THE CAPTAIN OF THE WIGHT

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A Romance of Carisbrooke Castle in 1488

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"WHAT ART THOU?" STAMMERED THE PAGE.

The Captain of the Wight

A Romance of Carisbrooke Castle in 1488

BY
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With Illustrations by the Author

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PREFACE.

To my mind there is no more picturesque period in the history of Western Europe than that of the Renaissance.

Among the many aspects in which it is possible to regard this important epoch, that of its influence on chivalry is one of the most interesting. The rough simplicity of the proud mediæval knight, gradually yielding to the subtle spell of pure poesy and courtly love, while the barred helm and steel gauntlet were hardly doffed from the stern field, or gorgeous tourney, this is a subject which will always fascinate.

However practical the world may grow, and perhaps, because of its very

practicality, there will always be minds which will turn with relief to the romantic and the ideal. In the turmoil of real life, with its sordid materialism, there are many men and women who dwell with delight on some noble life clothed round with the glamour of ancient time, and presenting itself to the mind in the garb of gorgeous pomp and splendid pageantry, who, while trying to achieve some great emprise themselves, will dream of the men of old time, who have soared aloft on the pinions of glorious fame.

With the privilege of a writer of fiction, I have chosen Sir Edward Woodville,[*] commonly called Lord Woodville, as the "eidolon" on which to clothe the heroic virtue of chivalry, without its many and grosser faults. So little is known of the Captain of the Wight, but what little there is, shows him in so noble a light, that I feel I am not necessarily exaggerating, may even be accurately describing, his knightly character. His attachment to his own unfortunate family, and his murdered nephews, caused him to be included among the list of nobles and knights, who were held up to public execration in that long and artful manifesto put forth by Richard III., before he set out for the campaign which ended in Bosworth field.

[*] I have adopted the spelling of the name Woodville, authorised by Lord Bacon. The varieties–Wydevil, Wydeville, Wyddevil, etc, etc.–are as numerous as those of Leicester, who wrote his own name eight different ways; while Villiers varied his fourteen times. But Mainwaring has outdone them all. It is said there are one hundred and thirty-one varieties!

Returning in the victorious train of Henry Tudor, now Henry VII. of England, Sir Edward Woodville was invested with the honourable post which had been lately held by his unfortunate brother, the accomplished Lord Scales. As "Lord and Captain of the Isle of Wight," he seems to have made himself so popular that, by his own influence alone, he was able to induce four hundred of the inhabitants to follow him to Brittany. "Noble and courageous," "hardie and valyant," "a valiant gentleman, and desirous of honour," are the epithets with which the old chroniclers speak of Sir Edward Woodville. That he was never married, and died upon the field of battle "valiantly fighting," are all the facts that are known about him. But these facts are enough to allow me to interpret his life as I have done.

Like another more exalted, but less fortunate, inhabitant of Carisbrooke Castle, in the last sad act of his life,

"He nothing common did or mean
Upon that memorable scene,"

but with his "crew of talle and hardie" men of the Wight, died fighting with his sword in hand, and his face to the foe, as became a valiant captain of that lovely isle.

I have consulted all the authorities I could find, in order to give as accurate a picture of the time as possible. I don't know that it is needful to mention all, but the "Tournois du Roi René d'Anjou," "The Memoirs of St Palaye," "The Boke of St Albans," Sir Thomas Malory's "Mort d'Arthur," and "La joyeuse hystoire du bon Chevalier, le gentil Seigneur de Bayart," have been my chief sources for knightly feats and the accessories of chivalry; while the chroniclers Halle, Grafton, Fabyan, Stowe, Philip de Commines, Bouchet, and the Paston Letters, have been my chief historical guides. Lord Bacon has surveyed the whole period from a loftier standpoint, and in his "Reigne of Henry VIIth," has presented us with a stately specimen of the art of writing history; although, as an old manuscript note in my edition briefly puts it, "it is somewhat more of a picture of a polished prince than a history exactly true, more vouchers and fewer speeches would have given it more strength, though less beauty."

It must be a subject of interest to the inhabitants of the Isle of Wight to know that, in writing of that fatal expedition to Brittany, every one of the old historians speak of the bravery of the predecessors, and, in many cases, the ancestors, of the present dwellers in the island.

It is to be deplored that there is no original account of the expedition of the four hundred, such as exists in the "Herald's" account of the expedition to Dixmude, preserved in John Leland's Collectanea, which happened in the same year (1488). I have tried laboriously to find out the names of the chief inhabitants of the Isle of Wight at that time; but owing to the great danger and discomfort there was in living in the island during the 15th century, arising from the constantly threatened invasions of the French, and their many actual occupations of the island, the chief families appear either to have become extinct in that period, or to have retired to the mainland.

It is also worthy of note, to see how many times the chief manors passed into new families through the female line. This fact is very significant of the troubled state of the times. It was not that the manhood of the island ceased for want of sons, but that these sons met a violent death in the many wars of that age.

In conclusion, I may add that, while the story is mainly written for the young, with which object in view I have paid less attention to the delineation of character than the animation of incident, and the variety of the scene, I trust their elders may also find information about a romantic episode in our local and national history.

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THE CAPTAIN OF THE WIGHT

CHAPTER I.
HOW THE GERFALCON SPED.

In front of an old ivy-covered manor house, so built, with its projecting wings, as to form three sides of a quadrangle, a boy was standing, idly leaning his arms on the stone coping of the low wall which shut in the fourth side of the courtyard.

The boy was well grown, with fair, ruddy face, and brown hair, cut, after the picturesque fashion of the latter half of the fifteenth century, straight above his eyebrows, but falling in wavy masses on each side of his face. His eyes were bright, and full of life. His strongly-knit frame gave promise of strength and activity, and his age might well have been put at seventeen or eighteen even, so tall was he, and well grown, although, in truth, he was not more than fifteen.

The free life in the fresh Hampshire air, blowing from the sea, over forest, gorse-covered common, and well-tilled fields, had given play to his thews and sinews.

It was evening. The sun was just setting over the blue hills covered with woods, interspersed with heathy patches. Far as the eye could see, there were gently-swelling undulations, with a loftier hill looming out of the grey mist which rose, film-like, behind the nearer masses of the russet forest. Here and there some larger expanse of mist looked like a lake amid the overhanging trees, while over all brooded the silence of the evening, when all nature pauses in reverence to the setting sun, broken only by the lowing of some distant kine, or the faint hum of a beetle as it went booming by.

Suddenly the boy stood up, listened attentively, then, springing through the gateway, he darted down the road in front of the house, to meet a horseman who was riding up the forest glade.

The man was singing blithely as he rode, and the refrain of each verse rang merrily in the stillness of the evening. It was the sound of this which had told

the boy of the new comer's approach.

"Ringwood, my hound, with a merry taste,
All about the green wood began caste,
I took my horn and blew him a blast
With tro-ro-ro-ro! tro-ro-ro-ro!
With hey go bet! hey go bet! ho!
There he goeth, there he goeth, there he goe,
We shall have sport and game enowe,"

rang out clear over the wood, and cheerily the boy answered,–

"In sooth, Humphrey, thou'rt in fine voice to-night; but, prythee, cease thy song for a while, and give me the gerfalcon, that I may see her."

"Certes, Master Ralph, thou wilt be well pleased anon. 'Tis the veriest sweetest little bird for mounting a heron, or springing a pheasant, as ever I did see. There, stroke her cautiously; see how she manteleth and warbelleth her wings."

So saying, the serving man, or varlet, as the falconer's assistants were called, stooped down and held out his right hand, which was protected by a stout leathern glove with a large gauntlet. Two leather thongs, called lunes, were connected by two rings or tyrrits, and the lunes were then fastened to the jesses, and the ends loosely twined round the little finger, to prevent the bird from escaping.

The bird was gaily hooded, and turned its head from side to side, causing the little artificial plume of feathers on its head to shake and flutter gaily.

The boy, in his eagerness to stroke his new possession–for it was his birthday, and his father had sent to Salisbury to buy this hawk for his favourite son–put out his hand too quickly, for the hawk made a peck at it; but he drew it back in time, and with more caution and gentle words he at last succeeded in stroking her wings and back.

"Marry Humphrey, she is a fine one. She is a long hawk, and ought to fly well."

"I' faith! will she so. I got her rare cheap; for the price has risen mightily sithen the tolls have been laid on all hawks. 'Tis one shilling and eightpence, over and above the price of the bird, I had to pay to Brother Anselm for the licence of bringing her over; but I got her cheap, marry, did I! An you'll find such another in all the south of England–ay, and the north too–for ten shillings, never call me Humphrey more."

They had now reached the gateway where Master Ralph, as Humphrey called him, had been waiting for his birthday present. The groom took off the leather glove and gave it to Ralph, who put it on, and took the bird into the house

to show to his father and mother, while Humphrey rode round to the stables.

The interior of the hall was a large low oak-panelled room, with a wide fireplace on one side. Antlers, spears, bows, and bills were hung or fixed all along the walls, and a few skins of red deer and other wild animals lay about on the stone floor. Ralph crossed the hall, and went down a low dark passage. He paused at a little oak door, and tapped.

"Come in," said a lady's voice, and Ralph entered joyously.

"Oh, mother, look! She's a hawk fit for the emperor. Thank thee, father, thank thee; 'tis the best gift thou couldst have chosen!" And the boy went up to the large armchair, in which an old man was sitting, clad in a long robe of fur, while opposite to him was standing his wife, the Dame Isabel de Lisle.

"Ay, my son, so thou art right joyous, art thou? Well, and that's e'en as it should be. Thou art growing a stout lad, and 'tis time to be thinking of thy after life. I would fain have ye all started in the world, before God sees fit to call me to him; and methinks 'twill not be long now."

"Why, father, what ails thee, that thou talkest thus dolefully?" said Ralph, his ardour damped by the tone of his father's remarks.

"Nay, child," said his mother, stroking the glossy, waving hair of her son, who had doffed his cap the moment he entered his parents' presence, "nay, child, 'tis naught but the old wound thy father hath gotten at Barnet grieveth him to-night."

"May-be, may-be, fair wife," said the old knight, who always called his lady "fair," although she was certainly considerably past the age when any claims to fairness might reasonably be supposed to have been surrendered; but in his eyes she was always fair. "Perchance 'tis naught; but my mind misgiveth me, and I would fain talk gravely to my sons to-night. If God wills that I should live, well and good–if not, well and good too; leastways, I shall have settled matters aright before I go hence."

"But, father, thou hast not looked at my falcon that thou gavest me. See what a long hawk it is; and what a gay lune Brother Anselm hath put on it."

"Ay, marry, fair son, 'tis a fine bird, and will spring a partridge rarely, I'll venture. Thou must fly her to-morrow–there's many a gagylling of geese, or sord of mallards, down Chute Forest way."

"Certes, father, I'll e'en try her at a heron first."

At this moment another step was heard outside, and two other boys came in; one a good deal older, and the other a year younger than Ralph.

"Well, Ralph, what hast got there?" said the elder, coming up and looking at the bird. "Marry she's a fine hawk, but I'd rather have had a falcon gentil."

"Ay, ay, and pay twenty shillings for it, let alone the toll of forty shillings in bringing of her into the kingdom."

"Nay, thou mightest have gotten one cheap from old Simon Bridle. He knows where all the best birds are to be got–all through the country side–"

"Nay, Jasper, why dost try to put the lad out of countenance with his pretty bird? Thou knowest she is a good bird, and thou wouldst be glad enough to have her thyself," said his mother.

"Now leave we this talk of the gerfalcon, and sithen you are all here, and 'tis yet half an hour to supper, let me hear what you, my sons, would wish to do after I am dead and gone. Jasper, you are the eldest, to you will fall my Bailiwick of Chute Forest, my manors of Chute, Holt, and Thruxton, and many other fair lands. Now wouldst thou go to the court, and seek to increase thy estate, as did thy great-grandfather Sir John Lisle of blessed memory, or wouldst thou stay at home, and take place and rank in thine own county?"

The eldest son took little time to answer, but replied respectfully,–

"I would fain stay at home and care for you and my lady mother, and mind the fair lands God and my ancestors have left me."

"Then, my son, as God wills it, and you have chosen, so be it, and may God's blessing and thy parents' be upon thee. Now, Ralph, my son, what willest thou?"

The young boy hesitated. He looked at his mother, and then down, and finally, raising his eyes with a keen light of joyous but rather shy determination said,–

"Noble sire, I would fain go to learn arms, and be trained in some noble prince's household, for I am of an age now when I could do some deed which might earn me knighthood."

"Well, fair son, thou hast answered as I would have thee. 'Tis sad to thy lady mother and me to part with thee, even for a space, but it is thy life that must be spent, not ours, and we have ever thought on thy weal. I will take thought what can be determined to try purveyance and maintenance as befitteth a son of the De Lisles. And now, son Walter, what willest thou?"

Walter was a delicate, slight boy, with a studious face, and one who had always been looked upon as the scholar of the family. He knew well what his parents wished, and also what was the custom of those of gentle blood who were the youngest sons. They must either seek their fortune in war, or else in the Church. He had not physical strength, nor sufficiently combative instincts, for the profession of arms, although, boylike, he had often been led away, when reading the romances of the time, to wish to imitate the deeds of Roland, or Tristram, or Launcelot; but then he was very fond of their worthy chaplain, who was also the boys' tutor, and he had been strongly imbued with a desire to sacrifice himself to God, as it was called. He therefore answered,–

"Father, I would like much to be a clerk, and follow in the steps of Our Lord

and Master. Perchance I may do some good work some day."

"Ay, in sooth wilt thou, my dear son; and thou hast made the choice most after thy mother's heart, albeit, weak man that I am, had I been a youth, I would have thought scorn of a clerkly life, yet, now I am old, I know well what awaiteth those who have devoted themselves to God and Mother Church from their youth upward. I will avise me what hath best be done for thee also, and will send a missive to my right reverend kinsman the Abbot of Quarr, and perchance he will do his best to help us. And now, my sons, since all is in fair trim for your future welfare, and thy noble and fair mother is right pleased, I know, as truly am I–and I give God thanks that He hath given me such right trusty and well-nurtured sons–let us all go to supper, for we have even to drink the health of our Ralph, who by God's will from henceforth will soon become a right honest varlet and trusty page, and in time will proceed to be a very worshipful knight, like his ancestors have been–worthy men, and leal to their liege lord."

