YONGE CHARLOTTE MARY

THE ARMOURER'S PRENTICES

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
THE VERDURER'S LODGE

"Give me the poor allottery my father left me by testament, with that I will go buy me fortunes."

"Get you with him, you old dog."

As You Like It.

The officials of the New Forest have ever since the days of the Conqueror enjoyed some of the pleasantest dwellings that southern England can boast.

The home of the Birkenholt family was not one of the least delightful. It stood at the foot of a rising ground, on which grew a grove of magnificent beeches, their large silvery boles rising majestically like columns into a lofty vaulting of branches, covered above with tender green foliage. Here and there the shade beneath was broken by the gilding of a ray of sunshine on a lower twig, or on a white trunk, but the floor of the vast arcades was almost entirely of the russet brown of the fallen leaves, save where a fern or holly bush made a spot of green. At the foot of the slope lay a stretch of pasture ground, some parts covered

by “lady-smocks, all silver white,” with the course of the little stream through the midst indicated by a perfect golden river of shining kingcups interspersed with ferns. Beyond lay tracts of brown heath and brilliant gorse and broom, which stretched for miles and miles along the flats, while the dry ground was covered with holly brake, and here and there woods of oak and beech made a sea of verdure, purpling in the distance.

Cultivation was not attempted, but hardy little ponies, cows, goats, sheep, and pigs were feeding, and picking their way about in the marshy mead below, and a small garden of pot-herbs, inclosed by a strong fence of timber, lay on the sunny side of a spacious rambling forest lodge, only one story high, built of solid timber and roofed with shingle. It was not without strong pretensions to beauty, as well as to picturesqueness, for the posts of the door, the architecture of the deep porch, the frames of the latticed windows, and the verge boards were all richly carved in grotesque devices. Over the door was the royal shield, between a pair of magnificent antlers, the spoils of a deer reported to have been slain by King Edward IV., as was denoted by the “glorious sun of York” carved beneath the shield.

In the background among the trees were ranges of stables and kennels, and on the grass-plat in front of the windows was a row of beehives. A tame doe lay on the little green sward, not far from a large rough deer-hound, both close friends who could be trusted at large. There was a mournful dispirited look about the hound, evidently an aged animal, for the once black muzzle was touched

with grey, and there was a film over one of the keen beautiful eyes, which opened eagerly as he pricked his ears and lifted his head at the rattle of the door latch. Then, as two boys came out, he rose, and with a slowly waving tail, and a wistful appealing air, came and laid his head against one of the pair who had appeared in the porch. They were lads of fourteen and fifteen, clad in suits of new mourning, with the short belted doublet, puffed hose, small ruffs and little round caps of early Tudor times. They had dark eyes and hair, and honest open faces, the younger ruddy and sunburnt, the elder thinner and more intellectual—and they were so much the same size that the advantage of age was always supposed to be on the side of Stephen, though he was really the junior by nearly a year. Both were sad and grave, and the eyes and cheeks of Stephen showed traces of recent floods of tears, though there was more settled dejection on the countenance of his brother.

"Ay, Spring," said the lad, "'tis winter with thee now. A poor old rogue! Did the new housewife talk of a halter because he showed his teeth when her ill-nurtured brat wanted to ride on him? Nay, old Spring, thou shalt share thy master's fortunes, changed though they be. Oh, father! father! didst thou guess how it would be with thy boys!" And throwing himself on the grass, he hid his face against the dog and sobbed.

"Come, Stephen, Stephen; 'tis time to play the man! What are we to do out in the world if you weep and wail?"

"She might have let us stay for the month's mind," was heard

from Stephen.

"Ay, and though we might be more glad to go, we might carry bitterer thoughts along with us. Better be done with it at once, say I."

"There would still be the Forest! And I saw the moorhen sitting yester eve! And the wild ducklings are out on the pool, and the woods are full of song. Oh! Ambrose! I never knew how hard it is to part—"

"Nay, now, Steve, where be all your plots for bravery? You always meant to seek your fortune—not bide here like an acorn for ever."

"I never thought to be thrust forth the very day of our poor father's burial, by a shrewish town-bred vixen, and a base narrow-souled—"

"Hist! hist!" said the more prudent Ambrose.

"Let him hear who will! He cannot do worse for us than he has done! All the Forest will cry shame on him for a mean-hearted skinflint to turn his brothers from their home, ere their father and his, be cold in his grave," cried Stephen, clenching the grass with his hands, in his passionate sense of wrong.

"That's womanish," said Ambrose.

"Who'll be the woman when the time comes for drawing cold steel?" cried Stephen, sitting up.

At that moment there came through the porch a man, a few years over thirty, likewise in mourning, with a paler, sharper countenance than the brothers, and an uncomfortable pleading

expression of self-justification.

"How now, lads!" he said, "what means this passion? You have taken the matter too hastily. There was no thought that ye should part till you had some purpose in view. Nay, we should be fain for Ambrose to bide on here, so he would leave his portion for me to deal with, and teach little Will his primer and accidence. You are a quiet lad, Ambrose, and can rule your tongue better than Stephen."

"Thanks, brother John," said Ambrose, somewhat sarcastically, "but where Stephen goes I go."

"I would—I would have found Stephen a place among the prickers or rangers, if—" hesitated John. "In sooth, I would yet do it, if he would make it up with the housewife."

"My father looked higher for his son than a pricker's office," returned Ambrose.

"That do I wot," said John, "and therefore, 'tis for his own good that I would send him forth. His godfather, our uncle Birkenholt, he will assuredly provide for him, and set him forth—"

The door of the house was opened, and a shrewish voice cried, "Mr. Birkenholt—here, husband! You are wanted. Here's little Kate crying to have yonder smooth pouch to stroke, and I cannot reach it for her."

"Father set store by that otter-skin pouch, for poor Prince Arthur slew the otter," cried Stephen. "Surely, John, you'll not let the babes make a toy of that?"

John made a helpless gesture, and at a renewed call, went

indoors.

"You are right, Ambrose," said Stephen, "this is no place for us. Why should we tarry any longer to see everything moiled and set at nought? I have couched in the forest before, and 'tis summer time."

"Nay," said Ambrose, "we must make up our fardels and have our money in our pouches before we can depart. We must tarry the night, and call John to his reckoning, and so might we set forth early enough in the morning to lie at Winchester that night and take counsel with our uncle Birkenholt."

"I would not stop short at Winchester," said Stephen. "London for me, where uncle Randall will find us preferment!"

"And what wilt do for Spring!"

"Take him with me, of course!" exclaimed Stephen. "What! would I leave him to be kicked and pinched by Will, and hanged belike by Mistress Maud?"

"I doubt me whether the poor old hound will brook the journey."

"Then I'll carry him!"

Ambrose looked at the big dog as if he thought it would be a serious undertaking, but he had known and loved Spring as his brother's property ever since his memory began, and he scarcely felt that they could be separable for weal or woe.

The verdurers of the New Forest were of gentle blood, and their office was well-nigh hereditary. The Birkenholts had held it for many generations, and the reversion passed as a matter of

course to the eldest son of the late holder, who had newly been laid in the burial ground of Beaulieu Abbey. John Birkenholt, whose mother had been of knightly lineage, had resented his father's second marriage with the daughter of a yeoman on the verge of the Forest, suspected of a strain of gipsy blood, and had lived little at home, becoming a sort of agent at Southampton for business connected with the timber which was yearly cut in the Forest to supply material for the shipping. He had wedded the daughter of a person engaged in law business at Southampton, and had only been an occasional visitor at home, ever after the death of his stepmother. She had left these two boys, unwelcome appendages in his sight. They had obtained a certain amount of education at Beaulieu Abbey, where a school was kept, and where Ambrose daily studied, though for the last few months Stephen had assisted his father in his forest duties.

Death had come suddenly to break up the household in the early spring of 1515, and John Birkenholt had returned as if to a patrimony, bringing his wife and children with him. The funeral ceremonies had been conducted at Beaulieu Abbey on the extensive scale of the sixteenth century, the requiem, the feast, and the dole, all taking place there, leaving the Forest lodge in its ordinary quiet.

It had always been understood that on their father's death the two younger sons must make their own way in the world; but he had hoped to live until they were a little older, when he might himself have started them in life, or expressed his wishes

respecting them to their elder brother. As it was, however, there was no commendation of them, nothing but a strip of parchment, drawn up by one of the monks of Beaulieu, leaving each of them twenty crowns, with a few small jewels and properties left by their own mother, while everything else went to their brother.

There might have been some jealousy excited by the estimation in which Stephen's efficiency—boy as he was—was evidently held by the plain-spoken underlings of the verdurer; and this added to Mistress Birkenholt's dislike to the presence of her husband's half-brothers, whom she regarded as interlopers without a right to exist. Matters were brought to a climax by old Spring's resentment at being roughly teased by her spoilt children. He had done nothing worse than growl and show his teeth, but the town-bred dame had taken alarm, and half in terror, half in spite, had insisted on his instant execution, since he was too old to be valuable. Stephen, who loved the dog only less than he loved his brother Ambrose, had come to high words with her; and the end of the altercation had been that she had declared that she would suffer no great lubbers of the half-blood to devour her children's inheritance, and teach them ill manners, and that go they must, and that instantly. John had muttered a little about "not so fast, dame," and "for very shame," but she had turned on him, and rated him with a violence that demonstrated who was ruler in the house, and took away all disposition to tarry long under the new dynasty.

The boys possessed two uncles, one on each side of the house.

Their father's elder brother had been a man-at-arms, having preferred a stirring life to the Forest, and had fought in the last surges of the Wars of the Roses. Having become disabled and infirm, he had taken advantage of a corrody, or right of maintenance, as being of kin to a benefactor of Hyde Abbey at Winchester, to which Birkenholt some generations back had presented a few roods of land, in right of which, one descendant at a time might be maintained in the Abbey. Intelligence of his brother's death had been sent to Richard Birkenholt, but answer had been returned that he was too evil-disposed with the gout to attend the burial.

The other uncle, Harry Randall, had disappeared from the country under a cloud connected with the king's deer, leaving behind him the reputation of a careless, thriftless, jovial fellow, the best company in all the Forest, and capable of doing every one's work save his own.

The two brothers, who were about seven and six years old at the time of his flight, had a lively recollection of his charms as a playmate, and of their mother's grief for him, and refusal to believe any ill of her Hal. Rumours had come of his attainment to vague and unknown greatness at court, under the patronage of the Lord Archbishop of York, which the Verdurer laughed to scorn, though his wife gave credit to them. Gifts had come from time to time, passed through a succession of servants and officials of the king, such as a coral and silver rosary, a jewelled bodkin, an agate carved with St. Catherine, an ivory pouncet box with a

pierced gold coin as the lid; but no letter with them, as indeed Hal Randall had never been induced to learn to read or write. Master Birkenholt looked doubtfully at the tokens and hoped Hal had come honestly by them; but his wife had thoroughly imbued her sons with the belief that Uncle Hal was shining in his proper sphere, where he was better appreciated than at home. Thus their one plan was to go to London to find Uncle Hal, who was sure to put Stephen on the road to fortune, and enable Ambrose to become a great scholar, his favourite ambition.

His gifts would, as Ambrose observed, serve them as tokens, and with the purpose of claiming them, they re-entered the hall, a long low room, with a handsome open roof, and walls tapestried with dressed skins, interspersed with antlers, hung with weapons of the chase. At one end of the hall was a small polished barrel, always replenished with beer, at the other a hearth with a wood fire constantly burning, and there was a table running the whole length of the room; at one end of this was laid a cloth, with a few trenchers on it, and horn cups, surrounding a barley loaf and a cheese, this meagre irregular supper being considered as a sufficient supplement to the funeral baked meats which had abounded at Beaulieu. John Birkenholt sat at the table with a trencher and horn before him, uneasily using his knife to crumble, rather than cut, his bread. His wife, a thin, pale, shrewish-looking woman, was warming her child's feet at the fire, before putting him to bed, and an old woman sat spinning and nodding on a settle at a little distance.

"Brother," said Stephen, "we have thought on what you said. We will put our stuff together, and if you will count us out our portions, we will be afoot by sunrise to-morrow."

"Nay, nay, lad, I said not there was such haste; did I, mistress housewife?"—(she snorted); "only that thou art a well-grown lusty fellow, and 'tis time thou wentest forth. For thee, Ambrose, thou wottest I made thee a fair offer of bed and board."

"That is," called out the wife, "if thou wilt make a fair scholar of little Will. 'Tis a mighty good offer. There are not many who would let their child be taught by a mere stripling like thee!"

"Nay," said Ambrose, who could not bring himself to thank her, "I go with Stephen, mistress; I would mend my scholarship ere I teach."

"As you please," said Mistress Maud, shrugging her shoulders, "only never say that a fair offer was not made to you."

"And," said Stephen, "so please you, brother John, hand us over our portions, and the jewels as bequeathed to us, and we will be gone."

"Portions, quotha?" returned John. "Boy, they be not due to you till you be come to years of discretion."

The brothers looked at one another, and Stephen said, "Nay, now, brother, I know not how that may be, but I do know that you cannot drive us from our father's house without maintenance, and detain what belongs to us."

And Ambrose muttered something about "my Lord of Beaulieu."

"Look you, now," said John, "did I ever speak of driving you from home without maintenance? Hath not Ambrose had his choice of staying here, and Stephen of waiting till some office be found for him? As for putting forty crowns into the hands of striplings like you, it were mere throwing it to the robbers."

"That being so," said Ambrose turning to Stephen, "we will to Beaulieu, and see what counsel my lord will give us."

"Yea, do, like the vipers ye are, and embroil us with my Lord of Beaulieu," cried Maud from the fire.

"See," said John, in his more caressing fashion, "it is not well to carry family tales to strangers, and—and—"

He was disconcerted by a laugh from the old nurse, "Ho! John Birkenholt, thou wast ever a lad of smooth tongue, but an thou, or madam here, think that thy brothers can be put forth from thy father's door without their due before the good man be cold in his grave, and the Forest not ring with it, thou art mightily out in thy reckoning!"

"Peace, thou old hag; what matter is't of thine?" began Mistress Maud, but again came the harsh laugh. "Matter of mine! Why, whose matter should it be but mine, that have nursed all three of the lads, ay, and their father before them, besides four more that lie in the graveyard at Beaulieu? Rest their sweet souls! And I tell thee, Master John, an thou do not righteously by these thy brothers, thou mayst back to thy parchments at Southampton, for not a man or beast in the Forest will give thee good day."

They all felt the old woman's authority. She was able and

spirited in her homely way, and more mistress of the house than Mrs. Birkenholt herself; and such were the terms of domestic service, that there was no peril of losing her place. Even Maud knew that to turn her out was an impossibility, and that she must be accepted like the loneliness, damp, and other evils of Forest life. John had been under her dominion, and proceeded to persuade her. "Good now, Nurse Joan, what have I denied these rash striplings that my father would have granted them? Wouldst thou have them carry all their portion in their hands, to be cozened of it at the first ale-house, or robbed on the next heath?"

"I would have thee do a brother's honest part, John Birkenholt. A loving part I say not. Thou wert always like a very popple for hardness, and smoothness, ay, and slipperiness. Heigh ho! But what is right by the lads, thou *shalt* do."

John cowered under her eye as he had done at six years old, and faltered, "I only seek to do them right, nurse."

Nurse Joan uttered an emphatic grunt, but Mistress Maud broke in, "They are not to hang about here in idleness, eating my poor child's substance, and teaching him ill manners."

"We would not stay here if you paid us for it," returned Stephen.

"And whither would you go?" asked John.

"To Winchester first, to seek counsel with our uncle Birkenholt. Then to London, where uncle Randall will help us to our fortunes."

