John Liddel so sorely wounded that there is no hope of his life. We had sixteen men killed outright, and few of us but are more or less scarred. On their side Allan Baird was killed; and John was smitten down, but how sorely wounded I cannot say for certain, for they put him on a horse, and took him away at once. They left twenty behind them on the ground dead; and the rest, finding that we were better men than they, rode off again.

"William Baird himself had not come up. His hold was too far for the news to have reached him, as we knew well enough; but doubtless he came up, with his following, a few hours after we had beaten his kinsmen. But we have ridden too fast for him to overtake us. We struck off north as soon as we crossed the border, travelled all night by paths by which they will find it difficult to follow or track us, especially as we broke up into four parties, and each chose their own way.

"I have driven all our cattle in, in case they should make straight here, after losing our track. Of course, there were many who fought against us who know us all well; but even were it other than the Bairds we had despoiled, they would hardly follow us so far across the border to fetch their cattle.

"As for the Bairds, the most notorious of the Scottish raiders, for them to claim the right of following would be beyond all bearing. Why, I don't believe there was a head of cattle among the whole herd that had not been born, and bred, on this side of the border. It is we who have been fetching back stolen goods."

By this time, he and his men had entered the house, and those who had gone through the fray scatheless were, assisted by the women, removing the armour from their wounded comrades. Those who had been forced to relinquish their spears were first attended to.

There was no thought of sending for a leech. Every man and woman within fifty miles of the border was accustomed to the treatment of wounds, and in every hold was a store of bandages, styptics, and unguents ready for instant use. Most of the men were very sorely wounded; and had they been of less hardy frame, and less inured to hardships, could not have supported the long ride. John Forster, before taking off his own armour, saw that their wounds were first attended to by his wife and her women.

"I think they will all do," he said, "and that they will live to strike another blow at the Bairds, yet.

"Now, Oswald, unbuckle my harness. Your mother will bandage up my arm and head, and Elspeth shall bring up a full tankard from below, for each of us. A draught of beer will do as much good as all the salves and medicaments.

"Do you take the first drink, Jock Samlen, and then go up to the watchtower. I see the men have been posted in the wall turrets. One of them shall relieve you, shortly."

As soon as the wounds were dressed, bowls of porridge were served round; then one of the men who had remained at home was posted at the lookout; and, after the cattle had been seen to, all who had been on the road stretched themselves on some rushes at one end of the room, and were, in a few minutes, sound asleep.

"I wonder whether we shall ever have peace in the land, Oswald," his mother said with a sigh; as, having seen that the women had all in readiness for the preparation of the midday meal, she sat down on a low stool, by his side.

"I don't see how we ever can have, Mother, until either we conquer Scotland, or the Scotch shall be our masters. It is not our fault. They are ever raiding and plundering, and heed not the orders of Douglas, or the other Lords of the Marches."

"We are almost as bad as they are, Oswald."

"Nay, Mother, we do but try to take back our own; as father well said, the cattle that were brought in are all English, that have been taken from us by the Bairds; and we do but pay them back in their own coin. It makes but little difference whether we are at war or peace. These reiving caterans are ever on the move. It was but last week that Adam Gordon and his bands wasted Tynedale, as far as Bellingham; and carried off, they say, two thousand head of cattle, and slew many of the people. If we did not cross the border sometimes, and give them a lesson, they would become so bold that there would be no limit to their raids."

"That is all true enough, Oswald, but it is hard that we should always require to be on the watch, and that no one within forty miles of the border can, at any time, go to sleep with the surety that he will not, ere morning, hear the raiders knocking at his gate."

"Methinks that it would be dull, were there nought to do but to look after the cattle," Oswald replied.

It seemed to him, bred up as he had been amid constant forays and excitements, that the state of things was a normal one; and that it was natural that a man should need to have his spear ever ready at hand, and to give or take hard blows.

"Besides," he went on, "though we carry off each others' cattle, and fetch them home again, we are not bad friends while the truces hold, save in the case of those who have blood feuds. It was but last week that Allan Armstrong and his two sisters were staying here with us; and I promised that, ere long, I would ride across the border and spend a week with them."

"Yes, but that makes it all the worse. Adam Armstrong married my sister Elizabeth, whom he first met at Goddington fair; and, indeed, there are few families, on either side of the border, who have not both English and Scotch blood in their veins. It is natural we should be friends, seeing how often we have held Berwick, Roxburgh, and Dumfries; and how often, in times of peace, Scotchmen

come across the border to trade at the fairs. Why should it not be so, when we speak the same tongue and, save for the border line, are one people? Though, indeed, it is different in Kirkcudbright and Wigtown, where they are Galwegians, and their tongue is scarce understood by the border Scots. 'Tis strange that those on one side of the border, and those on the other, cannot keep the peace towards each other."

"But save when the kingdoms are at war, Mother, we do keep the peace, except in the matter of cattle lifting; and bear no enmity towards each other, save when blood is shed. In wartime each must, of course, fight for his nation and as his lord orders him. We have wasted Scotland again and again, from end to end; and they have swept the Northern Counties well nigh as often.

"I have heard father say that, eight times in the last hundred years, this hold has been levelled to the ground. It only escaped, last time, because he built it so strongly of stone that they could not fire it; and it would have taken them almost as long, to pick it to pieces, as it took him to build it."

"Yes, that was when you were an infant, Oswald. When we heard the Scotch army was marching this way, we took refuge with all the cattle and horses among the Pikes; having first carried out and burnt all the forage and stores, and leaving nothing that they could set fire to. Your father has often laughed at the thought of how angry they must have been, when they found that there was no mischief that they could do; for, short of a long stay, which they never make, there was no way in which they could damage it. Ours was the only house that escaped scot free, for thirty miles round.

"But indeed, 'tis generally but parties of pillagers who trouble this part of the country, even when they invade England. There is richer booty, by far, to be gathered in Cumberland and Durham; for here we have nought but our cattle and horses, and of these they have as many on their side of the border. It is the plunder of the towns that chiefly attracts them, and while they go past here empty handed, they always carry great trains of booty on their backward way."

"Still, it would be dull work if there were no fighting, Mother."

"There is no fighting in Southern England, Oswald, save for those who go across the sea to fight the French; and yet, I suppose they find life less dull than we do. They have more to do. Here there is little tillage, the country is poor; and who would care to break up the land and to raise crops, when any night your ricks might be in flames, and your granaries plundered? Thus there is nought for us to do but to keep cattle, which need but little care and attention, and which can be driven off to the fells when the Scots make a great raid. But in the south, as I have heard, there is always much for farmers to attend to; and those who find life dull can always enter the service of some warlike lord, and follow him across the sea."

Oswald shook his head. The quiet pursuits of a farmer seemed to him to be but a poor substitute for the excitement of border war.

"It may be as you say, Mother; but for my part, I would rather enter the service of the Percys, and gain honour under their banner, than remain here day after day, merely giving aid in driving the cattle in and out, and wondering when the Bairds are coming this way, again."

His mother shook her head. Her father and two brothers had both been slain, the last time a Scottish army had crossed the border; and although she naturally did not regard constant troubles in the same light in which a southern woman would have viewed them, she still longed for peace and quiet; and was in constant fear that sooner or later the feud with the Bairds, who were a powerful family, would cost her husband his life.

Against open force she had little fear. The hold could resist an attack for days, and long ere it yielded, help would arrive; but although the watch was vigilant, and every precaution taken, it might be captured by a sudden night attack. William Baird had, she knew, sworn a great oath that Yardhope Hold should one day be destroyed; and the Forsters wiped out, root and branch. And the death of his cousin Allan, in the last raid, would surely fan the fire of his hatred against them.

"One never can say what may happen," she said, after a pause; "but if at any time evil should befall us, and you escape, remember that your uncle Alwyn is in Percy's service; and you cannot

do better than go to him, and place yourself under his protection, and act as he may advise you. I like not the thought that you should become a man-at-arms; and yet methinks that it is no more dangerous than that of a householder on the fells. At least, in a strong castle a man can sleep without fear; whereas none can say as much, here."

"If aught should happen to my father and you, Mother, you may be sure that I should share in it. The Bairds would spare no one, if they captured the hold. And although Father will not, as yet, take me with him on his forays, I should do my share of fighting, if the hold were attacked."

"I am sure that you would, Oswald; and were it captured I have no doubt that, as you say, you would share our fate. I speak not with any thought that it is likely things will turn out as I say; but they may do so, and therefore I give you my advice, to seek out your uncle. As to a capture of our hold, of that I have generally but little fear; but the fact that your father has been wounded, and three of his men killed, and that another Baird has fallen, has brought the possibility that it may happen more closely to my mind, this morning, than usual.

"Now, my boy, you had best spend an hour in cleaning up your father's armour and arms. The steel cap must go to the armourer at Alwinton, for repair; but you can get some of the dints out of his breast and back pieces, and can give them a fresh coat of black paint;" for the borderers usually darkened their armour so that, in their raids, their presence should not be betrayed by the glint of sun or moon upon them.

Oswald at once took up the armour, and went down the steps into the courtyard, so that the sound of his hammer should not disturb the sleepers. As, with slight but often repeated blows, he got out the dents that had been made in the fray, he thought over what his mother had been saying. To him also the death of three of the men, who had for years been his companions, came as a shock. It was seldom, indeed, that the forays for cattle lifting had such serious consequences. As a rule they were altogether bloodless; and it was only because of the long feud with the Bairds, and the fact that some warning of the coming of the party had, in spite of their precaution, reached Allan Baird; that on the present occasion such serious results had ensued.

Had it not been for this, the cattle would have been driven off without resistance, for Allan Baird's own household would not have ventured to attack so strong a party. No attempt would have been made to assault his hold; for he had often heard his father say that, even in the case of a blood feud, he held that houses should not be attacked, and their occupants slain. If both parties met under arms the matter was different; but that, in spite of the slaying of his own father by them, he would not kill even a Baird on his hearthstone.

Still, a Baird had been killed, and assuredly William Baird would not be deterred by any similar scruples. His pitiless ferocity was notorious, and even his own countrymen cried out against some of his deeds, and the Earl of Douglas had several times threatened to hand him over to the English authorities; but the Bairds were powerful, and could, with their allies, place four or five hundred men in the field; and, in the difficult country in which they lived, could have given a great deal of trouble, even to Douglas. Therefore nothing had come of his threats, and the Bairds had continued to be the terror of that part of the English border that was the most convenient for their operations.

Oswald was now past sixteen, and promised to be as big a man as his father, who was a fine specimen of the hardy Northumbrian race–tall, strong, and sinewy. He had felt hurt when his father had refused to allow him to take part in the foray.

"Time enough, lad, time enough," he had said, when the lad had made his petition to do so. "You are not strong enough, yet, to hold your own against one of the Bairds' moss troopers, should it come to fighting. In another couple of years it will be time enough to think of your going on such an excursion as this. You are clever with your arms, I will freely admit; as you ought to be, seeing that you practise for two hours a day with the men. But strength counts as well as skill, and you want both when you ride against the Bairds; besides, at present you have still much to learn about the paths

through the fells, and across the morasses. If you are ever to become a leader, you must know them well enough to traverse them on the darkest night, or through the thickest mist."

"I think that I do know most of them, Father."

"Yes, I think you do, on this side of the border; but you must learn those on the other side, as well. They are, indeed, of even greater importance in case of pursuit, or for crossing the border unobserved. Hitherto, I have forbidden you to cross the line, but in future Mat Wilson shall go with you. He knows the Scotch passes and defiles, better than any in the band; and so that you don't go near the Bairds' country, you can traverse them safely, so long as the truce lasts."

For years, indeed, Oswald, on one of the hardy little horses, had ridden over the country in company with one or other of the men; and had become familiar with every morass, moor, fell, and pass, down to the old Roman wall to the south, and as far north as Wooler, being frequently absent for three or four days at a time. He had several times ridden into Scotland, to visit the Armstrongs and other friends of the family; but he had always travelled by the roads, and knew nothing of the hill paths on that side. His life had, in fact, been far from dull, for they had many friends and connections in the villages at the foot of the Cheviots, and he was frequently away from home.

His journeys were generally performed on horseback, but his father encouraged him to take long tramps on foot, in order that he might strengthen his muscles; and would, not infrequently, give him leave to pay visits on condition that he travelled on foot, instead of in the saddle.

Constant exercise in climbing, riding, and with his weapons; and at wrestling and other sports, including the bow, had hardened every muscle of his frame, and he was capable of standing any fatigues; and although his father said that he could not hold his own against men, he knew that the lad could do so against any but exceptionally powerful ones; and believed that, when the time came, he would, like himself, be frequently chosen as leader in border forays. He could already draw the strongest bow to the arrowhead, and send a shaft with a strength that would suffice to pierce the light armour worn by the Scotch borderers. It was by the bow that the English gained the majority of their victories over their northern neighbours; who did not take to the weapon, and were unable to stand for a moment against the English archers, who not only loved it as a sport, but were compelled by many ordinances to practise with it from their childhood.

Of other education he had none, but in this respect he was no worse off than the majority of the knights and barons of the time, who were well content to trust to monkish scribes to draw up such documents as were required, and to affix their seal to them. He himself had once, some six years before, expressed a wish to be sent for a year to the care of the monks at Rothbury, whose superior was a distant connection of his father, in order to be taught to read and write; but John Forster had scoffed at the idea.

"You have to learn to be a man, lad," he had said, "and the monks will never teach you that. I do not know one letter from another, nor did my father, or any of my forebears, and we were no worse for it. On the marches, unless a man means to become a monk, he has to learn to make his sword guard his head, to send an arrow straight to the mark, to know every foot of the passes, and to be prepared, at the order of his lord, to defend his country against the Scots.

"These are vastly more important matters than reading and writing; which are, so far as I can see, of no use to any fair man, whose word is his bond, and who deals with honest men. I can reckon up, if I sell so many cattle, how much has to be paid, and more of learning than that I want not. Nor do you, and every hour spent on it would be as good as wasted. As to the monks, Heaven forfend that you should ever become one. They are good men, I doubt not, and I suppose that it is necessary that some should take to it; but that a man who has the full possession of his limbs should mew himself up, for life, between four walls, passing his time in vigils and saying masses, in reading books and distributing alms, seems to me to be a sort of madness."

"I certainly do not wish to become a monk, Father, but I thought that I should like to learn to read and write."

"And when you have learnt it, what then, Oswald? Books are expensive playthings, and no scrap of writing has ever been inside the walls of Yardhope Hold, since it was first built here, as far as I know. As to writing, it would be of still less use. If a man has a message to send, he can send it by a hired man, if it suits him not to ride himself. Besides, if he had written it, the person he sent it to would not be able to read it, and would have to go to some scribe for an interpretation of its contents.

"No, no, my lad, you have plenty to learn before you come to be a man, without bothering your head with this monkish stuff. I doubt if Hotspur, himself, can do more than sign his name to a parchment; and what is good enough for the Percys, is surely good enough for you."