So saying, the old knight rose up with difficulty, assisted by his sons, who ran to aid him, for he had received a severe wound from a bill, over his left thigh, and had never recovered the use of it since.

"Grammercy, fair sons! but, Ralph, do thou lead in thy lady mother, for to thee belongs the honour of the day."

And so the little party went down the passage and entered the hall, where supper was laid at the upper end. The servants were all assembled in the body of the hall, and the sons carved for their parents at the high table. Ralph's health was duly drunk amid much festivity, and the whole household retired to rest at a reasonable hour.

The next day a messenger was despatched to Salisbury, where the Abbot of Quarr, who was related to Sir John Lisle, or De Lysle, was staying, to ask him to come over to Thruxton Hall, and advise his kinsman on the future of his sons. The worthy Abbot came without delay; and that evening a family consultation was held in the old parlour, round the knight's armchair.

The old knight briefly explained the matter, and then left the worthy Abbot to comment on it.

"By the Holy Rood! but thy gentle sons have all well bethought them, and I could not have directed them better myself. Truly, 'tis the overruling spirit of God who has guided them to a right judgment!" said the Abbot. "Now for Jasper there will need to be no thought taken. Out of the abundance of thy lands he will be provided for, and may marry and raise up a fair lineage; but for our nephew Ralph other thoughts will be requisite. He will need fair clothes, as becometh one of a noble house, and an honest varlet to go with him, and a mettlesome courser; one not too fiery, that will lead him astray, and perchance disgrace him, or his clothes, but one that is stout withal, and not of a too tame spirit. And now

methinks I know of just such a one, which the Prior of Christchurch, who is at Sarum now on business, wisheth to part with, having become too feeble or too stout for so mettlesome a nag. Nephew Ralph, I will e'en give him thee, with my blessing."

"My Lord Abbot, I give thee humble thanks," stammered Ralph delighted.

"And now we must bethink us to what noble lord we may apprentice him. Thou knowest what state my Lord Scales, lately deceased, kept in his Castle of Carisbrooke. He, poor man–and may the Lord have mercy on his soul–was grievously done to death near Stoney Stratford, by the late King Richard, whom the devil led far astray. Nevertheless, he was a man of war, and well skilled in subtle council. However, King Henry hath made his brother Captain-General of our land; and Sir Edward Woodville, whom most men call the Lord Woodville, and who some even think will be called to the council by the style of Lord Rivers, is but now on his way back from the hard fight at Stoke by Newark, where he hath gained himself fresh glory. Certes he is a gallant, very puissant, and right hardy lord, and one under whom much knighthood and gentleness might be learnt, and as he is the uncle of our sovereign lord the King's most noble wife, there is much hope Ralph might be advanced in the King's household. Now I can present our fair nephew to him, and he can be brought up under my eye in the right pleasant Castle of Carisbrooke, of the honour of which the Lisles hold the Manor of Mansbridge. How say you, kinsman mine, will this serve you?"

"Ay, marry will it, my Lord Abbot, and I see fair promise of the boy's doing well, and faring right puissantly. And now I bethink me, our kinsman of Briddlesford may take an interest in the lad. His own son, I hear, hath been disinherited by him for his wilfulness and strong fealty to the house of York. I would fain see them reconciled, but an that may not be, I see no wrong in Ralph marrying his only daughter. But now, canst thou do somewhat also for son Walter here?–he would like well to be a clerk."

"By Our Lady, but he is a good lad, and we will take order that he be well advanced, as far as our poor influence in the Holy Church goeth; but he should be entered at Oxen ford shortly, for he is of age to go thither. I will write to my well-beloved brother and kinsman, the Abbot of Abyngdon, who will get him entered at Queen's College, over which, when I was a scholar, the very puissant prince Cardinal Beaufort was provost."

Thus the future of the boy was well arranged, and it was agreed that the Abbot of Quarr should take Ralph with him, as soon as his outfit was ready; and in order to expedite matters, a serving-man was sent to Salisbury to fetch out a tailor with the necessary cloth and stuff suitable to apparel a young man of good birth who was going to be page to so potent a lord as the Lord Woodville. At the same time, the varlet received orders to negotiate with the Prior of Christchurch

for the horse.

Meanwhile Ralph and his brother had tried the qualities of his new hawk.

"Thou well knowest, brother Ralph," said Jasper to him, as they rode along on their small ponies towards Chute Forest, "my peregrine will fly faster than thy gerfalcon."

"Marry, will it? that we shall see, I trow. See there's a bird yonder; 'tis a heron, now fly our birds at her."

No sooner said than done; off went the jesses, away went the hoods, and with a swing of the arm and wrist, the noble birds were cast off the fist. Up they sprang high in air. The gerfalcon mounted quicker, but the peregrine went straighter. Away they sped and the boys after them, halloing to the dogs to keep to heel.

"See, Ralph, I told thee so, thy bird can't hold a candle to mine. Well flown, Swiftwing, well mounted! Now she sees the quarry!"

"Ay, and the quarry sees her. Look, Jasp, she has turned, and, by St Edmund, she'll cross my beauty! Listen to the sweet tinkle of her bells. How swift she mounteth. Ah! my little lady, thou knowest thy work well."

"I'll bet you my new riding-whip against your new set of bells, that my hawk strikes her first."

"Done!" cried Ralph eagerly.

The attention of the two boys was keenly fixed on the two birds, and they rode on, heeding nothing, the varlet who attended his young lords keeping well up with them.

"Hi! Master Jasper, look where thou goest," cried out the servant; "thou will ride down yon old man!"

Jasper was not best pleased at being interrupted in his view of the sport, and, glancing down, saw a man with a hood drawn over his head, and an old tattered gown on, who was with difficulty walking across the heath, attended by a young girl, meanly attired, but very modest and sweet-looking.

"Why, old man, wherefore crossedst thou my path? Didst not see the game toward? Fie, I should have thought an old man like you wouldst have known better!"

"Nay, fair gentleman, I did cross thy path purposely. I have lost my way, and am parlous footsore; so is this poor lass, my daughter; and I crave you of your kindness tell me where we may get shelter."

"Ay, that will my father right willingly give you. Go you on, keep the path over the common, and we shall follow you anon. Thou canst not miss thy way. Say young Master Jasper of Thruxton sent thee. Thou wilt meet with care enough there."

"Grammercy, fair young master; but I will not keep thee from thy sport to

waste thy time hearing a poor man's thanks."

So saying, the man and the young girl continued their way.

Ralph had been looking on; he saw how weary the man was, and his generous young heart beat with pity. He rode after the strangers, and, dismounting, insisted on the poor man getting up and taking his daughter on the croup behind him. There was something in the manner of the wanderers which seemed to tell him they were not common people. The man was evidently much touched. He thanked the boy with quiet dignity, and accepted his offer with ready pleasure; while the large hazel eyes of the girl filled with grateful emotion. She gave him a shy glance, full of gratitude.

At this moment a loud shout of disappointment came from Jasper.

"By St Edmund, thy falcon hath risen above the heron, and will strike in another second!"

This was too much for Ralph. With a joyous bound he left the new-comers on his pony, and ran after his brother, just in time to see his gerfalcon give a swoop, and the next minute descend like a falling bolt right on to the doomed heron, who, however, with prompt instinct, turned up its long neck, and held its beak like a sword on which the falcon should impale itself.

"Gare beak, my beauty; strike him sideways. There, by all the saints, she has done it! There they come. Ah! Melampus; ah! Ringwood; heel, sir, heel!"

And the boy ran as hard as he could to the spot where the heron, still struggling, but feebly, was falling with the hawk's claws and talons fixed firmly in its back, and its strong beak pecking into its brain.

"Well done! well sped, brave bird!" cried Ralph joyously.

"Ay, but I have lost my riding-whip," said Jasper ruefully.

"Nay, Jasp, I will never take it; 'twas but in sport."

And thus the first flight of Ralph's gerfalcon ended. They recalled the goshawk, and with hawks hooded, jesses on legs, and fast on fists, they returned home, carrying the heron with them.

CHAPTER II.

HOW THE FLEDGLING LEFT THE NEST.

When the boys drew near home, talking volubly all the time, as boys do, and wondering whether the poor man and his daughter had reached the manor before

them, they met Humphrey, who was returning from Salisbury with the tailor and the new horse.

Ralph descried them some way off, and darted away like a hare, before Jasper and the groom had guessed the cause of his flight. Breathless the boy ran up to Humphrey, and could scarcely pour out the torrent of questions, mingled with ejaculations of pleasure and admiration, with which he overwhelmed the varlet, so scant of breath was he.

The horse was certainly a beauty, and did great credit to the taste and judgment of the worthy Abbot of Quarr.

"Ay, certes 'tis a fine beast; but the main fault, to my mind, is that he's too much for thee, Master Ralph. 'Tis a mettlesome hackney, and I don't marvel that fat Prior of Christchurch wanted to part with him. He'll find a difference between thy light weight and that old round shaveling yonder."

"Tush! Humphrey, let me get on him, that's all–an I bring him not to reason, beshrew me for a dullard and walk-a-foot."

By this time Jasper and the other groom had come up, and they were loud in their praises of the new horse.

"My faith! Ralph, thou'rt in luck to-day," said Jasper, somewhat discontentedly. "Thy falcon hath beat mine, and now thou ownest a horse the best, well-nigh, to look at in our stables. Thou'rt a lucky wight, that thou art."

They were approaching the manor house, and as they came within sight of the old buildings, they saw the Abbot of Quarr coming out of the hall door with Lady Lisle.

"Humphrey, let me mount him," said Ralph eagerly, "before they see us. I'd wager a mark my lady mother would be astonished, and so would my right reverend Lord Abbot."

"Nay, Master Ralph, better let one of the stable knaves try him first; he's a bit fresh and mettlesome. Maybe thou wouldst not master him."

"Marry, Humphrey, thou'rt parlous cautelous. Nay, but I will mount him; he's mine. An thou dost not hold him, I will e'en vault on him as he is, and take my chance."

Humphrey, seeing how wilful his young master was, and fearing lest the horse should kick him if he tried to mount as he threatened, drew up and held the horse. The boy, with a little run, vaulted on to the back of his steed, which stood quite still, only turning his head round, and looking at his new master with wise, mild eye. When the boy was firmly seated, and had taken the reins in his hand, for the horse was bitted and bridled, although there was only a cloth over its back, he clapped his heels to the animal's side, and urged him to a trot.

The others all watched him, and wondered to see the boy, who had hitherto only ridden his pony, sit so well and masterfully on the fine animal's back. His

seat was firm, and the grip of his knees strong.

The horse, unaccustomed to so light a weight, sprang forward with a plunge, for it was fresh, and had been worked but little lately. With eager excitement the boy urged it on to a canter, and clapped both heels to its sides. Nothing loth, the splendid animal threw up its head, gave a snort of answering joy, and broke into a long easy stride.

In another minute they had reached the approaching figures, and Ralph waved his cap with joyous triumph.

[image]

"RALPH WAVED HIS CAP IN TRIUMPH."

"Why, 'tis Ralph!" cried his mother, in amazement. "My son, have a care; 'tis a parlous great horse for so young a boy."

"Nay, fair lady," said the Abbot; "see how well he manageth him: there is naught to fear. He is a likely lad enough, and will make a fine brave present for me to give to my Lord Woodville. There is promise of a noble knight in that stripling. In sooth, he cometh of fair lineage."

Meanwhile the boy was galloping round the greensward in front of the house, talking to the horse all the while, patting his neck and mane, perfectly at home on the back of the animal, and radiant with joy.

As he came round again he drew up in front of his mother and the Abbot, and, reining in the horse, made a low reverence to them with his cap.

"Grammercy, my Lord Abbot, for thy right noble present; 'tis the most brave horse in all England, and I am right thankful to thee for thy gracious kindness," said the boy.

"Well, young master, thou managest him well enough, and I am glad to see that thou hast profited by the lessons of thy lady mother, and hast learned courtesy and easy manners. An thou goest on thus, thou wilt bring credit on thy family, and my Lord Woodville will value thee and us right worthily. Take the horse with my benediction, and may the Lord be with thee, even as He was with David. May He make thine arm strong, and thy spear sharp against all that is vile, mean, and base in this world. Mayest thou win knighthood, and not filthy lucre, by thy prowess; though indeed, as Paul saith, 'The workman is worthy of his hire,' and they do err grievously who think that the ministrations of Holy Church should be rewarded only by thanks, and naught else."

During this speech, the tailor and Humphrey, with Master Jasper and his varlet, had come up, and the inferiors all doffed their caps as they listened re-

spectfully to the Abbot.

"'Tis a learned man and a holy," said the tailor as they went round to the servants' offices, "and he draws a right subtle distinction in that same matter of the acquisition of goods; for as a rolling stone gathereth no moss, so a knight that acteth full knightly hath no means to acquire wealth for himself, whereas an Abbot, or churchman, who liveth well in one place, layeth up much goods for himself and Mother Church. Piety without wealth is as an addled egg that showeth a fair outside but is all fruitless and deceitful within. And as 'tis the duty of the Church to spend and be spent in the service of the saints, how can they spend if they have naught to give away."

While the tailor moralised thus to Humphrey, they entered the kitchen. Ralph and Jasper were walking by the side of their mother and the Abbot; they had dismounted from their horses, and had given them to the groom to take round to the stables.

After taking a few turns up and down in front of the house, Lady Lisle said she must go in and see the tailor, for no time was to be lost in cutting out and making the necessary clothes for Ralph to take with him.

It had been settled that all must be ready by to-morrow early, as the Abbot had to travel to Winchester to meet Sir Edward Woodville, who was going to stay there one night, on his way to Southampton to cross over to the Isle of Wight. There was, therefore, a great deal to be done, and Ralph was taken in by his mother to be measured and fitted, while she set her maids to work to sew the various pieces together as the tailor cut them out.

There was one part of the preparation Ralph liked very much; that was the selecting the weapons he would need as a page, and which might serve him if he should reach the rank of esquire before he returned home again. He was a tall boy and strong, therefore his father bade the old major-domo, who had acted as his esquire, select sound and strong arms, such as a good sword, a well-tempered dagger, and a stout bow with fitting arrows; while a target, a back and breast piece, and a light steel cap, with a strong under jerkin of leather, completed his defensive attire.