"Gipsy Hal! He is more like to help you to a halter," sneered John, *sotto voce*, and Joan herself observed, "Their uncle at Winchester will show them better than to run after that there go-by-chance."

However, as no one wished to keep the youths, and they were equally determined to go, an accommodation was come to at last. John was induced to give them three crowns apiece and to yield them up the five small trinkets specified, though not without some murmurs from his wife. It was no doubt safer to leave the rest of the money in his hands than to carry it with them, and he undertook that it should be forthcoming, if needed for any fit purpose, such as the purchase of an office, an apprentice's fee, or an outfit as a squire. It was a vague promise that cost him nothing just then, and thus could be readily made, and John's great desire was to get them away so that he could aver that they had gone by their own free will, without any hardship, for he had seen enough at his father's obsequies to show him that the love and sympathy of all the scanty dwellers in the Forest was with them.

Nurse Joan had fought their battles, but with the sore heart of one who was parting with her darlings never to see them again. She bade them doff their suits of mourning that she might make up their fardels, as they would travel in their Lincoln-green suits. To take these she repaired to the little rough shed-like chamber where the two brothers lay for the last time on their pallet bed, awake, and watching for her, with Spring at their feet. The poor old woman stood over them, as over the motherless nurslings

whom she had tended, and she should probably never see more, but she was a woman of shrewd sense, and perceived that "with the new madam in the hall" it was better that they should be gone before worse ensued.

She advised leaving their valuables sealed up in the hands of my Lord Abbot, but they were averse to this—for they said their uncle Randall, who had not seen them since they were little children, would not know them without some pledge.

She shook her head. "The less you deal with Hal Randall the better," she said. "Come now, lads, be advised and go no farther than Winchester, where Master Ambrose may get all the book-learning he is ever craving for, and you, Master Steevie, may prentice yourself to some good trade."

"Prentice!" cried Stephen, scornfully.

"Ay, ay. As good blood as thine has been prenticed," returned Joan. "Better so than be a cut-throat sword-and-buckler fellow, ever slaying some one else or getting thyself slain—a terror to all peaceful folk. But thine uncle will see to that—a steady-minded lad always was he—was Master Dick."

Consoling herself with this hope, the old woman rolled up their new suits with some linen into two neat knapsacks; sighing over the thought that unaccustomed fingers would deal with the shirts she had spun, bleached, and sewn. But she had confidence in "Master Dick," and concluded that to send his nephews to him at Winchester gave a far better chance of their being cared for, than letting them be flouted into ill-doing by their grudging

brother and his wife.

CHAPTER II
THE GRANGE OF SILKSTEDE

"All Itchen's valley lay,
St. Catherine's breezy side and the woodlands far away,
The huge Cathedral sleeping in venerable gloom,
The modest College tower, and the bedesmen's Norman home."

Lord Selborne.

Very early in the morning, even according to the habits of the time, were Stephen and Ambrose Birkenholt astir. They were full of ardour to enter on the new and unknown world beyond the Forest, and much as they loved it, any change that kept them still to their altered life would have been distasteful.

Nurse Joan, asking no questions, folded up their fardels on their backs, and packed the wallets for their day's journey with ample provision. She charged them to be good lads, to say their Pater, Credo, and Ave daily, and never omit Mass on a Sunday. They kissed her like their mother and promised heartily—and Stephen took his crossbow. They had had some hope of setting forth so early as to avoid all other human farewells, except that Ambrose wished to begin by going to Beaulieu to take leave of the Father who had been his kind master, and get his blessing

and counsel. But Beaulieu was three miles out of their way, and Stephen had not the same desire, being less attached to his schoolmaster and more afraid of hindrances being thrown in their way.

Moreover, contrary to their expectation, their elder brother came forth, and declared his intention of setting them forth on their way, bestowing a great amount of good advice, to the same purport as that of nurse Joan, namely, that they should let their uncle Richard Birkenholt find them some employment at Winchester, where they, or at least Ambrose, might even obtain admission into the famous college of St. Mary.

In fact, this excellent elder brother persuaded himself that it would be doing them an absolute wrong to keep such promising youths hidden in the Forest.

The purpose of his going thus far with them made itself evident. It was to see them past the turning to Beaulieu. No doubt he wished to tell the story in his own way, and that they should not present themselves there as orphans expelled from their father's house. It would sound much better that he had sent them to ask counsel of their uncle at Winchester, the fit person to take charge of them. And as he represented that to go to Beaulieu would lengthen their day's journey so much that they might hardly reach Winchester that night, while all Stephen's wishes were to go forward, Ambrose could only send his greetings. There was another debate over Spring, who had followed his master as usual. John uttered an exclamation of

vexation at perceiving it, and bade Stephen drive the dog back.

"Or give me the leash to drag him. He will never follow me."

"He goes with us," said Stephen.

"He! Thou'lt never have the folly! The old hound is half blind and past use. No man will take thee in with him after thee."

"Then they shall not take me in," said Stephen. "I'll not leave him to be hanged by thee."

"Who spoke of hanging him!"

"Thy wife will soon, if she hath not already."

"Thou wilt be for hanging him thyself ere thou have made a day's journey with him on the king's highway, which is not like these forest paths, I would have thee to know. Why, he limps already."

"Then I'll carry him," said Stephen, doggedly.

"What hast thou to say to that device, Ambrose?" asked John, appealing to the elder and wiser.

But Ambrose only answered "I'll help," and as John had no particular desire to retain the superannuated hound, and preferred on the whole to be spared sentencing him, no more was said on the subject as they went along, until all John's stock of good counsel had been lavished on his brothers' impatient ears. He bade them farewell, and turned back to the lodge, and they struck away along the woodland pathway which they had been told led to Winchester, though they had never been thither, nor seen any town save Southampton and Romsey at long intervals. On they went, sometimes through beech and oak

woods of noble, almost primeval, trees, but more often across tracts of holly underwood, illuminated here and there with the snowy garlands of the wild cherry, and beneath with wide spaces covered with young green bracken, whose soft irregular masses on the undulating ground had somewhat the effect of the waves of the sea. These alternated with stretches of yellow gorse and brown heather, sheets of cotton-grass, and pools of white crowfoot, and all the vegetation of a mountain side, only that the mountain was not there.

The brothers looked with eyes untaught to care for beauty, but with a certain love of the home scenes, tempered by youth's impatience for something new. The nightingales sang, the thrushes flew out before them, the wild duck and moorhen glanced on the pools. Here and there they came on the furrows left by the snout of the wild swine, and in the open tracts rose the graceful heads of the deer, but of inhabitants or travellers they scarce saw any, save when they halted at the little hamlet of Minestead, where a small alehouse was kept by one Will Purkiss, who claimed descent from the charcoal-burner who had carried William Rufus's corpse to burial at Winchester—the one fact in history known to all New Foresters, though perhaps Ambrose and John were the only persons beyond the walls of Beaulieu who did not suppose the affair to have taken place in the last generation.

A draught of ale and a short rest were welcome as the heat of the day came on, making the old dog plod wearily on with

his tongue out, so that Stephen began to consider whether he should indeed have to be his bearer—a serious matter, for the creature at full length measured nearly as much as he did. They met hardly any one, and they and Spring were alike too well known and trained, for difficulties to arise as to leading a dog through the Forest. Should they ever come to the term of the Forest? It was not easy to tell when they were really beyond it, for the ground was much of the same kind. Only the smooth, treeless hills, where they had always been told Winchester lay, seemed more defined; and they saw no more deer, but here and there were inclosures where wheat and barley were growing, and black timbered farm-houses began to show themselves at intervals. Herd boys, as rough and unkempt as their charges, could be seen looking after little tawny cows, black-faced sheep, or spotted pigs, with curs which barked fiercely at poor weary Spring, even as their masters were more disposed to throw stones than to answer questions.

By and by, on the further side of a green valley, could be seen buildings with an encircling wall of flint and mortar faced with ruddy brick, the dark red-tiled roofs rising among walnut-trees, and an orchard in full bloom spreading into a long green field.

"Winchester must be nigh. The sun is getting low," said Stephen.

"We will ask. The good folk will at least give us an answer," said Ambrose wearily.

As they reached the gate, a team of plough horses was passing

in led by a peasant lad, while a lay brother, with his gown tucked up, rode sideways on one, whistling. An Augustinian monk, ruddy, burly, and sunburnt, stood in the farm-yard, to receive an account of the day's work, and doffing his cap, Ambrose asked whether Winchester were near.

"Three mile or thereaway, my good lad," said the monk; "thou'lt see the towers an ye mount the hill. Whence art thou?" he added, looking at the two young strangers. "Scholars? The College elects not yet a while."

"We be from the Forest, so please your reverence, and are bound for Hyde Abbey, where our uncle, Master Richard Birkenholt, dwells."

"And oh, sir," added Stephen, "may we crave a drop of water for our dog?"

The monk smiled as he looked at Spring, who had flung himself down to take advantage of the halt, hanging out his tongue, and panting spasmodically. "A noble beast," he said, "of the Windsor breed, is't not?" Then laying his hand on the graceful head, "Poor old hound, thou art o'er travelled. He is aged for such a journey, if you came from the Forest since morn. Twelve years at the least, I should say, by his muzzle."

"Your reverence is right," said Stephen, "he is twelve years old. He is two years younger than I am, and my father gave him to me when he was a little whelp."

"So thou must needs take him to seek thy fortune with thee," said the good-natured Augustinian, not knowing how truly he

spoke. "Come in, my lads, here's a drink for him. What said you was your uncle's name?" and as Ambrose repeated it, "Birkenholt! Living on a corrody at Hyde! Ay! ay! My lads, I have a call to Winchester to-morrow, you'd best tarry the night here at Silkstede Grange, and fare forward with me."

The tired boys were heartily glad to accept the invitation, more especially as Spring, happy as he was with the trough of water before him, seemed almost too tired to stand over it, and after the first, tried to lap, lying down. Silkstede was not a regular convent, only a grange or farm-house, presided over by one of the monks, with three or four lay brethren under him, and a little colony of hinds, in the surrounding cottages, to cultivate the farm, and tend a few cattle and numerous sheep, the special care of the Augustinians.

Father Shoveller, as the good-natured monk who had received the travellers was called, took them into the spacious but homely chamber which served as refectory, kitchen, and hall. He called to the lay brother who was busy over the open hearth to fry a few more rashers of bacon; and after they had washed away the dust of their journey at the trough where Spring had slaked his thirst, they sat down with him to a hearty supper, which smacked more of the grange than of the monastery, spread on a large solid oak table, and washed down with good ale. The repast was shared by the lay brethren and farm servants, and also by two or three big sheep dogs, who had to be taught their manners towards Spring.

There was none of the formality that Ambrose was

accustomed to at Beaulieu in the great refectory, where no one spoke, but one of the brethren read aloud some theological book from a stone pulpit in the wall. Here Brother Shoveller conversed without stint, chiefly with the brother who seemed to be a kind of bailiff, with whom he discussed the sheep that were to be taken into market the next day, and the prices to be given for them by either the college, the castle, or the butchers of Boucher Row.

He however found time to talk to the two guests, and being sprung from a family in the immediate neighbourhood, he knew the verdurer's name, and ere he was a monk, had joined in the chase in the Forest.

There was a little oratory attached to the hall, where he and the lay brethren kept the hours, to a certain degree, putting two or three services into one, on a liberal interpretation of *laborare est orare*. Ambrose's responses made their host observe as they went out, "Thou hast thy Latin pat, my son, there's the making of a scholar in thee."

Then they took their first night's rest away from home, in a small guest-chamber, with a good bed, though bare in all other respects. Brother Shoveller likewise had a cell to himself, but the lay brethren slept promiscuously among their sheep-dogs on the floor of the refectory.

All were afoot in the early morning, and Stephen and Ambrose were awakened by the tumultuous bleatings of the flock of sheep that were being driven from their fold to meet their fate at Winchester market. They heard Brother Shoveller shouting his

orders to the shepherds in tones a great deal more like those of a farmer than of a monk, and they made haste to dress themselves and join him as he was muttering a morning abbreviation of his obligatory devotions in the oratory, observing that they might be in time to hear mass at one of the city churches, but the sheep might delay them, and they had best break their fast ere starting.

It was Wednesday, a day usually kept as a moderate fast, so the breakfast was of oatmeal porridge, flavoured with honey, and washed down with mead, after which Brother Shoveller mounted his mule, a sleek creature, whose long ears had an air of great contentment, and rode off, accommodating his pace to that of his young companions up a stony cart-track which soon led them to the top of a chalk down, whence, as in a map, they could see Winchester, surrounded by its walls, lying in a hollow between the smooth green hills. At one end rose the castle, its fortifications covering its own hill, beneath, in the valley, the long, low massive Cathedral, the college buildings and tower with its pinnacles, and nearer at hand, among the trees, the Almshouse of Noble Poverty at St. Cross, beneath the round hill of St. Catherine. Churches and monastic buildings stood thickly in the town, and indeed, Brother Shoveller said, shaking his head, that there were well-nigh as many churches as folk to go to them; the place was decayed since the time he remembered when Prince Arthur was born there. Hyde Abbey he could not show them, from where they stood, as it lay further off by the river side, having been removed from the neighbourhood of the

Minster, because the brethren of St. Grimbald could not agree with those of St. Swithun's belonging to the Minster, as indeed their buildings were so close together that it was hardly possible to pass between them, and their bells jangled in each other's ears.

Brother Shoveller did not seem to entertain a very high opinion of the monks of St. Grimbald, and he asked the boys whether they were expected there. "No," they said; "tidings of their father's death had been sent by one of the woodmen, and the only answer that had been returned was that Master Richard Birkenholt was ill at ease, but would have masses said for his brother's soul."

"Hem!" said the Augustinian ominously; but at that moment they came up with the sheep, and his attention was wholly absorbed by them, as he joined the lay brothers in directing the shepherds who were driving them across the downs, steering them over the high ground towards the arched West Gate close to the royal castle. The street sloped rapidly down, and Brother Shoveller conducted his young companions between the overhanging houses, with stalls between serving as shops, till they reached the open space round the Market Cross, on the steps of which women sat with baskets of eggs, butter, and poultry, raised above the motley throng of cattle and sheep, with their dogs and drivers, the various cries of man and beast forming an incongruous accompaniment to the bells of the churches that surrounded the market-place.

Citizens' wives in hood and wimple were there, shrilly

bargaining for provision for their households, squires and grooms in quest of hay for their masters' stables, purveyors seeking food for the garrison, lay brethren and sisters for their convents, and withal, the usual margin of begging friars, wandering gleemen, jugglers and pedlars, though in no great numbers, as this was only a Wednesday market-day, not a fair. Ambrose recognised one or two who made part of the crowd at Beaulieu only two days previously, when he had "seen through tears the juggler leap," and the jingling tune one of them was playing on a rebeck brought back associations of almost unbearable pain. Happily, Father Shoveller, having seen his sheep safely bestowed in a pen, bethought him of bidding the lay brother in attendance show the young gentlemen the way to Hyde Abbey, and turning up a street at right angles to the principal one, they were soon out of the throng.

It was a lonely place, with a decayed uninhabited appearance, and Brother Peter told them it had been the Jewry, whence good King Edward had banished all the unbelieving dogs of Jews, and where no one chose to dwell after them.

Soon they came in sight of a large extent of monastic buildings, partly of stone, but the more domestic offices of flint and brick or mortar. Large meadows stretched away to the banks of the Itchen, with cattle grazing in them, but in one was a set of figures to whom the lay brother pointed with a laugh of exulting censure.

"Long bows!" exclaimed Stephen. "Who be they?"