The idea had, in fact, been put into Oswald's head by his mother. At that time the feud with the Bairds had burned very hotly, and it would have lessened her anxieties had the boy been bestowed, for a time, in a convent. Oswald himself felt no disappointment at his father's refusal to a petition that he would never have made, had not his mother dilated to him, on several occasions, upon the great advantage of learning.

No thought of repeating the request had ever entered his mind. His father had thought more of it, and had several times expressed grave regret, to his wife, over such an extraordinary wish having occurred to their son.

"The boy has nothing of a milksop about him," he said; "and is, for his age, full of spirit and courage. How so strange an idea could have occurred to him is more than I can imagine. I should as soon expect to see an owlet, in a sparrow hawk's nest, as a monk hatched in Yardhope Hold."

His wife discreetly kept silence as to the fact that she, herself, had first put the idea in the boy's head; for although Mary Forster was mistress inside of the hold, in all other matters John was masterful, and would brook no meddling, even by her. The subject, therefore, of Oswald's learning to read and write, was never renewed.

Chapter 2: Across The Border

A most vigilant watch was kept up, for the next week, at Yardhope Hold. At night, three or four of the troopers were posted four or five miles from the hold, on the roads by which an enemy was likely to come; having under them the fleetest horses on the moor. When a week passed there was some slight relaxation in the watch, for it was evident that the Bairds intended to bide their time for a stroke, knowing well that they would not be likely to be able to effect a surprise, at present. The outlying posts were, therefore, no longer maintained; but the dogs of the hold, fully a dozen in number, were chained nightly in a circle three or four hundred yards outside it; and their barking would, at once, apprise the watchers in the turrets on the walls of the approach of any body of armed men.

Two days later, Oswald started for his promised visit to the Armstrongs. It was not considered necessary that he should be accompanied by any of the troopers, for Hiniltie lay but a few miles across the frontier. In high spirits he galloped away and, riding through Yardhope, was soon at Alwinton; and thence took the track through Kidland Lee, passed round the head of the Usmay brook, along the foot of Maiden Cross Hill, and crossed the frontier at Windy Guile. Here he stood on the crest of the Cheviots and, descending, passed along at the foot of Windburgh Hill; and by noon entered the tiny hamlet of Hiniltie, above which, perched on one of the spurs of the hill, stood the Armstrongs' hold. It was smaller than that of Yardhope, and had no surrounding wall; but, like it, was built for defence against a sudden attack.

Adam Armstrong was on good terms with his neighbours across the border. Although other members of his family were frequently engaged in forays, it was seldom, indeed, that he buckled on armour, and only when there was a general call to arms. He was, however, on bad terms with the Bairds, partly because his wife was a sister of Forster's, partly because of frays that had arisen between his herdsmen and those of the Bairds, for his cattle wandered far and wide on the mountain slopes to the south, and sometimes passed the ill-defined line, beyond which the Bairds regarded the country as their own. Jedburgh was but ten miles away, Hawick but six or seven, and any stay after the sun rose would speedily have brought strong bodies of men from these towns, as well as from his still nearer neighbours, at Chester, Abbotrule, and Hobkirk.

Oswald's approach was seen, and two of his cousins–Allan, who was a lad of about the same age, and Janet, a year younger–ran out from the house to meet him.

"We have been expecting you for the last ten days," the former exclaimed, "and had well nigh given you up."

"I hold you to be a laggard," the girl added, "and unless you can duly excuse yourself, shall have naught to say to you."

"My excuse is a good one, Janet. My father made a foray, a fortnight since, into the Bairds' country, to rescue some of the cattle they had driven off from our neighbours, some days before. There was a sharp fight, and Allan Baird was killed; and since then we have been expecting a return visit from them, and have been sleeping with our arms beside us. Doubtless they will come someday, but as it is evident they don't mean to come at present, my father let me leave."

"In that case we must forgive you," the girl said. "Some rumours of the fray have reached us, and my father shook his head gravely, when he heard that another Baird had been killed by the Forsters."

"It was not only us," Oswald replied. "There were some of the Liddels, and the Hopes, and other families, engaged. My father was chosen as chief; but this time it was not our quarrel, but theirs, for we had lost no cattle, and my father only joined because they had aided us last time, and he could not hold back now. Of course, he was chosen as chief because he knows the country so well."

"Well, come in, Oswald. It is poor hospitality to keep you talking here, outside the door."

A boy had already taken charge of Oswald's horse and, after unstrapping his valise, had led it to a stable that formed the basement of the house.

"Well, laddie, how fares it with you, at home?" Adam Armstrong said, heartily, as they mounted the steps to the main entrance. "We have heard of your wild doings with the Bairds. 'Tis a pity that these feuds should go on, from father to son, ever getting more and more bitter. But there, we can no more change a borderer's nature than you can stop the tide in the Solway. I hear that it was well nigh a pitched battle."

"There was hard fighting," Oswald replied. "Three of our troopers, and eight or ten of the others were killed. My father was twice wounded, one of the Hopes was killed, and a Liddel severely wounded. But from what they say, the Bairds suffered more. Had they not done so, there would have been a hot pursuit; but as far as we know there was none."

"The Bairds will bide their time," Armstrong said gravely. "They are dour men, and will take their turn, though they wait ten years for it."

"At any rate they won't catch us sleeping, Uncle; and come they however strong they may, they will find it hard work to capture the Hold."

"Ay, ay, lad, but I don't think they will try to knock their heads against your wall. They are more like to sweep down on a sudden, and your watchman will need keen eyes to make them out before they are thundering at the gate, or climbing up the wall. However, your father knows his danger, and it is of no use talking more of it. What is done is done."

"And how is your mother, Oswald?" Mistress Armstrong asked.

"She is well, Aunt, and bade me give her love to you."

"Truly I wonder she keeps her health, with all these troubles and anxieties. We had hoped that, after the meeting last March of the Commissioners on both sides, when the Lords of the Marches plighted their faith to each other, and agreed to surrender all prisoners without ransom, and to forgive all offenders, we should have had peace on the border. As you know, there were but three exceptions named; namely Adam Warden, William Baird, and Adam French, whom the Scotch Commissioners bound themselves to arrest, and to hand over to the English Commissioners, to be tried as being notorious truce breakers, doing infinite mischief to the dwellers on the English side of the border. And yet nothing has come of it, and these men still continue to make their raids, without check or hindrance, either by the Earl of March or Douglas."

"There are faults on both sides, wife," her husband said.

"I do not deny it, gudeman; but I have often heard you say these three men are the pests of the border; and that, were it not for them, things might go on reasonably enough, for no one counts a few head of cattle lifted, now and again. It is bad enough that, every two or three years, armies should march across the border, one way or the other; but surely we might live peaceably, between times. Did not I nearly lose you at Otterburn, and had you laid up on my hands, for well-nigh six months?"

"Ay, that was a sore day, for both sides."

"Will you tell me about it, Uncle?" Oswald asked. "My father cares not much to talk of it; and though I know that he fought there, he has never told me the story of the battle."

"We are just going to sit down to dinner, now," Adam Armstrong said, "and the story is a long one; but after we have done, I will tell you of it. Your father need not feel so sore about it; for, since the days of the Bruce, you have had as many victories to count as we have."

After dinner, however, Armstrong had to settle a dispute between two of his tenants, as to grazing rights; and it was not until evening that he told his story.

"In 1388 there were all sorts of troubles in England, and France naturally took advantage of them, and recommenced hostilities, and we prepared to share in the game. Word was sent round privately, and every man was bidden to gather, in Jedburgh forest. I tell you, lad, I went with a heavy heart, for although men of our name have the reputation of being as quarrelsome fellows as any that dwell on the border, I am an exception, and love peace and quiet; moreover, the children were but young, and I saw that the fight would be a heavy business, and I did not like leaving them, and their mother. However, there was no help for it, and we gathered there, over 40,000 strong. The main

body marched away into Cumberland; but Douglas, March, and Moray, with 300 spears and 2000 footmen, including many an Armstrong, entered Northumberland.

"We marched without turning to the right or left, or staying to attack town, castle, or house, till we crossed the river Tyne and entered Durham. Then we began the war; burning, ravaging, and slaying. I liked it not, for although when it comes to fighting I am ready, if needs be, to bear my part, I care not to attack peaceful people. It is true that your kings have, over and over again, laid waste half Scotland; killing, slaying, and hanging; but it does not seem to me any satisfaction, because some twenty of my ancestors have been murdered, to slay twenty people who were not born until long afterwards, and whose forbears, for aught I know, may have had no hand in the slaughter of mine.

"However, having laden ourselves with plunder from Durham, we sat down for three days before Newcastle, where we had some sharp skirmishes with Sir Henry and his brother, Sir Ralph Percy; and in one of these captured Sir Henry's pennant.

"Then we marched away to Otterburn, after receiving warning from Percy that he intended to win his pennant back again, before we left Northumberland. We attacked Otterburn Castle, but failed to carry it, for it was strong and well defended. There was a council that night, and most of the leaders were in favour of retiring at once to Scotland, with the abundance of spoil that we had gained. But Douglas persuaded them to remain two or three days, and to capture the castle, and not to go off as if afraid of Percy's threats. So we waited all the next day; and at night the Percys, with 600 spears and 8000 infantry, came up. Our leaders had not been idle, for they had examined the ground carefully, and arranged how the battle should be fought, if we were attacked.

"Having heard nothing of the English, all day, we lay down to sleep, not expecting to hear aught of them until the morning. It was a moonlight night, and being in August, there was but a short darkness between the twilights; and the English, arriving, at once made an attack, falling first on the servants' huts, which they took for those of the chiefs. This gave us time to form up in good order, as we had lain down each in his proper position.

"A portion of the force went down to skirmish with the English in front, but the greater portion marched along the mountain side, and fell suddenly upon the English flank. At first there was great confusion; but the English, being more numerous, soon recovered their order and pushed us back, though not without much loss on both sides.

"Douglas shouted his battle cry, advanced his banner, fighting most bravely; as did Sir Patrick Hepburn, but for whose bravery the Douglas banner would have been taken, for the Percys, hearing the cry of 'a Douglas! a Douglas!' pressed to that part of the field, and bore us backwards. I was in the midst of it, with ten of my kinsmen; and though we all fought as became men, we were pressed back, and began to think that the day would be lost.

"Then the young earl, furious at seeing disaster threaten him, dashed into the midst of the English ranks, swinging his battle-axe and, for a time, cutting a way for himself. But one man's strength and courage can go for but little in such a fray. Some of his knights and squires had followed him, but in the darkness it was but few who perceived his advance.

"Presently three knights met him, and all their spears pierced him, and he was borne from his horse, mortally wounded. Happily the English were unaware that it was Douglas who had fallen. Had they known it, their courage would have been mightily raised, and the day would assuredly have been lost. We, too, were ignorant that Douglas had fallen, and still fought on.

"In other parts of the field March and Moray were holding their own bravely. Sir Ralph Percy, who had, like Douglas, charged almost alone into Moray's ranks, was sorely wounded and, being surrounded, surrendered to Sir John Maxwell. Elsewhere many captures were made by both parties; but as the fight went on the advantage turned to our side; for we had rested all the day before, and began the battle fresh, after some hours of sleep; while the English had marched eight leagues, and were weary when they began the fight.

"Sir James Lindsay and Sir Walter Sinclair, with some other knights who had followed Douglas, found him still alive. With his last words he ordered them to raise his banner, and to shout 'Douglas!' so that friends and foes should think that he was of their party. These instructions they followed. We and others pressed forwards, on hearing the shout; and soon, a large party being collected, resumed the battle at this point. Moray and March both bore their arrays in the direction where they believed Douglas to be battling, and so, together, we pressed upon the English so hardly that they retreated, and for five miles we pursued them very hotly. Very many prisoners were taken, but all of quality were at once put to ransom, and allowed to depart on giving their knightly word of payment within fifteen days.

"It was a great victory, and in truth none of us well knew how it had come about, for the English had fought as well and valiantly as we did ourselves; but it is ill for wearied men to fight against fresh ones. Never was I more surprised than when we found that the battle, which for a time had gone mightily against us, was yet won in the end. Methinks that it was, to a great extent, due to the fact that each Englishman fought for himself; while we, having on the previous day received the strictest orders to fight each man under his leader, to hold together, and to obey orders in all respects, kept in our companies; and so, in the end, gained the day against a foe as brave, and much more numerous, than ourselves."

"Thank you, Uncle Armstrong. I have often wondered how it was that the Percys, being three to one against you, were yet defeated; fighting on their own ground, as it were. 'Tis long, indeed, since we suffered so great a reverse."

"That is true enough, Oswald. In the days of Wallace and Bruce, we Scots often won battles with long odds against us; but that was because we fought on foot, and the English for the most part on horseback–a method good enough on an open plain, but ill fitted for a land of morass and hill, like Scotland. Since the English also took to fighting on foot, the chances have been equal; and we have repulsed invasions not so much by force, as by falling back, and so wasting the country that the English had but the choice of retreating or starving.

"There is reason, indeed, why, when equal forces are arrayed against each other, the chances should also be equal; for we are come of the same stock, and the men of the northern marches of England, and those of Scotland, are alike hardy and accustomed to war. Were we but a united people, as you English are, methinks that there would never have been such constant wars between us; for English kings would not have cared to have invaded a country where they would find but little spoil, and have hard work to take it. But our nobles have always been ready to turn traitors. They are mostly of Norman blood and Norman name, and no small part of them have estates in England, as well as in Scotland. Hence it is that our worst enemies have always been in our midst.

"And now it is time for bed, or you will be heavy in the morning; and I know that you intend starting at dawn, with the dogs, and have promised to bring in some hares for dinner."

Not only Oswald and Allan, but Janet also was afoot early; and, after taking a basin of porridge, started for the hills, accompanied by four dogs. They carried with them bows and arrows, in case the dogs should drive the hares within shot.

Six hours later they returned, carrying with them five hares and a brace of birds. These had both fallen to Oswald's bow, being shot while on the ground; for in those days the idea that it was unsportsmanlike to shoot game, except when flying, was unknown.

For a week they went out every day, sometimes with the dogs, but more often with hawks; which were trained to fly, not only at birds in their flight, but at hares, on whose heads they alighted, pecking them and beating them so fiercely with their wings, that they gave time for the party on foot to run up, and despatch the quarry with an arrow.

Once or twice they accompanied Adam Armstrong, when he rode to some of the towns in the neighbourhood, and spent the day with friends of the Armstrongs there. For a fortnight, the time

passed very pleasantly to the English lad; but, at the end of that time, Adam Armstrong returned from a visit to Jedburgh with a grave face.

"I have news," he said, "that your King Richard has been deposed; that Henry, the Duke of Lancaster, having landed in Yorkshire, was joined by Percy and the Earl of Westmoreland, and has been proclaimed king. This will cause great troubles in England, for surely there must be many there who will not tamely see a king dethroned by treasonable practices; and another, having no just title to the crown, promoted to his place.