It was decided that Humphrey should go with him, and a sumpter horse was to take the baggage of master and man. The evening was passed in great excitement on the part of Ralph, who could not keep still for a minute, and caused Jasper to break out in wrath several times, while his father and mother watched him silently, the latter with eyes full of affectionate sadness. It was the first time the family circle had been broken up.

Suddenly Jasper remembered the poor man and his daughter, and, glad of an opportunity of directing attention to some other matter, he said,–

"Marry, Ralph, we never asked what became of that old beggar and thy nag;

didst hear whether they had left him in the stables?"

"Was it a poor man and a young girl?" said Lady Lisle.

"Ay, mother; didst thou see them?"

"Certes I did, and a quandary it put me into too. For I saw it was thy pony, Ralph, and I marvelled what had come to thee. But the vagrant put me at ease. Poor old man, and poor little wench, they were sorely bested; and when I heard their tale, I felt proud of my son Ralph. 'Twas well done to succour the weary and footsore."

"Humph!" said the Abbot. "I know not, fair lady, whether 'twere altogether a wise action. The beggar was a stranger, and 'tis a mad prank to lend thy goods to people thou dost not know."

"Maybe, Lord Abbot; but I bethink me of One who not only lent but gave to those whom He did not know."

"Ay, marry, so do I, fair lady, but we who live in the world must be careful not to be visionaries or unlike other folk; and if Ralph goeth with me, he must be mindful of the saying, 'Honour to whom honour is due.' Now a beggar and his slut of a daughter are not fit people to give one's pony too–unless, indeed, he is mindful of being a saint; if so, he'd best not go to my Lord Woodville."

The evening was soon gone, and all things were in fair way for an early start to-morrow. The hospitable Lady Lisle had given a night's lodging to the two weary wayfarers, who had told her their journey lay to the Isle of Wight, where the aunt of the young girl lived; and Lady Lisle had said she would see what could be done to further them on their way–perhaps even the Abbot of Quarr would allow them to go in his train.

Before retiring to rest, Sir John Lisle called his son to him, and gave him solemn words of advice, and as Ralph listened, boy as he was, he felt proud of his father for speaking such noble words.

"My son," the old knight said, sitting in his large arm-chair, laying his hand on the boy's head, who sat at his feet on a low stool, looking up into his father's face, "my son, thou art going forth like a fledgling from the nest. Thou hast been gently nurtured, and hast proved that the good lessons of thy lady mother and Sir Thomas Merlin[*] have sunk into thy heart. But the world into which thou goest will offer many trials and sore temptations. I cannot guard thee beforehand against all; but there are some few things I can tell thee, and thy mother will tell thee some others. Fear God before all things! Fight the King's enemies, and those of thy country; and never turn thy back on the foe as long as thy chief bids thee fight. In all things be obedient, and pay reverence to those in authority over thee. Be liberal, courteous, and gentle. Let thy charges be as thy purse can pay. Thy kinsman, the Abbot of Quarr, will aid thee in all that is right for thy place in life; for I have assigned him certain lands and rents in trust for thee, and thou must

maintain the rank of thy family and name. Brave I know thou art, and truthful, I well believe; but of the matters that appertain to thy gentle life, these thy lady mother will tell thee. I have been too much a man of war in these troublous times, and, I fear me, God loveth not those who have used the sword too freely. But 'tis in the blood, and we are not able to fight against it. And now, my son, may God be with thee. Fare thee well. Win thy spurs, and come home a very gentle, perfect knight."

[*] Priests were in that age called "Sir."

So saying, the old knight laid his hands on the boy's wavy hair, and let them rest there a little space, while his lips moved, as if in prayer. When he removed his hands, he raised the boy and kissed him on his forehead, and bid him "Good-night."

Ralph was touched, and went up to his room, for the first time that day sorry he was going; but soon the glorious life before him caused him to forget tender thoughts, and he got into bed longing for the night to be over and his adventures to begin. While he was lying wide awake, unable to sleep through excitement, he heard his mother's step outside the door, and in another minute she came in.

"My little son–nay, not so little after all, but to me always my little son–I have come to wish thee good-night, and to say farewell; for to-morrow we must all be busy, and I cannot then say what I would say now. Thy father hath told thee what appertains to knighthood, I would fain tell thee of what concerneth thy soul–albeit this also belongeth more to Sir Thomas Merlin's office; but a mother's words are always blessed, if God guideth her, as He surely doth. Remember always to say thy prayers, night and morning; and pray not only in thy words and memory, but with the real fervour of a thinking heart. Repeat not simply set sentences, but think of thy daily needs, and daily sins, and lay all before God. Be mindful to give thanks in thy prayers, for gratitude is the sign of a gentle heart. Remember, also, always to be generous to the poor; if thou gainest riches, give freely to those who need, for in so doing, thou layest up treasure in heaven. Help the weak, the widow, and the fatherless, and in all thy youthful strength and rejoicing, forget not the sick, the miserable, and those in grievous dolour. Avoid all bad words; be cleanly of speech, as well as of life; and think ever on thy Blessed Lord, the saints, and thy mother. And, lastly, be courteous, obedient, and humble. Be gay and light-hearted, as becometh youth, but never let wine overcome thee, or the temptations of the tavern and the dice-box. Avoid all boastfulness, but let

thine arm and hand ever maintain thy word, as is fit for one who professeth arms, which is a calling honoured of Heaven, in the person of those puissant captains of Rome, the captain of the Italian company, and the captain that confessed our Blessed Lord. Now, good-night, fair son, and may God bless thee. I have brought thee a little purse; it containeth some small pieces that may procure thee favour with thy companions when thou meetest with them. Humphrey hath charge of thy wardrobe and body-linen, and will see to thy proper furnishing as one of gentle birth and fair lineage. God bless thee, my son, and bring thee back to us, as thy noble father said, 'a very gentle, perfect knight,' and, better still, bring thee, and all of us, to that rest above, where there is no more fighting–no more parting."

So saying, the sweet lady bent down and kissed her son with fervent love, and left him to his thoughts.

The next morning all were astir early–Ralph among the earliest. The worthy Abbot said Mass, assisted by the excellent Chaplain, Sir Thomas Merlin, and after breakfast the preparations for departure were completed.

The little cavalcade came round to the front of the old mansion, and a pretty scene it made. There were the sumpter horses of the Abbot and his two servants; Humphrey, and the baggage horse of Master Ralph; and Ralph's new present, the handsome charger, newly harnessed with new saddle and gay housings. Behind, mounted on Ralph's pony, was the young girl, while her father stood by her side ready to lead the pony, for Lady Lisle had bethought her of them, and had persuaded the Abbot to let them journey with him as far as Winchester, at least, although that worthy prelate was much averse to taking stray waifs in his train.

Ralph was already dressed in a new suit of clothes. Three suits had already been made, and more were to follow, if it was found that he was not dressed suitably to his rank and companions. And very handsome he looked in his gay attire. He wore a velvet bonnet on one side of his head, his wavy hair falling on each side of his free, merry face; a little linen collar was round his neck, and a close-fitting tunic of parti-coloured cloth, puffed at the shoulders and elbows, and pleated down the front and back below the chest and shoulder blades, was fastened round his waist by a leathern belt, from which hung a wallet and a poignard. Tight-fitting hose clad his well-formed legs, and were of different colours, according to the fashion of the time, on each leg. He held his falcon on fist, and carried a little riding-whip in his left hand. A riding-cloak was strapped over the pommel of his saddle, from which also hung some saddle bags containing a few needful articles for the journey and for immediate use.

All the household had come out to see the start.

The Abbot took leave of his kinsfolk, giving them his benediction, and promising to care well for their son. He then mounted his horse with the aid

of his varlets, for he was a large and portly ecclesiastic, and, when mounted, presented a very majestic and dignified appearance in his white Cistercian cassock, with its black scapular hood and cloak, with a square, rather high black cap on his head.

"Come, cousin Ralph, haste thee, the day grows apace, and we should be at Winton before noon or little after."

Ralph had gone up to his father, and knelt down to receive his blessing, saying,–

"Farewell, my noble father, when I come again may I find thee and my lady mother well and in good state, and may I do naught that will bring dolour on thy life."

"Amen, fair son. Go and do valiantly–and the God of thy fathers go with thee."

Rising up, Ralph embraced his father and mother, took leave of his brothers and the servants, and mounted his horse. His heels were armed with spurs, and, touching the animal's flank he caused him to rear and paw the air.

"Marry, the lad sits the horse like a man of thirty. He will do well, and gain himself a name."

The cavalcade now turned off down the glade and disappeared round a bend of the ride, Ralph waving his cap as a last adieu.

"Well, fair wife, so our fledgling hath flown, let us get indoors and pray to God for His mercy."

CHAPTER III.

OF THE FLEDGLING REJOICING IN HIS FREEDOM.

When Ralph trotted after the little cavalcade, which he had allowed to get ahead of him as he waved his final adieu to his parents and his home, he felt all the pride of boyhood budding into independent manhood.

He had long chafed at his inactive life. The rough experience of the late civil wars had taught men to live fast, and many a hardy knight had begun the fierce struggle in the hand-strokes of war at the age of twelve or thirteen. The boyhood of King Edward the Fourth had often been told him, how early he had learned the accomplishments of the tilt-yard, and how early he had practised them on the stern field of war. A king by the right of his own good sword at the age of

twenty, he had fought in many deadly fights as leader and simple man-at-arms for several years before.

Ralph had always been a good boy at his lessons, for he was fond of the chaplain who taught him, but the book he loved most of all was the recently printed book of Sir Thomas Malory, who had compiled and translated the Mort-d'Arthur. He gloated over the description of the single combats, the jousts, and the tourneys in that poetic story, and never tired of the numberless tales of "how the good knight Sir Bors or Sir Lamorak laid on either strokes, and how they foined and lashed, and gave each other blows till the blood ran down, and each stood astonied." His favourite knight was Sir Beaumains. He admired Sir Launcelot, but he was too far above him, while Sir Beaumains was only a beginner, and went through adventures which were not too far out of the common as possibly to occur to himself.

And now he was on the actual road to fortune. He was going to be trained in the household of a great knight, live in a castle, and have daily instruction with youths like himself, aspirants to fame and martial deeds.

The fresh air of the morning seemed never before so fresh, never had the birds sung so blithely. How springy the turf seemed under his horse's hoofs. He sang gaily as he trotted along, and flicked at the flies that tried to settle on his horse's neck.

"Softly, Master Ralph," cried Humphrey. "Thou art a light weight, I know, but we have far to go, and 'tis best to let the cattle go quiet."

The Abbot had settled himself comfortably in his saddle, and called his young kinsman up to him. The servants fell a little behind, Humphrey trying to draw the mendicant and his young daughter into conversation. But he only received short answers from the man, while the girl barely answered at all. The serving-man, unable to make anything out of either of them, gave up the attempt, and began to talk to the attendants of the Abbot.

It was a lovely June day. All the country looked crisp and bright in the clear sunlight. The road lay over a high hill, whence a broad landscape stretched before them, then it dipped down into the old town of Andover, where the cavalcade stopped before the rambling old wooden hostelry, and the Abbot refreshed himself with a cup of malmsey before they entered on the rather wild track of forest and down that lay between Andover and Winchester.

Leaving Andover, they crossed the low land on each side of the Teste, and that river itself near Chilbolton, and then rose over the steep acclivity of Barton Stacey down, with its wide ridge of hills stretching east and west in bleak loneliness, to face the sweeping winds that roared over them from the south-west bringing up the salt of the channel to invigorate the sheep that browsed over their slopes.

The Abbot discoursed from time to time of the various duties Ralph would have to fulfil, how he must conduct himself towards his superiors, equals, and inferiors; and his advice was certainly considerably more worldly-wise than had been that of Ralph's father and mother.

The boy listened attentively; but somehow, with the quick intuition of youthful directness, he detected the ring of worldly wisdom, as differing from the ingenuous simplicity of his' parent's advice. He could not help being amused and interested with the many little anecdotes with which the Abbot illustrated and enlivened his advice, while he felt more than ever how little he knew of the world and its ways.

"Now look you, fair kinsman," said the Abbot. "'Tis a right thing, and one well-pleasing to Holy Church, to be generous and free-handed; but 'tis not wise to give blindly, and without due inquiry. Thou lentest yonder idle vagrant thine horse yesterday. The holy saints guided him aright to thy father's house; but he might, for aught thou knewest, have just as well taken thine horse to Weyhill horse-fair, and there sold him, or ridden away where thou wouldst never have seen him more."

"But, my lord Abbot," cried the boy, "I liked the sound of his voice, and his words were fair: he could not but be honest."

"See there now; alack! good lack! the boy will surely come to harm an he goeth on like that! See you not, fair kinsman, that an you hearken to all fair words and gentle voices, you will e'en be stripped as clean as a rose bush with a blight on it? That is what I say, wait and see. I say not 'give not,' but look well before you give.

"Then again in a quarrel–for hot youth must needs quarrel–be wary how you enter in; see well that your adversary is one from whom you can hope to obtain honour,–one that if you vanquish him can yield you due satisfaction and fair guerdon, or, if he should vanquish you–for you must e'en look to both sides–that he be one to whom you may yield without loss of honour,–sithen he be so puissant a foe that there is as much honour gained in encountering him as there might be in overcoming another.

"In all things give heed and act discreetly. Be no tale-bearer, but listen well to all that goeth on. In all things serve thy master loyally; but be not so besotted as ever to be ruined for any. As for ensample, if thy lord choose a quarrel that must needs bring him to destruction, go not thou after him, but save thyself in time; as rats are said to cross by the hawser that mooreth a ship to the land, when they know of their own natural sagacity that ruin awaiteth that ship. Only give him fair notice thereof first. See how, during the late civil commotions, the Church hath acted discreetly, and saved her possessions in the midst of the broil. Even George, Archbishop of York, allied as he was to the Earl of Warwick and

the Duke of Clarence, yet compounded with the late King Edward IV., on whose soul may God have mercy. But, blessed saints! whom have we here? 'Tis some noble baron, I doubt not, going to Winchester too, unless, indeed, it be the train of my Lord Woodville himself."