"Brethren of St. Grimbald, sir. Such rule doth my Lord of Hyde keep, mitred abbot though he be. They say the good bishop hath called him to order, but what recks he of bishops? Good-day, Brother Bulpett, here be two young kinsmen of Master Birkenholt to visit him; and so *benedicite*, fair sirs. St. Austin's grace be with you!"

Through a gate between two little red octagonal towers, Brother Bulpett led the two visitors, and called to another of the monks, "*Benedicite*, Father Segrim, here be two striplings wanting speech of old Birkenholt."

"Looking after dead men's shoes, I trow," muttered father Segrim, with a sour look at the lads, as he led them through the outer court, where some fine horses were being groomed, and then across a second court surrounded with a beautiful cloister, with flower beds in front of it. Here, on a stone bench, in the sun, clad in a gown furred with rabbit skin, sat a decrepit old man, both his hands clasped over his staff. Into his deaf ears their guide shouted, "These boys say they are your kindred, Master Birkenholt."

"Anan?" said the old man, trembling with palsy. The lads knew him to be older than their father, but they were taken by surprise at such feebleness, and the monk did not aid them, only saying roughly, "There he is. Tell your errand."

"How fares it with you, uncle?" ventured Ambrose.

"Who be ye? I know none of you," muttered the old man, shaking his head still more.

"We are Ambrose and Stephen from the Forest," shouted Ambrose.

"Ah! Steve! poor Stevie! The accursed boar has rent his goodly face so as I would never have known him. Poor Steve! Best his soul!"

The old man began to weep, while his nephews recollected that they had heard that another uncle had been slain by the tusk of a wild boar in early manhood. Then to their surprise, his eyes fell on Spring, and calling the hound by name, he caressed the creature's head—"Spring, poor Spring! Stevie's faithful old dog. Hast lost thy master? Wilt follow me now?"

He was thinking of a Spring as well as of a Stevie of sixty years ago, and he babbled on of how many fawns were in the Queen's Bower this summer, and who had best shot at the butts at Lyndhurst, as if he were excited by the breath of his native Forest, but there was no making him understand that he was speaking with his nephews. The name of his brother John only set him repeating that John loved the greenwood, and would be content to take poor Stevie's place and dwell in the verdurer's lodge; but that he himself ought to be abroad, he had seen brave Lord Talbot's ships ready at Southampton, John might stay at home, but he would win fame and honour in Gascony.

And while he thus wandered, and the boys stood by perplexed and distressed, Brother Segrim came back, and said, "So, young sirs, have you seen enough of your doting kinsman? The sub-prior bids me say that we harbour no strange, idling, lubber lads

nor strange dogs here. 'Tis enough for us to be saddled with dissolute old men-at-arms without all their idle kin making an excuse to come and pay their devoirs. These corrodies are a heavy charge and a weighty abuse, and if there be the visitation the king's majesty speaks of, they will be one of the first matters to be amended."

Wherewith Stephen and Ambrose found themselves walked out of the cloister of St. Grimbald, and the gates shut behind them.

CHAPTER III
KINSMEN AND STRANGERS

"The reul of St. Maure and of St. Beneit
Because that it was old and some deale streit
This ilke monk let old things pace;
He held ever of the new world the trace."

Chaucer.

"The churls!" exclaimed Stephen.

"Poor old man!" said Ambrose; "I hope they are good to him!"

"To think that thus ends all that once was gallant talk of fighting under Talbot's banner," sighed Stephen, thoughtful for a moment. "However, there's a good deal to come first."

"Yea, and what next?" said the elder brother.

"On to uncle Hal. I ever looked most to him. He will purvey me to a page's place in some noble household, and get thee a clerk's or scholar's place in my Lord of York's house. Mayhap there will be room for us both there, for my Lord of York hath a goodly following of armed men."

"Which way lies the road to London?"

"We must back into the town and ask, as well as fill our stomachs and our wallets," said Ambrose. "Talk of their rule! The entertaining of strangers is better understood at Silkstede

than at Hyde."

"Tush! A grudged crust sticks in the gullet," returned Stephen. "Come on, Ambrose, I marked the sign of the White Hart by the market-place. There will be a welcome there for foresters."

They returned on their steps past the dilapidated buildings of the old Jewry, and presently saw the market in full activity; but the sounds and sights of busy life where they were utter strangers, gave Ambrose a sense of loneliness and desertion, and his heart sank as the bolder Stephen threaded the way in the direction of a broad entry over which stood a slender-bodied hart with gold hoofs, horns, collar, and chain.

"How now, my sons?" said a full cheery voice, and to their joy, they found themselves pushed up against Father Shoveller.

"Returned already! Did you get scant welcome at Hyde? Here, come where we can get a free breath, and tell me."

They passed through the open gateway of the White Hart, into the court, but before listening to them, the monk exchanged greetings with the hostess, who stood at the door in a broad hat and velvet bodice, and demanded what cheer there was for noon-meat.

"A jack, reverend sir, eels and a grampus fresh sent up from Hampton; also fresh-killed mutton for such lay folk as are not curious of the Wednesday fast. They are laying the board even now."

"Lay platters for me and these two young gentlemen," said the Augustinian. "Ye be my guests, ye wot," he added, "since ye

tarried not for meat at Hyde."

"Nor did they ask us," exclaimed Stephen; "lubbers and idlers were the best words they had for us."

"Ho! ho! That's the way with the brethren of St. Grimbald! And your uncle?"

"Alas, sir, he doteth with age," said Ambrose. "He took Stephen for his own brother, dead under King Harry of Windsor."

"So! I had heard somewhat of his age and sickness. Who was it who thrust you out?"

"A lean brother with a thin red beard, and a shrewd, puckered visage."

"Ha! By that token 'twas Segrim the bursar. He wots how to drive a bargain. St. Austin! but he deemed you came to look after your kinsman's corrody."

"He said the king spake of a visitation to abolish corrodies from religious houses," said Ambrose.

"He'll abolish the long bow from them first," said Father Shoveller. "Ay, and miniver from my Lord Abbot's hood. I'd admonish you, my good brethren of S. Grimbald, to be in no hurry for a visitation which might scarce stop where you would fain have it. Well, my sons, are ye bound for the Forest again? An ye be, we'll wend back together, and ye can lie at Silkstede to-night."

"Alack, kind father, there's no more home for us in the Forest," said Ambrose.

"Methought ye had a brother?"

"Yea; but our brother hath a wife."

"Ho! ho! And the wife will none of you?"

"She would have kept Ambrose to teach her boy his primer," said Stephen; "but she would none of Spring nor of me."

"We hoped to receive counsel from our uncle at Hyde," added Ambrose.

"Have ye no purpose now?" inquired the Father, his jolly good-humoured face showing much concern.

"Yea," manfully returned Stephen. "'Twas what I ever hoped to do, to fare on and seek our fortune in London."

"Ha! To pick up gold and silver like Dick Whittington. Poor old Spring here will scarce do you the part of his cat," and the monk's hearty laugh angered Stephen into muttering, "We are no fools," but Father Shoveller only laughed the more, saying, "Fair and softly, my son, ye'll never pick up the gold if ye cannot brook a kindly quip. Have you friends or kindred in London?"

"Yea, that have we, sir," cried Stephen; "our mother's own brother, Master Randall, hath come to preferment there in my Lord Archbishop of York's household, and hath sent us tokens from time to time, which we will show you."

"Not while we be feasting," said Father Shoveller, hastily checking Ambrose, who was feeling in his bosom. "See, the knaves be bringing their grampus across the court. Here, we'll clean our hands, and be ready for the meal;" and he showed them, under a projecting gallery in the inn yard a stone trough,

through which flowed a stream of water, in which he proceeded to wash his hands and face, and to wipe them in a coarse towel suspended nigh at hand. Certainly after handling sheep freely there was need, though such ablutions were a refinement not indulged in by all the company who assembled round the well-spread board of the White Hart for the meal after the market.

They were a motley company. By the host's side sat a knight on his way home from pilgrimage to Compostella, or perhaps a mission to Spain, with a couple of squires and other attendants, and converse of political import seemed to be passing between him and a shrewd-looking man in a lawyer's hood and gown, the recorder of Winchester, who preferred being a daily guest at the White Hart to keeping a table of his own. Country franklins and yeomen, merchants and men-at-arms, palmers and craftsmen, friars and monks, black, white, and grey, and with almost all, Father Shoveller had greeting or converse to exchange. He knew everybody, and had friendly talk with all, on canons or crops, on war or wool, on the prices of pigs or prisoners, on the news of the country side, or on the perilous innovations in learning at Oxford, which might, it was feared, even affect St. Mary's College at Winchester.

He did not affect outlandish fishes himself, and dined upon pike, but observing the curiosity of his guests, he took good care to have them well supplied with grampus; also in due time with varieties of the pudding and cake kind which had never dawned on their forest-bred imagination, and with a due proportion

of good ale—the same over which the knight might be heard rejoicing, and lauding far above the Spanish or French wines, on which he said he had been half starved.

Father Shoveller mused a good deal over his pike and its savoury stuffing. He was not by any means an ideal monk, but he was equally far from being a scandal. He was the shrewd man of business and manager of his fraternity, conducting the farming operations and making all the bargains, following his rule respectably according to the ordinary standard of his time, but not rising to any spirituality, and while duly observing the fast day, as to the quality of his food, eating with the appetite of a man who lived in the open fields.

But when their hunger was appeased, with many a fragment given to Spring, the young Birkenholts, wearied of the endless talk that was exchanged over the tankard, began to grow restless, and after exchanging signs across Father Shoveller's solid person, they simultaneously rose, and began to thank him and say they must pursue their journey.

"How now, not so fast, my sons," said the Father; "tarry a bit, I have more to say to thee. Prayers and provender, thou knowst—I'll come anon. So, sir, didst say yonder beggarly Flemings haggle at thy price for thy Southdown fleeces. Weight of dirt forsooth! Do not we wash the sheep in the Poolhole stream, the purest water in the shire?"

Manners withheld Ambrose from responding to Stephen's hot impatience, while the merchant in the sleek puce-coloured coat

discussed the Flemish wool market with the monk for a good half-hour longer.

By this time the knight's horses were brought into the yard, and the merchant's men had made ready his palfrey, his pack-horse being already on the way; the host's son came round with the reckoning, and there was a general move. Stephen expected to escape, and hardly could brook the good-natured authority with which Father Shoveller put Ambrose aside, when he would have discharged their share of the reckoning, and took it upon himself. "Said I not ye were my guests?" quoth he. "We missed our morning mass, it will do us no harm to hear Nones in the Minster."

"Sir, we thank you, but we should be on our way," said Ambrose, incited by Stephen's impatient gestures.

"Tut, tut. Fair and softly, my son, or more haste may be worse speed. Methought ye had somewhat to show me."

Stephen's youthful independence might chafe, but the habit of submission to authorities made him obediently follow the monk out at the back entrance of the inn, behind which lay the Minster yard, the grand western front rising in front of them, and the buildings of St. Swithun's Abbey extending far to their right. The hour was nearly noon, and the space was deserted, except for an old woman sitting at the great western doorway with a basket of rosaries made of nuts and of snail shells, and a workman or two employed on the bishop's new reredos.

"Now for thy tokens," said Father Shoveller. "See my young

foresters, ye be new to the world. Take an old man's counsel, and never show, nor speak of such gear in an hostel. Mine host of the White Hart is an old gossip of mine, and indifferent honest, but who shall say who might be within earshot?"

Stephen had a mind to say that he did not see why the meddling monk should wish to see them at all, and Ambrose looked a little reluctant, but Father Shoveller said in his good-humoured way, "As you please, young sirs. 'Tis but an old man's wish to see whether he can do aught to help you, that you be not as lambs among wolves. Mayhap ye deem ye can walk into London town, and that the first man you meet can point you to your uncle—Randall call ye him?—as readily as I could show you my brother, Thomas Shoveller of Granbury. But you are just as like to meet with some knave who might cozen you of all you have, or mayhap a beadle might take you up for vagabonds, and thrust you in the stocks, or ever you get to London town; so I would fain give you some commendation, an I knew to whom to make it, and ye be not too proud to take it."

"You are but too good to us, sir," said Ambrose, quite conquered, though Stephen only half believed in the difficulties.

The Father took them within the west door of the Minster, and looking up and down the long arcade of the southern aisle to see that no one was watching, he inspected the tokens, and cross-examined them on their knowledge of their uncle.

His latest gift, the rosary, had come by the hand of Friar Hurst, a begging Minorite of Southampton, who had it from

another of his order at Winchester, who had received it from one of the king's archers at the Castle, with a message to Mistress Birkenholt that it came from her brother, Master Randall, who had good preferment in London, in the house of my Lord Archbishop of York, without whose counsel King Henry never stirred. As to the coming of the agate and the pouncet box, the minds of the boys were very hazy. They knew that the pouncet box had been conveyed through the attendants of the Abbot of Beaulieu, but they were only sure that from that time the belief had prevailed with their mother that her brother was prospering in the house of the all-powerful Wolsey. The good Augustinian, examining the tokens, thought they gave colour to that opinion. The rosary and agate might have been picked up in an ecclesiastical household, and the lid of the pouncet box was made of a Spanish coin, likely to have come through some of the attendants of Queen Katharine.

"It hath an appearance," he said. "I marvel whether there be still at the Castle this archer who hath had speech with Master Randall, for if ye know no more than ye do at present, 'tis seeking a needle in a bottle of hay. But see, here come the brethren that be to sing Nones—sinner that I am, to have said no Hours since the morn, being letted with lawful business."

Again the unwilling Stephen had to submit. There was no feeling for the incongruous in those days, and reverence took very different directions from those in which it now shows itself, so that nobody had any objection to Spring's pacing gravely

with the others towards the Lady Chapel, where the Hours were sung, since the Choir was in the hands of workmen, and the sound of chipping stone could be heard from it, where Bishop Fox's elaborate lace-work reredos was in course of erection.

Passing the shrine of St. Swithun, and the grand tomb of Cardinal Beaufort, where his life-coloured effigy filled the boys with wonder, they followed their leader's example, and knelt within the Lady Chapel, while the brief Latin service for the ninth hour was sung through by the canon, clerks, and boys. It really was the Sixth, but cumulative easy-going treatment of the Breviary had made this the usual time for it, as the name of noon still testifies. The boys' attention, it must be confessed, was chiefly expended on the wonderful miracles of the Blessed Virgin in fresco on the walls of the chapel, all tending to prove that here was hope for those who said their Ave in any extremity of fire or flood.

Nones ended, Father Shoveller, with many a halt for greeting or for gossip, took the lads up the hill towards the wide fortified space where the old Castle and royal Hall of Henry of Winchester looked down on the city, and after some friendly passages with the warder at the gate, Father Shoveller explained that he was in quest of some one recently come from court, of whom the striplings in his company could make inquiry concerning a kinsman in the household of my Lord Archbishop of York.

The warder scratched his head, and bethinking himself that Eastcheap Jockey was the reverend. Father's man, summoned a

horse-boy to call that worthy.

"Where was he?"

"Sitting over his pottle in the Hall," was the reply, and the monk, with a laugh savouring little of asceticism, said he would seek him there, and accordingly crossed the court to the noble Hall, with its lofty dark marble columns, and the Round Table of King Arthur suspended at the upper end. The governor of the Castle had risen from his meal long ago, but the garrison in the piping times of peace would make their ration of ale last as far into the afternoon as their commanders would suffer. And half a dozen men still sat there, one or two snoring, two playing at dice on a clear corner of the board, and another, a smart well-dressed fellow in a bright scarlet jerkin, laying down the law to a country bumpkin, who looked somewhat dazed. The first of these was, as it appeared, Eastcheap Jockey, and there was something both of the readiness and the impudence of the Londoner in his manner, when he turned to answer the question.