"Such a thing is contrary to all reason and justice. A king has the same right to his crown as a noble to his estates, and none may justly take them away, save for treasonable practices; and a king cannot commit treason against himself. Therefore it is like that there will be much trouble in England, and I fear that there is no chance of the truce that concludes, at the end of this month, being continued.

"The fact that the two great northern lords of England are both, with their forces, in the south will further encourage trouble; and the peace that, with small intermissions, has continued since the battle of Otterburn, is like to be broken. Therefore, my lad, I think it best that you should cut short your visit, by a week, and you shall return and finish it when matters have settled down.

"Here in Scotland we are not without troubles. Ill blood has arisen between March and Douglas, owing to the Duke of Ramsay breaking his promise to marry the Earl of March's daughter, and taking Douglas's girl to wife. This, too, has sorely angered one more powerful than either Douglas or March– I mean, of course, Albany, who really exercises the kingly power.

"But troubles in Scotland will in no way prevent war from breaking out with England. On the contrary, the quarrel between the two great lords of our marches will cause them to loose their hold of the border men, and I foresee that we shall have frays and forays among ourselves again, as in the worst times of old. Therefore, it were best that you went home. While these things are going on, the private friendship between so many families on either side of the border must be suspended, and all intercourse; for maybe every man on either side will be called to arms, and assuredly it will not be safe for one of either nation to set foot across the border, save armed, and with a strong clump of spears at his back."

"I shall be sorry, indeed, to go," Oswald said, "but I see that if troubles do, as you fear, break out at the conclusion of the peace, a fortnight hence–"

"They may not wait for that," Adam Armstrong interrupted him. "A truce is only a truce so long as there are those strong enough to enforce it, and with Douglas and March at variance on our side, and Northumberland and Westmoreland absent on yours, there are none to see that the truce is not broken; and from what I hear, it may not be many days before we see the smoke of burning houses rising, upon either side of the border."

"The more reason for my going home," Oswald said. "My father is not likely to be last in a fray, and assuredly he would not like me to be away across the border when swords are drawn. I am very sorry, but I see that there is no help for it; and tomorrow, at daybreak, I will start for home."

That evening was the dullest Oswald had spent, during his visit. The prospect that the two nations might soon be engaged in another desperate struggle saddened the young cousins, who felt that a long time might elapse before they again met; and that in the meantime their fathers, and possibly themselves, might be fighting in opposite ranks. Although the breaches of the truces caused, as a rule, but little bloodshed, being in fact but cattle lifting expeditions, it was very different in time of war, when wholesale massacres took place on both sides, towns and villages were burned down, and the whole of the inhabitants put to the sword. Ten years had sufficed to soften the memory of these events, especially among young people, but each had heard numberless stories of wrong and slaughter, and felt that, when war once again broke out in earnest, there was little hope that there would be any change in the manner in which it would be conducted.

Oswald rode rapidly, until he had crossed the border. The truce would not expire for another thirteen days, but the raiders might be at work at any moment; for assuredly there would be no chance

of complaints being made, on the eve of recommencement of general hostilities. He met no one on the road, until he reached the first hamlet on the English side. Here he stopped to give his horse half an hour's rest, and a feed. As he dismounted, two or three of the villagers came up.

"Have you heard aught, lad, of any gatherings on the other side of the border?"

"None from where I came; but there was a talk that notices had been sent, through the southern Scottish marches, for all to be in readiness to gather to the banner without delay, when the summons was received."

"That is what we have heard," a man said. "We have made everything in readiness to drive off our cattle to the fells; the beacons are all prepared for lighting, from Berwick down to Carlisle; and assuredly the Scotch will find little, near the border, to carry back with them.

"You are the son of stout John Forster of Yardhope Keep, are you not? I saw you riding by his side, two months since, at Alwinton fair."

"Yes, I was there with him."

"He will have hot work, if a Scotch army marches into Tynedale. The Bairds will be sure to muster strongly, and they won't forgive the last raid on them; and whichever way they go, you may be sure that your father's hold will receive a visit."

"It was but a return raid," Oswald said. "The Bairds had been down our way, but a short time before, and lifted all the cattle and horses that they could lay hands on, for miles round."

"That is true enough. We all know the thieving loons. But men remember the injuries they have suffered, better than those they have inflicted; and they will count Allan Baird's death as more than a set-off for a score of their own forays."

"If we have only the Bairds to settle with, we can hold our walls against them," Oswald said; "but if the whole of the Scotch army come our way, we must do as you are doing, drive the cattle to the hills, and leave them to do what harm they can to the stone walls, which they will find it hard work to damage."

"Aye, I have heard that they are stronger than ordinary; and so they need be, seeing that you have a blood feud with the Bairds. Well, they are not like to have much time to waste over it, for our sheriff has already sent word here, as to the places where we are to gather when the beacon fires are lighted; and you may be sure that the Percys will lose no time in marching against them, with all their array; and the Scots are like to find, as they have found before, that it is an easier thing to cross the border than it is to get back."

Late that evening, Oswald returned home. After the first greetings, his father said:

"It is high time that you were back, Oswald. Rumour is busy, all along the border; but for myself, though I doubt not that their moss troopers will be on the move, as soon as the truce ends, I think there will not be any invasion in force, for some little time. The great lords of the Scotch marches are ill friends with each other; and, until the quarrel between Douglas and Dunbar is patched up, neither will venture to march his forces into England. It may be months, yet, before we see their pennons flying on English soil.

"My brother Alwyn has been over here, for a day or two, since you were away. The Percys are down south, so he was free to ride over here. He wants us to send you to him, without loss of time. He says that there is a vacancy in Percy's household, owing to one of his esquires being made a knight, and a page has been promoted to an esquireship. He said that he spoke to Hotspur, before he went south, anent the matter; and asked him to enroll you, not exactly as a page, but as one who, from his knowledge of the border, would be a safe and trusty messenger to send, in case of need. As he has served the Percys for thirty years, and for ten has been the captain of their men-at-arms; and has never asked for aught, either for himself or his relations, Percy gave him a favourable answer; and said that if, on his return, he would present you to him, and he found that you were a lad of manners that would be suitable for a member of his household, he would grant his request; partly, too, because

my father and myself had always been stanch men, and ready at all times to join his banner, when summoned, and to fight doughtily. So there seems a good chance of preferment for you.

"Your mother is willing that you should go. She says, and truly enough, that if you stay here it will be but to engage, as I and my forebears have done, in constant feuds with the Scots; harrying and being harried, never knowing, when we lie down to rest, but that we may be woke up by the battle shout of the Bairds; and leaving behind us, when we die, no more than we took from our fathers.

"I know not how your own thoughts may run in the matter, Oswald, but methinks that there is much in what she says; though, for myself, I wish for nothing better than what I am accustomed to. Percy would have knighted me had I wished it, years ago; but plain Jock Forster I was born, and so will I die when my time comes; for it would alter my condition in no way, save that as Jock Forster I can lead a raid across the border, but as Sir John Forster it would be hardly seemly for me to do so, save when there is open war between the countries.

"It is different, in your case; You are young, and can fit yourself to another mode of life; and can win for yourself, with your sword, a better fortune than you will inherit from me. Besides, lad, I am like enough, unless a Baird spear finishes me sooner, to live another thirty years yet; and it is always sure to lead to trouble, if there are two cocks in one farmyard. You would have your notions as to how matters should be done, and I should have mine; and so, for many reasons, it is right that you should go out into the world. If matters go well with you, all the better; if not, you will always be welcome back here, and will be master when I am gone.

"What say you?"

"It comes suddenly upon me, Father; but, as I have always thought that I should like to see something of the world beyond our own dales, I would gladly, for a time at least, accept my uncle's offer; which is a rare one, and far beyond my hopes. I should be sorry to leave you and my mother but, save for that it seems to me, as to you, that it would be best for me to go out into the world, for a time."

"Then that is settled, and tomorrow you shall ride to Alnwick and see, at any rate, if aught comes of the matter.

"Do not cry, Wife. It is your counsel that I am acting upon, and you have told me you are sure that it is best that he should go. It is not as if he were taking service with a southern lord. He will be but a day's ride away from us, and doubtless will be able to come over, at times, and stay a day or two with us; and once a year, when times are peaceable, you shall ride behind me, on a pillion, to see how things go with him at the Percys' castle. At any rate it will be better, by far, than if he had carried out that silly fancy of his, for putting himself in the hands of the monks and learning to read and write; which would, perchance, have ended in his shaving his crown and taking to a cowl, and there would have been an end of the Forsters of Yardhope.

"Now, put that cold joint upon the table, again. Doubtless the lad has a wolf's appetite."

There was no time lost. The next day was spent in looking out his clothes and packing his valise, by his mother; while he rode round the country, to say goodbye to some of his friends. The next morning, at daybreak, he started; and, at nightfall, rode into the castle of Alnwick, and inquired for Alwyn Forster. The two men-at-arms, who had regarded his appearance, on his shaggy border horse, with scarce concealed contempt; at once answered, civilly, that the captain would be found in his room, in the north turret. They then pointed out to him the stables, where he could bestow his horse; and, having seen some hay placed before it, and a feed of barley, to which the animal was but little accustomed, Oswald made his way up the turret, to the room in which his uncle lodged.

The stately castle, and the beauty, as well as the strength, of the Percys' great stronghold, had in no small degree surprised, and almost awed the lad, accustomed only to the rough border holds. It was situated on rising ground, on the river Aln; and consisted of a great keep, which dated back to the times of the Saxons; and three courts, each of which were, indeed, separate fortresses, the embattled gates being furnished with portcullises and strong towers. Within the circuit of its walls, it contained some five acres of ground, with sixteen towers, the outer wall being surrounded by a moat.

The Percys were descended from a Danish chief, who was one of the conquerors of Normandy, and settled there. The Percy of the time came over with William the Norman, and obtained from him the gift of large possessions in the south of England, and in Yorkshire; and, marrying a great Saxon heiress, added to his wide lands in the north.

One of the Percys, in the reign of Henry the Second, made a journey to Jerusalem, and died in the Holy Land. None of his four sons survived him. His eldest daughter Maud married the Earl of Warwick; but, dying childless, her sister Agnes became sole heir to the broad lands of the Percys. She married the son of the Duke of Brabant, the condition of her marriage being that he should either take the arms of the Percys, instead of his own; or continue to bear his own arms, and take the name of Percy. He chose the latter alternative. Their son was one of the barons who forced King John to grant the Magna Carta.

The Percys always distinguished themselves, in the wars against the Scot; and received, at various times, grants of territory in that country; one of them being made Earl of Carrick, when Robert the Bruce raised the standard of revolt against England.

Upon the other hand, they not unfrequently took a share in risings against the Kings of England; and their estates were confiscated, for a time, by their taking a leading part in the action against Piers Gaveston, the royal favourite.

It was in the reign of Henry the Second that the Percy of the time obtained, by purchase, the Barony of Alnwick; which from that date became the chief seat of the family. The present earl was the first of the rank, having been created by Richard the Second. He was one of the most powerful nobles in England, and it was at his invitation that Henry of Lancaster had come over from France, and had been placed on the throne by the Percys, and some other of the northern nobles; and, as a reward for his service, the earl was created High Constable of England.

Chapter 3: At Alnwick

"You are rarely changed, Oswald," his uncle said, as the lad entered his apartment. "'Tis three years since I last saw you, and you have shot up nigh a head, since then. I should not have known you, had I met you in the street; but as I was expecting you, it is easy to recall your features. I made sure that you would come; for, although your father was at first averse to my offer, I soon found that your mother was on my side, and I know that, in the long run, my brother generally gives in to her wishes; and I was sure that, as you were a lad of spirit, you would be glad to try a flight from home.

"You are growing up mightily like your father, and promise to be as big and as strong as we both are. Your eyes speak of a bold disposition, and my brother tells me that you are already well practised with your arms.

"You understand that it is Sir Henry, whom they call Hotspur, that you are to serve. As to the earl, he is too great a personage for me to ask a favour from, but Sir Henry is different. I taught him the first use of his arms, and many a bout have I had with him. He treats me as a comrade, rather than as the captain of his father's men-at-arms, here; and when I spoke to him about you, he said at once:

"'Bring him here, and we will see what we can do for him. If he is a fellow of parts and discretion, I doubt not that we can make him useful. You say he knows every inch of our side of the border, and something of the Scottish side of it, his mother's sister being married to one of the Armstrongs. There is like to be trouble before long. You know the purpose for which I am going away; and the Scots are sure to take advantage of changes in England, and a youth who can ride, and knows the border, and can, if needs be, strike a blow in self defence, will not have to stay idle in the castle long. His father is a stout withstander of the Scots, and the earl would have given him knighthood, if he would have taken it; and maybe, in the future, the son will win that honour. He is too old for a page, and I should say too little versed in our ways for such a post; but I promise you that, when he is old enough, he shall be one of my esquires.'

"So you may soon have an opportunity of showing Hotspur what you are made of. And now, I doubt not that you are hungry. I will send down to the buttery, for a couple of tankards and a pasty. I had my supper two hours ago, but I doubt not that I can keep you company in another."

He went to the window, and called out, "John Horn!"

The name was repeated below, and in two minutes a servant came up. The captain gave him directions, and they shortly sat down to a substantial meal.

"The first thing to do, lad, will be to get you garments more suitable to the Percys' castle than those you have on; they are good enough to put on under armour, or when you ride in a foray; but here, one who would ride in the train of the Percys must make a brave show. It is curfew, now; but tomorrow, early, we will sally into the town, where we shall find a good choice of garments, for men of all conditions. You hold yourself well, and you have something of your mother's softness of speech; and will, I think, make a good impression on Sir Henry, when suitably clad.

"You see, there are many sons of knights, of good repute and standing, who would be glad, indeed, that their sons should obtain a post in Hotspur's personal following; and who might grumble, were they passed over in favour of one who, by his appearance, was of lower condition than themselves.

"John Forster is well known, on the border, as a valiant fighter, and a leading man in Coquetdale. It is known, too, that he might have been knighted, had he chosen; and doubtless there are many who, having heard that his hold is one of the strongest on the border, give him credit for having far wider possessions than that bit of moor round the hold, and grazing rights for miles beyond it. If, then, you make a brave show, none will question the choice that Hotspur may make; but were you to appear in that garb you have on, they might well deem that your father is, after all, but a moss trooper.

"He told me that you had, once, a fancy to learn to read and write. What put that idea into your head? I do not say that it was not a good one, but at least it was a strange one, for a lad brought up as you have been."

"I think, Uncle, that it was rather my mother's idea than my own; she thought that it might conduce to my advancement, should I ever leave the hold and go out into the world."

"She was quite right, Oswald; and 'tis a pity that you did not go, for a couple of years, to a monastery. It is a good thing to be able to read an order, or to write one, for many of the lords and knights can do no more than make a shift to sign their names. As for books I say nothing, for I see not what manner of good they are; but father Ernulf, who is chaplain here, tells me that one who gives his mind to it can, in a year, learn enough to write down, not in a clerkly hand, but in one that can be understood, any letter or order his lord may wish sent, or to read for him any that he receives.