They had now reached a high bleak hill, and were nearly at the point where another road joined the one they were travelling by, which led from Marlborough and Cirencester to Winchester. Coming along this other road, which led from Reading, and just rising over the brow of the hill, Ralph could see a party of well-armed men. The dust from their horses obscured them partly, but he could make out that there were several footmen, carrying the formidable bill which dealt such deadly wounds, and gleaming above them were the helmets of two or three men-at-arms. The red crosses on their white surcoats, or tabards, showed that they belonged to the troops levied for the king, or at least raised by some noble for service, for which it was customary to take a contract.

"Ay, belike that's what they are," said the Abbot. "Do you, Peter, now ride on, while I tarry here to welcome my Lord Woodville; and take good lodgings for the night in Winchester, for me and my kinsman the Master Ralph de Lisle."

This was said to the chief of his lay brothers who acted as his serving-men, and who were clad in a dress very much resembling their lord's, but of a dark colour, instead of white.

Ralph was glad they were going to wait to meet the approaching party. He had never seen a band of armed men before, and he thought the appearance of these very imposing, as the pennons of the mounted men fluttered in the breeze.

"Ay, there's the banner of my Lord Woodville–he'll not be far behind," said the Abbot, as another little band mounted the hill, the centre figure carrying a little square flag on the end of a lance, which gaily waved its red and white colours as the horseman moved to the swing of his steed.

It was a very pretty sight. The wide-extending view, over broad pasture and swelling down, the distance hidden by a grey haze; the yellow road, leading straight across the green grass of the down, for the summer was hardly begun, while the gleaming weapons, white surcoats, and fluttering banners, mingled with the brilliant red of the crosses, and the blazon on the flag, contrasted well with the deep blue of the cloudless sky, fading away to the warm haze of the horizon. Gaily the grasshoppers chirped among the wild convolvulus on the roadside, the bees hummed over the clover, and the larks were soaring joyously in the azure overhead.

Ralph gave a sigh of enjoyment–life was already beginning.

The little party sat motionless on their steeds, the Abbot having reined up his horse at the junction of the two roads. Ralph sat on his horse beside him, and Humphrey, the other lay brother, and the sumpter horses, were grouped

behind them–while behind them again was the poor man, leaning against the pony on which his daughter sat, who had, however, frequently insisted on her father taking her place.

Suddenly the Abbot remembered them.

"Beshrew me," he said, "I wish thy lady mother had not saddled me with these beggars; it beseemeth not a prelate like me to have such rapscallions attending on him."

The girl noticed the impatience of the Abbot, and partly heard his muttered words.

"Come, father, let us get hence before the others come; we but disgrace the noble Abbot and his fair nephew."

"Nay, nay, stay now," said the Abbot testily, relenting a little when he heard the soft voice of the girl. "'T would look worse an thou wert now to slip off as though I were ashamed of thee. Even stay and brave it out. After all, 'twill look seemly that I be busied in the protection of the poor and houseless. Ay, marry! 'twill please my Lord Woodville who ever jibeth at the pride of Mother Church, as he calleth it, when I appear in the state befitting the Abbot of the first house of our order in England, and patron of the Chapel of St Nicholas in his own castle of Carisbrooke. Prythee stay: 'twill be well!"

The advanced guard had now reached the place where the others were awaiting them.

The Abbot recognised the sergeant-at-arms who led the little band.

"Why, how now, Tom o' Kingston, who'd have thought to have met thee here to-day?"

"What, my Lord Abbot, you over here! 'tis my noble lord will be right pleased to see thee," answered a splendid specimen of a man-at-arms, clad from head to foot in brown armour, his horse barbed and protected with body arms as well. He had his slender lance slung behind him, and his long sword clanked against the iron of his stirrup. His moustaches curled over the lower chin-piece of his salade or helmet, and his eyes looked bold and fierce under the shadow of its projecting peak. Over his breastplate he wore a loose white surcoat, blazoned with the red cross of St George, while a heavy mace hung from his high-peaked saddle-bow. The effect of the massive armour was to give the trooper the appearance of immense width of chest and strength of body, while in reality he was only of medium size, in proportion to men of the present day.

"Is my Lord Woodville nigh at hand, worthy Tom?" said the Abbot.

"Ay, my lord, he is just behind his banner, attended by his own gentlemen, and some gentlemen of France. But I must be getting on, or the march will be delayed. Hast thou any further orders, my Lord Abbot?"

"Nay, Master Tom; I will see thee again at Winchester belike, where I would

commend to thy care this young springald here, who comes of gentle birth, and is desirous of learning knightly feats of arms under thy noble master."

"He shall be right welcome, whoever he is, but all the more so that he cometh under thy commendation, reverend lord. 'Tis a right gallant youth, and he sitteth his horse full manfully."

So saying, the sergeant-at-arms clapped spurs to his horse, made a salute with his gauntleted hand, and trotted after his party, who had gone on while he was exchanging greetings with the Abbot.

"Note him well, Ralph; he is one of the best soldiers we have in our island, and he comes of gentle blood too. He is the most trusty of all the men-at-arms belonging to my Lord Woodville."

The main body of the troops had now come close to where they were standing. The foremost ranks passed them without any greeting beyond a respectful salute to the Abbot. The men marched along in very loose order, for it was a time of peace, and they were returning from the successful but deadly fight at Stoke. Several of them were bandaged on the arm or head, and those who were wounded were only lightly armed.

After this body had passed, a little interval elapsed, and then came Sir Edward Woodville, commonly called Lord Woodville, Lord and Captain of the Isle of Wight, and knight of the Lancastrian order of S.S.[*] He was attended by several gentlemen, mostly English, but some two or three evidently French. He was preceded by two men-at-arms, and three mounted archers, all splendidly armed and equipped. Behind him came a group of three or four pages, all young men of good birth, aspirants to knightly rank, and being trained in the household of Sir Edward Woodville.

[*] The origin of this symbol is not known. Conjecture has varied between the words "Soveraygno Seneschal" and the swan badge of the House of Lancaster. The collar formed a very graceful ornament, the gold S.S. being linked together, or set on blue and white ribbon.

Ralph looked at these eagerly. They would be his future companions, and he felt a little shy at first, as the boys all scanned him critically, making remarks to each other the while in a low tone.

Lord Woodville instantly recognised the Abbot, and greeted him cordially. After the mutual salutations were over, and the Abbot of Quarr had congratulated him on the success of the King's arms, and his own part in the fray, he introduced Ralph to him, as a present from himself, telling Lord Woodville his previous history and lineage.

At the mention of the word Lisle, a shade seemed to pass over the tranquil face of the Captain of the Wight, like a cloud shadow over the smooth slope of a southerly down; but it passed as quickly as it came, and although he examined the boy more attentively, his expression had resumed its usual serenity.

The boy felt somewhat abashed as the calm grey eyes of the distinguished knight and nobleman fell upon him, searching him through and through; but he scanned the countenance and appearance of his future lord with shy interest, in spite of the awe his glance produced.

He saw before him a gentleman of about thirty to thirty-five years of age, in the prime of life, and strikingly handsome. For all the Woodvilles, both male and female, were remarkable for their personal advantages, and inherited the beauty of person which had caused Jacquetta of Luxemburg, second wife of the great Duke of Bedford, and the cause of the ruin of the English power in France nearly as much as the hapless Joan of Arc, to choose their father, a simple country gentleman, for her second husband. He was dressed magnificently, and very elegantly. Covering his long dark chestnut hair, which hung down on each side of his face, was a velvet bonnet, ornamented with an ostrich plume on one side, fastened by a brilliant ruby brooch. Dark eyebrows surmounted very expressive grey eyes; his complexion would have been fair, had it not been bronzed by long exposure in many a campaign and knightly enterprise. His face was clean shaven, and thus the firm but sweet lines of his mouth were displayed to full advantage. A close-fitting lace collar round his neck contrasted with the spiral ridge of his steel gorget, which the richly-embroidered surcoat, cut straight across the chest, from shoulder to shoulder, allowed to be plainly visible. The short sleeves of this surcoat reached only to the elbows; the rest of his person was encased in rich armour, while a gorgeous gold-studded belt supported his straight long sword and richly-jewelled dagger. His helmet was carried by an esquire fully armed, who also bore his lord's lance. A handsome collar of S.S., ending in a portcullis badge, adorned his neck, while instead of steel gauntlets he wore soft leather gloves, and a splendid falcon rested on his right hand. Another esquire bore his lord's shield, and led a spare horse, fully accoutred in body armour and housing for battle or tilt.

"So this is Master Ralph de Lisle, is it?" said Lord Woodville, who had been appointed on the accession of Henry VII. to succeed his unfortunate but accomplished brother, Lord Scales, in the lordship of the Isle of Wight. "He cometh of an old Isle of Wight family, and is heartily welcome to such training as he can acquire in my poor household. Truly an his deeds shall answer to his fair outside, he will prove a right hardy knight. But tell me," he added, "is he of near kin to old Sir William Lisle of Briddlesford?"

"Nay, my lord, not of close kin," replied the Abbot of Quarr. "Sir William's

grandsire returned to the land of his fathers in Harry the Fourth's reign. As thou knowest, he hath but one son and one daughter, and he hath disinherited the son. 'Tis a sad story."

"Ah! I had forgotten," said Lord Woodville. Then turning to the old knight who rode a little behind, he said, "Here, Sir John Trenchard, is one more to add to your charge. I deliver Master Lisle to your care, knowing full well I cannot give him to a better master of chivalry and gentle learning. Teach him as you so well know how, and the King will gain a fine soldier, and you, my friend, more credit than ever."

Lord Woodville then smiled graciously at Ralph and turned to the Abbot to continue the converse interrupted by the presentation of the boy.

So Ralph Lisle was introduced to his future Lord, and from henceforth would be under the orders of the good knight Sir John Trenchard, until he should be declared worthy to rank as an esquire, and take part in warlike expeditions.

CHAPTER IV.

HOW THE FLEDGLING GREW TO A COCKEREL.

By the time Ralph had reached Winchester, he had learned the names of his future companions, and had already had occasion to experience their love of practical joking, tempered, however, in this case, by the presence of their lord and his gentlemen.

The eldest of the pages was Willie Newenhall, and Ralph was not long in seeing that he was thought little of by the other three, who made him a butt for their wit, which, however, seemed to fall very harmlessly on its object.

"You see he's so parlous full of conceit, he never knows we are making game of him," said Richard de Cheke,[*] the youngest of the pages, and by far the liveliest.

[*] The old family of the Chykes, Cheikes, or Chekes, held the manor of Mottestone from 1370 to 1600, from whom the manor passed to the Dillingtons and Leighs of North Court. Sir John Cheke of their family was professor of Greek in Cambridge, and in 1544 was tutor to Edward VI.

"But when he doth find out, certes he groweth angry?" asked Ralph.

"Nay, what care we for his anger? Even I, small as I am, can teach him a lesson in all things, saving the care of his person and the filling of his skin."

"Marry, young one," said a well-grown, shapely youth, who was riding a little behind and to the left of Ralph Lisle, "here's a missive of great import, 'tis even the business of the last come page to take all such to our right worshipful bear-leader and timber breaker, old Jack in Harness himself. So do thou take it, before worse comes of it."

So saying, the youth handed Ralph a bit of paper, folded neatly, and addressed in a stiff scrawl, "Toe ye rite worchipful Syr Jakke yn Harneis."

"And who is he?" said Ralph, looking at the scrawl and then at the youth.

"Who is he, quotha? why, that you'll soon know, an you do not my bidding. That's the puissant, right valiant, and thrice-renowned knight to whom my Lord Woodville handed thee over, even as we have been handed over, to learn chivalry, and all courtesy. Therefore say I, take you this to him right promptly."

Ralph was a little puzzled. The whole was said so seriously, and in such evident good faith, that he thought he might be violating some rule already. The youth was obviously older than himself, and was doubtless a page of some months' standing. He thought on the whole it would be better to obey, trusting to his good luck to get him out of the scrape with their master if there were any trick, and to his own arm to punish the perpetrator of the joke, if it were one.

"Now, my youngling, what dost wait for?" said the page, whose name was Eustace Bowerman, and who was a second cousin of the lively young page Richard Cheke.

"Why, in sooth I am in doubt whether thou art not making game of me," said Ralph, with a good-humoured twinkle in his eye.

"This cock will crow soon," said young Cheke to the other page, who was on his right; "eh, Maurice?"

"Marry will he. We will pit him against Eustace; they'll make a rare match. Albeit Eustace is the older, I'll lay the new one will beat him. There's a deal of weight in his thews. Look at his leg as he sits his hackney."

"Shall we tell him Eustace is making game of him?"

"Nay; best let him give the missive to old Jack in Harness, and see what comes of it. List; Eustace is taking him to task. I' faith, he doth it well."

"Hark ye, sirrah! You are but just come out of the country, or I'd be wroth with thee; but as it is, I forgive thy manners. Know that all new pages have to do the bidding of the older ones without question, under pain of a leathern strap, and worse torment. Now get thee on thy message."

"Nay, fair page," said Ralph smiling, "I would be loth to do aught that should be misbecoming, and will ever obey in all that I ought, with all humility, but I am

not sure in this that I ought to do your behest. Nevertheless, rather than be thought churlish, I will do what you want, only not, I pray you to understand, because I fear your talk of leathern straps and such like, of which I have little dread from thee, but because 'tis the first matter I have been asked to do, and I would rather seem to be over willing to oblige than churlish of mood."

"By my faith, 'tis a good answer," said the last page who had spoken to Richard Cheke, and who was the only one of the pages who was of high birth. He was a son of Anthony, Lord Scales, brother to Lord Woodville, and therefore himself a Woodville, and nephew to the present Captain of the Wight, which office his father had previously held.

"I like this youth dearly, even now–he will be a gain to us. Thou knowest I never cared over-much for thy kinsman Bowerman, he is so mighty coxcombified, and I would much like to see him overmatched," continued Maurice Woodville.

They had now entered the old city of Winchester, whose streets were very narrow, and made more so by the concourse of people, who all came thronging out and stood at their doors and along the pavement to see the gay troop pass.

Ralph, as he said he would deliver the note to Sir John Trenchard, took the opportunity of doing so when they were nearing the city cross, then not more than about fifty years old, perhaps, and where there was more room. He rode up alongside of the old knight, and, doffing his cap, presented to him the missive.

The old knight, who was short-sighted and rather choleric, besides being a very indifferent scholar, took the paper, and stared at Ralph.