He knew many in my Lord of York's house—as many as a man was like to know where there was a matter of two hundred folk between clerks and soldiers, he had often crushed a pottle with them. No; he had never heard of one called Randall, neither in hat nor cowl, but he knew more of them by face than by name, and more by byname than surname or christened name. He was certainly not the archer who had brought a token for Mistress Birkenholt, and his comrades all avouched equal ignorance on the subject. Nothing could be gained there, and while Father

Shoveller rubbed his bald head in consideration, Stephen rose to take leave.

"Look you here, my fair son," said the monk. "Starting at this hour, though the days be long, you will not reach any safe halting place with daylight, whereas by lying a night in this good city, you might reach Alton to-morrow, and there is a home where the name of Brother Shoveller will win you free lodging and entertainment."

"And to-night, good Father?" inquired Ambrose.

"That will I see to, if ye will follow me."

Stephen was devoured with impatience during the farewells in the Castle, but Ambrose represented that the good man was giving them much of his time, and that it would be unseemly and ungrateful to break from him.

"What matter is it of his? And why should he make us lose a whole day?" grumbled Stephen.

"What special gain would a day be to us?" sighed Ambrose. "I am thankful that any should take heed for us."

"Ay, you love leading-strings," returned Stephen. "Where is he going now? All out of our way!"

Father Shoveller, however, as he went down the Castle hill, explained that the Warden of St. Elizabeth's Hospital was his friend, and knowing him to have acquaintance among the clergy of St. Paul's, it would be well to obtain a letter of commendation from him, which might serve them in good stead in case they were disappointed of finding their uncle at once.

"It would be better for Spring to have a little more rest," thought Stephen, thus mitigating his own longing to escape from the monks and friars, of whom Winchester seemed to be full.

They had a kindly welcome in the pretty little college of St. Elizabeth of Hungary, lying in the meadows between William of Wykeham's College and the round hill of St. Catharine. The Warden was a more scholarly and ecclesiastical-looking person than his friend, the good-natured Augustinian. After commending them to his care, and partaking of a drink of mead, the monk of Silkstede took leave of the youths, with a hearty blessing and advice to husband their few crowns, not to tell every one of their tokens, and to follow the counsel of the Warden of St. Elizabeth's, assuring them that if they turned back to the Forest, they should have a welcome at Silkstede. Moreover he patted Spring pitifully, and wished him and his master well through the journey.

St. Elizabeth's College was a hundred years older than its neighbour St. Mary's, as was evident to practised eyes by its arches and windows, but it had been so entirely eclipsed by Wykeham's foundation that the number of priests, students, and choir-boys it was intended to maintain, had dwindled away, so that it now contained merely the Warden, a superannuated priest, and a couple of big lads who acted as servants. There was an air of great quietude and coolness about the pointed arches of its tiny cloister on that summer's day, with the old monk dozing in his chair over the manuscript he thought he was reading, not

far from the little table where the Warden was eagerly studying Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*. But the Birkenholts were of the age at which quiet means dulness, at least Stephen was, and the Warden had pity both on them and on himself; and hearing joyous shouts outside, he opened a little door in the cloister wall, and revealed a multitude of lads with their black gowns tucked up "a playing at the ball"—these being the scholars of St. Mary's. Beckoning to a pair of elder ones, who were walking up and down more quietly, he consigned the strangers to their care, sweetening the introduction by an invitation to supper, for which he would gain permission from their Warden.

One of the young Wykehamists was shy and churlish, and sheered off from the brothers, but the other catechised them on their views of becoming scholars in the college. He pointed out the cloister where the studies took place in all weathers, showed them the hall, the chapel, and the chambers, and expatiated on the chances of attaining to New College. Being moreover a scholarly fellow, he and Ambrose fell into a discussion over the passage of Virgil, copied out on a bit of paper, which he was learning by heart. Some other scholars having finished their game, and become aware of the presence of a strange dog and two strange boys, proceeded to mob Stephen and Spring, whereupon the shy boy stood forth and declared that the Warden of St. Elizabeth's had brought them in for an hour's sport.

Of course, in such close quarters, the rival Warden was esteemed a natural enemy, and went by the name of "Old Bess,"

so that his recommendation went for worse than nothing, and a dash at Spring was made by the inhospitable young savages.

Stephen stood to the defence in act to box, and the shy lad stood by him, calling for fair play and one at a time. Of course a fight ensued, Stephen and his champion on the one side, and two assailants on the other, till after a fall on either side, Ambrose's friend interfered with a voice as thundering as the manly crack would permit, peace was restored, Stephen found himself free of the meads, and Spring was caressed instead of being tormented.

Stephen was examined on his past, present, and future, envied for his Forest home, and beguiled into magnificent accounts, not only of the deer that had fallen to his bow and the boars that had fallen to his father's spear, but of the honours to which his uncle in the Archbishop's household would prefer him—for he viewed it as an absolute certainty that his kinsman was captain among the men-at-arms, whom he endowed on the spot with scarlet coats faced with black velvet, and silver medals and chains.

Whereat one of the other boys was not behind in telling how his father was pursuivant to my Lord Duke of Norfolk, and never went abroad save with silver lions broidered on back and breast, and trumpets going before; and another dwelt on the splendours of the mayor and aldermen of Southampton with their chains and cups of gold. Stephen felt bound to surpass this with the last report that my Lord of York's men rode Flemish steeds in crimson velvet housings, passmented with gold and gems, and of course his uncle had the leading of them.

"Who be thine uncle?" demanded a thin, squeaky voice. "I have brothers likewise in my Lord of York's meimé."

"Mine uncle is Captain Harry Randall, of Shirley," quoth Stephen magnificently, scornfully surveying the small proportions of the speaker, "What is thy brother?"

"Head turnspit," said a rude voice, provoking a general shout of laughter; but the boy stood his ground, and said hotly: "He is page to the comptroller of my lord's household, and waits at the second table, and I know every one of the captains."

"He'll say next he knows every one of the Seven Worthies," cried another boy, for Stephen was becoming a popular character.

"And all the paladins to boot. Come on, little Rowley!" was the cry.

"I tell you my brother is page to the comptroller of the household, and my mother dwells beside the Gate House, and I know every man of them," insisted Rowley, waxing hot. "As for that Forest savage fellow's uncle being captain of the guard, 'tis more like that he is my lord's fool, Quipsome Hal!"

Whereat there was a cry, in which were blended exultation at the hit, and vituperation of the hitter. Stephen flew forward to avenge the insult, but a big bell was beginning to ring, a whole wave of black gowns rushed to obey it, sweeping little Rowley away with them; and Stephen found himself left alone with his brother and the two lads who had been invited to St. Elizabeth's, and who now repaired thither with them.

The supper party in the refectory was a small one, and the rule of the foundation limited the meal to one dish and a pittance, but the dish was of savoury eels, and the Warden's good nature had added to it some cates and comfits in consideration of his youthful guests.

After some conversation with the elder Wykehamist, the Warden called Ambrose and put him through an examination on his attainments, which proved so satisfactory, that it ended in an invitation to the brothers to fill two of the empty scholarships of the college of the dear St. Elizabeth. It was a good offer, and one that Ambrose would fain have accepted, but Stephen had no mind for the cloister or for learning.

The Warden had no doubt that he could be apprenticed in the city of Winchester, since the brother at home had in keeping a sum sufficient for the fee. Though the trade of "capping" had fallen off, there were still good substantial burgesses who would be willing to receive an active lad of good parentage, some being themselves of gentle blood. Stephen, however, would not brook the idea. "Out upon you, Ambrose!" said he, "to desire to bind your own brother to base mechanical arts."

"'Tis what Nurse Joan held to be best for us both," said Ambrose.

"Joan! Yea, like a woman, who deems a man safest when he is a tailor, or a perfumer. An you be minded to stay here with a black gown and a shaven crown, I shall on with Spring and come to preferment. Maybe thou'lt next hear of me when I have got

some fat canonry for thee."

"Nay, I quit thee not," said Ambrose. "If thou fare forward, so do I. But I would thou couldst have brought thy mind to rest there."

"What! wouldst thou be content with this worn-out place, with more churches than houses, and more empty houses than full ones? No! let us on where there is something doing! Thou wilt see that my Lord of York will have room for the scholar as well as the man-at-arms."

So the kind offer was declined, but Ambrose was grieved to see that the Warden thought him foolish, and perhaps ungrateful.

Nevertheless the good man gave them a letter to the Reverend Master Alworthy, singing clerk at St. Paul's Cathedral, telling Ambrose it might serve them in case they failed to find their uncle, or if my Lord of York's household should not be in town. He likewise gave them a recommendation which would procure them a night's lodging at the Grange, and after the morning's mass and meat, sped them on their way with his blessing, muttering to himself, "That elder one might have been the staff of mine age! Pity on him to be lost in the great and evil City! Yet 'tis a good lad to follow that fiery spark his brother. *Tanquam agnus inter lupos.* Alack!"

CHAPTER IV
A HERO'S FALL

> "These four came all afront and mainly made at me. I made no more ado, but took their seven points on my target —thus—"
>
> *Shakespeare.*

The journey to Alton was eventless. It was slow, for the day was a broiling one, and the young foresters missed their oaks and beeches, as they toiled over the chalk downs that rose and sank in endless succession; though they would hardly have slackened their pace if it had not been for poor old Spring, who was sorely distressed by the heat and the want of water on the downs. Every now and then he lay down, panting distressfully, with his tongue hanging out, and his young masters always waited for him, often themselves not sorry to rest in the fragment of shade from a solitary thorn or juniper.

The track was plain enough, and there were hamlets at long intervals. Flocks of sheep fed on the short grass, but there was no approaching the shepherds, as they and their dogs regarded Spring as an enemy, to be received with clamour, stones, and teeth, in spite of the dejected looks which might have acquitted him of evil intentions.

The travellers reached Alton in the cool of the evening, and

were kindly received by a monk, who had charge of a grange just outside the little town, near one of the springs of the River Wey.

The next day's journey was a pleasanter one, for there was more of wood and heather, and they had to skirt round the marshy borders of various bogs. Spring was happier, being able to stop and lap whenever he would, and the whole scene was less unfriendly to them. But they scarcely made speed enough, for they were still among tall whins and stiff scrub of heather when the sun began to get low, gorgeously lighting the tall plumes of golden broom, and they had their doubts whether they might not be off the track; but in such weather, there was nothing alarming in spending a night out of doors, if only they had something for supper. Stephen took a bolt from the purse at his girdle, and bent his crossbow, so as to be ready in case a rabbit sprang out, or a duck flew up from the marshes.

A small thicket of trees was in sight, and they were making for it, when sounds of angry voices were heard, and Spring, bristling up the mane on his neck, and giving a few premonitory fierce growls like thunder, bounded forward as though he had been seven years younger. Stephen darted after him, Ambrose rushed after Stephen, and breaking through the trees, they beheld the dog at the throat of one of three men. As they came on the scene, the dog was torn down and hurled aside, giving a howl of agony, which infuriated his master. Letting fly his crossbow bolt full at the fellow's face, he dashed on, reckless of odds, waving his knotted stick, and shouting with rage. Ambrose, though more

aware of the madness of such an assault, still hurried to his support, and was amazed as well as relieved to find the charge effectual. Without waiting to return a blow, the miscreants took to their heels, and Stephen, seeing nothing but his dog, dropped on his knees beside the quivering creature, from whose neck blood was fast pouring. One glance of the faithful wistful eyes, one feeble movement of the expressive tail, and Spring had made his last farewell! That was all Stephen was conscious of; but Ambrose could hear the cry, "Good sirs, good lads, set me free!" and was aware of a portly form bound to a tree. As he cut the rope with his knife, the rescued traveller hurried out thanks and demands—"Where are the rest of you?" and on the reply that there were no more, proceeded, "Then we must on, on at once, or the villains will return! They must have thought you had a band of hunters behind you. Two furlongs hence, and we shall be safe in the hostel at Dogmersfield. Come on, my boy," to Stephen, "the brave hound is quite dead, more's the pity. Thou canst do no more for him, and we shall soon be in his case if we dally here."

"I cannot, cannot leave him thus," sobbed Stephen, who had the loving old head on his knees. "Ambrose! stay, we must bring him. There, his tail wagged! If the blood were staunched—"

"Stephen! Indeed he is stone dead! Were he our brother we could not do otherwise," reasoned Ambrose, forcibly dragging his brother to his feet. "Go on we must. Wouldst have us all slaughtered for his sake? Come! The rogues will be upon us anon. Spring saved this good man's life. Undo not his work.

See! Is yonder your horse, sir? This way, Stevie!"

The instinct of catching the horse roused Stephen, and it was soon accomplished, for the steed was a plump, docile, city-bred palfrey, with dapple-grey flanks like well-stuffed satin pincushions, by no means resembling the shaggy Forest ponies of the boys' experience, but quite astray in the heath, and ready to come at the master's whistle, and call of "Soh! Soh!—now Poppet!" Stephen caught the bridle, and Ambrose helped the burgess into the saddle. "Now, good boys," he said, "each of you lay a hand on my pommel. We can make good speed ere the rascals find out our scant numbers."

"You would make better speed without us, sir," said Stephen, hankering to remain beside poor Spring.

"D'ye think Giles Headley the man to leave two children, that have maybe saved my life as well as my purse, to bear the malice of the robbers?" demanded the burgess angrily. "That were like those fellows of mine who have shown their heels and left their master strapped to a tree! Thou! thou! what's thy name, that hast the most wit, bring thy brother, unless thou wouldst have him laid by the side of his dog."

Stephen was forced to comply, and run by Poppet's side, though his eyes were so full of tears that he could not see his way, even when the pace slackened, and in the twilight they found themselves among houses and gardens, and thus in safety, the lights of an inn shining not far off.

A figure came out in the road to meet them, crying, "Master!

master! is it you? and without scathe? Oh, the saints be praised!"

"Ay, Tibble, 'tis I and no other, thanks to the saints and to these brave lads! What, man, I blame thee not, I know thou canst not strike; but where be the rest?"

"In the inn, sir. I strove to call up the hue and cry to come to the rescue, but the cowardly hinds were afraid of the thieves, and not one would come forth."

"I wish they may not be in league with them," said Master Headley. "See! I was delivered—ay, and in time to save my purse, by these twain and their good dog. Are ye from these parts, my fair lads?"

"We be journeying from the New Forest to London," said Ambrose. "The poor dog heard the tumult, and leapt to your aid, sir, and we made after him."

"'Twas the saints sent him!" was the fervent answer. "And" (with a lifting of the cap) "I hereby vow to St. Julian a hound of solid bronze a foot in length, with a collar of silver, to his shrine in St. Faith's, in token of my deliverance in body and goods! To London are ye bound? Then will we journey on together!"

They were by this time near the porch of a large country hostel, from the doors and large bay window of which light streamed out. And as the casement was open, those without could both see and hear all that was passing within.

The table was laid for supper, and in the place of honour sat a youth of some seventeen or eighteen years, gaily dressed, with a

little feather curling over his crimson cap, and thus discoursing:—

"Yea, my good host, two of the rogues bear my tokens, besides him whom I felled to the earth. He came on at me with his sword, but I had my point ready for him; and down he went before me like an ox. Then came on another, but him I dealt with by the back stroke as used in the tilt-yard at Clarendon."

"I trow we shall know him again, sir. Holy saints! to think such rascals should haunt so nigh us," the hostess was exclaiming. "Pity for the poor goodman, Master Headley. A portly burgher was he, friendly of tongue and free of purse. I well remember him when he went forth on his way to Salisbury, little thinking, poor soul, what was before him. And is he truly sped?"