"In most matters, doubtless, an order by word of mouth is just as good as one writ on vellum; but there are times when a messenger could not be trusted to deliver one accurately, as he receives it; or it might have to be passed on, from hand to hand. Otherwise, a spoken message is the best; for if a messenger be killed on the way, none are the wiser as to the errand on which he is going; while, if a parchment is found on him, the first priest or monk can translate its purport.

"The chaplain has two younger priests with him; and, should you be willing, I doubt not that one of these would give you instruction, for an hour or two of a day. The Percys may not be back for another month or two, and if you apply yourself to it honestly, you might learn something by that time."

"I should like it very much, Uncle."

"Then, so it shall be, lad. For two or three hours a day you must practise in arms–I have some rare swordsmen among my fellows–but for the rest of the time, you will be your own master. I will speak with father Ernulf, in the morning, after we have seen to the matter of your garments."

A straw pallet was brought up to the chamber; and, after chatting for half an hour about his visit to the Armstrongs, Oswald took off his riding boots and jerkin, the total amount of disrobing usual at that time on the border, and was soon asleep.

"I am afraid, Uncle," he said in the morning, "that the furnishment of the purse my father gave me, at starting, will not go far towards what you may consider necessary for my outfit."

"That need not trouble you at all, lad. I told your father I should take all charges upon myself, having no children of my own, and no way to spend my money; therefore I can afford well to do as I like towards you. Once the war begins, you will fill your purse yourself; for although the peoples of the towns and villages suffer by the Scotch incursions, we men-at-arms profit by a war. We have nought that they can take from us, but our lives, while we take our share of the booty, and have the ransom of any knights or gentlemen we may make prisoners."

Accordingly they went into Alnwick, and Alwyn Forster bought for his nephew several suits of clothes, suitable for a young gentleman of good family; together with armour, of much more modern fashion than that to which Oswald was accustomed. When they returned to the castle, the lad was told to put on one of these suits, at once.

"Make your old ones up in a bundle," his uncle said. "There may be occasions when you may find such clothes useful; though here, assuredly, they are out of place. Now, I will go with you to Father Ernulf."

The priest's abode was in what was called the Abbots' Tower, which was the one nearest to the large monastery, outside the walls.

"I told you, father," the captain said, "that belike my nephew would join me here, as I was going to present him to Sir Henry Percy. The good knight will not be back again, mayhap, for some weeks; and the lad has a fancy to learn to read and write, and I thought you might put him in the way of his attaining such knowledge."

"He looks as if the sword will suit his hand better than the pen," the priest said, with a smile, as his eye glanced over the lad's active figure. "But surely, if he is so inclined, I shall be glad to further his wishes. There is a monk at the monastery who, although a good scholar, is fitted rather for the army than the Church. He was one of our teachers, but in sooth had but little patience with the blunders of the children; but I am sure that he would gladly give his aid to a lad like this, and would bear with him, if he really did his best. I have nought to do at present, and will go down with him, at once, and talk to Friar Roger.

"If the latter would rather have nought to do with it, one of my juniors shall undertake the task; but I am sure that the friar would make a better instructor, if he would take it in hand.

"He is a stout man-at-arms–for, as you know, when the Scots cross the border, the abbot always sends a party of his stoutest monks to fight in Percy's ranks; as is but right, seeing that the Scots plunder a monastery as readily as a village. Friar Roger was the senior in command, under the sub-prior, of the monks who fought at Otterburn, and all say that none fought more stoutly, and the monks were the last to fall back on that unfortunate day. They say that he incurred many penances for his unchurchly language, during the fight; but that the abbot remitted them, on account of the valour that he had shown."

Accordingly, the priest went off with Oswald to the monastery, while Alwyn Forster remained, to attend to his duties as captain of the men-at-arms. On his saying that he wished to see the friar Roger, the priest was shown into a waiting room, where the monk soon joined them.

He was a tall, powerful man, standing much over six feet in height, and of proportionate width of shoulders. He carried his head erect, and looked more like a man-at-arms, in disguise, than a monk. He bent his head to the priest, and then said in a hearty tone:

"Well, Father Ernulf, what would you with me, today? You have no news of the Scots having crossed the border, and I fear that there is no chance, at present, of my donning a cuirass over my gown?"

"None at present, brother, though it may well be so, before long. I hope that we shall soon have the earl and his son back again, for the Scots are sure to take advantage of their absence, now that the truce is expired.

"No, I want you on other business. This young gentleman is the nephew of Alwyn Forster, whom you know."

"Right well, Father; a good fellow, and a stout fighter."

"He is about to enter Sir Henry's household," the priest went on; "but, seeing that the knight is still away, and may be absent for some weeks yet, the young man is anxious to learn to read and write–

"Not from any idea of entering the Church," he broke off, with a smile, at the expression of surprise on the monk's face; "but that it may be useful to him in procuring advancement.

"I have, therefore, brought him to you; thinking that you would make a far better teacher, for a lad like him, than your brothers in the school. I thought perhaps that, if I spoke to the abbot, he might release you from your attendance at some of the services, for such a purpose."

"That is a consideration," the monk laughed.

"Well, young sir, I tell you fairly that among my gifts is not that of patience with fools. If you are disposed to work right heartily, as I suppose you must be, or you would not make such a request, I on my part will do my best to teach you; but you must not mind if, sometimes, you get a rough buffet to assist your memory."

"I should doubt whether a buffet, from you, would not be more likely to confuse my memory than to assist it," Oswald said, with a smile; "but at any rate, I am ready to take my chance, and can promise to do my best to avoid taxing your patience, to that point."

"That will do, Father," the monk said. "He is a lad of spirit, and it is a pleasure to train one of that kind. As to the puny boys they send to be made monks because, forsooth, they are likely to

grow up too weak for any other calling, I have no patience with them; and I get into sore disgrace, with the abbot, for my shortness of temper."

"I am afraid, from what I hear," the priest said, shaking his head, but unable to repress a smile, "that you are often in disgrace, Brother Roger."

"I fear that it is so, and were it not that I am useful, in teaching the lay brothers and the younger monks the use of the carnal weapons, I know that, before this, I should have been bundled out, neck and crop. 'Tis hard, Father, for a man of my inches to be shut up, here, when there is so much fighting to be done, abroad."

"There is good work to be done, everywhere," the priest said gravely. "Many of us may have made a mistake in choosing our vocations; but, if so, we must make the best we can of what is before us."

"What time will you come?" the monk asked Oswald.

"My uncle said that he would suit my hours to yours; but that, if it was all the same to you, I should practise in arms from six o'clock till eight, and again for an hour or two in the evening; so that I could come to you either in the morning or afternoon."

"Come at both, if you will," the monk said. "If the good father can get me off the services, from eight till six, you can be with me all that time, save at the dinner hour. You have but a short time to learn in, and must give yourself heartily to it.

"There is the chapel bell ringing, now, and I must be off. The abbot will not be present at this service, Father; and if you will, you can see him now. I doubt not that he will grant your request, for I know that I anger him, every time I am in chapel. I am fond of music, and I have a voice like a bull; and, do what I will, it will come out in spite of me; and he says that my roaring destroys the effect of the whole choir."

So saying, he strode away.

"Do you wait outside the gates, my son," the priest said. "I shall be only a few minutes with the abbot; who, as Friar Roger says, will, I doubt not, be glad enough to grant him leave to abstain from attendance at the services."

In a short time, indeed, he rejoined Oswald at the gate.

"That matter was managed, easily enough," he said. "The abbot has, himself, a somewhat warlike disposition, which is not to be wondered at, seeing that he comes from a family ever ready to draw the sword; and he has, therefore, a liking for Friar Roger, in spite of his contumacies, breaches of regulations, and quarrels with the other monks. He is obliged to continually punish him, with sentences of seclusion, penance, and fasting; but methinks it goes against the grain. He said, at once, that he was delighted to hear that he had voluntarily undertaken some work that would keep him out of trouble, and that he willingly, and indeed gladly, absolved him from attendance in chapel, during the hours that he was occupied with you.

"'He is not without his uses,' he said. 'He is in special charge of the garden, and looks after the lay brothers employed in it. I will put someone else in charge, while he is busy, though I doubt if any will get as much work out of the lay brothers as he does; and indeed, he himself labours harder than any of them. With any other, I should say that tucking his gown round his waist, and labouring with might and main was unseemly; but as it works off some of his superabundant energy, I do not interfere with him.'"

"How ever did he become a monk, Father?"

"It seems that he was a somewhat sickly child, and his father sent him to the monastery to be taught, with a view to entering the Church. He was quick and bright in his parts, but as his health improved he grew restless, and at fifteen refused to follow the vocation marked out for him, and returned home; where, as I have heard, he took part in various daring forays across the border. When he was five-and-twenty, he was wounded well-nigh to death in one of these, and he took it as a judgment upon him, for deserting the Church; so he returned here, and became a lay brother. He was

a very long time, before he recovered his full strength, and before he did so he became a monk, and I believe has bitterly regretted the fact, ever since.

"Some day, I am afraid, he will break the bounds altogether, throw away his gown, assume a breast plate and steel cap, and become an unfrocked monk. I believe he fights hard against his inclinations, but they are too strong for him. If war breaks out I fear that, some day, he will be missing.

"He will, of course, go down south, where he will be unknown; and where, when the hair on his tonsure has grown, he can well pass as a man-at-arms, and take service with some warlike lord. I trust that it may not be so, but he will assuredly make a far better man-at-arms than he will ever make a good monk."

The next morning, after practising for two hours with sword and pike, Oswald went down, at eight o'clock, to the monastery, and was conducted to friar Roger's cell. The latter at once began his instruction, handing him a piece of blackened board, and a bit of chalk.

"Now," he said, "you must learn to read and write, together. There are twenty-six letters, and of each there is a big one and a little one. The big ones are only used at the beginning of a sentence–that is where, if you were talking, you would stop to take breath and begin afresh–and also at the first letter of the names of people, and places.

"The first letter is 'A'. There it is, in that horn book, you see. It looks like two men, or two trees, leaning against each other for support; with a line, which might be their hands, in the middle.

"Now, make a letter like that, on your board. The little 'a' is a small circle with an upright, with a tail to it; you might fancy it a fish, with its tail turned up.

"Now, write each of those, twelve times."

So he continued with the first six letters.

"That will be as much as you will remember, at first," he said. "Now we will begin spelling with those letters, and you will see how they are used. You see, it is a mixture of the sounds of the two: 'b a' makes ba, and 'b e' be, 'c a' ca, 'd a' da, 'd e' de, and so on. Now, we will work it out."

Oswald was intelligent, and anxious to learn. He had been accustomed, when riding, to notice every irregularity of ground, every rock and bush that might serve as a guide, if lost in a fog, and he very quickly took in the instruction given him; and, by the time the convent bell rung to dinner, he had made a considerable progress with the variations that could be formed with the six letters that he had learned; and the friar expressed himself as highly satisfied with him.

"You have learned as much, in one morning, as many of the boys who attend schools would learn in a month," he said. "If you go on like this, I will warrant that, if Percy delays his return for two months, you will know as much as many who have been two years at the work. I have always said that it is a mistake to teach children young; their minds do not take in what you say to them. You may beat it into them, but they only get it by rote; and painfully, because they don't understand how one thing leads to another, and it is their memory only, and not their minds, that are at work."

The next day came news that the Scotch had crossed the border, and there was great excitement in the castle; but it was soon learned that the invasion was not on a great scale, neither the Douglases nor the Earl of March having taken part in it.

"There is no fear of our being attacked, here," Alwyn Forster said to Oswald. "The sheriffs of the county will call out their levies, and will soon make head against them. At the same time, we shall make preparations against any chance of their coming hither."

This was done. Vast quantities of arrows were prepared, stones collected and carried up to the points on the wall most exposed to attack; and orders sent out, by the governor of the castle in the Percys' absence, to the people for many miles round, that on the approach of the Scots all were to retire to refuge, the women and children taking to the hills, while the men capable of bearing arms were to hasten to the defence of the castle.

For a time, the Scots carried all before them, wasting and devastating the country. Oswald heard that they had captured, without resistance, his father's hold. He rejoiced at the news, for he

feared that, not knowing the strength of the invading force, resistance might have been attempted; in which case all in the hold might have been put to the sword. He had no doubt, now, that his father and mother had retired with their followers to the hills, as they had always determined to do, in case of an invasion by a force too strong to resist.

Had the Percys been at home, they might have held out, confident that the Scotch would be attacked before they could effect its capture; but as all the northern lords, with their retainers, were away in the south, it would be some time before a force could be collected that could make head against the Scots.

A portion of the Scottish army laid siege to the castle of Wark, on the Tweed. This castle had always played a conspicuous part in the border wars. It had been besieged and captured by David of Scotland, in the reign of Stephen; and two or three years later was again besieged, but this time repulsed all attacks. David, after his defeat at the battle of the Standard, resumed the siege. It again repulsed all attacks, but at last was reduced to an extremity by famine, and capitulated.

The castle was demolished by the Scots, but was rebuilt by Henry the Second. In 1215 it was again besieged, this time by King John, who resented the defection of the northern barons; and it was captured, and again destroyed. In 1318 it was captured and destroyed by Robert Bruce. In 1341 it was besieged by David Bruce, but held out until relieved by King Edward, himself. In 1383 it was again besieged by the Scots, and part of its fortifications demolished. On the present occasion it was again captured, and razed to the ground.

Another portion of the Scottish army, plundering and burning, advanced along the valley of the Coquet. As they approached, the inhabitants of the district round Alnwick began to pour into the castle; but orders were issued that all the fighting men should join the force of Sir Robert Umfraville, the sheriff of the district, who was gathering a force to give the Scots battle.

"I fear that there is small chance of the Scots making their way hither," Oswald's instructor said, in lugubrious tones. "Sir Robert is a stout fighter, and the Scots, laden as they must be with booty, and having hitherto met with no resistance, will be careless and like to be taken by surprise. Methinks the abbot ought to send off a contingent, to aid Sir Robert."

Oswald laughed.

"I suppose he wants to keep them for more urgent work, and thinks that the Church should only fight when in desperate straits. However, Father, you may have an opportunity yet; for we cannot regard it as certain that Sir Robert will defeat the Scots."

Three days later, however, the news arrived that Sir Robert had attacked the Scots, at Fulhetlaw, and utterly defeated them; taking prisoner Sir Richard Rutherford and his five sons, together with Sir William Stewart, John Turnbull, a noted border reiver, and many others; and that those who had escaped were in full flight for the border.