"Eh, this for me?" he said shortly; then holding the piece of paper close to his nose, he called out,–"Why–what–By St Thomas! what meaneth this? Boy, art playing me some trick? Is this a time for thy discourteous pranks?" cried the old knight, in high wrath, crumpling up the paper, and flinging it at Ralph. "Tell me what meaneth this! Who gave thee this?"

But Ralph determined he would bear the blame himself, and settle it with his practical joker afterwards, so he said,–

"Noble sir, I was told to give it thee, so I did."

"By St Nicholas! but if thou hadst had mud given thee to bear to me, thou wouldst have done it, wouldst thou? Get thee back for a simpleton, and tell me all afterwards, when I call for thee."

They were now passing a cross street, very narrow and awkward. There was a block in front, so that Lord Woodville halted exactly opposite this street. He was talking to the Abbot of Quarr, who was on his left. Ralph was immediately behind, but a horse's length distant. The rest of the gentlemen were engaged talking together or looking up at the windows, where the burgesses' wives and daughters were gazing down at the gallant show of men-at-arms and gentlemen.

Suddenly, a drove of cattle which was being driven to market crossed the narrow street a little way down. Among them was a magnificent bull–very fierce and irritated with its journey. Seeing the red blazon on Lord Woodville's surcoat, with a bellow of fury he broke from his driver and turned down the street leading to where that nobleman was quietly sitting, with his head turned away talking to the Abbot, and rushed madly at him. It was but a very little distance, and there was no time for warning. In another second the fierce bull would have gored the noble horse and trampled on Lord Woodville.

Ralph, without a moment's hesitation, struck spurs into his horse, which gave a leap forward. He had thought of nothing but of interposing himself between his lord and the raging brute. Fortunately for him, he was not in time. But his gallant steed struck full against the shoulder of the bull with such violence that it knocked the animal over, and Ralph's horse came down at the same time, flinging his rider over his head.

The whole thing had passed so rapidly, and, from the position of the chief performers in the occurrence, was so little seen, that scarcely anybody knew what had happened. Lord Woodville was the first to take in the situation, and seeing the position of the bull, the horse, and the boy, was alarmed for the latter's safety. The horse had stumbled over the bull, which was struggling and kicking wildly with its legs, while, fortunately, Ralph had been thrown clear of them both. He still held the reins in his hands, but he did not move.

"By'r Lady! the child's dead!" cried Lord Woodville, drawing his sword, and leaning down from his horse. So close was the huddled mass of struggling animals, and so narrowly had he escaped destruction, that, without dismounting, he calmly passed the keen edge across the upturned neck of the bull, which gave a few wild plunges and then lay still.

"See to the horse," said the Captain of the Wight, as he got off his own animal and went up to Ralph. There was blood flowing from the side of his head. He had been thrown with considerable force on to the pavement.

The crowd began now to understand what had happened, and the crush became great.

"Clear me a way, knaves!" cried Lord Woodville. "Keep back the varlets, Sir John; and go for a leech, Eustace Bowerman."

Humphrey had by this time made his way to the place where the accident had occurred. Directly he saw it was his young master who was lying on the ground, he pushed sturdily forward, regardless of everyone.

"Body o' me! what will my lady say, if aught evil should befal Master Ralph? He isn't dead, my lord?" he asked anxiously of Lord Woodville, who was bending over the boy.

"Nay, he is not dead; but is there no leech nigh?"

At this moment a shopman came up to Lord Woodville and offered to take the wounded gentleman into his house out of the crowd. This offer was willingly accepted, and the boy was carried in by Humphrey and Maurice Woodville. They took him into a back room, and the mistress of the house bathed his head and staunched the blood. Ralph slowly opened his eyes. Seeing the look of returning consciousness, Lord Woodville left the house, mounted his horse, and went on to his lodgings, which had been taken for him near the cathedral.

Humphrey was left in charge, and the Abbot, who had dismounted when he saw his kinsman taken into the house, having seen that the boy was in safe hands and doing well, went away also to his lodgings.

Very few knew how the accident had occurred, most thought that the bull had charged the boy. Only Lord Woodville, Sir John Trenchard, and the Abbot had seen the noble action of the boy. His fellow pages had seen him urge his horse forward, but could not see for the projecting houses what else had happened. About half an hour after the accident, a timid knock came at the door, and Humphrey was surprised to see the young girl who had been their companion on their journey to Winchester, standing there when he opened it.

"Well, young wench, what dost thou want?" he asked familiarly.

"My father has heard what has happened, and as he could not leave thy pony, he has sent me to ask how Master Lisle doeth," said the girl quietly, and in an educated voice.

"Grammercy, 'tis parlous kind of thy father, and, for a poor vagrant, it showeth much strange breeding. Tell thy father Master Lisle doth well, and will be on his legs anon."

The girl then shut the door very gently, and Humphrey returned to the bedside of his young Master.

"Humphrey, I feel right hungry," said the boy presently; "canst get me a bit of something to eat?"

"Ay, marry can I!" cried Humphrey cheerily. "That's right good news–I'll be back anon," and he left the room in search of some food.

He had scarcely been gone two minutes when another rap came at the door. Ralph bid them come in, and Maurice Woodville, accompanied by Richard Cheke, entered.

"Well, youngling, and how dost thou fare?" said the latter, in a kind tone. "Thou hast done well for a beginner, and I'd give a good deal to be lying there in thy place. Why, Maurice, he's had the good luck, hasn't he?"

"Ay truly. Thy fortune's made, lad. We've come from the Lord Captain to inquire into thy estate, and to bring thee these dainties from his own table, in case thy wounds allow of thine eating."

"Grammercy," cried Ralph joyously, "my varlet hath but now gone out to

get me some provender, for I feel parlous hungry."

"Then here's what will tickle thy gizzard right merrily. John, bring in the cates."

A serving-man entered bearing a basket, out of which he took first a very clean damask cloth; this he spread neatly on a table, which he placed close to the bed; then he took out a dish covered with a plate. he put a knife and fork and winecup by the side of the plate, which he removed, and disclosed two large salmon trout, with a garnish of fresh watercresses. A flagon of ruby red Burgundy followed, flanked by some tasty-looking rolls, fresh butter, and cheese.

"There, my friend, there's a dainty little banquet for thee; eat, drink, and get well," said Richard.

Ralph sat up, he had his head bandaged. He felt in his wallet for his purse, and handed the servingman a groat, and then he attacked the food with all the ardour of a healthy appetite, contented with himself and all the world.

Whilst their new comrade was refreshing himself, the other pages talked of all their pastimes and occupations, and freely discussed the virtues and failings of their companions and superiors. They made no secret of their dislike of Eustace Bowerman, and utter contempt for Willie Newenhall.

"I tell you what, Lisle, when you're quite game again, we'll get up a tilt between you and Bowerman, and I'll bet my greyhound pup to what you like, you'll beat him," said Maurice Woodville.

"But I have never tilted yet," said Ralph, rather ashamed of the admission.

"Oh, what matter; you sit your horse like a stout jockey, and you'll very soon learn where to place your lance. Old Tom o' Kingston'll soon teach you that, trust him!" cried Richard Cheke.

"Shall I get into a scrape with Sir Jack in Harness, as you call him?"

"No fear. Old Jack is a right good chap, and he'll stand your friend. He knew you were put up to that game by one of us, and I don't doubt he knows very well which it was; but even had you done it yourself, what you did just now will make him your friend for life. He's a tough old ironsides. His father was constable of Carisbrooke Castle in good Duke Humphrey's time, and he's seen a lot of hard knocks. There's not much he loves, but he dearly loveth a hard fight, and my Uncle Woodville."

"Ay, marry he doth," said Richard; "and you've shown him you're made of good stuff for the one, and saved the life of the other."

"It's great sport your coming just now. Dicky and I are a match for Bowerman together, but that great lout Willie Newenhall just turns the balance. He's a mortal coward by himself, but with Bowerman to back him, his fat weight is too much for us; but now you, with your stout limbs and big body, could beat them both single-handed. Do you ever get into a rage?" said Maurice.

"No, not often," said Ralph, laughing. "I was always told to keep my temper. Now, Jasper, he often lost his, and so I thrashed him at most things."

"Ah!" said Maurice, sighing, "I wish I could keep mine. I do get so mad when Bowerman sneers at me."

And so the boys wiled away the time until Humphrey came back with one of the servants of the Abbot of Quarr, and a grave ecclesiastic, who was the infirmarer of Hide Abbey.

The boys, with the courtesy which was especially a part of their education, rose when they saw this dignified monk enter, and remained standing while he undid the bandages, and examined Ralph's cut.

"'Tis a light matter," he said to Humphrey; "thou canst tell my Lord Abbot he need be in no wise anxious–the boy will be healed by to-morrow. Thou hadst best keep quiet to-day, young master, and if thou hast a quiet night, thou mayest travel to-morrow whithersoever thou mindest. But drink but little wine, my son, for wine is heating for a wound, and may bring on fever."

"May we offer thy Reverence a cup?" said Maurice Woodville.

"Thank thee, fair sir, but I touch not wine, except it be ordered me."

However, Humphrey and the lay brother had no such scruples, and quaffed off a cup each, directly Dicky offered it them.

The two pages now took leave of Ralph, saying they must not tarry longer, as their lord would wish to hear how they had sped; but they promised to come again as soon as they could.

When Humphrey and Ralph were alone, the latter said,–

"Humphrey, it seems years since I left home, and yet it was but four hours agone."

"Ay, Master Ralph, time flies apace when one is busy."

"Didst thou see to my horse?"

"Trust me, Master Ralph; he's ne'er a bit hurt, not even a scratch. He knocked over that bull like ninepins, so they tell me. But, marry, 'twas a mercy you didn't get in front of him. You mustn't be that rash again. Whatever would they have said to me up Thruxton way?"

"Humphrey, I want you to see after that poor vagrant and his daughter. Mother was kind to them. I would like to help them over to the Isle of Wight, where they are going. You have seen to my pony?"

"Not yet, but I will by-and-by."

"Then take them this noble, 'twill help them to a night's lodging and food," said Ralph shyly, drawing out a coin from his purse.

Humphrey took it surlily.

"I don't know as how you did ought to go giving away your mother's presents like this, Master Ralph; you'll be wanting all your money among them

gay springalds yonder, I'm thinking."

"Nay, Humphrey, do my bidding," said Ralph quietly.

And so Humphrey went off shaking his head, and muttering,–

"Young master be right masterful. The saints grant he be not led astray to overmuch almsgiving. I'd rather see him squander a bit on his own sports. 'Twould be more akin to his age."

CHAPTER V.

OF THE COMING TO THE ISLE OF WIGHT.

The next morning found Ralph Lisle refreshed and eager for the day's work. His head felt quite well, and had it not been for a piece of plaster which the infirmarer of Hide, who came to dress his wound early in the morning, placed over the cut, he would hardly have remembered the occurrence.

Neither the Abbot of Quarr nor Lord Woodville had forgotten him. The former sent some money for his expenses at the worthy citizen's house, and the latter sent him a tabard of white taffeta, embroidered with the badge of the captain of the Island, in all respects like the other pages, with a supply of food from his own table; and the servant who brought these was directed to say that they would start at eight o'clock, and that he was to arrange all matters with his host.

Punctually at half-past seven Humphrey brought round Ralph's horse, well brushed and groomed, and Ralph, looking more handsome than ever in his new surcoat, with his sword buckled to his belt, and his silver-hilted poignard, stood in all the pride of conscious importance at the doorstep, the admired of all the little street-boys and burgesses who were up and about at that hour; while he was conscious of many a girlish face looking out from the casements of the houses opposite and above him, glancing down smiles of approval, for all the city knew what he had done, and who he was, the Lisles of Thruxton and Mansbridge being well-known throughout the county.

His worthy host and hostess were loud in their regrets at his departure, and at first refused all offer of remuneration, but Ralph pressed it on them with so much gratitude and delicacy, that their scruples yielded, and they accepted it with evident reluctance, and only on condition that when he was a belted knight he would come back and see them. This was touching Ralph in his weakest point. He promised with a conscious smile, and mounted his horse amid the

loudly-expressed admiration of the little crowd.

As he rode down the street, Humphrey caught sight of a well-known face.

"Why, there's old Dickon of Andover! Dickon, I say," he called out, "an you be a-going home to-night, go up to Thruxton and say how you seen the young master all well, and say as how he sends greetings to my lord and her leddyship. Ye mind now?"

"Oh, ay, I'se mind," cried back old Dickon, stopping to gaze upon Ralph. "Well now he do look foine, to be sure."

And so they turned into the street where the *cortège* was in waiting for the Captain of the Wight to come out.

Ralph felt a little shy as he rode up to the large body of archers and men-at-arms that blocked up the street, but he soon felt at ease as he was greeted kindly by Maurice Woodville and Dicky Cheke, who were on the look out for him.

"Willie Newenhall is still stuffing," said the latter, "and as for Eustace, he is putting the last touch of paint to his cheeks; he's such a coxcomb, you'd never guess half he does."

But now all drew up in order. The men-at-arms sat erect, and held their lances upright; the knights and mounted archers drew their swords; the yeomen and billmen held their halberds and bills at attention and a flourish of trumpets announced that the Captain of the Wight was issuing from the house.

As Lord Woodville came out, followed by his guests, among whom Ralph recognised his kinsman the Abbot of Quarr, he glanced quickly over the assembled troop. His keen eye took in everything, but with the dignity befitting his rank he never mentioned what he saw amiss at the time, making a note of it in his memory, to call the attention of the proper officer to it privately, while if he saw anything to praise he always publicly expressed his approval.

In the present case his eye fell on Ralph, but knowing how trying it would be for the young boy to be called out before all that assembly, he merely nodded to him with a kind smile of recognition, and said,–

"Ah, there's my trusty young friend; right glad am I to see him so blythe this morning. Sir John Trenchard, you will see to his comfort, I know."

He then mounted his steed, the stirrup being held for him by Willie Newenhall, as the oldest of his pages.

The captain of the guard gave the order to march, and the leading files turned down to the right, and directed their way to Southampton.

Ralph did not see much of the old city of Winchester, but he had been there several times before, and old buildings had little charms for him, with the animation of life before him. Men, not grey stones, however skilfully carved, or however cunningly piled up, were his attraction.