"I tell thee, good woman, I saw him go down before three of their pikes. What more could I do but drive my horse over the nearest rogue who was rifling him?"

"If he were still alive—which Our Lady grant!—the knaves will hold him to ransom," quoth the host, as he placed a tankard on the table.

"I am afraid he is past ransom," said the youth, shaking his head. "But an if he be still in the rogues' hands and living, I will get me on to his house in Cheapside, and arrange with his mother to find the needful sum, as befits me, I being his heir and about to wed his daughter. However, I shall do all that in me lies to get the poor old seignior out of the hands of the rogues. Saints defend me!"

"The poor old seignior is much beholden to thee," said Master Headley, advancing amid a clamour of exclamations from three or four serving-men or grooms, one protesting that he thought his master was with him, another that his horse ran away with him, one showing an arm which was actually being bound up, and the youth declaring that he rode off to bring help.

"Well wast thou bringing it," Master Headley answered. "I might be still standing bound like an eagle displayed, against yonder tree, for aught you fellows recked."

"Nay, sir, the odds—" began the youth.

"Odds! such odds as were put to rout—by what, deem you? These two striplings and one poor hound. Had but one of you had the heart of a sparrow, ye had not furnished a tale to be the laugh of the Barbican and Cheapside. Look well at them. How old be you, my brave lads?"

"I shall be sixteen come Lammas day, and Stephen fifteen at Martinmas day, sir," said Ambrose; "but verily we did nought. We could have done nought had not the thieves thought more were behind us."

"There are odds between going forward and backward," said Master Headley, dryly. "Ha! Art hurt? Thou bleedst," he exclaimed, laying his hand on Stephen's shoulder, and drawing him to the light.

"'Tis no blood of mine," said Stephen, as Ambrose likewise came to join in the examination. "It is my poor Spring's. He took the coward's blow. His was all the honour, and we have left

him there on the heath!" And he covered his face with his hands.

"Come, come, my good child," said Master Headley; "we will back to the place by times to-morrow when rogues hide and honest men walk abroad. Thou shalt bury thine hound, as befits a good warrior, on the battle-field. I would fain mark his points for the effigy we will frame, honest Tibble, for St. Julian. And mark ye, fellows, thou godson Giles, above all, who 'tis that boast of their valour, and who 'tis that be modest of speech. Yea, thanks, mine host. Let us to a chamber, and give us water to wash away soil of travel and of fray, and then to supper. Young masters, ye are my guests. Shame were it that Giles Headley let go farther them that have, under Heaven and St. Julian, saved him in life, limb, and purse."

The inn was large, being the resort of many travellers from the south, often of nobles and knights riding to Parliament, and thus the brothers found themselves accommodated with a chamber, where they could prepare for the meal, while Ambrose tried to console his brother by representing that, after all, poor Spring had died gallantly, and with far less pain than if he had suffered a wasting old age, besides being honoured for ever by his effigy in St. Faith's, wherever that might be, the idea which chiefly contributed to console his master.

The two boys appeared in the room of the inn looking so unlike the dusty, blood-stained pair who had entered, that Master Headley took a second glance to convince himself that they were the same, before beckoning them to seats on either side of him,

saying that he must know more of them, and bidding the host load their trenchers well from the grand fabric of beef-pasty which had been set at the end of the board. The runaways, four or five in number, herded together lower down, with a few travellers of lower degree, all except the youth who had been boasting before their arrival, and who retained his seat at the board, thumping it with the handle of his knife to show his impatience for the commencement of supper; and not far off sat Tibble, the same who had hailed their arrival, a thin, slight, one-sided looking person, with a terrible red withered scar on one cheek, drawing the corner of his mouth awry. He, like Master Headley himself, and the rest of his party were clad in red, guarded with white, and wore the cross of St. George on the white border of their flat crimson caps, being no doubt in the livery of their Company. The citizen himself, having in the meantime drawn his conclusions from the air and gestures of the brothers, and their mode of dealing with their food, asked the usual question in an affirmative tone, "Ye be of gentle blood, young sirs?"

To which they replied by giving their names, and explaining that they were journeying from the New Forest to find their uncle in the train of the Archbishop of York.

"Birkenholt," said Tibble, meditatively. "He beareth vert, a buck's head proper, on a chief argent, two arrows in saltire. Crest, a buck courant, pierced in the gorge by an arrow, all proper."

To which the brothers returned by displaying the handles of

their knives, both of which bore the pierced and courant buck.

"Ay, ay," said the man. "'Twill be found in our books, sir. We painted the shield and new-crested the morion the first year of my prenticeship, when the Earl of Richmond, the late King Harry of blessed memory, had newly landed at Milford Haven."

"Verily," said Ambrose, "our uncle Richard Birkenholt fought at Bosworth under Sir Richard Pole's banner."

"A tall and stalwart esquire, methinks," said Master Headley. "Is he the kinsman you seek?"

"Not so, sir. We visited him at Winchester, and found him sorely old and with failing wits. We be on our way to our mother's brother, Master Harry Randall."

"Is he clerk or layman? My Lord of York entertaineth enow of both," said Master Headley.

"Lay assuredly, sir," returned Stephen; "I trust to him to find me some preferment as page or the like."

"Know'st thou the man, Tibble?" inquired the master.

"Not among the men-at-arms, sir," was the answer; "but there be a many of them whose right names we never hear. However, he will be easily found if my Lord of York be returned from Windsor with his train."

"Then will we go forward together, my young Masters Birkenholt. I am not going to part with my doughty champions!"—patting Stephen's shoulder. "Ye'd not think that these light-heeled knaves belonged to the brave craft of armourers?"

"Certainly not," thought the lads, whose notion of armourers was derived from the brawny blacksmith of Lyndhurst, who sharpened their boar spears and shod their horses. They made some kind of assent, and Master Headley went on. "These be the times! This is what peace hath brought us to! I am called down to Salisbury to take charge of the goods, chattels, and estate of my kinsman, Robert Headley—Saints rest his soul!—and to bring home yonder spark, my godson, whose indentures have been made over to me. And I may not ride a mile after sunset without being set upon by a sort of robbers, who must have guessed overwell what a pack of cowards they had to deal with."

"Sir," cried the younger Giles, "I swear to you that I struck right and left. I did all that man could do, but these rogues of serving-men, they fled, and dragged me along with them, and I deemed you were of our company till we dismounted."

"Did you so? Methought anon you saw me go down with three pikes in my breast. Come, come, godson Giles, speech will not mend it! Thou art but a green, town-bred lad, a mother's darling, and mayst be a brave man yet, only don't dread to tell the honest truth that you were afeard, as many a better man might be."

The host chimed in with tales of the thieves and outlaws who then, and indeed for many later generations, infested Bagshot heath, and the wild moorland tracks around. He seemed to think that the travellers had had a hair's-breadth escape, and that a few seconds' more delay might have revealed the weakness of the rescuers and have been fatal to them.

However there was no danger so near the village in the morning, and, somewhat to Stephen's annoyance, the whole place turned out to inspect the spot, and behold the burial of poor Spring, who was found stretched on the heather, just as he had been left the night before. He was interred under the stunted oak where Master Headley had been tied. While the grave was dug with a spade borrowed at the inn, Ambrose undertook to cut out the dog's name on the bark, but he had hardly made the first incision when Tibble, the singed foreman, offered to do it for him, and made a much more sightly inscription than he could have done. Master Headley's sword was found honourably broken under the tree, and was reserved to form a base for his intended *ex voto*. He uttered the vow in due form like a funeral oration, when Stephen, with a swelling heart, had laid the companion of his life in the little grave, which was speedily covered in.

CHAPTER V
THE DRAGON COURT

"A citizen
Of credit and renown;
A trainband captain eke was he
Of famous London town."

Cowper.

In spite of his satisfaction at the honourable obsequies of his dog, Stephen Birkenholt would fain have been independent, and thought it provoking and strange that every one should want to direct his movements, and assume the charge of one so well able to take care of himself; but he could not escape as he had done before from the Warden of St. Elizabeth, for Ambrose had readily accepted the proposal that they should travel in Master Headley's company, only objecting that they were on foot; on which the good citizen hired a couple of hackneys for them.

Besides the two Giles Headleys, the party consisted of Tibble, the scarred and withered foreman, two grooms, and two serving-men, all armed with the swords and bucklers of which they had made so little use. It appeared in process of time that the two namesakes, besides being godfather and godson, were cousins, and that Robert, the father of the younger one, had, after his

apprenticeship in the paternal establishment at Salisbury, served for a couple of years in the London workshop of his kinsman to learn the latest improvements in weapons. This had laid the foundation of a friendship which had lasted through life, though the London cousin had been as prosperous as the country one had been the reverse. The provincial trade in arms declined with the close of the York and Lancaster wars. Men were not permitted to turn from one handicraft to another, and Robert Headley had neither aptitude nor resources. His wife was vain and thriftless, and he finally broke down under his difficulties, appointing by will his cousin to act as his executor, and to take charge of his only son, who had served out half his time as apprentice to himself. There had been delay until the peace with France had given the armourer some leisure for an expedition to Salisbury, a serious undertaking for a London burgess, who had little about him of the ancient northern weapon-smith, and had wanted to avail himself of the protection of the suite of the Bishop of Salisbury, returning from Parliament. He had spent some weeks in disposing of his cousin's stock in trade, which was far too antiquated for the London market; also of the premises, which were bought by an adjoining convent to extend its garden; and he had divided the proceeds between the widow and children. He had presided at the wedding of the last daughter, with whom the mother was to reside, and was on his way back to London with his godson, who had now become his apprentice.

Giles Headley the younger was a fine tall youth, but

clumsy and untrained in the use of his limbs, and he rode a large, powerful brown horse, which brooked no companionship, lashing out with its shaggy hoofs at any of its kind that approached it, more especially at poor, plump, mottled Poppet. The men said he had insisted on retaining that, and no other, for his journey to London, contrary to all advice, and he was obliged to ride foremost, alone in the middle of the road; while Master Headley seemed to have an immense quantity of consultation to carry on with his foreman, Tibble, whose quiet-looking brown animal was evidently on the best of terms with Poppet. By daylight Tibble looked even more sallow, lean, and sickly, and Stephen could not help saying to the serving-man nearest to him, "Can such a weakling verily be an armourer?"

"Yea, sir. Wry-mouthed Tibble, as they call him, was a sturdy fellow till he got a fell against the mouth of a furnace, and lay ten months in St. Bartholomew's Spital, scarce moving hand or foot. He cannot wield a hammer, but he has a cunning hand for gilding, and coloured devices, and is as good as Garter-king-at-arms himself for all bearings of knights and nobles."

"As we heard last night," said Stephen.

"Moreover in the spital he learnt to write and cast accompts like a very scrivener, and the master trusts him more than any, except maybe Kit Smallbones, the head smith."

"What will Smallbones think of the new prentice!" said one of the other men.

"Prentice! 'Tis plain enough what sort of prentice the youth

is like to be who beareth the name of a master with one only daughter."

An emphatic grunt was the only answer, while Ambrose pondered on the good luck of some people, who had their futures cut out for them with no trouble on their own part.

This day's ride was through more inhabited parts, and was esteemed less perilous. They came in sight of the Thames at Lambeth, but Master Headley, remembering how ill his beloved Poppet had brooked the ferry, decided to keep to the south of the river by a causeway across Lambeth marsh, which was just passable in high and dry summers, and which conducted them to a raised road called Bankside, where they looked across to the towers of Westminster, and the Abbey in its beauty dawned on the imagination of Stephen and Ambrose. The royal standard floated over the palace, whence Master Headley perceived that the King was there, and augured that my Lord of York's meiné would not be far to seek. Then came broad green fields with young corn growing, or hay waving for the scythe, the tents and booths of May Fair, and the beautiful Market Cross in the midst of the village of Charing, while the Strand, immediately opposite, began to be fringed with great monasteries within their ample gardens, with here and there a nobleman's castellated house and terraced garden, with broad stone stairs leading to the Thames.

Barges and wherries plied up and down, the former often gaily canopied and propelled by liveried oarsmen, all plying their arms

in unison, so that the vessel looked like some brilliant many-limbed creature treading the water. Presently appeared the heavy walls inclosing the City itself, dominated by the tall openwork timber spire of St. Paul's, with the foursquare, four-turreted Tower acting, as it has been well said, as a padlock to a chain, and the river's breadth spanned by London bridge, a very street of houses built on the abutments. Now, Bankside had houses on each side of the road, and Wry-mouthed Tibble showed evident satisfaction when they turned to cross the bridge, where they had to ride in single file, not without some refractoriness on the part of young Headley's steed.

On they went, now along streets where each story of the tall houses projected over the last, so that the gables seemed ready to meet; now beside walls of convent gardens, now past churches, while the country lads felt bewildered with the numbers passing to and fro, and the air was full of bells.

Cap after cap was lifted in greeting to Master Headley by burgess, artisan, or apprentice, and many times did he draw Poppet's rein to exchange greetings and receive congratulations on his return. On reaching St. Paul's Minster, he halted and bade the servants take home the horses, and tell the mistress, with his dutiful greetings, that he should be at home anon, and with guests.

"We must e'en return thanks for our safe journey and great deliverance," he said to his young companions, and thrusting his arm into that of a russet-vested citizen, who met him at the door,

he walked into the cathedral, recounting his adventure.

The youths followed with some difficulty through the stream of loiterers in the nave, Giles the younger elbowing and pushing so that several of the crowd turned to look at him, and it was well that his kinsman soon astonished him by descending a stair into a crypt, with solid, short, clustered columns, and high-pitched vaulting, fitted up as a separate church, namely that of the parish of St. Faith. The great cathedral, having absorbed the site of the original church, had given this crypt to the parishioners. Here all was quiet and solemn, in marked contrast to the hubbub in "Paul's Walk," above in the nave. Against the eastern pillar of one of the bays was a little altar, and the decorations included St. Julian, the patron of travellers, with his saltire doubly crossed, and his stag beside him. Little ships, trees, and wonderful enamelled representations of perils by robbers, field and flood, hung thickly on St. Julian's pillar, and on the wall and splay of the window beside it; and here, after crossing himself, Master Headley rapidly repeated a Paternoster, and ratified his vow of presenting a bronze image of the hound to whom he owed his rescue. One of the clergy came up to register the vow, and the good armourer proceeded to bespeak a mass of thanksgiving on the next morning, also ten for the soul of Master John Birkenholt, late Verdurer of the New Forest in Hampshire—a mode of showing his gratitude which the two sons highly appreciated.

Then, climbing up the steps again, and emerging from the cathedral by the west door, the boys beheld a scene for which

their experiences of Romsey, and even of Winchester, had by no means prepared them. It was five o'clock on a summer evening, so that the place was full of stir. Old women sat with baskets of rosaries and little crosses, or images of saints, on the steps of the cathedral, while in the open space beyond, more than one horse was displaying his paces for the benefit of some undecided purchaser, who had been chaffering for hours in Paul's Walk. Merchants in the costume of their countries, Lombard, Spanish, Dutch, or French, were walking away in pairs, attended by servants, from their Exchange, likewise in the nave. Women, some alone, some protected by serving-men or apprentices, were returning from their orisons, or, it might be, from their gossipings. Priests and friars, as usual, pervaded everything, and round the open space were galleried buildings with stalls beneath them, whence the holders were removing their wares for the night. The great octagonal structure of Paul's Cross stood in the centre, and just beneath the stone pulpit, where the sermons were wont to be preached, stood a man with a throng round him, declaiming a ballad at the top of his sing-song voice, and causing much loud laughter by some ribaldry about monks and friars.