The Scotch incursion had made no change in Oswald's work. He continued to study hard with the monk. As a rule, he fully satisfied his teacher; but at times, when he failed to name the letters required to make up a certain sound, the latter lost all patience with him; and, more than once, with difficulty restrained himself from striking him. Spelling in those days, however, had by no means crystallized itself into any definite form, and there was so large a latitude allowed that, if the letters used gave an approximate sound to the word, it was deemed sufficient.

The consequence was that Oswald's education progressed at a speed that would, in these more rigid days, be deemed impossible. He was intensely interested in the work, and even his martial exercises were, for the time, secondary to it in his thoughts. He felt so deeply grateful to his instructor that, even if he had struck him, he would have cared but little. In those days rough knocks were readily given, and the idea that there was anything objectionable, in a boy being struck, had never been entertained by anyone. Wives were beaten not uncommonly, servants frequently; and from the highest to the lowest, corporal punishment was regarded as the only way to ensure the carrying out of orders.

Oswald was slower in learning to write down the letters than he was to read them. His hands were so accustomed to the rein, the bow, and the sword that they bungled over the work of forming letters. Nevertheless, by the time the Percys returned, three months and a half after his arrival at the castle, he could both read and write short and simple words; and as these formed a large proportion of English speech, at the time, he had made a considerable step in the path of learning, and the monk was highly pleased with his pupil.

"I shall not be able to come tomorrow, Father," he said to the monk, one day. "The earl and Sir Henry will be back tonight, and my uncle says that I must keep near him, tomorrow; so that, if opportunity offers, he may present me to the knight."

"I feared it would come to that," the monk said. "I wish they had all stopped away, another three or four months; then you would have got over your difficulty of piecing together syllables, so as to make up a long word. 'Tis a thousand pities that you should stop altogether, just when you are getting on so well."

"I will come as often as I can, Father, if you will let me."

"No, no, lad. I know what it is, when the family are at home. It will be, 'Here, Oswald, ride with such a message;' or Hotspur, himself, may be going out with a train, and you will have to accompany him. There will always be something.

"Indeed, save but for your teaching, it is high time that the Percys were back again; for there has already been a great deal of hot work, on the border, and report says that the Scots are mustering strongly, and that there is going to be a great raid into Cumberland; so you will be busy, and so shall I. The lay brothers have made but a poor hand of it, while I have been busy. I went down in the evening, yesterday, to see them drill; and it was as much as I could do to prevent myself from falling upon them, and giving them a lesson of a different sort.

"As it was, I gave it to their instructor heartily, and was had up before the abbot on his complaint, this morning; and am to eat Lenten fare for the next ten days, which accords but ill either with my liking or needs."

In the evening, the courtyard was ablaze with torches as, amid the cheers of the garrison, the Earl of Northumberland and his son rode in, with a strong body of men-at-arms. The greater portion of the following with which they had met Henry of Lancaster on his landing, and escorted him to London, had long since returned to their homes; being released from service, when it was seen that no opposition was to be looked for from the adherents of Richard. The followings of the various nobles and knights of the northern counties had left the main body on the way home, and Northumberland had brought with him, to Alnwick, only the men-at-arms who formed the regular force retained under his standard.

Oswald was greatly struck with the splendid appearance, and appointments, of the earl and the knights who attended him, and with the martial array of his followers. Hitherto, he had seen but the roughest side of war; the arms and armour carried not for show, but for use, and valued for their strength, without any reference to their appearance. On the border there was not the smallest attempt at uniformity in appearance, polished armour was regarded with disfavour, and that worn was of the roughest nature, the local armourer's only object being to furnish breast and back pieces that would resist the strongest spear thrust. Of missiles they made little account, for the Scots had but few archers, and their bows were so inferior in strength, to those carried by the English archers, that armour strong enough to resist a spear thrust was amply sufficient to keep out a Scottish arrow.

There was not, even in the array of the Earl of Northumberland's men-at-arms, any approach to the uniformity that now prevails among bodies of soldiers. The helmets, breast and back pieces, were, however, of similar form, as the men engaged for continued service were furnished with armour by the earl; but there was a great variety in the garments worn under them, these being of all colours, according to the fancy of their wearers. All, however, carried spears of the same length, while some had swords, and others heavy axes at their girdles. The helmets and armour were all brightly polished,

and as the lights of the torches flashed from them and from the spearheads; Oswald, for the first time, witnessed something of the pomp of war.

His uncle, as captain of the men-at-arms left in the castle, was invited to the banquet held after the arrival of the force. Oswald, therefore, was free to wander about among the soldiers, listening to their talk of what they had seen in London, and of the entertainments there in honour of the new king; exciting, thereby, no small amount of envy among those who had been left behind in garrison.

Oswald already knew that the earl had been appointed Constable of England, for life, and now heard that the lordship of the Isle of Man had since been conferred on him.

Chapter 4: An Unequal Joust

"You must don your best costume tomorrow, Oswald," his uncle said, when he returned from the banquet. "Sir Henry Percy's first question, after asking as to the health of the garrison, was:

"'Has this nephew of yours, of whom you were speaking to me, come yet?'

"I told him that you had been here well-nigh four months, that you had been practising in arms with my best swordsmen, who spoke highly of you, and that the whole of your spare time had been spent at the monastery, where you had been studying to acquire the art of reading and writing, thinking that such knowledge must be useful to you in his service. I told him that brother Roger had reported that you had shown marvellous sharpness there, and could already read from a missal, barring only some of the long words.

"'Oh, he had the fighting monk for his master!' Sir Henry said, laughing. 'Truly he must have been a good pupil, if he has come out of it without having his head broken, a dozen times. The friar is a thorn in the abbot's flesh, and more than once I have had to beg him off, or he would have been sent to the monastery of Saint John, which is a place of punishment for refractory monks. But in truth he is an honest fellow, though he has mistaken his vocation. He is a valiant man-at-arms, and the abbot's contingent would be of small value, without him.

"'Well, I will see your nephew in the morning. His perseverance in learning, and his quickness in acquiring it, show him to be a youth of good parts, and intelligent; but until I see him, I cannot say what I will make of him.'"

Accordingly, the next morning the lad accompanied his uncle to Sir Henry's private apartment, and found the knight alone. Sir Henry, Lord Percy, was now about forty years old. He had received the order of knighthood at the coronation of Richard the Second, when his father was created earl; and, nine years later, he was made governor of Berwick and Warden of the Marches; in which office he displayed such activity in following up and punishing raiders, that the Scots gave him the name of Hotspur. He was then sent to Calais, where he showed great valour. Two years later he was made Knight of the Garter, and was then appointed to command a fleet, sent out to repel a threatened invasion by the French. Here he gained so great a success that he came to be regarded as one of the first captains of the age.

At Otterburn, his impetuosity cost him his freedom; for, pressing forward into the midst of the Scotch army, he and his brother Ralph were taken prisoners, and carried into Scotland. He had just been appointed, by King Henry, sheriff of Northumberland, and governor of Berwick and Roxburgh, and received other marks of royal favour.

Although of no remarkable height, his broad shoulders and long, sinewy arms testified to his remarkable personal strength. His face was pleasant and open, and showed but small sign of his impetuous and fiery disposition.

"So this is the young springal," he said, with a smile; as, with a quick glance, he took in every detail of Oswald's figure and appearance. "By my troth, you have not overpraised him. He bears himself well, and is like to be a stout fighter, when he comes to his full strength. Indeed, as the son of John Forster of Yardhope, and as your nephew, good Alwyn, he could scarce be otherwise; although I have not heard that either his father, or you, ever showed any disposition for letters."

"No indeed, Sir Henry; nor have we, as far as I have ever seen, been any the worse for our lack of knowledge on that head. But with the lad here, it is different. Under your good patronage he may well hope to attain, by good conduct and valour, a promotion where book learning may be of use to him; and therefore, when he expressed a desire to learn, I did my best to favour his design."

"And you did well, Alwyn. And since he has gained so much, in so short a time, it were a pity he should not follow it up; and he shall, if it likes him, so long as he is in this castle, have two hours every morning in which he can visit the fighting monk, until he can read and write freely.

"Now, young sir, the question is, how can we best employ you? You are too old for a lady's bower, but not old enough, yet, for an esquire."

"Nor could I aspire to such a position, my lord, until I have proved myself worthy of it. My uncle told me that he had suggested that I might be useful as a bearer of messages, and orders; and as I know every foot of the border, from near Berwick to Cumberland, methinks that I might serve you in that way. I ride lightly, know every morass and swamp, and every road through the fells; and have at times, when there was peace, crossed the Cheviots by several of the passes, to pay visits to my mother's sister, who is married to one of the Armstrongs, near Jedburgh. If your lordship will deign to employ me in such service, I can promise to do so safely, and to justify my uncle's recommendation; and shall be ready, at all times, to risk my life in carrying out your orders."

"Well spoken, lad. I like the tone of your voice, and your manner of speech. They are such as will do no discredit to my household, and I hereby appoint you to it; further matters I will discuss with your uncle."

Oswald expressed his thanks in suitable terms, and then, bowing deeply, retired.

"A very proper lad, Alwyn. I would have done much for you, old friend, and would have taken him in some capacity, whatever he might have turned out; but, frankly, I doubted whether John Forster, valiant moss trooper as he is, would have been like to have had a son whom I could enroll in my household, where the pages and esquires are all sons of knights and men of quality. It is true that his father might have been a knight, had he chosen, since the earl offered him that honour after Otterburn; for three times he charged, at the head of a handful of his own men, right into the heart of the Scottish army, to try and rescue me; but he has always kept aloof in his own hold, going his own way and fighting for his own hand; and never once, that I can recall, has he paid a visit to us here, or at our other seats. I feared that under such a training as he would be likely to have, the lad would have been but a rough diamond. However, from his appearance and bearing, he might well have come of a noble family."

"'Tis his mother's doing, methinks, Sir Henry. She is of gentle birth. Her father was Sir Walter Gillespie. He was killed by the Scots, when she was but a girl, or methinks he would scarcely have given her in marriage to my brother John. She went with a sister to live with an old aunt, who let the girls have their way, without murmur; and seeing that they had no dowry, for their father was but a poor knight, there were not many claimants for their hands; and when she chose John Forster, and her sister Adam Armstrong, she did not say them nay. She has made a good wife to him, though she must have had many an anxious hour, and doubtless it is her influence that has made the lad what he is."

"How think you I had best bestow him, among the pages or the esquires?"

"I should say, Sir Henry, as you are good enough to ask my opinion, that it were best among the esquires. It would be like putting a hunting dog among a lady's pets, to put him with the pages. Moreover, boys think more of birth than men do. The latter judge by merit, and when they see that the lad has something in him, would take to him; whereas were he with the pages there might be quarrels, and he might fall into disgrace."

"I think that you are right, Alwyn. He might get a buffet or two, from the esquires, but he will be none the worse for that; while with the pages it might be bickering, and ill will. He shall take his chance with the squires. Bring him to me at twelve o'clock, and I will myself present him to them, with such words as may gain their goodwill, and make the way as easy as may be for him."

Accordingly, at twelve o'clock, Oswald went to Hotspur's room, and was taken by him to the hall where the esquires, six in number, had just finished a meal. They varied in age from eighteen to forty. They all rose, as their lord entered.

"I wish to present to you this young gentleman, my friends. He is the son of John Forster of Yardhope, whose name is familiar to you all, as one of the most valiant of the defenders of the border against the Scottish incursions. None distinguished themselves more at the battle of Otterburn, where he performed feats of prodigious valour, in his endeavours to rescue me and my brother from the

hands of the Scots. The earl my father offered him knighthood, but he said bluntly that he preferred remaining, like his father, plain John Forster of Yardhope. The lad's mother is a daughter of Sir Walter Gillespie, and he is nephew of Alwyn, captain of the men-at-arms here.

"He knows every foot of the border, its morasses, fells, and passes; and will prove a valuable messenger, when I have occasion to send orders to the border knights and yeomen. I have attached him to my household. You will find him intelligent, and active. He comes of a fighting stock; and will, I foresee, do no discredit to them in the future. I hesitated whether I should place him with the pages or with you, and have decided that, with your goodwill, he will be far more comfortable in your society, if you consent to receive him."

"We will do so willingly, on such recommendation," the senior of the esquires said; "as well as for the sake of his brave uncle, whom we all respect and like, and of his valiant father. The addition of young blood to our party will, indeed, not be unwelcome; and while, perchance, he may learn something from us, he will assuredly be able to tell us much that is new of the doings on the border, of which nothing but vague reports have reached our ears."

"Thanks, Allonby," Hotspur said. "I expected nothing less from you. He will, of course, practise at arms regularly, when not occupied in carrying messages; and you will be surprised to hear that he will go for two hours daily to the monastery, where he has, for the last three months, been learning reading and writing at the hands of Brother Roger, the fighting monk. It is his own desire, and a laudable one; and when I say that he has succeeded in giving Brother Roger satisfaction, you may well imagine that he must have made great progress."

A smile ran round the faces of the esquires, for Brother Roger's pugnacious instincts were widely known.

"Truly, Sir Henry, if brother Roger did not lose patience with him, it would be hard, indeed, if we could not get on with him; and in truth, this desire to improve himself speaks well for the lad's disposition."

When Hotspur left, Allonby said, "Take a seat, Master Oswald. But first, have you dined?"

"I took my meal an hour since, with my uncle," Oswald replied.

"Ay, I remember that your uncle sticks to the old hours. Tell us, were you with your father in that foray he headed, to carry off some cattle that had been lifted by the Bairds? We heard a report of it, last night."

"I was not with him, to my great disappointment; for he said that another year must pass, before I should be fit to hold my own in a fray. The affair was a somewhat hot one. Three of my father's men were killed, and some ten or twelve of those under other leaders; and my father and several of the band were wounded, some very sorely. It happened thus."

And he then told the details of the affair.

"It might well have been worse," Allonby said, "for, had the Bairds had time to assemble, it would have gone hardly with your father's party; especially as there is, as I have heard, a blood feud between him and them."

"They have scored the last success," Oswald said, "seeing that they accompanied Sir Richard Rutherford in his raid, nigh two months ago; and, as I hear, while the rest came on harrying and plundering Croquetdale, the Bairds and their gathering remained at our hold, which they found deserted, for indeed my father could not hope to defend it successfully, against so large a force; and there they employed themselves in demolishing the outer wall, and much of the hold itself; and would have completed their task, had it not been for the defeat inflicted upon the rest of the Scots by Sir Robert Umfraville, when they were forced to hasten back across the border. My father sent me a message afterwards, saying that he and my mother, with their followers, had been forced to take to the fells; and that, on their return, they found the place well-nigh destroyed; but that he was going to set to work to rebuild it as before, and that he hoped, some time, to demolish the Bairds' hold in like fashion. It will be some time before the place is restored; for, my father's means being limited,

he and his retainers would have to turn masons; but as the materials were there, he doubted not that, in time, they would make a good job of it."

"Truly, it is a hard life on the border," the squire said, "and it is wonderful that any can be found willing to live within reach of the Scotch raiders. I myself have done a fair share of fighting, under our lord's banner; but to pass my life, never knowing whether I may not awake to find the house assailed, would be worse than the hardest service against an open foe.