The delicious air of the morning played over his face; the delightful sensa-

tion of being part of what men stopped to look at, an object of awe and admiration, this thrilled him, and he yielded to the temptation, so natural to exuberant youth, of giving himself airs, and thinking of his appearance. At first the sense of shyness had kept this feeling of self-admiration down, but as he rode along, and noticed the glance of the passers-by, how they stopped to gaze open-mouthed at them, and how loud were the expressions of approval at the fine appearance of the cavalcade, he began to feel his own importance, and was fast adopting the easy self-satisfaction of the other pages.

By the time they had reached Southampton, which they did in rather less than three hours from leaving Winchester, he felt on perfectly easy terms with everyone, including Eustace Bowerman even, who, however, did not seem inclined to be very friendly to him, seeming not to relish the remark of Maurice Woodville when he said,–

"Certes, Bowerman, Lisle oweth thee many thanks. Had it not been for thy kind thought, he would never have done so hardily as he hath. He would have been sitting his nag like any stick, such as you and old Pudding Face, when the bull ran at our lord–but now he hath gotten himself a name at the first start; our Captain will never forget."

Bowerman bit his lip. It was quite true.

"Marry, young Maurice, don't you be talking. If Lisle's horse took fright and bolted when the bull came blundering down that alley, I don't see why the Captain should make such a fuss about it."

"His horse didn't bolt," said Dicky hotly; "you know right well Lisle spurred him in the way."

"Nay, Master Dicky malapert, I know no such thing."

"Then you don't know much, as I always said," retorted Dicky.

"Marry, Dicky, I'll have to wallop thee once more, I see. You're growing saucy again."

"Wallop me i' faith!" sneered Dicky; "I'd like to see you doing it."

"Wait till we get on board the barge then, and you'll soon be satisfied."

Willie Newenhall never engaged in these wordy contests. He only thought of his appearance, when he was going to feed again, or of the danger he was always in from the fair sex, by reason of his own good looks. The other pages knew well his weak points, and would always chaff him on the risks he ran from his many fascinations.

"I' faith, Willie, there's a pretty lass looking at thee; and that's her brother, or sweetheart, with her. How fierce he looks. Ah, if you look at her that way, he'll be murdering you presently," added Dicky, as Willie looked round nervously, to see the group his comrade was referring to, only to meet with a jeering remark from the apprentice who was standing by the girl, of "Hi, young round knave,

pudding chops or pig's eyes, what do you lack here?" or some equally elegant observation, which caused Maurice and Dicky to laugh derisively, and the men-at-arms and archers, who were close behind, to grin broadly.

But Willie was far too stupid to make any retort, he only grunted angrily, and leered at the people on the other side of the street.

Then they passed through Southampton, under the noble Bargate, with its figure of Bevis of Hampton, and the giant Ascapart, whose reality all true townsfolk believed in, and of whose doughty deeds with Guy of Warwick Ralph had often heard and longed to emulate. The cavalcade rode down the long street under the old west gate tower, and outside the splendid old walls, on to the town quay.

Oh, the sight of the gleaming water! Ralph had never seen the sea before–how it glanced and sparkled in the mid-day sun of June. The dim haze of the opposite shore, where stretched the New Forest away and away far into the land and down the coast, with all its memories of ancient times. The splash of the little waves, rippling before the fresh north breeze, as they sparkled against the bluff bows of the unwieldy barges or straighter stems of the swifter galleys. How stately was the curve of a high-prowed, lofty-pooped merchant ship as she came round to the helm, while all her sails fluttered in the breeze as her bows ran up in the wind, and the heavy splash told of the weighty anchor dropping to the muddy bottom of the Teste.

Then the smells, the sounds, the cries. Ralph had never enjoyed life before. All the instincts of his race came out in him,–of that ancient race of the island, whose origin was lost in the dim vista of antiquity, whose lands belonged to the mysterious sons of Stur long before the Norman Conquest, and passed by marriage to De Lisle, if indeed De Lisle was not simply the Norman form of expression for the original lord of the island, for who could more worthily be called "de insula" or "of the island" or "De Lisle" than that family which was above all others "of the island?" since the possessions of the "filius Azor" or "Stur" are the most important of any, as recorded in Domesday book.

The instincts of his sea-girt ancestors rose in him, and Ralph Lisle gazed at the dancing water with eager delight.

The scene of confusion that then followed delighted him still more. The getting the horses on board, the telling off the various parties each to its own barge, the excitement of pushing out into the stream, or warping the larger vessels off to their kedge anchors, which were dropped in the middle of the fairway, all this was delicious, and Ralph felt he was in a wonderful dream.

"Mind your eye, young Popinjay!" bawled a burly seaman. "Stand clear o' that warp now," as Ralph took his stand on a large coil of rope near the bows. "Such a gay bird as you should know better than to stand on a warp that way.

Did yer think 'twas a doormat?"

In a few minutes the barge was hauled out into the stream, the anchor was right up and down.

"Haul away there," called the captain.

Out flapped the big foresail in the breeze, the jib was run out, the anchor was up, and hanging at the bows, already the water was chattering under her stem.

"Now then, my lads, shake out that mainsail. Look alive there!" bawled the skipper, and the great white sail dropped down from the mainmast and longyard, where it had been brailed up, and swelled out in the breeze, louder chattered the wavelets under the bow, and merrily the seamen sheeted home the ropes.

Ralph had now time to look round him. He was on the same barge as Lord Woodville and his immediate escort. The horses with the grooms and men-at-arms were on a large barge that was running alongside of them. On their right, but a little astern, was another barge containing the rest of the troop, and among them Ralph was glad to see the beggar man and his daughter.

The baggage and vanguard had gone on early in the morning, under the charge of Tom o' Kingston.

Ralph looked up at the swelling sails and the tall masts. The barge was bluff-bowed and high-sterned, like those remnants of the Middle Ages the Breton and Norman *chasses marées* of modern times, and like them she carried three large lug sails, and one jib, set far out on a high peaked bowsprit.

As this was the barge of the captain of the Island, she was far better appointed than the other vessels. Her sails were white, and adorned with the arms of the Lord Woodville, argent, a fess, and canton, gules, while the mainsail bore the arms of Newport, the capital of the Island. The ropes were all white and new, and the decks and bulwarks were scrupulously clean, and the latter fresh varnished.

Ralph was never tired of looking aloft at the large blocks or pulleys, the strong ropes, the stout masts, and the swelling sails lazily falling in graceful folds as the breeze died down, or bellying out to the fresher puffs of the fair weather wind.

He leaned over the side and watched the ripple of the water as the hull glided through it. How dark green the sea looked on the side where the shadow of the hull and sails fell, how mellow and blue it sparkled on the side where the sunlight shone upon it. He looked at the other barges; they were rippling through the sea, a little fount of water spouting up under the cutwater, and glancing off the bows in a lovely curve of spray, the one vessel all shadow, the other all bright and gleaming in the sun.

The tide was running out strongly. Swiftly they flew past Netley, its abbey

towers rising out of the green woods, the toll of its bell sounding over the water the hour of nones; gaily they flew past the mouth of the Hamble, and in a short time were gliding out by Calshott Spit, running before the breeze into the stronger ripple of the main tide of the Solent.

But long ere this Ralph had been summoned to dinner, and for the first time he was called upon to wait upon his lord. It was his duty to serve him with wine, and deftly he performed his task, for he had been well taught at home. The motion of the vessel was scarcely perceptible, and his hand was very steady. After the Captain of the Wight and his guests had been served, the pages sat down apart to their repast, and Ralph was astonished at his own appetite.

"I tell you what it is, little eyes," cried Dicky, "you'll have to look after yourself, or Lisle will leave you nothing to eat."

To this Willie Newenhall made no answer, but glanced askance at Ralph, and eat away harder than ever.

"There, there, Willie, dear, don't be afraid; he'll leave you a bit, if you are a good lad, I don't doubt," laughed Maurice.

It had been Bowerman's duty to attend closely upon his lord, and he had found no opportunity to put his threat in execution. However, now the repast was over, he began to remember what had passed.

"Dicky," he said, "come hither."

"Not I," said that lively young gentleman. "You can come here, if you want me."

"Be quiet, varlets!" called out Sir John Trenchard, who was sitting on a settle on the deck not far off. "If you want to jangle, wait till you get ashore."

They were now splashing through the tide, which ran swiftly over the Brambles, the steersman keeping the vessel's head well up to it, so as not to be carried down past the Newport river.

Larger and larger loomed up the island. Away to their left lay Portsmouth and the ridge of Portsdown; to their right they could see far down the Solent, point after point standing up in ever-decreasing clearness, until the distant Node Hill, above Freshwater, where the land trended away to the south-west, loomed up faint and grey in the shimmering haze of the lovely afternoon.

Nearer and nearer they drew to the island, and as they approached the land Ralph saw that a fine stretch of water opened up ahead.

"The tide's making out amain yet," said the skipper, approaching Lord Woodville, with cap in hand. "What will be your lordship's pleasure? Shall we run in and anchor, and land your lordship, or will it please you that we try to stem the tide? Natheless it will be but a poor job we shall make of it till the tide turns; and then we sha'n't have water far up for some while."

"Run us ashore at Northwood,[*] we will ride up to Carisbrooke. Our bag-

gage can come up afterwards, in the evening, when the tide makes enough to float you up to Newport Quay."

[*] Cowes as yet (1487) was not. The building of the castles by Henry VIII., sixty years afterwards, was the beginning of Cowes.

"Ay, ay, my lord."

Ralph watched the movements of the crew with curiosity. As they ran in before the wind, which was very fitful, he saw them brail up the mainsail, then as they ran up past the land, which was all covered with woods and bush, they took in the foresail, and gently, under the light pressure of the jib, the barge slithered on the mud, close to a shingle hard, where it was possible to disembark at low tide.

And now again all was confusion. The other barges ran in alongside the Captain's. The gangways were lowered down. The horses with great difficulty were partly lowered, partly driven out on to the shingle. The grooms and men-at-arms got out, and led the horses up to form their ranks on the grass sward at the foot of the woods, which then stretched in unbroken verdure from Northwood Church to Gurnard Bay and Thorness, forming part of the King's Forest of Alvington, Watchingwell, or Parkhurst.

The Lord Woodville, when all was ready, disembarked with his guests, and, attended by his pages, he mounted his horse on the green grass above, great state being observed, and great care taken, by laying down mats and cloths, that he should not soil his feet on the muddy shingle.

As soon as he was mounted, the order to advance was given, and the cavalcade set off for Carisbrooke, through the green woods by the side of the blue Medina, glancing through the stems of the trees by the roadside. More than ever Ralph felt grateful to the Abbot of Quarr for having presented him to so puissant a chief, and one under whom he should learn such courtesy and gentleness. He felt sorry to leave the sea and the ships, but rejoiced that their journey lay along the water side.

Humphrey had disembarked with him, and Ralph, looking back, saw that the beggar man and his daughter were still on the other barge.

"We shall have to look sharp after our pony, Master Ralph," grumbled Humphrey.

As they rose over the hill by Northwood Church, where the churchyard was being prepared for the approaching consecration, for up to this year the few inhabitants had to go all the way to Carisbrooke to bury their dead, Ralph looked

back, and thought he had never seen anything so pretty. Below, lay the Newport creek, clothed in thick woods on each side; beyond, stretched the blue Solent, the yellow line of the Hampshire coast and the grey distance blending with the mellow haze of the sky. The three barges, with their masts sloping at different angles, their great yards swinging athwart each other, and the sails only partially furled, giving animation and picturesqueness to the foreground, while above all spread the blue vault of heaven, cloudless and serene.

CHAPTER VI.

HOW THEY CAME TO CARISBROOKE CASTLE.

The cavalcade as it drew near Newport was formed into more precise array. It behoved the Captain of the Wight to enter the capital of his little kingdom in becoming state.

The vanguard, under Tom o' Kingston, had been sent on earlier in the day, the bailiffs and burgesses of Newport had therefore received ample notice to prepare for the reception of their Lord and Captain.

The military force of the island at this time was much improved. After the conclusion of the civil war, Edward IV. appointed Anthony Woodville, Lord Scales, the most accomplished knight as well as finished gentlemen of his time, to be lord and Captain of the Wight, in succession to his father, Richard, Lord Woodville, Earl Rivers. Under the martial rule of this skilled warrior, the defences of Carisbrooke Castle and the military force of the island seem to have been put on a sound footing, and the military tenures of the landlords who held their lands of the "honour of Carisbrooke Castle" were carefully inquired into, and their services duly enforced. The large powers possessed by the Warden of the Island, in the reign of Edward III., as evidenced in the commission granted to John de Gattesdon, show that a vigorous Captain had ample means at his disposal for mustering a formidable force, and that only the supineness, or corruption, or absenteeism of the lord of the island or his deputies could have allowed the inhabitants to have fallen into such a state of despair as two petitions, presented to the King and Parliament in 1449, show that they had yielded to. In short, if the Captain of the Wight was a keen soldier and able man, the forces of the island were smart and serviceable, and if he were not, they fell into indiscipline and inefficiency.

Sir Edward Woodville, now Captain of the Island, was in all respects a "righte hardie, puissant, and valyant knighte," and took pains that all under his command should be well-appointed and well-disciplined, and as his appointment vested in his person the supreme civil as well as military command, his influence and authority were wide reaching–in other words, he was a "strong" Captain.

The chief officials in Newport were the bailiffs, for there was no mayor or court of aldermen for more than a hundred and seventeen years after this date, and they acted as deputies for the Captain of the Wight in all matters relating to the business of the borough of Newport. These officials now came out, arrayed in all the dignity of their office, accompanied by the chief burgesses of the town, and attended by Tom o' Kingston and the body of archers and men-at-arms he commanded. The populace, naturally eager to see all pageants, crowded out of their houses, and by the time the procession, issuing from the town over the bridge to the north, had reached the Priory of St Cross, it had attained to very considerable proportions. Several of the neighbouring gentry had ridden in and joined the concourse, with their servants and dependants. Chief among these was conspicuous a martial figure, attended by a very lovely girl, and followed by four stalwart yeoman, well mounted and appointed. When the *cortège* had reached the gate of the Priory of St Cross it halted, and in the meadows at the foot of Hunny Hill the concourse found room to see the reception of their Lord and Captain.