Master Headley turned aside as quickly as he could, through Paternoster Row, which was full of stalls, where little black books, and larger sheets printed in black-letter, seemed the staple commodities, and thence the burgess, keeping a heedful eye on his young companions among all his greetings, entered

the broader space of Cheapside, where numerous prentice lads seemed to be playing at different sports after the labours of the day.

Passing under an archway surmounted by a dragon with shining scales, Master Headley entered a paved courtyard, where the lads started at the figures of two knights in full armour, their lances in rest, and their horses with housings down to their hoofs, apparently about to charge any intruder. But at that moment there was a shriek of joy, and out from the scarlet and azure petticoats of the nearest steed, there darted a little girl, crying, "Father! father!" and in an instant she was lifted in Master Headley's arms, and was clinging round his neck, while he kissed and blessed her, and as he set her on her feet, he said, "Here, Dennet, greet thy cousin Giles Headley, and these two brave young gentlemen. Greet them like a courteous maiden, or they will think thee a little town mouse."

In truth the child had a pointed little visage, and bright brown eyes, somewhat like a mouse, but it was a very sweet face that she lifted obediently to be kissed not only by the kinsman, but by the two guests. Her father meantime was answering with nods to the respectful welcomes of the workmen, who thronged out below, and their wives looking down from the galleries above; while Poppet and the other horses were being rubbed down after their journey.

The ground-floor of the buildings surrounding the oblong court seemed to be entirely occupied by forges, workshops,

warehouses and stables. Above, were open railed galleries, with outside stairs at intervals, giving access to the habitations of the workpeople on three sides. The fourth, opposite to the entrance, had a much handsomer, broad, stone stair, adorned on one side with a stone figure of the princess fleeing from the dragon, and on the other of St. George piercing the monster's open mouth with his lance, the scaly convolutions of the two dragons forming the supports of the handrail on either side. Here stood, cap in hand, showing his thick curly hair, and with open front, displaying a huge hairy chest, a giant figure, whom his master greeted as Kit Smallbones, inquiring whether all had gone well during his absence. "'Tis time you were back, sir, for there's a great tilting match on hand for the Lady Mary's wedding. Here have been half the gentlemen in the Court after you, and my Lord of Buckingham sent twice for you since Sunday, and once for Tibble Steelman, and his squire swore that if you were not at his bidding before noon to-morrow, he would have his new suit of Master Hillyer of the Eagle."

"He shall see me when it suiteth me," said Mr. Headley coolly. "He wotteth well that Hillyer hath none who can burnish plate armour like Tibble here."

"Moreover the last iron we had from that knave Mepham is nought. It works short under the hammer."

"That shall be seen to, Kit. The rest of the budget to-morrow. I must on to my mother."

For at the doorway, at the head of the stairs, there stood the

still trim and active figure of an old woman, with something of the mouse likeness seen in her grand-daughter, in the close cap, high hat, and cloth dress, that sumptuary opinion, if not law, prescribed for the burgher matron, a white apron, silver chain and bunch of keys at her girdle. Due and loving greetings passed between mother and son, after the longest and most perilous absence of Master Headley's life, and he then presented Giles, to whom the kindly dame offered hand and cheek, saying, "Welcome, my young kinsman, your good father was well known and liked here. May you tread in his steps!"

"Thanks, good mistress," returned Giles. "I am thought to have a pretty taste in the fancy part of the trade. My Lord of Montagu—"

Before he could get any farther, Mistress Headley was inquiring what was the rumour she had heard of robbers and dangers that had beset her son, and he was presenting the two young Birkenholts to her. "Brave boys! good boys," she said, holding out her hands and kissing each according to the custom of welcome, "you have saved my son for me, and this little one's father for her. Kiss them, Dennet, and thank them."

"It was the poor dog," said the child, in a clear little voice, drawing back with a certain quaint coquetting shyness; "I would rather kiss him."

"Would that thou couldst, little mistress," said Stephen. "My poor brave Spring!"

"Was he thine own? Tell me all about him," said Dennet,

somewhat imperiously.

She stood between the two strangers looking eagerly up with sorrowfully interested eyes, while Stephen, out of his full heart, told of his faithful comradeship with his hound from the infancy of both. Her father meanwhile was exchanging serious converse with her grandmother, and Giles finding himself left in the background, began: "Come hither, pretty coz, and I will tell thee of my Lady of Salisbury's dainty little hounds."

"I care not for dainty little hounds," returned Dennet; "I want to hear of the poor faithful dog that flew at the wicked robber."

"A mighty stir about a mere chance," muttered Giles.

"I know what *you* did," said Dennet, turning her bright brown eyes full upon him. "You took to your heels."

Her look and little nod were so irresistibly comical that the two brothers could not help laughing; whereupon Giles Headley turned upon them in a passion.

"What mean ye by this insolence, you beggars' brats picked up on the heath?"

"Better born than thou, braggart and coward that thou art!" broke forth Stephen, while Master Headley exclaimed, "How now, lads? No brawling here!"

Three voices spoke at once.

"They were insolent."

"He reviled our birth."

"Father! they did but laugh when I told cousin Giles that he took to his heels, and he must needs call them beggars' brats

picked up on the heath."

"Ha! ha! wench, thou art woman enough already to set them together by the ears," said her father, laughing. "See here, Giles Headley, none who bears my name shall insult a stranger on my hearth."

Stephen however had stepped forth holding out his small stock of coin, and saying, "Sir, receive for our charges, and let us go to the tavern we passed anon."

"How now, boy! Said I not ye were my guests?"

"Yea, sir, and thanks; but we can give no cause for being called beggars nor beggars' brats."

"What beggary is there in being guests, my young gentlemen?" said the master of the house. "If any one were picked up on the heath, it was I. We owned you for gentlemen of blood and coat armour, and thy brother there can tell thee that, ye have no right to put an affront on me, your host, because a rude prentice from a country town hath not learnt to rule his tongue."

Giles scowled, but the armourer spoke with an authority that imposed on all, and Stephen submitted, while Ambrose spoke a few words of thanks, after which the two brothers were conducted by an external stair and gallery to a guest-chamber, in which to prepare for supper.

The room was small, but luxuriously filled beyond all ideas of the young foresters, for it was hung with tapestry, representing the history of Joseph; the bed was curtained, there was a carved chest for clothes, a table and a ewer and basin of bright brass

with the armourer's mark upon it, a twist in which the letter H and the dragon's tongue and tail were ingeniously blended. The City was far in advance of the country in all the arts of life, and only the more magnificent castles and abbeys, which the boys had never seen, possessed the amount of comforts to be found in the dwellings of the superior class of Londoners. Stephen was inclined to look with contempt upon the effeminacy of a churl merchant.

"No churl," returned Ambrose, "if manners makyth man, as we saw at Winchester."

"Then what do they make of that cowardly clown, his cousin?"

Ambrose laughed, but said, "Prove we our gentle blood at least by not brawling with the fellow. Master Headley will soon teach him to know his place."

"That will matter nought to us. To-morrow shall we be with our uncle Hal. I only wish his lord was not of the ghostly sort, but perhaps he may prefer me to some great knight's service. But oh! Ambrose, come and look. See! The fellow they call Smallbones is come out to the fountain in the middle of the court with a bucket in each hand. Look! Didst ever see such a giant? He is as big and brawny as Ascapart at the bar-gate at Southampton. See! he lifts that big pail full and brimming as though it were an egg shell. See his arm! 'Twere good to see him wield a hammer! I must look into his smithy before going forth to-morrow."

Stephen clenched his fist and examined his muscles ere donning his best mourning jerkin, and could scarce be persuaded

to complete his toilet, so much was he entertained with the comings and goings in the court, a little world in itself, like a college quadrangle. The day's work was over, the forges out, and the smiths were lounging about at ease, one or two sitting on a bench under a large elm-tree beside the central well, enjoying each his tankard of ale. A few more were watching Poppet being combed down, and conversing with the newly-arrived grooms.

One was carrying a little child in his arms, and a young man and maid sitting on the low wall round the well, seemed to be carrying on a courtship over the pitcher that stood waiting to be filled. Two lads were playing at skittles, children were running up and down the stairs and along the wooden galleries, and men and women went and came by the entrance gateway between the two effigies of knights in armour. Some were servants bringing helm or gauntlet for repair, or taking the like away. Some might be known by their flat caps to be apprentices, and two substantial burgesses walked in together, as if to greet Master Headley on his return. Immediately after, a man-cook appeared with white cap and apron, bearing aloft a covered dish surrounded by a steamy cloud, followed by other servants bearing other meats; a big bell began to sound, the younger men and apprentices gathered together and the brothers descended the stairs, and entered by the big door into the same large hall where they had been received. The spacious hearth was full of green boughs, with a beaupot of wild rose, honeysuckle, clove pinks and gilliflowers; the lower parts of the walls were hung with tapestry representing

the adventures of St. George; the mullioned windows had their upper squares filled with glass, bearing the shield of the City of London, that of the Armourers' Company, the rose and portcullis of the King, the pomegranate of Queen Catharine, and other like devices. Others, belonging to the Lancastrian kings, adorned the pendants from the handsome open roof and the front of a gallery for musicians which crossed one end of the hall in the taste of the times of Henry V. and Whittington.

Far more interesting to the hungry travellers was it that the long table, running the whole breadth of the apartment, was decked with snowy linen, trenchers stood ready with horns or tankards beside them, and loaves of bread at intervals, while the dishes were being placed on the table. The master and his entire establishment took their meals together, except the married men, who lived in the quadrangle with their families. There was no division by the salt-cellar, as at the tables of the nobles and gentry, but the master, his family and guests, occupied the centre, with the hearth behind them, where the choicest of the viands were placed; next after them were the places of the journeymen according to seniority, then those of the apprentices, household servants, and stable-men, but the apprentices had to assist the serving-men in waiting on the master and his party before sitting down themselves. There was a dignity and regularity about the whole, which could not fail to impress Stephen and Ambrose with the weight and importance of a London burgher, warden of the Armourers' Company, and alderman of the Ward of Cheap.

There were carved chairs for himself, his mother, and the guests, also a small Persian carpet extending from the hearth beyond their seats. This article filled the two foresters with amazement. To put one's feet on what ought to be a coverlet! They would not have stepped on it, had they not been kindly summoned by old Mistress Headley to take their places among the company, which consisted, besides the family, of the two citizens who had entered, and of a priest who had likewise dropped in to welcome Master Headley's return, and had been invited to stay to supper. Young Giles, as a matter of course, placed himself amongst them, at which there were black looks and whispers among the apprentices, and even Mistress Headley wore an air of amazement.

"Mother," said the head of the family, speaking loud enough for all to hear, "you will permit our young kinsman to be placed as our guest this evening. To-morrow he will act as an apprentice, as we all have done in our time."

"I never did so at home!" cried Giles, in his loud, hasty voice.

"I trow not," dryly observed one of the guests.

Giles, however, went on muttering while the priest was pronouncing a Latin grace, and thereupon the same burgess observed, "Never did I see it better proved that folk in the country give their sons no good breeding."

"Have patience with him, good Master Pepper," returned Mr. Headley. "He hath been an only son, greatly cockered by father, mother, and sisters, but ere long he will learn what is befiting."

Giles glared round, but he met nothing encouraging. Little Dennet sat with open mouth of astonishment, her grandmother looked shocked, the household which had been aggrieved by his presumption laughed at his rebuke, for there was not much delicacy in those days; but something generous in the gentle blood of Ambrose moved him to some amount of pity for the lad, who thus suddenly became conscious that the tie he had thought nominal at Salisbury, a mere preliminary to municipal rank, was here absolute subjection, and a bondage whence there was no escape. His was the only face that Giles met which had any friendliness in it, but no one spoke, for manners imposed silence upon youth at table, except when spoken to; and there was general hunger enough prevailing to make Mistress Headley's fat capon the most interesting contemplation for the present.

The elders conversed, for there was much for Master Headley to hear of civic affairs that had passed in his absence of two months, also of all the comings and goings, and it was ascertained that my Lord Archbishop of York was at his suburban abode, York House, now Whitehall.

It was a very late supper for the times, not beginning till seven o'clock, on account of the travellers; and as soon as it was finished, and the priest and burghers had taken their leave, Master Headley dismissed the household to their beds, although daylight was scarcely departed.

CHAPTER VI
A SUNDAY IN THE CITY

"The rod of Heaven has touched them all,
The word from Heaven is spoken:
Rise, shine and sing, thou captive thrall,
Are not thy fetters broken?"

Keble.

On Sunday morning, when the young Birkenholts awoke, the whole air seemed full of bells from hundreds of Church and Minster steeples. The Dragon Court wore a holiday air, and there was no ring of hammers at the forges; but the men who stood about were in holiday attire: and the brothers assumed their best clothes.

Breakfast was not a meal much accounted of. It was reckoned effeminate to require more than two meals a day, though, just as in the verdurer's lodge at home, there was a barrel of ale on tap with drinking horns beside it in the hall, and on a small round table in the window a loaf of bread, to which city luxury added a cheese, and a jug containing sack, with some silver cups beside it, and a pitcher of fair water. Master Headley, with his mother and daughter, was taking a morsel of these refections, standing, and in out-door garments, when the brothers appeared at about

seven o'clock in the morning.

"Ha! that's well," quoth he, greeting them. "No slugabeds, I see. Will ye come with us to hear mass at St. Faith's?" They agreed, and Master Headley then told them that if they would tarry till the next day in searching out their uncle, they could have the company of Tibble Steelman, who had to see one of the captains of the guard about an alteration of his corslet, and thus would have every opportunity of facilitating their inquiries for their uncle.

The mass was an ornate one, though not more so than they were accustomed to at Beaulieu. Ambrose had his book of devotions, supplied by the good monks who had brought him up, and old Mrs. Headley carried something of the same kind; but these did not necessarily follow the ritual, and neither quiet nor attention was regarded as requisite in "hearing mass." Dennet, unchecked, was exchanging flowers from her Sunday posy with another little girl, and with hooded fingers carrying on in all innocence the satirical pantomime of Father Francis and Sister Catharine; and even Master Headley himself exchanged remarks with his friends, and returned greetings from burgesses and their wives while the celebrant priest's voice droned on, and the choir responded—the peals of the organ in the Minster above coming in at inappropriate moments, for there they were in a different part of High Mass using the Liturgy peculiar to St. Paul's.

Thinking of last week at Beaulieu, Ambrose knelt meantime with his head buried in his hands, in an absorption of feeling that

was not perhaps wholly devout, but which at any rate looked more like devotion than the demeanour of any one around. When the *Ite missa est* was pronounced, and all rose up, Stephen touched him and he rose, looking about, bewildered.

"So please you, young sir, I can show you another sort of thing by and by," said in his ear Tibble Steelman, who had come in late, and marked his attitude.

They went up from St. Faith's in a flood of talk, with all manner of people welcoming Master Headley after his journey, and thence came back to dinner which was set out in the hall very soon after their return from church. Quite guests enough were there on this occasion to fill all the chairs, and Master Headley intimated to Giles that he must begin his duties at table as an apprentice, under the tuition of the senior, a tall young fellow of nineteen, by name Edmund Burgess. He looked greatly injured and discomfited, above all when he saw his two travelling companions seated at the table—though far lower than the night before; nor would he stir from where he was standing against the wall to do the slightest service, although Edmund admonished him sharply that unless he bestirred himself it would be the worse for him.

When the meal was over, and grace had been said, the boards were removed from their trestles, and the elders drew round the small table in the window with a flagon of sack and a plate of wastel bread in their midst to continue their discussion of weighty Town Council matters. Every one was free to make holiday, and

Edmund Burgess good-naturedly invited the strangers to come to Mile End, where there was to be shooting at the butts, and a match at singlestick was to come off between Kit Smallbones and another giant, who was regarded as the champion of the brewer's craft.