"Now, Master Oswald, we will go down to the courtyard, and see what your instructors have done for you, in the matter of arms. With whom have you been practising, since you came here?"

"Principally with Godfrey Harpent, Dick Bamborough, and William Anell; but I have had a turn with a great many of the other men-at-arms."

"The three men you name are all stout fellows, and good swordsmen. As a borderer, I suppose that you have practised with the lance?"

"We call it by no such knightly term. With us it is a spear, and nought else; but all borderers carry it, both for fighting and for pricking up cattle; and from the time that I could sit a horse I have always practised for a while, every day, with some of my father's troopers, or with himself, using blunt weapons whitened with chalk, so as to show where the hits fell. Although in a charge upon footmen, our border spearmen would couch their weapons and ride straight at their foe; in skirmishes, where each can single out an enemy, and there is a series of single combats, they do not so fight, but circle round each other, trusting to the agility of their horses to avoid a thrust, and to deliver one when there is an opening. Our spears are nothing like so heavy as the knightly lances, and we thrust with them as with the point of a sword."

"But in that way you can hardly penetrate armour," one of the other esquires said.

"No, it is only in a downright charge that we try to do so. When we are fighting as I speak of, we thrust at the face, at the armpit, the joints of the armour, which in truth seldom fits closely, or below the breastplate. The Scotch use even less armour than do our borderers, their breast pieces being smaller, and they seldom wear back pieces. It is a question chiefly of the activity of the horses, as of the skill of their riders, and our little moor horses are as active as young goats; and although neither horse nor rider can stand a charge of a heavily-armed knight or squire, methinks that if one of our troopers brought him to a stand, he would get the better of him, save if the knight took to mace or battle-axe."

"Have you your horse with you, Oswald?"

"Yes, it is in the stable. I have gone out with it, every morning, as soon as the castle gates were opened, and have ridden for a couple of hours before I began my exercises."

"Do you take him in hand first, Marsden," Allonby said to one of the younger esquires, a young man of two or three and twenty.

Light steel caps with cheeks, gorgets, shoulder and arm pieces, and padded leathern jerkins were put on; and then, with blunted swords, they took their places facing each other. The squire took up a position of easy confidence. He was a good swordsman, and good-naturedly determined to treat the lad easily, and to play with him for a time before scoring his first hit.

He soon, however, found that the game was not to be conducted on the lines that he had laid down. Oswald, after waiting for a minute or two, finding his opponent did not take the offensive, did so himself; and for a time Marsden had all his work to do, to defend himself. Several times, indeed, it was with the greatest difficulty that he guarded his head. The activity of his assailant almost bewildered him, as he continually shifted his position, and with cat-like springs leapt in and dealt a blow, leaping back again before his opponent's arm had time to fall.

Finding at last that, quick as he might be, Marsden's blade always met his own, Oswald relaxed his efforts, as he was growing fatigued; and as he did so Marsden took the offensive, pressing him backwards, foot by foot. Every time, however, that he found himself approaching a barrier, or other obstacle, that would prevent his further retreat, Oswald, with a couple of springs, managed to shift

his ground. When he saw that Marsden was growing breathless from his exertions, he again took the offensive, and at last landed a blow fairly on his opponent's helm.

"By my faith," the squire said, with a laugh that had nevertheless a little mortification in it, "I would as soon fight with a wildcat; and yet your breath scarce comes fast, while I have not as much left in me as would fill an eggshell."

"It was an excellent display," Allonby said.

"Truly, lad, your activity is wonderful, and you might well puzzle the oldest swordsman, by such tactics. Marsden did exceedingly well, too. Many times I thought that your sword would have gone home, but up to the last, his guard was always ready in time. As for yourself, we had scarce the opportunity of seeing how your sword would guard your head, for you trusted always to your legs, rather than your arms.

"Well, lad, you will do. Your arm is like iron, or it would have tired long before, with that sword, which is a little over heavy for you. As to your wind, you would tire out the stoutest swordsman in the Percys' train. I do not say that, in the press of a battle, where your activity would count for little, a good man-at-arms would not get the better of you; but in a single combat, with plenty of room, it would be a good man, indeed, who would tackle you; especially were he clad in armour, and you fighting without it. His only chance would be to get in one downright blow, that would break down your guard. As Marsden says, you fight like a wildcat, rather than as a man-at-arms; but as the time may come when you will ride in heavy armour, and so lose the advantage of your agility, you had best continue to practise regularly with us, and the men-at-arms, and learn to fight in the fashion that would be needed, were you engaged in a pitched battle when on horseback, and in armour."

"I shall be glad, indeed, to do so," Oswald said modestly. "I know that I am very ignorant of real swordsmanship, and the men-at-arms have me quite at their mercy, when they insist upon my not shifting my ground. At home, I have only practised with my father's troopers, and we always fight on foot, and with stout sticks instead of swords, and without defences save our head pieces; but fighting in knightly fashion I knew nothing of, until I came here."

"You will soon acquire that, lad. With your strength of arm, length of wind, quickness of eye, and activity, you will make a famous swordsman, in time.

"Ah! Here is Sir Henry."

"Have you been trying the lad's metal?" Hotspur asked, as he saw Oswald in the act of taking off his steel cap. Marsden had already done so.

"That have we, Sir Henry, and find it as of proof. Marsden here, who is no mean blade, has taken him in hand; and the lad has more than held his own against him, not so much by swordsmanship as by activity, and wind. It was a curious contest. Marsden compared Oswald to a wildcat, and the comparison was not an ill one; for, indeed, his springs and leaps were so rapid and sudden that it was difficult to follow him, and the fight was like one between such an animal, and a hound. Marsden defended himself well against all his attacks, until his breath failed him, and he was dealt a downright blow on his helm, on which I see it has made a shrewd dent. As for his blows, they fell upon air, for the lad was ever out of reach before the ripostes came. In his own style of fighting, I would wager on him against any man-at-arms in the castle."

"I am glad to hear it," Hotspur said. "I shall feel the less scruple, in sending him on missions which are not without danger. He will need training, to fit him for combat in the ranks. No doubt he has had no opportunity for such teaching, and would go down before a heavy-armed man, with a lance, like a blade of grass before a millstone."

"He thinks not, Sir Henry, at least not in a single combat, for by his accounts his horse is as nimble as himself; but of course, in charges he and his horse would be rolled over, as you say."

"He thinks not? Oh, well, we will try him! I have an hour to spare.

"Do you put on a suit of full armour, Sinclair, and we will ride out to the course beyond the castle.

"What will you put on, lad?"

"I will put on only breast piece and steel cap; but I only said I should have a chance against a lance, Sir Henry. I do not pretend that I could stand against any man-at-arms, armed with sword and mace; but only that I thought that, with my horse, I could evade the shock of a fully-accoutred man, and then harass and maybe wound him with my spear."

"Well, we will try, lad. Put on what you will, and get your horse saddled. It will be rare amusement to see so unequal a course. We shall be ready in a quarter of an hour."

Oswald went up to his uncle, and told him what was proposed. Alwyn, who had witnessed his exercises with the rough riders of his father, smiled grimly.

"If you can evade his first charge, which I doubt not that you can, you will have him at your mercy, with your light spear against his lance, and your moor horse against his charger; but put on the heaviest of your two steel caps, and strong shoulder pieces. 'Tis like enough that, in his temper, he may throw away his lance and betake him to his sword. I will demand that he carries neither mace nor battle-axe, and that you should only carry sword and spear. Your horse's nimbleness may keep you out of harm, which is as much as you can expect, or hope for. Put on a light breast plate, too, for in spite of the wooden shield to his lance head, he may hurt you sorely if he does chance to strike you."

Oswald saw that his horse was carefully saddled. He procured from his uncle a piece of cloth; and, removing the spearhead, wrapped this round the head of the shaft, until it formed a ball the size of his fist. This he whitened thickly with chalk.

In a few minutes Sinclair, who was the heaviest and strongest of the esquires, rode out into the courtyard in full armour. Sir Henry, with his own esquires, and several of the gentlemen of the earl's household, came down; and Hotspur laughed at the contrast presented by the two combatants: the one a mass of steel, with shield and lance, on a warhorse fully caparisoned; the other a slight, active-looking figure, with but little defensive armour, on a rough pony which had scarce an ounce of superfluous flesh.

"Now, gentlemen," he said, "we may be engaged in warfare with the Scots, before long; and you will here have an opportunity of seeing the nature of border fighting. The combat may seem to you ridiculously unequal, but I know the moss trooper, and I can tell you that, in a single combat like this, activity goes far to counterbalance weight and armour. You remember how Robert Bruce, before Bannockburn, mounted on but a pony, struck down Sir Robert Bohun, a good knight and a powerful one."

As the party went out, through the gates, to the tilting ground outside the walls, the men-at-arms, seeing that something unusual was going to take place, crowded up to the battlements, looking down on the ground.

"Now, gentlemen," Percy said, "you will take your places at opposite ends of the field; and when I drop my scarf, you will charge. It is understood that you need not necessarily ride straight at each other; but that it is free, to each of you, to do the best he can to overthrow his opponent."

As he gave the signal, the two riders dashed at full speed at each other; and, for a moment, the spectators thought that Oswald was going to be mad enough to meet his opponent in full course. When, however, the horses were within a length of each other, the rough pony swerved aside with a spring like that of a deer; and, wheeling round instantly, Oswald followed his opponent. The latter tried to wheel his charger, but as he did so, Oswald's spear struck him in the vizor, leaving a white mark on each side of the slit; and then he too wheeled his horse, maintaining his position on the left hand, but somewhat in rear, of his opponent; who was, thereby, wholly unable to use his lance, while Oswald marked the junction of gorget and helmet with several white circles. Furious at finding himself incapable of either defending himself, or of striking a blow, the squire threw away his lance, and drew his sword.

Hotspur shouted, at the top of his voice:

"A breach of the rules! A breach of the rules! The combat is at an end."

But his words were unheard, in the helmet. Making his horse wheel round on his hind legs, Sinclair rode at Oswald with uplifted sword. The latter again couched his spear under his arm and, touching his horse with his spur, the animal sprung forward; and before the sword could fall, the point of the spear caught the squire under the armpit, and hurled him sideways from his saddle.

Hotspur and those round him ran forward. Sinclair lay without moving, stunned by the force with which he had fallen. Oswald had already leapt from his horse, and raised Sinclair's head, and began to unlace the fastenings of his helmet. Hotspur's face was flushed with anger.

"Do not upbraid him, my lord, I pray you," Oswald said. "He could scarce have avoided breaking the conditions, helpless as he felt himself; and he could not have heard your voice, which would be lost in his helmet. I pray you, be not angered with him."

Hotspur's face cleared.

"At your request I will not, lad," he said; "and, indeed, he has been punished sufficiently."

By the time that the helmet was removed, one of the soldiers from the battlements ran out from the castle, with a ewer of water. This was dashed into the squire's face. He presently opened his eyes. A heavy fall was thought but little of in those days; and as Sinclair was raised to his feet, and looked round in bewilderment at those who were standing round him, Hotspur said good temperedly:

"Well, Master Sinclair, the lad has given us all a lesson that may be useful to us. I would scarce have believed it, if I had not seen it; that a stout soldier, in full armour, should have been worsted by a lad on a rough pony; but I see now that the advantage is all on the latter's side, in a combat like this, with plenty of room to wheel his horse.

"Why, he would have slain you a dozen times, Sinclair. Look at your vizor. That white mark is equal on both sides of the slit, and had there been a spear head on the shaft, it would have pierced you to the brain. Every joint of your armour, behind, is whitened; and that thrust, that brought you from your horse, would have spitted you through and through.

"Now, let there be no ill feeling over this. It is an experiment, and a useful one; and had I, myself, been in your place, I do not know that I could have done aught more than you did."

Sinclair was hot tempered, but of a generous disposition, and he held out his hand to Oswald, frankly.

"It was a fair fight," he said, "and you worsted me, altogether. No one bears malice for a fair fall, in a joust."

"The conditions were not at all even," Oswald said. "On a pony like mine, unless you had caught me in full career, it was impossible that the matter could have turned out otherwise."

"I often wondered," Hotspur said, as they walked towards the gate, "that our chivalry should have been so often worsted by the rough Scottish troopers; but now I understand it. The Scotch always choose broken ground, and always scatter before we get near them; and, circling round, fall upon our chivalry when their weight and array are of no use to them. Happily, such a misadventure has never happened to myself; but it might well do so. The Scotch, too, have no regard for the laws of chivalry; and once behind will spear the horse, as indeed happened to me, at Otterburn. 'Tis a lesson in war one may well take to heart; and when I next fight the Scots, I will order that on no account, whatever, are the mounted men to break their ranks; but, whatever happens, are to move in a solid body, in which case they could defy any attacks upon them by light-armed horse, however numerous."

At the gate of the castle, Alwyn Forster met them.

"You have given me a more useful addition to my following than I dreamt of, Alwyn," Hotspur said. "Did you see the conflict?"

"I watched it from the wall, Sir Henry. I felt sure how the matter would end. The lad is quick and sharp at border exercises. I have seen him work with his father's troopers. There were not many of them who could hold their own against him, and in fighting in their own way, I would back the moss troopers against the best horsemen in Europe. They are always accustomed to fight each man for himself, and though a score of men-at-arms would ride through a hundred of them, if they met

the charge; in single combat their activity, and the nimbleness of their horses, would render them more than a match for a fully-caparisoned knight."

"So it seems," Hotspur said; "and yet, if Sinclair had but known that the lad was about to swerve in his course, which indeed he ought to have known–for it would have been madness to meet his charge–he too should have changed his course to his left, when a couple of lengths away; for he might be sure that the lad would turn that way, so as to get on his left hand, and in that case he would have ridden over him like a thunderbolt."

"Yes, Sir Henry, but Oswald would have had his eye on knee and bridle; and the moment the horse changed his direction, he would have been round the other way, like an arrow from a bow; and would have planted himself, as he did, in the squire's rear."

"Perhaps so," Hotspur said thoughtfully. "At any rate, Alwyn, the boy has given us all a lesson, and you have done me good service, by presenting him to me."

Chapter 5: A Mission

For the next three or four months, Oswald was but little at the castle; Percy utilizing his services, in the manner most agreeable to him, by sending him on errands to various knights and gentlemen, in different parts of Northumberland, and to the fortified places held by the English across the Border. A fortnight after his contest with Sinclair, Sir Henry formally appointed him one of his esquires.

"You are young," he said, "for such a post; but as you have shown that you are well able to take care of yourself in arms, and as I perceive you to be shrewd and worthy of confidence, your age matters but little. As my messenger, you will be more useful travelling as one of my esquires, than as one without settled rank; and I can not only send written communications by you, but can charge you to speak fully in my name, and with my authority."