Soon after the arrival of the bailiffs and their attendants, the gleam of spear points, bills, and halberds showed over the brow of the steep hill that descended abruptly to the little town. Soon afterwards the Lord Woodville himself appeared, attended by his household and guests, and followed by the main body of his mounted archers and men-at-arms.

As Ralph looked down into the valley below he was struck by the gay prospect. The bright tabards and glancing weapons of the men-at-arms gave colour and life to the picture, mingling as they did with the soberer dresses of the townsfolk, with their wives and daughters. The high pointed head-dresses of some of the dames, and the horned caps of others, whence transparent draperies hung in the wind, much to the annoyance of their male relatives, who had either to take care not to become entangled in them, or else to run the risk of sharp reprimand or scornful look, added a quaint variety to the scene. The banner of Newport flaunted its blazon in the breeze, side by side with the arms of Woodville and the royal arms. Beyond were the red tiles of the old houses, the streets, neat and orderly, the tower of the Church of St Thomas, rising above the houses, and, behind all, the steep down of St George's to the left, and the range of downs stretching away to the right, with the vale of the Medina between, from which the mist of approaching evening was already beginning to rise, while from out

the valley to the right the noble pile of Carisbrooke Castle rose clear and grand in all its feudal beauty, lately restored, and rendered wellnigh impregnable to the forces of mediæval warfare. How splendid it looked, its walls and battlements, turrets and bastions, lighted up by the westering sun, the dark shadow of the smooth slope of Buccomb down forming a background to the ruddy pile, and the donjon keep standing up grim and distinct amid the lesser towers and roofs, flinging defiance to the assaults of men and time alike in the flag on its summit.

Such was the scene Ralph looked upon, but as they descended the steep hill his eyes became fixed on the throng of people awaiting them, and once more he felt a sense of shyness come over him. He was not yet used to being looked at. His fellow-pages, however, were quite unconcerned, and were passing remarks freely among themselves under their breath, as they recognised faces in the crowd.

"Marry! there's old Billy Gander. How red his nose is! Why didn't he get some of thy powder thou art so fond of, Bowerman?"

"And look! there's Dicky Shide. By St Anthony! but he's got a worse squint than of old. Poor old Squint Eye!"

"Willie, my swain, there's Polly Bremeskete. I wouldn't let her see thee, that I wouldn't. She told Tom o' Kingston she meant to marry thee, come next Peter's day. And she always keeps her word."

"By'r lady, there's Yolande de Lisle; she looks more lovely than ever!" And Eustace Bowerman drew himself up, and sat his horse with greater importance than before, while even Richard Cheke and Maurice Woodville looked conscious, and glanced at their dress, squared their toes, and sat more erect on their steeds, holding their horses tighter with their knees, and making them step in lighter action.

Ralph glanced to where Bowerman had descried the object of all this homage, curious to see who it was that bore his name. He had heard that a great-uncle of his had returned to the island home of his ancestors in King Harry the Fourth's reign, but he had forgotten all about it, and had never given such remote genealogical questions a thought. However, now he heard the name mentioned, he recollected what he had been told, and what his father had said about the disinherited son, and the only daughter.

He had not to search long for the young lady who created so much admiration among the pages.

Sitting her palfrey with easy grace, and perfectly at home amid the noisy crowd and free manners of the rough troopers, was a girl or rather young woman of about eighteen or twenty, of very graceful, although somewhat robust, proportions, but remarkable for her brilliant complexion, lovely features, and sparkling blue eyes. Fun and health glowed in every line of her face, in her masses of wavy fair hair, which refused to be confined under the prim cap and horned head-dress

in which the fashion of the time struggled hard to reduce them to order, in her soft cheeks, red lips, and graceful rounded figure. Ralph thought there never was anyone so lovely in the whole world. He forget everything. He gazed at her in rapt admiration, utterly oblivious of all that was going on.

"By my halidome, Master Page, whither goest thou?" said the grating voice of Sir John Trenchard, against whom Ralph bumped with a sudden jerk, as the troop stopped for Lord Woodville to receive the homage of his subjects. "Canst not see where thou goest, or keep a fitting distance from thy betters? Draw back to thy fellows, I say."

Thus roughly aroused, Ralph, much abashed, reined up his horse, and backed it to a line with the other pages, who were grinning from ear to ear at his luckless mistake; but what made him more uncomfortable still, was that he saw the fair object of his admiration had witnessed it all, and was smiling meaningly at Eustace Bowerman. He began to envy that page in a way he would not have thought possible before.

But Bowerman was all smiles and amiability now. He nodded familiarly to one person, haughtily to another, and most expressively to the lady on horseback. But she, after the first glance of recognition and amusement, looked no more his way, being occupied with gazing at the Captain of the Wight and the two French knights who were with him.

Ralph, as soon as he had recovered from his mortification, tried to keep his eyes away from Mistress Lisle, and watched what was going on.

After the bailiffs had done homage, and congratulated Lord Woodville on the success of his expedition, the burgesses came forward and performed their part of the ceremony, being greeted kindly by the Captain, who was evidently very popular. Ralph noticed that the old knight who sat his horse so firmly, and held up his head so proudly, was greeted with especial respect by Lord Woodville, who also exchanged very courteous salutations with the lovely lady of the golden hair, to whom he presented the two French knights, who, with their proverbial gallantry, seemed to be paying her compliments which, as they could not be too flattering, seemed not unwillingly received.

The ceremonies over, the cavalcade reformed. The bailiffs and the burgesses heading the procession, they then defiled over the bridge, and passed into the town.

Ralph had now recovered himself sufficiently to ask who that old knight was who looked so striking, and to whom Lord Woodville had paid so much attention.

"Ay, certes, you may well ask," said Maurice Woodville, "for he is, or ought to be, a kinsman of thine own, seeing he beareth the same name as thyself, and, for aught I know, the same coat armour."

"Nay, for the fair lady weareth on her mantle a coat argent with a chief gules charged with three lions rampant of the field, whereas my father beareth or a fess between two chevrons sable."

"Well, you must e'en settle that as best pleaseth you; all I know is that he is called Sir William de Lisle of the Wood, or, as our chaplain would have it, '*Dominus de Insula de Bosco*,' which, to my thinking, isn't half as pretty as the English."

"And is that his daughter?" asked Ralph shyly, thinking of his father's words with keener interest.

"Ay, marry is she, and the loveliest demoiselle in all the Wight, and the world to boot, say I!" answered Maurice, with enthusiasm.

At the corner of St James Street, where it intersected the High Street, there was a halt. Here the Abbot of Quarr took leave of Lord Woodville, for his road lay down High Street, and so to his monastery. Sir William Lisle and his daughter, much to her regret, also took leave; but Lord Woodville, before parting with the Abbot and the old knight, called to Ralph to come up; who, with some embarrassment, rode forward, and was by Lord Woodville presented to Sir William Lisle and the fair Yolande.

"Sir William, I have a kinsman of yours I would fain make you acquainted with. This fair youth hath already begun right manfully, and I dare vouch will prove a full knightly twig of thy own worshipful stock."

Sir William de Lisle looked at Ralph, as he thought somewhat sternly, but his words were kind.

"Fair young sir, I am right pleased to hear thee so well reported of. 'Twill give our daughter and me joy to see thee at our poor home of Briddlesford, whenever thy noble Captain can spare thee. Thou wilt find good sport for thy hawk in the woods and creek of Wodyton, and along the banks of King's Quay; only beware how thou fliest him over the lands of the Abbot of Quarr, for he is a strict preserver of his own demesne."

As Sir William said this, he glanced at the Lord Abbot, and a merry twinkle was in his eye, for many had been the discussions over the rights of the respective demesnes, for the lands of the Lisles bordered on those of Quarr Abbey, and hot had been the complaints of Sir William that idle monks had been caught setting traps in his lands, which had led to counter charges on the part of the monks.

"And forget not, fair cousin, if thou shouldest be tempted our way, to bring over some of thy fellow pages with thee; for without them thou wilt be parlous dull, seeing there is naught at home to amuse thee saving my poor self; and one poor girl is but sorry sport for a merry page," said Yolande, with a demure smile, as she turned her palfrey to accompany her father.

Ralph longed to say something that would become him, but he felt very shy

amid all that concourse of people, with his comrades watching, and the French knights and Lord Woodville all looking at him; he could only stammer out his thanks, and bow low over his saddle.

"Fare-thee-well, kinsman mine," said the Abbot; "give diligent heed to thy instructors, reverence those in authority over thee, and attend carefully to the ministrations of worthy Sir Simon Halberd, who will give me frequent account of thee when he cometh to Quarr."

"Grammercy, my Lord Abbot, I owe thee many thanks for thy great kindness in giving me to so noble a lord," said Ralph, who, now that the bright eyes of his fair kinswoman were not gazing at him with the amused look which so disconcerted him, felt his presence of mind returning, and was able to answer with his customary boldness.

And so the cavalcades parted, Mistress Yolande giving a farewell glance of Parthian destructiveness at the French knights, but deigning no more to notice such simple things as innocent pages.

"By St Nicholas, Bowerman, you are always to be luckless now!" laughed Maurice. "But yestere'en you helped Lisle to the best bit of good fortune he's likely to have for some time; and now he's called up before all of us to be presented to our fair princess of the golden hair. Didst see how kindly she smiled on him?" he added mischievously.

"Body o' me! an' you hold not your jabbering tongue, I'll flay you when we get to the castle!" said Bowerman savagely.

"Nay, fair youth, be not wroth; 'tis not I who got Lisle all this good luck. Virtue is its own reward. Be happy! sweet damoiseau, and rejoice in thy good nature. 'Tis true, 'tis not often you do a fellow a good turn; so be happy when you do."

"All right, my young cockerel, tarry but the nonce. My time will come anon," said Eustace, in furious dudgeon.

Ralph had fallen back as the procession moved on. All the pages were well known in Newport, and the doings of the little court at the castle were intimately discussed. The characters of each of the principal members of the garrison were well known, and any new arrival was critically examined and freely talked about.

[image]

THE CAPTAIN OF THE WIGHT ENTERING CARISBROOKE CASTLE.

The worthy burgesses' wives and their fair daughters much regretted that

the Captain of the Island was not married. The lady of Sir John Trenchard presided over the domestic part of the castle, and did the honours when ladies paid it a visit. But she was not of an amiable disposition, and it was popularly reported that her worthy lord's little asperities of temper, and sourness of look, arose in great measure from the austere frigidity of this eminently respectable matron, who, however, as Ralph subsequently found, was at heart a very kind and sweet lady. The reasons for Lord Woodville being still a bachelor were variously stated, and all hotly asserted by their different supporters, who one and all had their information on undoubted private authority, which they were not at liberty to divulge. The only fact that really was known, however, was the simple one that there was no Lady Woodville. The head of the column was now mounting the steep ascent to the castle, and Ralph noticed the splendid position of this noble fortress. The sun was getting low on the western horizon; the level rays bathed all the long valley away to the west in a rich golden haze, falling full on the grandly-proportioned towers of the main guard. The massive walls, pierced for archery, and crowned with their projecting machicolations and graceful parapets, were not yet clothed with the growth of yellow and grey lichen which has been slowly painting them for the last four hundred years. The stone was yet fresh from the hand of the mason, and above the great gate, high up on the parapet, could be seen the arms of Lord Scales.

"My grandfather had that done!" said Maurice proudly, pointing up to the noble gateway as they tramped over the drawbridge, and passed out of the warmth of the sunlight under the heavy portcullis, and between the massive iron-studded oak doors, which were swung back to allow the Captain of the Wight and his "meynie" to enter, and then slowly and harshly swung back as the last man-at-arms clanked over the drawbridge, shutting out the sunlight and the outside world.

The guard under the archway presented arms, the trumpets sounded a flourish, and out into the sunlight, whose rays just passed between the towers, and touched his plume, rode the lord of the castle, and of all those stalwart men.

CHAPTER VII.

HOW THE COCKEREL SHOWED FIGHT.

The days passed rapidly by after Ralph Lisle had become part of the retinue of

the Captain of the Wight. Each day brought its busy round of occupation. There was the early practice, before the morning meal, at throwing the bar, running at the quintain, and leaping over the wooden horse. Every exercise was directed to bringing fully into play all the muscles of the body, and especially such as were most needed in the handling of the lance, and the management of the war horse. After the morning meal, at which the pages had their table apart in the hall of the Lord Woodville's apartments, which at that period were very much in the same position as the Governor's lodgings were at a later time, when added to and repaired by Sir George Carey, those pages who were not on duty went through a course of "grammar and rhetoric," under the instruction of Sir Simon Halbard, the chaplain of St Nicholas within the walls. The whole garrison, or at least such part of it as could be spared from their duties, always attended mass every morning, for the Lord Woodville was a strict disciplinarian, and enforced the precept of the Church with the rigid punctuality of a Grand-Master of the Temple.

The "book-learning," as the pages called it, occupied about three hours, and then preparations were made for the mid-day meal, the most important of all the meals of the day. This repast was served in much state, all the pages being required to attend to carve and hand the dishes, and pour out the wine for the Captain of the Wight and his guests, or the knights of his household. After those of highest rank were served, the pages sat down to their repast, presided over by the senior esquire.

The afternoons were spent either in attendance on their lord, or in private amusements and exercises of their own. No one of the pages was allowed out of the precincts of the castle without Sir John Trenchard's leave, but this was usually very easily obtained.

So passed the days in healthy exercise and wholesome occupation. There had been many little bickerings, and even personal struggles between the pages, but, boy-like, they had been brief, and, on the whole, the life was very pleasant. Ralph had ridden over with Maurice Woodville to pay his relatives a visit at Bridlesford. They had met his fair cousin, who was riding out to fly her hawk; and as they accompanied her to a high hill, whence a lovely view was obtained all over the Solent and far inland from the New Forest and Beaulieu on the left to Chichester and even the hills above Arundel on the right, they were surprised to meet one of the Breton, or French Knights, as they called them, riding out there, quite unattended.