Stephen was nothing loth, especially if he might take his own crossbow; but Ambrose never had much turn for these pastimes and was in no mood for them. The familiar associations of the mass had brought the grief of orphanhood, homelessness, and uncertainty upon him with the more force. His spirit yearned after his father, and his heart was sick for his forest home. Moreover, there was the duty incumbent on a good son of saying his prayers for the repose of his father's soul. He hinted as much to Stephen, who, boy-like, answered, "Oh, we'll see to that when we get into my Lord of York's house. Masses must be plenty there. And I must see Smallbones floor the brewer."

Ambrose could trust his brother under the care of Edmund Burgess, and resolved on a double amount of repetitions of the appointed intercessions for the departed.

He was watching the party of youths set off, all except Giles Headley, who sulkily refused the invitations, betook himself to a window and sat drumming on the glass, while Ambrose stood leaning on the dragon balustrade, with his eyes dreamily following the merry lads out at the gateway.

"You are not for such gear, sir," said a voice at his ear, and he saw the scathed face of Tibble Steelman beside him.

"Never greatly so, Tibble," answered Ambrose. "And my heart is too heavy for it now."

"Ay, ay, sir. So I thought when I saw you in St. Faith's. I have known what it was to lose a good father in my time."

Ambrose held out his hand. It was the first really sympathetic word he had heard since he had left Nurse Joan.

"'Tis the week's mind of his burial," he said, half choked with tears. "Where shall I find a quiet church where I may say his *De profundis* in peace?"

"Mayhap," returned Tibble, "the chapel in the Pardon churchyard would serve your turn. 'Tis not greatly resorted to when mass time is over, when there's no funeral in hand, and I oft go there to read my book in quiet on a Sunday afternoon. And then, if 'tis your will, I will take you to what to my mind is the best healing for a sore heart."

"Nurse Joan was wont to say the best for that was a sight of the true Cross, as she once beheld it at Holy Rood church at Southampton," said Ambrose.

"And so it is, lad, so it is," said Tibble, with a strange light on his distorted features.

So they went forth together, while Giles again hugged himself in his doleful conceit, marvelling how a youth of birth and nurture could walk the streets on a Sunday with a scarecrow such as that!

The hour was still early, there was a whole summer afternoon before them; and Tibble, seeing how much his young companion was struck with the grand vista of church towers and spires,

gave him their names as they stood, though coupling them with short dry comments on the way in which their priests too often perverted them.

The Cheap was then still in great part an open space, where boys were playing, and a tumbler was attracting many spectators; while the ballad-singer of yesterday had again a large audience, who laughed loudly at every coarse jest broken upon mass-priests and friars.

Ambrose was horrified at the stave that met his ears, and asked how such profanity could be allowed. Tibble shrugged his shoulders, and cited the old saying, "The nearer the church"—adding, "Truth hath a voice, and will out."

"But surely this is not the truth?"

"'Tis mighty like it, sir, though it might be spoken in a more seemly fashion."

"What's this?" demanded Ambrose. "'Tis a noble house."

"That's the Bishop's palace, sir—a man that hath much to answer for."

"Liveth he so ill a life then?"

"Not so. He is no scandalous liver, but he would fain stifle all the voices that call for better things. Ay, you look back at yon ballad-monger! Great folk despise the like of him, never guessing at the power there may be in such ribald stuff; while they would fain silence that which might turn men from their evil ways while yet there is time."

Tibble muttered this to himself, unheeded by Ambrose, and

then presently crossing the church-yard, where a grave was being filled up, with numerous idle children around it, he conducted the youth into a curious little chapel, empty now, but with the Host enthroned above the altar, and the trestles on which the bier had rested still standing in the narrow nave.

It was intensely still and cool, a fit place indeed for Ambrose's filial devotions, while Tibble settled himself on the step, took out a little black book, and became absorbed. Ambrose's Latin scholarship enabled him to comprehend the language of the round of devotions he was rehearsing for the benefit of his father's soul; but there was much repetition in them, and he had been so trained as to believe their correct recital was much more important than attention to their spirit, and thus, while his hands held his rosary, his eyes were fixed upon the walls where was depicted the Dance of Death. In terrible repetition, the artist had aimed at depicting every rank or class in life as alike the prey of the grisly phantom. Triple-crowned pope, scarlet-hatted cardinal, mitred prelate, priests, monks, and friars of every degree; emperors, kings, princes, nobles, knights, squires, yeomen, every sort of trade, soldiers of all kinds, beggars, even thieves and murderers, and, in like manner, ladies of every degree, from the queen and the abbess, down to the starving beggar, were each represented as grappled with, and carried off by the crowned skeleton. There was no truckling to greatness.

The bishop and abbot writhed and struggled in the grasp of Death, while the miser clutched at his gold, and if there were

some nuns, and some poor ploughmen who willingly clasped his bony fingers and obeyed his summons joyfully, there were countesses and prioresses who tried to beat him off, or implored him to wait. The infant smiled in his arms, but the middle-aged fought against his scythe.

The contemplation had a most depressing effect on the boy, whose heart was still sore for his father. After the sudden shock of such a loss, the monotonous repetition of the snatching away of all alike, in the midst of their characteristic worldly employments, and the anguish and hopeless resistance of most of them, struck him to the heart. He moved between each bead to a fresh group; staring at it with fixed gaze, while his lips moved in the unconscious hope of something consoling; till at last, hearing some uncontrollable sobs, Tibble Steelman rose and found him crouching rather than kneeling before the figure of an emaciated hermit, who was greeting the summons of the King of Terrors, with crucifix pressed to his breast, rapt countenance and outstretched arms, seeing only the Angel who hovered above. After some minutes of bitter weeping, which choked his utterance, Ambrose, feeling a friendly hand on his shoulder, exclaimed in a voice broken by sobs, "Oh, tell me, where may I go to become an anchorite! There's no other safety! I'll give all my portion, and spend all my time in prayer for my father and the other poor souls in purgatory."

Two centuries earlier, nay, even one, Ambrose would have been encouraged to follow out his purpose. As it was, Tibble

gave a little dry cough and said, “Come along with me, sir, and I’ll show you another sort of way.”

“I want no entertainment!” said Ambrose, “I should feel only as if he,” pointing to the phantom, “were at hand, clutching me with his deadly claw,” and he looked over his shoulder with a shudder.

There was a box by the door to receive alms for masses on behalf of the souls in purgatory, and here he halted and felt for the pouch at his girdle, to pour in all the contents; but Steelman said, “Hold, sir, are you free to dispose of your brother’s share, you who are purse-bearer for both?”

“I would fain hold my brother to the only path of safety.”

Again Tibble gave his dry cough, but added, “He is not in the path of safety who bestows that which is not his own but is held in trust. I were foully to blame if I let this grim portrayal so work on you as to lead you to beggar not only yourself, but your brother, with no consent of his.”

For Tibble was no impulsive Italian, but a sober-minded Englishman of sturdy good sense, and Ambrose was reasonable enough to listen and only drop in a few groats which he knew to be his own.

At the same moment, a church bell was heard, the tone of which Steelman evidently distinguished from all the others, and he led the way out of the Pardon churchyard, over the space in front of St. Paul’s. Many persons were taking the same route; citizens in gowns and gold or silver chains, their wives in tall

pointed hats; craftsmen, black-gowned scholarly men with fur caps, but there was a much more scanty proportion of priests, monks or friars, than was usual in any popular assemblage. Many of the better class of women carried folding stools, or had them carried by their servants, as if they expected to sit and wait.

"Is there a procession toward? or a relic to be displayed?" asked Ambrose, trying to recollect whose feast-day it might be.

Tibble screwed up his mouth in an extraordinary smile as he said, "Relic quotha? yea, the soothest relic there be of the Lord and Master of us all."

"Methought the true Cross was always displayed on the High Altar," said Ambrose, as all turned to a side aisle of the noble nave.

"Rather say hidden," muttered Tibble. "Thou shalt have it displayed, young sir, but neither in wood nor gilded shrine. See, here he comes who setteth it forth."

From the choir came, attended by half a dozen clergy, a small, pale man, in the ordinary dress of a priest, with a square cap on his head. He looked spare, sickly, and wrinkled, but the furrows traced lines of sweetness, his mouth was wonderfully gentle, and there was a keen brightness about his clear grey eye. Every one rose and made obeisance as he passed along to the stone stair leading to a pulpit projecting from one of the columns.

Ambrose saw what was coming, though he had only twice before heard preaching. The children of the ante-reformation were not called upon to hear sermons; and the few exhortations

given in Lent to the monks of Beaulieu were so exclusively for the religious that seculars were not invited to them. So that Ambrose had only once heard a weary and heavy discourse there plentifully garnished with Latin; and once he had stood among the throng at a wake at Millbrook, and heard a begging friar recommend the purchase of briefs of indulgence and the daily repetition of the Ave Maria by a series of extraordinary miracles for the rescue of desperate sinners, related so jocosely as to keep the crowd in a roar of laughter. He had laughed with the rest, but he could not imagine his guide, with the stern, grave eyebrows, writhen features and earnest, ironical tone, covering—as even he could detect—the deepest feeling, enjoying such broad sallies as tickled the slow merriment of village clowns and forest deer-stealers.

All stood for a moment while the Paternoster was repeated. Then the owners of stools sat down on them, some leant on adjacent pillars, others curled themselves on the floor, but most remained on their feet as unwilling to miss a word, and of these were Tibble Steelman and his companion.

Omnis qui facit peccatum, *servus est peccati*, followed by the rendering in English, "Whosoever doeth sin is sin's bond thrall." The words answered well to the ghastly delineations that seemed stamped on Ambrose's brain and which followed him about into the nave, so that he felt himself in the grasp of the cruel fiend, and almost expected to feel the skeleton claw of Death about to hand him over to torment. He expected the consolation of hearing that

a daily "Hail Mary," persevered in through the foulest life, would obtain that beams should be arrested in their fall, ships fail to sink, cords to hang, till such confession had been made as should insure ultimate salvation, after such a proportion of the flames of purgatory as masses and prayers might not mitigate.

But his attention was soon caught. Sinfulness stood before him not as the liability to penalty for transgressing an arbitrary rule, but as a taint to the entire being, mastering the will, perverting the senses, forging fetters out of habit, so as to be a loathsome horror paralysing and enchaining the whole being and making it into the likeness of him who brought sin and death into the world. The horror seemed to grow on Ambrose, as his boyish faults and errors rushed on his mind, and he felt pervaded by the contagion of the pestilence, abhorrent even to himself. But behold, what was he hearing now? "The bond thrall abideth not in the house for ever, but the Son abideth ever. *Si ergo Filius liberavit, verè liberi eritis*." "If the Son should make you free, then are ye free indeed." And for the first time was the true liberty of the redeemed soul comprehensibly proclaimed to the young spirit that had begun to yearn for something beyond the outside.

Light began to shine through the outward ordinances; the Church; the world, life, and death, were revealed as something absolutely new; a redeeming, cleansing, sanctifying power was made known, and seemed to inspire him with a new life, joy, and hope. He was no longer feeling himself necessarily crushed by the fetters of death, or only delivered from absolute peril by

a mechanism that had lost its heart, but he could enter into the glorious liberty of the sons of God, in process of being saved, not in sin but *from* sin.

It was an era in his life, and Tibble heard him sobbing, but with very different sobs from those in the Pardon chapel. When it was over, and the blessing given, Ambrose looked up from the hands which had covered his face with a new radiance in his eyes, and drew a long breath. Tibble saw that he was like one in another world, and gently led him away.

"Who is he? What is he? Is he an angel from Heaven?" demanded the boy, a little wildly, as they neared the southern door.

"If an angel be a messenger of God, I trow he is one," said Tibble. "But men call him Dr. Colet. He is Dean of St. Paul's Minster, and dwelleth in the house you see below there."

"And are such words as these to be heard every Sunday?"

"On most Sundays doth he preach here in the nave to all sorts of folk."

"I must—I must hear it again!" exclaimed Ambrose.

"Ay, ay," said Tibble, regarding him with a well-pleased face. "You are one with whom it works."

"Every Sunday!" repeated Ambrose. "Why do not all—your master and all these," pointing to the holiday crowds going to and fro—"why do they not all come to listen?"

"Master doth come by times," said Tibble, in the tone of irony that was hard to understand. "He owneth the dean as a rare

preacher."

Ambrose did not try to understand. He exclaimed again, panting as if his thoughts were too strong for his words—"Lo you, that preacher—dean call ye him?—putteth a soul into what hath hitherto been to me but a dead and empty framework."

Tibble held out his hand almost unconsciously, and Ambrose pressed it. Man and boy, alike they had felt the electric current of that truth, which, suppressed and ignored among man's inventions, was coming as a new revelation to many, and was already beginning to convulse the Church and the world.

Ambrose's mind was made up on one point. Whatever he did, and wherever he went, he felt the doctrine he had just heard as needful to him as vital air, and he must be within reach of it. This, and not the hermit's cell, was what his instinct craved. He had always been a studious, scholarly boy, supposed to be marked out for a clerical life, because a book was more to him than a bow, and he had been easily trained in good habits and practices of devotion; but all in a childish manner, without going beyond simple receptiveness, until the experiences of the last week had made a man of him, or more truly, the Pardon chapel and Dean Colet's sermon had made him a new being, with the realities of the inner life opened before him.

His present feeling was relief from the hideous load he had felt while dwelling on the Dance of Death, and therewith general goodwill to all men, which found its first issue in compassion for Giles Headley, whom he found on his return seated on the steps

—moody and miserable.

"Would that you had been with us," said Ambrose, sitting down beside him on the step. "Never have I heard such words as to-day."

"I would not be seen in the street with that scarecrow," murmured Giles. "If my mother could have guessed that he was to be set over me, I had never come here."

"Surely you knew that he was foreman."

"Yea, but not that I should be under him—I whom old Giles vowed should be as his own son—I that am to wed yon little brown moppet, and be master here! So, forsooth," he said, "now he treats me like any common low-bred prentice."

"Nay," said Ambrose, "an if you were his son, he would still make you serve. It's the way with all craftsmen—yea and with gentlemen's sons also. They must be pages and squires ere they can be knights."

"It never was the way at home. I was only bound prentice to my father for the name of the thing, that I might have the freedom of the city, and become head of our house."

"But how could you be a wise master without learning the craft?"

"What are journeymen for?" demanded the lad. "Had I known how Giles Headley meant to serve me, he might have gone whistle for a husband for his wench. I would have ridden in my Lady of Salisbury's train."

"You might have had rougher usage there than here," said

Ambrose. "Master Headley lays nothing on you but what he has himself proved. I would I could see you make the best of so happy a home."

"Ay, that's all very well for you, who are certain of a great man's house."

"Would that I were certified that my brother would be as well off as you, if you did but know it," said Ambrose. "Ha! here come the dishes! 'Tis supper time come on us unawares, and Stephen not returned from Mile End!"

Punctuality was not, however, exacted on these summer Sunday evenings, when practice with the bow and other athletic sports were enjoined by Government, and, moreover, the youths were with so trustworthy a member of the household as Kit Smallbones.

Sundry City magnates had come to supper with Master Headley, and whether it were the effect of Ambrose's counsel, or of the example of a handsome lad who had come with his father, one of the worshipful guild of Merchant Taylors, Giles did vouchsafe to bestir himself in waiting, and in consideration of the effort it must have cost him, old Mrs. Headley and her son did not take notice of his blunders, but only Dennet fell into a violent fit of laughter, when he presented the stately alderman with a nutmeg under the impression that it was an overgrown peppercorn. She suppressed her mirth as well as she could, poor little thing, for it was a great offence in good manners, but she was detected, and, only child as she was, the consequence was

the being banished from the table and sent to bed.