Oswald was not slow in finding out the advantages that the position gave him. On the first errands on which he had been sent, he had been treated as but an ordinary messenger, had been placed at dinner below the salt, and herded with the men-at-arms. As an esquire of Lord Percy, he was treated with all courtesy, was introduced to the ladies of the family, sat at the high table, and was regarded as being in the confidence of his lord. His youth excited some little surprise, but acted in his favour, because it was evident that Percy would not have nominated him as one of his esquires, had he not shown particular merit. In his journeys, he often passed near Yardhope, where the rebuilding of the wall and keep was being pushed on with much vigour; the inhabitants of the villages in the valley lending their assistance to restore the fortalice, which they regarded as a place of refuge, in case of sudden invasion by the Scots. His parents were both greatly pleased at his promotion, especially his mother, who had always been anxious that he should not settle down to the adventurous, and dangerous, life led by his father.

"By our Lady," John Forster said, "though it be but six months since you first left us, you have changed rarely. I speak not of your fine garments, but you have grown and widened out, and are fast springing from a boy into a man; and it is no small thing that Percy should have thought so well of you as to make you one of his esquires, already."

"It was from no merit of mine, Father, but because he thought that, as his messenger, I should be able to speak in his name with more authority than had I been merely the bearer of a letter from him."

"'Tis not only that," his father replied. "I received a letter but two days since from my brother Alwyn, written by the hand of a monk of his acquaintance, telling me that Lord Percy was mightily pleased with you; not only because you had set yourself to read and write, but from the way in which you had defeated one of his esquires in a bout at arms. Alwyn said that he doubted not that you would win knightly spurs, as soon as you came to full manhood. So it is clear that merit had something to do with your advancement, though this may be also due, to some extent, to the cause you assign for it. The monk who wrote the letter added, on his own account, that he had been your preceptor; and that, though he had often rated you soundly, you had made wonderful progress."

"The monk is a good teacher," Oswald laughed; "but he would have made a better man-at-arms than he will ever make a monk. I believe it pleased him more that I worsted Sinclair–which indeed was a small thing to do, seeing that he had no idea of fighting, save of charging straight at a foe–than at the progress I made at my books. He commands the contingent that the monastery sends, when Percy takes the field to repel an invasion; and, could he have his own will, would gladly exchange a monk's robes for the harness of a man-at-arms. I would wish for no stouter companion in the fray."

The speed with which he had performed his journeys, and the intelligence which he showed in carrying out his missions and reporting on their issue, earned for the lad an increasing amount of liking and confidence, on the part of his lord. It was not only that he delivered the replies to Hotspur's messages accurately; but his remarks, upon the personal manner and bearing of those to whom he was sent, were of still greater value to Percy. Naturally, all had promised to have their contingent of

fighting men ready, in case of serious invasion by the Scots; but Oswald was able to gather, from their manner, whether the promises would surely be fulfilled; or whether, in case of trouble, the knights were more likely to keep their array for the defence of their own castles than to join Percy in any general movement.

One day, when Oswald had been engaged six months at this work, which had taken him several times into Cumberland and Westmoreland, as well as the north, Lord Percy summoned him to his private apartment.

"Hitherto you have done well, Oswald, and I feel now that I can trust you with a mission of far higher importance than those you have hitherto performed. 'Tis not without its dangers, but I know that you will like it none the less for that reason. You are young, indeed, for business of such importance; but it seems to me that, of those around me, you would be best fitted to carry it out. Your manner of speech has changed much, since you came here; but doubtless you can fall at will into the border dialect, which differs little from that on the other side; and you can pass, well enough, as coming from Jedburgh, or any other place across the border.

"All the world knows, lad, that George, Earl of March and Dunbar, was mightily offended at Rothesay breaking off the match with his daughter, and marrying the child of his rival Douglas; but now I am going to tell you what the world does not know, and which is a secret that would cost many a life, were it to be blabbed abroad, and which I should not tell you, had I not a perfect confidence in your discretion. The anger of March–as he is mostly called on this side of the border, while in Scotland they more often call him Earl of Dunbar–goes beyond mere displeasure with the Douglas, and sullen resentment against Rothesay. He has sent a confidential messenger to me, intimating that he is ready to acknowledge our king as his sovereign, and place himself and his forces at his disposal.

"I see you are surprised, as is indeed but natural; but the Marches have ever been rather for England than for Scotland, although they have never gone so far as to throw off their allegiance to the Scottish throne. It is not for us to consider whether March is acting treacherously, to James of Scotland; but whether he is acting in good faith, towards us.

"It was easy for him to send a messenger to me, since Scotland trades with England, and a ship bound for London might well touch at one of our ports on the way down; but the presence of an Englishman, at Dunbar, would not be so readily explained. His messenger especially enjoined on me not to send any communication in writing, even by the most trustworthy hand; since an accident might precipitate matters, and drive him to take up arms, before we were in a position to give him aid. Therefore, in the first place, I wish you to journey to Dunbar, to see the earl, and deliver to him the message I shall give you, and endeavour to inform yourself how far he is to be trusted. Say what he will, I can scarce bring myself to believe that he will really throw off his allegiance to Scotland; save in the event of a great English army marching north, when doubtless he would do what most Scotch nobles have always done, namely, hasten to give in his submission, and make the best terms he can, for himself. 'Tis a business which I like not, although it is my duty to accept a proposal that, if made in good faith, would be of vast value to the king.

"You must, after seeing the earl, return here with all speed, to bear me any message March may give you, and to report your impressions as to his sincerity, and good faith. 'Tis a month since I received his message. Since then, I have communicated with the king, and have received his authority to arrange terms with March, to guarantee him in the possession of his lordships, to hand over to him certain tracts of the Douglas country which he bargained for, and to assure him of our support. But he must be told that the king urges him to delay, at present, from taking any open steps; as, in the first place, he is bound by the truce just arranged, for the next two years; and in the second because, having no just cause of quarrel with Scotland, and being at present but newly seated on the throne, he would have difficulty in raising an army for the invasion of that country. The king is ready to engage himself not to renew the truce, and to collect an army, in readiness to act in concert with him, as soon as it is terminated.

"The earl has sent, by his messenger, a ring; which, on being presented at Dunbar, will gain for the person who carries it immediate access to him; and I shall also give you my signet, in token that you are come from me. You will carry, also, a slip of paper that can be easily concealed, saying that you have my full authority to speak in my name. You yourself can explain to him that I have selected you for the mission because of your knowledge of border speech, and because a youth of your age can pass unobserved, where a man might excite attention and remark, and possibly be detained, until he could render a satisfactory account of himself.

"Here are the conditions, set down upon paper. Take it, and commit them to heart, and then tear the paper into shreds, and burn them. As far as Roxburgh you can, of course, ride as my squire; but beyond, you must travel in disguise. This you had better procure here, and take with you; for although the Governor of Roxburgh is a trusty knight, it were best that no soul should know that you go on a mission to March; and I shall simply give you a letter to him, stating that you are engaged in a venture in my service, and that your horse and armour are to be kept for you, until your return."

Thanking Lord Percy for the honour done him, in selecting him for the mission, and promising him to carry it out, to the best of his power, Oswald retired and, making his way up to an inner room, set about learning the contents of the paper given him, which was, indeed, a copy of the royal letter to Percy. When he had thoroughly mastered all the details, and could repeat every word, he followed Sir Henry's instructions, tore the letter up, and carefully burned every fragment. Then he went out into the town, and bought garments suited for travelling unnoticed in Scotland, the dress being almost identical on both sides of the border, save for the lowland Scotch bonnet.

On his return, he found that Lord Percy had sent for him during his absence, and he at once went to his apartments.

"I have been thinking over this matter further," Sir Henry said. "The abbot came in, just as you left me; and, among other things, he mentioned that friar Roger had again fallen into disgrace, having gone so far as to strike the sub-prior on the cheek, almost breaking the jaw of that worthy man; and that, finding discipline and punishment of no avail with him, he was about to expel him, in disgrace, from the community. He said that he had only retained him so long on account of my goodwill for the fellow, and from the fact that he would, as I had often urged, be most valuable as leader of the abbot's forces, in case of troubles with the Scots, but that his last offence has passed all bearing.

"For the time I could say nothing, for discipline must be maintained, in a monastery as well as in the castle; but after the abbot had left me, and I was walking up and down in vexation over the affair–for I like the rascal, in spite of his ways, and there is no one else who could so well lead the contingent of the monastery–a thought occurred to me. I like not your going altogether alone, for the times are lawless, and you might meet trouble on the road; and yet I did not see whom I could send with you. Now it seems to me that this stout knave would make an excellent companion for you.

"In the first place, you like him, and he likes you; secondly, a monk travelling north on a mission, say from the abbot to the prior of a monastery near Dunbar, could pass anywhere unheeded; and in the third place, although as a peaceful man he could carry no military arms, he might yet take with him a staff, with which I warrant me he would be a match for two or three ordinary men; and lastly, I may be able to convince the abbot that he can thus get rid of him from the monastery, for some time, and avoid the scandals he occasions, and yet hold him available on his return for military service.

"What say you, lad?"

"I should like it much, Sir Henry. I could wish for no stouter companion; and although he may be quarrelsome with his fellows, it is, methinks, solely because the discipline of the monastery frets him, and he longs for a more active life; but I believe that he could be fully trusted to behave himself discreetly, were he engaged in outdoor work, and there can be no doubt that he is a stout man-at-arms, in all ways."

"I should not trust him, in any way, with the object of your mission. If I obtain the abbot's consent, I shall simply send for him, rate him soundly for his conduct, but telling him I make all

allowances for his natural unfitness for his vocation; and that I have, as a matter of grace, obtained from the abbot permission to use his services for a while, and to suspend his sentence upon him, until it be seen how he comports himself; and, with that view, I am about to send him as your companion, on a commission with which I have intrusted you, to the town of Dunbar. I shall hint that, if he behaves to my satisfaction, I may persuade the abbot to allow him to remain in my service, until the time comes when he may be useful to the convent for military work; he still undertaking to drill the lay brothers, and keep the abbot's contingent in good order; and that, when the troubles are at an end, I will obtain for him full absolution from his vows, so that he may leave the monastery without the disgrace of being expelled, and may then take service with me, or with another, as a man-at-arms.

"I wish you to be frank with me. If you would rather go alone, matters shall remain as they are."

"I would much rather that he went with me, my lord. From the many conversations that I have had with him, I am sure that he is shrewd and clever, and that, once beyond the walls of the monastery and free to use his weapon, he would be full of resource. There is doubtless much lawlessness on both sides of the border, and although I should seem but little worth robbing, two travel more pleasantly than one; and the monk has taken such pains with me, and has been so kind, that there is no one with whom I would travel, with greater pleasure."

"Then I will go across to the monastery, at once, and see the abbot; and I doubt not that he will grant my request, for, much and often as brother Roger has given him cause for anger, I know that he has a sort of kindness for him, and will gladly avoid the necessity for punishing and disgracing him. If all is arranged, the monk shall come over here, and see you."

An hour later, Brother Roger came in to the captain's quarters.

"So you have been in trouble again, Brother Roger," Alwyn Forster said with a laugh, as he held out his hand to him.

"That have I, and an hour ago I was lying in a prison cell, cursing my hot temper; and with, as it seemed, the certainty of being publicly unfrocked, and turned out like a mangy dog from a pack. It was not, mind you, that the thought of being unfrocked was altogether disagreeable; for I own that I am grievously ill fitted for my vocation, and that fasts and vigils are altogether hateful to me; but it would not be a pleasant thing to go out into the world as one who had been kicked out, and though I might get employment as a man-at-arms, I could never hope for any promotion, however well I might behave. However, half an hour ago the cell door was opened, and I was taken before the abbot, whom I found closeted with Hotspur.

"The latter rated me soundly, but said that, for the sake of Otterburn, he had spoken for me to the abbot; and that as he would, for the present, be able to make use of me in work that would be more to my liking, the abbot had consented to reconsider his decision, and would lend me to him for a time, in hopes that my good conduct would, in the end, induce him to overlook my offences; and that, in that case, he might even be induced to take steps, of a less painful description than public disgrace, for freeing me of my gown.

"I naturally replied that I was grateful for his lordship's intercession; and that, outside monkish offices, there was nothing I would not do to merit his kindness. He told me that I was to report myself to your nephew, who would inform me of the nature of the service upon which I was, at first, to be employed."

"It is to undertake a journey with me," Oswald said. "I am going on a mission for our lord, to Dunbar. The object of my mission is one that concerns me only, but it is one of some importance; and as the roads are lonely, since March and Douglas quarrelled, and order is but badly kept on the other side of the border, he thought that I should be all the better for a companion. Assuredly, I could wish for none better than yourself, for in the first place you have proved a true friend to me; in the second, you have so much knowledge, that we shall not lack subjects for conversation upon the journey; and lastly, should I get into any trouble, I could reckon upon you as a match for two or three border robbers."

"Nothing could be more to my taste," the monk said joyfully. "I did not feel quite sure, before, whether I was glad or sorry that my expulsion was put off, for I always thought that it would come to that some day; but now that I learn for what service Hotspur intends me, I feel as if I could shout for joy.

"Get me a flagon of beer, good Alwyn. I have drunk but water for the last twenty-four hours, and was in too great haste, to learn what was before me, even to pay a visit to brother Anselm, the cellarer, who is a stanch friend of mine.

"And do I go as a man-at-arms, Master Oswald? For, as your mission is clearly of a private character, disguise may be needful."

"No, Roger, you will go in your own capacity, as a monk, journeying on a mission from the abbot to the head of some religious community, near Dunbar. I doubt not that Lord Percy will obtain a letter from the abbot, and though it may be that there will be no need to deliver it, still it may help us on the way. As you are going with me, I shall attire myself as a young lay servitor of the convent."

"I would that it had been otherwise," the monk said, with a sigh. "I should have travelled far more lightly, in the heaviest mail harness, than in this monk's robe. Besides, how can I carry arms, for use in case of necessity?"

"You can carry a staff," Oswald said, laughing; "and being so big a man, you will assuredly require a long and heavy one; and, even if it is heavily shod with iron, no one need object."

"That is not so bad, Master Oswald. A seven-foot staff, of the thickness of my wrist; with an iron shoe, weighing a pound or two, is a carnal weapon not to be despised. As you doubtless know, our bishops, when they ride in the field, always carry a mace instead of a sword, so that they may not shed blood; though I say not that the cracking of a man's skull is to be accomplished, without some loss thereof. However, if a bishop may lawfully crack a man's head, as an eggshell, I see not that blame can attach to me, a humble and most unworthy son of the church, if some slight harm should come to any man, from the use of so peaceful an instrument as a staff. And how about yourself, young master?"

"I can carry a sword," Oswald replied. "In times like these, no man travels unarmed; and as I go as a servitor, and an assistant to your reverence, there will be nothing unseemly in my carrying a weapon, to defend you from the attack of foes."