But when, after supper was over, Ambrose went out to see if there were any signs of the return of Stephen and the rest, he found the little maiden curled up in the gallery with her kitten in her arms.

"Nay!" she said, in a spoilt-child tone, "I'm not going to bed before my time for laughing at that great oaf! Nurse Alice says he is to wed me, but I won't have him! I like the pretty boy who had the good dog and saved father, and I like you, Master Ambrose. Sit down by me and tell me the story over again, and we shall see Kit Smallbones come home. I know he'll have beaten the brewer's fellow."

Before Ambrose had decided whether thus far to abet rebellion, she jumped up and cried: "Oh, I see Kit! He's got my ribbon! He has won the match!"

And down she rushed, quite oblivious of her disgrace, and Ambrose presently saw her uplifted in Kit Smallbones' brawny arms to utter her congratulations.

Stephen was equally excited. His head was full of Kit Smallbones' exploits, and of the marvels of the sports he had witnessed and joined in with fair success. He had thought Londoners poor effeminate creatures, but he found that these youths preparing for the trained bands understood all sorts of martial exercises far better than any of his forest acquaintance, save perhaps the hitting of a mark. He was half wild with a boy's enthusiasm for Kit Smallbones and Edmund Burgess, and

when, after eating the supper that had been reserved for the late comers, he and his brother repaired to their own chamber, his tongue ran on in description of the feats he had witnessed and his hopes of emulating them, since he understood that Archbishop as was my Lord of York, there was a tilt-yard at York House.

Ambrose, equally full of his new feelings, essayed to make his brother a sharer in them, but Stephen entirely failed to understand more than that his book-worm brother had heard something that delighted him in his own line of scholarship, from which Stephen had happily escaped a year ago!

CHAPTER VII
YORK HOUSE

"Then hath he servants five or six score,
Some behind and some before;
A marvellous great company
Of which are lords and gentlemen,
With many grooms and yeomen
And also knaves among them."

Contemporary Poem on Wolsey.

Early were hammers ringing on anvils in the Dragon Court, and all was activity. Master Headley was giving his orders to Kit Smallbones before setting forth to take the Duke of Buckingham's commands; Giles Headley, very much disgusted, was being invested with a leathern apron, and entrusted to Edmund Burgess to learn those primary arts of furbishing which, but for his mother's vanity and his father's weakness, he would have practised four years sooner. Tibble Steelman was superintending the arrangement of half a dozen corslets, which were to be carried by three stout porters, under his guidance, to what is now Whitehall, then the residence of the Archbishop of York, the king's prime adviser, Thomas Wolsey.

"Look you, Tib," said the kind-hearted armourer, "if those

lads find not their kinsman, or find him not what they look for, bring them back hither, I cannot have them cast adrift. They are good and brave youths, and I owe a life to them."

Tibble nodded entire assent, but when the boys appeared in their mourning suits, with their bundles on their backs, they were sent back again to put on their forest green, Master Headley explaining that it was reckoned ill-omened, if not insulting, to appear before any great personage in black, unless to enhance some petition directly addressed to himself. He also bade them leave their fardels behind, as, if they tarried at York House, these could be easily sent after them.

They obeyed—even Stephen doing so with more alacrity than he had hitherto shown to Master Headley's behests; for now that the time for departure had come, he was really sorry to leave the armourer's household. Edmund Burgess had been very good-natured to the raw country lad, and Kit Smallbones was, in his eyes, an Ascapart in strength, and a Bevis in prowess and kindliness. Mistress Headley too had been kind to the orphan lads, and these two days had given a feeling of being at home at the Dragon. When Giles wished them a moody farewell, and wished he were going with them, Stephen returned, "Ah! you don't know when you are well off."

Little Dennet came running down after them with two pinks in her hands. "Here's a sop-in-wine for a token for each of you young gentlemen," she cried, "for you came to help father, and I would you were going to stay and wed me instead of Giles."

"What, both of us, little maid?" said Ambrose, laughing, as he stooped to receive the kiss her rosy lips tendered to him.

"Not but what she would have royal example," muttered Tibble aside.

Dennet put her head on one side, as considering. "Nay, not both; but you are gentle and courteous, and he is brave and gallant —and Giles there is moody and glum, and can do nought."

"Ah! you will see what a gallant fellow Giles can be when thou hast cured him of his home-sickness by being good to him," said Ambrose, sorry for the youth in the universal laughter at the child's plain speaking.

And thus the lads left the Dragon, amid friendly farewells. Ambrose looked up at the tall spire of St. Paul's with a strong determination that he would never put himself out of reach of such words as he had there drunk in, and which were indeed spirit and life to him.

Tibble took them down to the St. Paul's stairs on the river, where at his whistle a wherry was instantly brought to transport them to York stairs, only one of the smiths going any further in charge of the corslets. Very lovely was their voyage in the brilliant summer morning, as the glittering water reflected in broken ripples church spire, convent garden, and stately house. Here rows of elm-trees made a cool walk by the river side, there strawberry beds sloped down the Strand, and now and then the hooded figures of nuns might be seen gathering the fruit. There, rose the round church of the Temple, and the beautiful

gardens surrounding the buildings, half monastic, half military, and already inhabited by lawyers. From a barge at the Temple stairs a legal personage descended, with a square beard, and open, benevolent, shrewd face, before whom Tibble removed his cap with eagerness, saying to Ambrose, "Yonder is Master More, a close friend of the dean's, a good and wise man, and forward in every good work."

Thus did they arrive at York House. Workmen were busy on some portions of it, but it was inhabited by the great Archbishop, the king's chief adviser. The approach of the boat seemed to be instantly notified, as it drew near the stone steps giving entrance to the gardens, with an avenue of trees leading up to the principal entrance.

Four or five yeomen ran down the steps, calling out to Tibble that their corslets had tarried a long time, and that Sir Thomas Drury had been storming for him to get his tilting armour into order.

Tibble followed the man who had undertaken to conduct him through a path that led to the offices of the great house, bidding the boys keep with him, and asking for their uncle Master Harry Randall.

The yeoman shook his head. He knew no such person in the household, and did not think there ever had been such. Sir Thomas Drury was found in the stable court, trying the paces of the horse he intended to use in the approaching joust. "Ha! old Wry-mouth," he cried, "welcome at last! I must have my

new device damasked on my shield. Come hither, and I'll show it thee."

Private rooms were seldom enjoyed, even by knights and gentlemen, in such a household, and Sir Thomas could only conduct Tibble to the armoury, where numerous suits of armour hung on blocks, presenting the semblance of armed men. The knight, a good-looking personage, expatiated much on the device he wished to dedicate to his lady-love, a pierced heart with a forget-me-not in the midst, and it was not until the directions were finished that Tibble ventured to mention the inquiry for Randall.

"I wot of no such fellow," returned Sir Thomas, "you had best go to the comptroller, who keeps all the names." Tibble had to go to this functionary at any rate, to obtain an order for payment for the corslets he had brought home. Ambrose and Stephen followed him across an enormous hall, where three long tables were being laid for dinner.

The comptroller of the household, an esquire of good birth, with a stiff little ruff round his neck, sat in a sort of office inclosed by panels at the end of the hall. He made an entry of Tibble's account in a big book, and sent a message to the cofferer to bring the amount. Then Tibble again put his question on behalf of the two young foresters, and the comptroller shook his head. He did not know the name. "Was the gentleman" (he chose that word as he looked at the boys) "layman or clerk?"

"Layman, certainly," said Ambrose, somewhat dismayed to find

how little, on interrogation, he really knew.

"Was he a yeoman of the guard, or in attendance on one of my lord's nobles in waiting?"

"We thought he had been a yeoman," said Ambrose.

"See," said the comptroller, stimulated by a fee administered by Tibble, "'tis just dinner time, and I must go to attend on my Lord Archbishop; but do you, Tibble, sit down with these striplings to dinner, and then I will cast my eye over the books, and see if I can find any such name. What, hast not time? None ever quits my lord's without breaking his fast."

Tibble had no doubt that his master would be willing that he should give up his time for this purpose, so he accepted the invitation. The tables were by this time nearly covered, but all stood waiting, for there flowed in from the great doorway of the hall a gorgeous train—first, a man bearing the double archiepiscopal cross of York, fashioned in silver, and thick with gems—then, with lofty mitre enriched with pearls and jewels, and with flowing violet lace-covered robes came the sturdy square-faced ruddy prelate, who was then the chief influence in England, and after him two glittering ranks of priests in square caps and richly embroidered copes, all in accordant colours. They were returning, as a yeoman told Tibble, from some great ecclesiastical ceremony, and dinner would be served instantly.

"That for which Ralf Bowyer lives!" said a voice close by, "He would fain that the dial's hands were Marie bones, the face blancmange, wherein the figures should be grapes of Corinth!"

Stephen looked round and saw a man close beside him in what he knew at once to be the garb of a jester. A tall scarlet velvet cap, with three peaks, bound with gold braid, and each surmounted with a little gilded bell, crowned his head, a small crimson ridge to indicate the cock's comb running along the front. His jerkin and hose were of motley, the left arm and right leg being blue, their opposites, orange tawny, while the nether stocks and shoes were in like manner black and scarlet counterchanged. And yet, somehow, whether from the way of wearing it, or from the effect of the gold embroidery meandering over all, the effect was not distressing, but more like that of a gorgeous bird. The figure was tall, lithe, and active, the brown ruddy face had none of the blank stare of vacant idiocy, but was full of twinkling merriment, the black eyes laughed gaily, and perhaps only so clearsighted and shrewd an observer as Tibble would have detected a weakness of purpose about the mouth.

There was a roar of laughter at the gibe, as indeed there was at whatever was uttered by the man whose profession was to make mirth.

"Thou likest thy food well enough thyself, quipsome one," muttered Ralf.

"Hast found one who doth not, Ralf? Then should he have a free gift of my bauble," responded the jester, shaking on high that badge, surmounted with the golden head of an ass, and jingling with bells. "How now, friend Wry-mouth? 'Tis long since thou wert here! This house hath well-nigh been forced to its ghostly

weapons for lack of thy substantial ones. Where hast thou been?"

"At Salisbury, good Merryman."

"Have the Wilts men raked the moon yet out of the pond? Did they lend thee their rake, Tib, that thou hast raked up a couple of green Forest palmer worms, or be they the sons of the man in the moon, raked out and all astray?"

"Mayhap, for we met them with dog and bush," said Tibble, "and they dropped as from the moon to save my poor master from the robbers on Bagshot heath! Come now, mine honest fellow, aid me to rake, as thou sayest, this same household. They are come up from the Forest, to seek out their uncle, one Randall, who they have heard to be in this meiné. Knowest thou such a fellow?"

"To seek a spider in a stubble-field! Truly he needs my bauble who sent them on such an errand," said the jester, rather slowly, as if to take time for consideration. "What's your name, my Forest flies?"

"Birkenholt, sir," answered Ambrose, "but our uncle is Harry Randall."

"Here's fools enow to take away mine office," was the reply. "Here's a couple of lads would leave the greenwood and the free oaks and beeches, for this stinking, plague-smitten London."

"We'd not have quitted it could we have tarried at home," began Ambrose; but at that moment there was a sudden commotion, a trampling of horses was heard outside, a loud imperious voice demanded, "Is my Lord Archbishop within?" a

whisper ran round, "the King," and there entered the hall with hasty steps, a figure never to be forgotten, clad in a hunting dress of green velvet embroidered with gold, with a golden hunting horn slung round his neck.

Henry VIII. was then in the splendid prime of his youth, in his twenty-seventh year, and in the eyes, not only of his own subjects, but of all others, the very type of a true king of men. Tall, and as yet of perfect form for strength, agility, and grace; his features were of the beautiful straight Plantagenet type, and his complexion of purely fair rosiness, his large well-opened blue eyes full at once of frankness and keenness, and the short golden beard that fringed his square chin giving the manly air that otherwise might have seemed wanting to the feminine tinting of his regular lineaments. All caps were instantly doffed save the little bonnet with one drooping feather that covered his short, curled, yellow hair; and the Earl of Derby, who was at the head of Wolsey's retainers, made haste, bowing to the ground, to assure him that my Lord Archbishop was but doffing his robes, and would be with his Grace instantly. Would his Grace vouchsafe to come on to the privy chamber where the dinner was spread?

At the same moment Quipsome Hal sprang forward, exclaiming, "How now, brother and namesake? Wherefore this coil? Hath cloth of gold wearied yet of cloth of frieze? Is she willing to own her right to this?" as he held out his bauble.

"Holla, old Blister! art thou there?" said the King, good-humouredly. "What! knowest not that we are to have such a

wedding as will be a sight for sore eyes!"

"Sore! that's well said, friend Hal. Thou art making progress in mine art! Sore be the eyes wherein thou wouldst throw dust."

Again the King laughed, for every one knew that his sister Mary had secretly been married to the Duke of Suffolk for the last two months, and that this public marriage and the tournament that was to follow were only for the sake of appearances. He laid his hand good-naturedly on the jester's shoulder as he walked up the hall towards the Archbishop's private apartments, but the voices of both were loud pitched, and bits of the further conversation could be picked up. "Weddings are rife in your family," said the jester, "none of you get weary of fitting on the noose. What, thou thyself, Hal? Ay, thou hast not caught the contagion yet! Now ye gods forefend! If thou hast the chance, thou'lt have it strong."

Therewith the Archbishop, in his purple robes, appeared in the archway at the other end of the hall, the King joined him, and still followed by the jester, they both vanished. It was presently made known that the King was about to dine there, and that all were to sit down to eat. The King dined alone with the Archbishop as his host; the two noblemen who had formed his suite joined the first table in the higher hall; the knights that of the steward of the household, who was of knightly degree, and with whom the superior clergy of the household ate; and the grooms found their places among the vast array of yeomen and serving-men of all kinds with whom Tibble and his two young companions had

to eat. A week ago, Stephen would have contemned the idea of being classed with serving-men and grooms, but by this time he was quite bewildered, and anxious enough to be thankful to keep near a familiar face on any terms, and to feel as if Tibble were an old friend, though he had only known him for five days.

Why the King had come had not transpired, but there was a whisper that despatches from Scotland were concerned in it.

The meal was a lengthy one, but at last the King's horses were ordered, and presently Henry came forth, with his arm familiarly linked in that of the Archbishop, whose horse had likewise been made ready that he might accompany the King back to Westminster. The jester was close at hand, and as a parting shaft he observed, while the King mounted his horse, "Friend Hal! give my brotherly commendations to our Madge, and tell her that one who weds Anguish cannot choose but cry out."

Wherewith, affecting to expect a stroke from the King's whip, he doubled himself up, performed the contortion now called turning a coachwheel, then, recovering himself, put his hands on his hips and danced wildly on the steps; while Henry, shaking his whip at him, laughed at the only too obvious pun, for Anguish was the English version of Angus, the title of Queen Margaret's second husband, and it was her complaints that had brought him to his counsellor.

The jester then, much to the annoyance of the two boys, thought proper to follow them to the office of the comptroller,

and as that dignitary read out from his books the name of every Henry, and of all the varieties of Ralf and Randolf among the hundred and eighty persons composing the household, he kept on making comments. "Harry Hempseed, clerk to the kitchen; ay, Hempseed will serve his turn one of these days. Walter Randall, groom of the chamber; ah, ha! my lads, if you want a generous uncle who will look after you well, there is your man! He'll give you the shakings of the napery for largesse, and when he is in an open-handed mood, will let you lie on the rushes that have served the hall. Harry of Lambeth, yeoman of the stable. He will make you free of all the taverns in Eastchepe."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.