"You can surely take a dagger, too. A dagger is a meet companion to a sword, and is sometimes mighty useful, in a close fight. And, mark me, take a smaller dagger also, that can be concealed under your coat. I myself will assuredly do the same. There are many instances in which a trifle of that kind might come in useful, such as for shooting the lock of a door, or working out iron bars."

"I will do so," Oswald said, "though I hope there will be no occasion, such as you say, for its use."

"When do we start, Master Oswald?"

"Tomorrow, at daybreak. We shall ride as far as Roxburgh. I shall go on my own horse, which, though as good an animal as was ever saddled, has but a poor appearance. You had best purchase a palfrey, as fat and sleek as may be found, but with strength enough to carry your weight. I shall be amply provided with money; and if you find a bargain, let me know, and I will give you the means. Mind, buy nothing that looks like a warhorse, but something in keeping with your appearance."

That evening, Oswald had another interview with Percy, and received his final instructions, and a bag of money.

"Be careful with it, lad," he said; "not so much because of the use that it may be to you, but because, were you seized and searched by robbers, and others, the sight of the gold might awake suspicions that you were not what you seemed, and might lead to a long detention. Keep your eye on Brother Roger, and see that he does not indulge too much in the wine cups, and that he comports himself rather in keeping with his attire, than with his natural disposition; and if you have any difficulty in restraining him, or if he does not obey your orders, send him back, at once. Will you see him again this evening?"

"He is waiting for me in my apartment, now, my lord, having come for the money for the purchase of a palfrey, which I bade him get."

"Send him to me, when you get there."

When the monk appeared before Hotspur, the latter said, "See here, monk, I have saved you from punishment, and become, as it were, your surety. See that you do not discredit me. You will remember that, although my young esquire may ask your advice, and benefit by your experience, he is your leader; and his orders, when he gives them, are to be obeyed as promptly as if it were I myself who spoke, to one of my men-at-arms. He is my representative in the matter, and is obeying my orders, as you will obey his. The mission is one of importance, and if it fails from any fault of yours, you had better drown yourself in the first river you come to, than return to Northumberland."

"I think that you can trust me, my lord," the monk said, calmly. "I am a very poor monk, but methinks that I am not a bad soldier; and although I go in the dress of the one, I shall really go as the other. I know that my duty, as a soldier, will be to obey. Even as regards my potations, which I own are sometimes deeper than they should be, methinks that, as a soldier, I shall be much less thirsty than I was as a monk. If the enterprise should fail from any default of mine, your lordship may be sure that I shall bear your advice in mind."

"I doubt not that you will do well, Roger. I should not have sent you with my esquire, on such a business, had I not believed that you would prove yourself worthy of my confidence. I know that a man may be a good soldier, and even a wise counsellor, though he may be a very bad monk."

The next morning the pair rode out from the castle, at daybreak. Roger was dressed in the usual monkish attire of the time, a long loose gown with a cape, and a head covering resembling a small turban. He rode a compactly built little horse, which seemed scarce capable of carrying his weight, but ambled along with him as if it scarcely felt it. Oswald was dressed as a lay servitor, in tightly-fitting high hose, short jerkin girt in by a band at the waist, and going half-way down to the knee. He rode his own moorland horse, and carried on his arm a basket with provisions for a day's march. He wore a small cloth cap, which fell down to his neck behind. His uncle accompanied him to the gate, which was, by his orders, opened to give them egress.

"Goodbye, lad," he said. "I know not, and do not wish to know, the object of your journey. It is enough for me that it is a confidential mission for Hotspur, and I am proud that you should have been chosen for it, and I feel convinced that you will prove you have merited our lord's confidence.

"Goodbye, friend Roger! Don't let your love of fisticuffs and hard knocks carry you away, but try and bear yourself as if you were still in the monastery, with the abbot keeping his eye upon you."

Brother Roger laughed.

"You make a cold shiver run down my back, Alwyn. I was feeling as if I had just got out of a cold cellar, into the sunshine, and could shout with very lightness of heart. I am not in the least disposed to quarrel with anyone, so let your mind be easy as to my doings. I shall be discretion itself; and even if I am called upon to strike, will do so as gently as may be, putting only such strength into the blow as will prevent an opponent from troubling us further."

So, with a wave of the hand, they rode on.

"I had better strap that staff beside your saddle, and under your knee," Oswald said, when they had ridden a short distance. "You carry it as if it were a spear, and I have seen already three or four people smile, as we passed them."

Roger reluctantly allowed Oswald to fasten the staff beside him.

"One wants something in one's hands," he said. "On foot it does not matter so much, but now I am on horseback again, I feel that I ought to have a spear in hand, and a sword dangling at my side."

"You must remember that you are still a monk, Roger, although enlarged for a season. Some day, perhaps, you will be able to gratify your desires in that way. You had best moderate the speed of your horse, for although he ambles along merrily, at present, he can never carry that great carcase of yours, at this pace, through our journey."

"I should like one good gallop," Roger sighed, as he pulled at the rein, and the horse proceeded at a pace better suited to the appearance of its rider.

"A nice figure you would look, with your robes streaming behind you," Oswald laughed. "There would soon be a story going through the country, of a mad monk.

"Now, we take this turning to the right, and here leave the main north road, for we are bound, in the first place, to Roxburgh."

"I thought that it must be that, or Berwick, though I asked no questions."

"We shall not travel like this beyond Roxburgh, but shall journey forward on foot."

"I supposed that we should come to that, Master Oswald, for otherwise you would not have told me to provide myself with a staff."

They journeyed pleasantly along. Whenever they approached any town or large village, Oswald reined back his horse a little, so that its head was on a level with Roger's stirrup. They slept that night at Kirknewton, where they put up at a small hostelry. Oswald had intended going to the monastery there, but Roger begged so earnestly that they should put up elsewhere, that he yielded to him.

"I should have no end of questions asked, as to our journey across the border, and its object," Roger said; "and it always goes against my conscience to have to lie, unless upon pressing occasions."

"And, moreover," Oswald said, with a laugh, "you might be expected to get up to join the community at prayers, at midnight; and they might give you a monk's bed, instead of a more comfortable one in the guest chambers."

"There may be something in that," Roger admitted, "and I have so often to sleep on a stone bench, for the punishment of my offences, that I own to a weakness for a soft bed, when I can get one."

However, Oswald was pleased to see that his follower behaved, at their resting place, with more discretion than he could have hoped for; although he somewhat surprised his host, by the heartiness of his appetite; but, on the other hand, he was moderate in his potations, and talked but little, retiring to a bed of thick rushes, at curfew.

"In truth, I was afraid to trust myself," he said to Oswald, as they lay down side by side. "Never have I felt so free, since Otterburn–never, indeed, since that unfortunate day when I was wounded, and conceived the fatal idea of becoming a monk. Two or three times, the impulse to troll out a trooper's song was so strong in me, that I had to clap my hand over my mouth, to keep it in."

"'Tis well you did, Roger, for assuredly if you had so committed yourself, on the first day of starting, I must have sent you back to Alnwick, feeling that it would not be safe for you to proceed with me farther. When we get upon the Cheviots, tomorrow, you may lift your voice as you choose; but it were best that you confined yourself to a Latin canticle, even there, for the habit of breaking into songs of the other kind might grow upon you."

"I will do so," Roger said, seriously. "Some of the canticles have plenty of ring and go, and the words matter not, seeing that I do not understand them."

The next morning they resumed their journey, crossed the Cheviots, which were here comparatively low hills; and, after four hours' riding, arrived at Roxburgh.

"Why do we come here?" Roger asked. "It would surely have been much shorter had we travelled through Berwick, and along the coast road."

"Much shorter, Roger; but Sir Henry thought it better that we should go inland to Haddington, and thence east to Dunbar; as, thus entering the town, it would seem that we came from Edinburgh, or from some western monastery; whereas, did we journey by the coast road, it might be guessed that we had come from England."

As before, they put up at a hostelry; and Oswald then proceeded, on foot, to the governor's house. Some soldiers were loitering at the door.

"What do you want, lad?" one of them asked, as he came up.

"I have a letter, which I am charged to deliver into the governor's own hands."

"A complaint, I suppose, from some worthy prior, who has lost some of his beeves?"

"Maybe the governor will inform you, if you ask him," Oswald replied.

"I shall pull your ear for you, when you come out, young jackanapes," the soldier said, hotly.

"That danger I must even risk. Business first, and pleasure afterwards."

And while the other soldiers burst into a fit of laughter, at the astonishment of their comrade at what he deemed the insolence of this young servitor of a monastery, he quietly entered. The guard at the door, who had heard the colloquy, led him into the governor's room.

"A messenger with a letter desires speech with you, Sir Philip," he said.

"Bid him enter," the knight said, briefly.

Oswald entered, and bowed deeply. He waited until the door closed behind the attendant, and then said:

"I am the bearer of a letter, sir, from Lord Percy to you."

The knight looked at him in surprise.

"Hotspur has chosen a strange messenger," he muttered to himself, as he took the missive Oswald held out to him, cut the silk that bound it with a dagger, and read its contents. As he laid it down, he rose to his feet.

"Excuse my want of courtesy," he said. "Lord Percy tells me that you are one of his esquires–no slight recommendation–and that you are intrusted with somewhat important a mission, on his part, to Dunbar, a still higher recommendation–for assuredly he would not have selected you for such a purpose, had you not stood high in his regard. But, indeed, at first I took you for what you seemed, as the bearer of a complaint from some abbot; for in truth, such complaints are not uncommon, for whenever a bullock is lost, they put it down to my men.

"Where are your horses that Percy speaks of? You will, I hope, take up your abode here, as long as you stay in the town."

"Thank you, Sir Philip; but I shall go forward in the morning. I have already put up at the Golden Rose. It would attract attention, were I to come here, and it were best that I remain as I am; and indeed, I have brought no clothes with me, save those I stand in."

"Well, perhaps, as you do not wish to attract attention, it were best so; and I pray you inform Lord Percy of the reason why you declined my entertainment."

"I shall be glad, Sir Philip, if you will send down a couple of your men to fetch the horses up to your stables; as I shall start, as soon as the gates are open, tomorrow morning."

"I will do so, at once."

And the governor rang a handbell on the table.

"Send two of the men up here," he said, as an attendant entered.

A minute later a door opened, and two soldiers came in, and saluted. One of them, to Oswald's amusement, was the man with whom he had exchanged words, below.

"You will accompany this gentleman to the Golden Rose, and bring back two horses, which he will hand over to you, and place them in the stables with mine.

"Are you sure, Master Forster, that there is nothing more that I can do for you?"

"Nothing, whatever, I thank you, sir; and I am greatly obliged by your courtesy, and with your permission I will take my leave. I hope to return here in the course of a week, or ten days."

So saying, Oswald shook hands with the governor and went downstairs, followed by the soldiers, who had not yet recovered from their surprise at seeing Oswald seated, and evidently on familiar terms with their lord. Oswald said nothing to them, until he arrived at the Golden Rose. Then he led the way to the stables, and handed the horses over to them.

"I suppose that that pulling of the ear will be deferred, for a time?" he said, with a smile, to the soldier who had made the remark.

The man sheepishly took hold of the bridle.

"I could not tell, sir–" he began.

"Of course you could not," Oswald interrupted. "Still, it may be a lesson, to you, that it is just as well not to make fun of people, until you are quite sure who they are. There, I bear no malice; get yourselves a stoup of wine, in payment for your services."

"I thought that there was something out of the way about him," the other man said, as they walked up the street with the two horses; "or he would never have turned upon you, as he did. It is evident that he is someone of consequence, and is here on some secret business or other, with Sir Philip. It is well that he did not bear malice, for you would have got it hot, from the governor, had he reported what you said to him."

Chapter 6: At Dunbar

The journey passed without any incident of importance, but Oswald had reason to congratulate himself on having taken the monk with him. On one occasion, as they were passing over a wild heath, a party of eight or ten men, on rough ponies, rode up. They were armed with spears and swords. They reined up with exclamations of disappointment as Roger, who had rolled up his robe round his waist, for convenience of walking, let it fall round him.

"You have played us a scurvy trick, monk," the leader said, angrily. "Who was to guess it was a monk, who was thus striding along?"

"You would find it difficult to walk, yourself, with this robe dangling about your heels," Roger said.

"Whither are you bound, and whence are you going?"

"We are travelling to Dunbar, being sent to the convent of Saint Magnus there, and come from Roxburgh."

"'Tis a shame that so stalwart a fellow as you are should be leading a drone's life, in a convent; when every true Scotsman is sharpening his spear, in readiness for what may come when the truce with England expires."

"I am glad to hear that you are so well employed," Roger replied; "but methinks that, in days like these, it is sometimes useful to have a few men of thews and sinews, even in a religious house; for there are those who sometimes fail in the respect they owe to the Church."

"That is true enough," the men laughed. "Well, go thy way. There is naught to be gained from a travelling monk."

"Naught, good friend, save occasionally hard blows, when the monk happens to be of my strength and stature, and carries a staff like this."

"'Tis a goodly weapon, in sooth, and you look as if you knew how to wield it."

"Even a monk may know that, seeing that a staff is not a carnal weapon."

And rolling up his sleeves, Roger took the staff in the middle with both hands, in the manner of a quarterstaff, and made it play round his head; with a speed, and vigour, that showed that he was a complete master of the exercise.

"Enough, enough!" the man said, while exclamations of admiration broke from the others. "Truly from such a champion, strong enough to wield a weapon that resembles a weaver's beam, rather than a quarterstaff, there would be more hard knocks than silver to be gained; but it is all the more pity that such skill and strength should be thrown away, in a convent. Perhaps it is as well that you are wearing a monk's gown, for methinks that, eight to one as we are, some of us might have got broken heads, before we gained the few pence in your pocket.

"Come on, men. Better luck next time. It is clear that this man is not the one we are charged to capture."

And, with his followers, he rode off across the moor.

"I do not think that they are what they seem," Oswald said, as they resumed their journey. "The man's speech was not that of a border raider, and his followers would hardly have sat their horses so silently, and obeyed his orders so promptly, had they been merely thieving caterans; besides, you marked that he said you were not the man they were watching for."

"Whom think you that they are, then, Master Oswald?"

"I think it possible that they may be a party of Douglas's followers, led by a knight. It may be that Douglas has received some hint of March's being in communication with England; and that he has sent a party to seize, and search, any traveller who looked like a messenger from the south. Of course, this may be only fancy. Still, I am right glad that you were wearing your monkish robe; for,

had I been alone, I might have been cross-questioned so shrewdly as to my purpose in travelling, that I might have been held on suspicion, and means employed to get the truth out of me."

At the small town where they stopped, next night, they learned that many complaints had been made, by travellers from the south, of how they had been stopped by a party of armed men on the border, closely questioned, and searched, and in some cases robbed. This had been going on for some weeks, and the sheriff of the county had twice collected an armed force, and ridden in search of the robbers, but altogether without success. It was believed that they were strangers to the district, and the description given of them had not agreed with those of any noted bad characters, in the neighbourhood.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.