There had been much talk about the business of these Bretons with the Captain of the Island. Merchant ships, bringing salt and other commodities to Newport from Nantes and St Malo, had reported how unsettled was the state of Brittany, how the Duke of Orleans and the Prince of Orange, both nephews of

the old Duke of Brittany, had fled to him, to his castle of Malestroit, and how the armies of the King of France, who was himself but a boy, but whose affairs were wonderfully managed by that very wise and puissant lady the Dame de Beaujeu, his sister, had entered the country, and how all would go to utter ruin, unless King Henry sent force of knights and men-at-arms to assist the Duke of Brittany and his fair young daughter the Duchess Anne. Such news was bruited abroad, and there was no young knight in England who did not burn with ardour to lay lance in rest for so great a princess, and against the hereditary foe of England. All men knew, therefore, that the Sire de Kervignac and the Vicomte de la Roche Guemené were come to solicit men-at-arms and archers, and there was not one of the garrison of Carisbroke Castle who did not heartily wish they might succeed, and perhaps no one wished it more than Master Eustace Bowerman.

After the customary courtesies had been exchanged, Mistress Yolande urged the two pages to fly their hawks at a heron, which was busily feeding on the rich weeds far out on the mud at the mouth of a creek called King's Quay. The boys, nothing loth, cast off their birds, and rode eagerly after them. But whether it were that the wood was too thick, or the country too rough, the lady did not follow them, while the knight stayed, as in duty bound, to escort her, and so the boys lost sight of them for the rest of the afternoon. And not only did they suffer this disappointment, but, what was almost worse, Ralph's falcon killed the bird, but fell with it so far out on the mud that it was impossible to get at it, although the boys did everything they could to urge their dogs to go on to the treacherous slime, and bring the quarry to land. The tide was quite low, and they had to give up all hopes of obtaining more sport. It was with much difficulty, and after long waiting, that they were able to get the falcon to fly back to fist, for it was taught not to leave its prey until some one came to take it. When at last they did recover the bird, the afternoon was too far advanced for them to return by Briddlesford to inquire after Mistress Yolande, and bid good-bye to Sir William de Lisle, which Ralph would dearly have liked to do; and he was, besides, in such a state of mud from having tried to recover the bird, that they thought it best to return to Carisbroke without being seen by any one. Riding home as fast as they could, they made a *détour*, to avoid passing through Newport, and reached the castle just before the gates were shut for the evening. When they got back, and related the events of the afternoon, they found Eustace Bowerman, who was already sulky enough at not having been asked by Ralph to accompany him instead of Maurice Woodville, in a towering temper.

"You blind moles," he growled, "why did ye not cleave to Mistress Lisle and that jackanapes of a Frenchman? What geese ye must have been, to have been shaken off like that. But I'll talk to that jackanapes anon, that I will. What does he mean by coming over here and sporting in our covers?" and Eustace Bowerman

flung himself out of his chair, and went to the oriel window, which looked out into the courtyard of the castle.

"I' faith, Eustace, my Trojan, don't you call me a goose again," said Ralph good-humouredly, but with a determination in his tone.

"And prythee why not?" said Eustace, who was glad of anything to vent his ill-humour upon. "None but a goose would show the white feather as you did, riding away from that dandified Frenchman."

"I never showed the white feather yet," said Maurice hotly, "and if you say that I did, you lie in your throat."

Eustace was not in a humour to take things quietly. In a passion at these words of Maurice, he rushed across the room, and would have flung himself upon him, had not Ralph put out his foot, and tripped him up. He fell heavily to the ground, greeted by a roar of laughter from Dicky Cheke, who scented the battle from afar, and chuckled at the approaching crisis.

"Oh, cocks and pies, my swaggering imp, look you there! You've split your new trunk hose all down the leg. Fie, man, you're not fit to be seen; run away and get old Gammer Tibet to sew it up for you."

But Eustace rose in a more towering rage than ever. He turned upon Ralph, and struck at him with all his force. But Ralph had not been learning martial exercises for nothing, and although he was four years junior to Eustace Bowerman, yet in height and activity he was in no way his inferior, although his frame was not as well set, or his weight and strength as great as that of his assailant. With ease, therefore, he knocked down the blow that Eustace aimed at him, but refrained from replying by a blow in return.

"Bowerman, I don't want to fight," said Ralph quietly; "why get into a rage about nothing?"

"So you don't want to fight, eh? I thought not," sneered Eustace, who was in a very evil mood. "Then I want to thrash you, so you'd best take it quietly."

Ralph, seeing that there really was nothing else for it, although he was of a very peace-loving, happy disposition, stepped back, and awaited his antagonist's assault.

Bowerman, who saw how reluctant Ralph was to fight, mistook this backwardness for cowardice, utterly forgetting, or else wilfully misinterpreting, the brave action of the boy at Winchester.

He advanced upon him with a fierce scowl of concentrated hate, and aimed a blow right at Ralph's face; but the boy guarded it with his right arm, and at the same time with his left dealt his assailant a swift and well-planted blow full in his chest, causing him to stagger back and gasp for breath.

"Well done, Lisle!" cried Dicky Cheke, in an ecstasy of joy and excitement. "Do it again, my lusty lambkin; follow it up with one on his nose that'll spoil his

beauty for some time."

"Why don't you give it those little bodikins?" stormed Eustace to his ally Willie Newenhall, as he prepared to attack Ralph again.

"Because he's afraid, the big booby," laughed Dicky derisively.

Bowerman, seeing that his antagonist was not to be despised, determined to close with him and overpower him by his superior weight. Stepping back therefore, to gather way for a rush, he was about to spring upon Ralph, when that boy, with the instinct of a general, anticipated him, darting forward to meet him, and pounding him with blows.

The delight of Dicky was a treat to behold. He danced, jumped, sang, whistled, and at last, forgetting everything in the wild madness of the moment, he flung himself upon Willie, and belaboured him right manfully. That stolid youth was looking on with a lack-lustre expression on his fat face, and marvelling to see how Ralph dared to stand up to Bowerman, whom he had always looked upon as invincible. He was roughly aroused from his stupid contemplation of the contest, by Dicky Cheke's unprovoked assault. When once aroused, however, his greater age and weight told heavily in his favour, and poor Dicky would have paid dearly for his temerity, by being crushed under the dead weight of "Pig's Eyes," as he called him, had not Maurice Woodville assailed him with vigour in the rear.

The uproar now waxed furious. Ralph, who had gained a decided advantage by becoming the assailant, was pounding his adversary with hearty alacrity, not without receiving, however, very severe blows in return. The two smaller boys had got Willie down, and were pummelling him with right good will, while he roared lustily to Bowerman to come and take "these little fiends off him."

In the midst of the confusion the door opened, and the Captain of the Wight appeared, attended by the other Breton knight, the Sire Alain de Kervignac.

So busy were the combatants, that none of them noticed the interruption, and for a second or two fierce blows were exchanged before any one was aware that there were spectators.

Dicky Cheke was the first to catch sight of the calm face of his lord, over which an amused expression flitted.

"Holy saints!" he gasped, suddenly stopping in the act of planting a well-directed blow in the prostrate Willie's eye, who was at the same moment pounding Maurice in the chest, "here's the Captain," and he sprang up, breathless and confused, hastily adjusting his disordered dress as best he could.

The others were equally startled, and for a second or two there was a very awkward pause.

"Well, young gentlemen, I see you have taken the lessons of the tilt-yard to heart; but I should wish you to remember that it better becomes you to tilt at the quintain, or even at each other, with lances, than grovel on the ground, and

spoil your clothes in this unseemly brawl."

The youths all looked very much abashed, but Lord Woodville would not see that it was a real fight that was going on; he treated it as a mere trial of strength, and continued:–

"I have brought this noble Breton knight to see you, for he purposes, together with his right valiant companion in arms, the sire de la Roche Guemené, to hold a joust against all comers, and he fain would see if I cannot spare the stoutest of my pages to make a trial of arms before the ladies of our island. How like you this, my varlets?"

There was no need to ask. The flushed faces and bright eyes showed how welcome such news was; only the three younger boys looked a little crestfallen, for they knew they were too young to be allowed to tilt in the lists, even supposing the two others were so highly favoured.

"I see by your looks you like the news well. Master Bowerman and Master Newenhall, I hear from Sir John Trenchard that you are now of an age when you may make public trial of arms, I therefore appoint you my esquires, and give you permission to joust with spears on the first six courses, but not to take part in the tourney with swords." Then seeing the looks of disappointment in the faces of Ralph Lisle, and his two comrades, he added,–"And you, fair pages, must rest you content for another year, when you be grown older. And now, my masters, set your dress in order–contend no more; and do thou, Ralph Lisle, come hither with me." So saying, Lord Woodville left the room, followed by the Breton knight, and speedily joined by Ralph, who stayed a second to put his dress tidy.

"My page," said Lord Woodville to Ralph, as soon as he had come up with them, "take this missive to the hermit who dwells on St Catherine's hill. Thou knowest the way–'tis where thou wentest hunting with me last week. Take the best horse out of my stable, and ride like the wind; wait for an answer, and bring me back word right quickly. I have chosen thee for thy good riding, and fealty to me. Talk to no man, but do my bidding straightway."

Ralph was delighted at this mark of confidence. He took the note, and turned away to go to the stables. As he was going out of the door of the hall, he heard Lord Woodville say,–

"I marvel where sire Amand de la Roche Guemené hath gotten to? I have not seen him all day."

Ralph paused.

"My lord, I saw him this afternoon. He met us with Mistress Lisle, and we left them together when we flew our hawks."

"Marry you did!" said the Captain of the Wight, glancing at his companion; and adding, in a voice not intended for Ralph's ear,–"Fair knight, we shall have to take care that thy gentle companion doth not spoil our island of its comeliest

damoiselle."

As Ralph rode across the courtyard, he met Humphrey, who was astonished to see his young master riding forth so late, for the sun was just setting, and the gates were shut for the night; but Ralph with great pride told him, he was riding forth in all haste on the business of the Captain, and the worthy varlet shared in his young master's importance.

At the sight of the pass given to Ralph by Sir John Trenchard, the captain of the guard ordered the gates to open, and the heavy rattle of the chains showed that the drawbridge was being let down, and in another moment Ralph rode out into the glorious light of the after-glow which illumined all the sky to the west.

With a light heart he heard the heavy drawbridge creak up again, and, rejoicing in his freedom, he put spurs to his horse and rode fast over the hill, away towards the distant downs to the south. His horse was fresh, and, under Ralph's light weight, cantered swiftly along. He knew the way, or at least thought he did, and took no notice of objects; his mind was full of the approaching tilt, and his one idea was how he could obtain leave from Lord Woodville to let him splinter a lance. And so he cantered on in the ever-increasing gloom, not seeing how dim it was growing, or how damp a mist from the sea was drifting down the valley. The few roads that went through the island were bad in the most frequented parts, but in the cross tracks over the downs to the back of the island they were little more than muddy quagmires in wet weather, and ruts hard as rock in fine. Ralph galloped past Gatcombe, belonging to the Bremshotts, the last male of which family was then very old, and his lands were about to pass away to other names. Little did Ralph know that he was passing what once had belonged to his ancestors, and how that fair manor had come down, through three successive ladies, from the Fitz Stuar to the Lisles, and thence, in the female line, to the Bremshotts, whose daughters again would share it with the Dudleys and the Pakenhams. He breathed his horse up the steep slope that led past Chillerton Down, and as he descended on the further side, he first felt how damp was the night air, and noticed how difficult it was to find his way. Mindful, however, of his lord's injunction to make all the speed he could, he urged his horse to a reckless pace, and it was not until he had ridden for another half-hour that he began to be anxious as to his whereabouts. The air seemed much keener than it had been, and there was a salt freshness in it, that ought to have told him he must be near the sea. Could he have mistaken his way? There was no building he could see anywhere, and the track had entirely ceased. Ralph got off his horse to examine the ground. He was on rough, coarse grass, with large stones cropping up here and there. This might be the slope of St Catherine's down, or it might be anywhere. Ralph mounted his horse again. The mist was dense, there was no star or light to be seen in any direction, nor was there any sound of human life.

But there was a sound–what was it? Ralph could hear a dull roar, and seething, swishing sound. He could not tell what it was. He had never lived by the sea, or he would have known that it was the swell of the Channel rolling on the shore, and breaking in surf among the rocks of that dangerous coast. He spurred on his horse once more. But after a few strides the horse refused to go further, and backed and reared, as he had never done before. In vain Ralph struck his spurs into his flanks, and urged him or by word and rein. The horse only reared and snorted the more, and swung round on his hind legs, plunging in utterly uncontrolled rebellion.

Ralph could not make it out. Never since the animal had been given to him had he known him to be so unmanageable. Seeing how useless it was to press the horse any further, he ceased to try to subdue him to his will, trusting to get the mastery when he had quieted down.

As the horse stood still, his flanks quivering with excitement, Ralph noticed a smell of smoke: his senses had become keener since he had lost his way.

This smell of smoke caused him to feel more hopeful; where there was smoke there must be a fire, and probably a human habitation. He turned his head round to ascertain where the smell came from, and, as he sniffed the air in various directions, he came to the conclusion that it must be in front of him.

Once more he urged his horse forward, but the animal was as determined as ever not to go that way.

"What can it be?" thought Ralph, who was beginning to feel a little superstitious, as the tales of goblins and spirits came back to his mind, suggested by the unaccountable noise, the mysterious smoke, and, above all, the remarkable stubbornness of his horse, usually so docile and manageable.

For the third time he stuck his spurs against his horse's sides, encouraging him by his voice at the same time, but with the same result–not one step forward would the animal take.

"Young man, didst thou never hear of Balaam?" said a deep voice, proceeding, apparently, directly from under the horse's head, and in another moment a tall black figure rose out of the darkness, so close as almost to touch Ralph, who could not restrain a shudder of supernatural dread at the suddenness of the strange appearance.

CHAPTER VIII.

HOW THE COCKEREL GOT A FALL.

"What art thou?" stammered Ralph, as soon as he had recovered from his surprise. "What dost thou mean by thy talk of Balaam?"

"Look, boy, and thou wilt see," answered the dark figure, which every second was becoming more clearly defined in the gloom.

Without Ralph having noticed it, the mist had been growing lighter for the last quarter of an hour. The atmosphere, while still densely thick, was yet paler and more luminous, and immediate objects were more easily distinguished.

Hardly had the strange figure spoken the words, than the vapour which enveloped them parted, and a wonderful sight presented itself to the eyes of the awe-struck boy.

Was it all a dream? or was he really standing, or floating in mid air? He could hardly repress a shudder of unutterable awe, so strange was the sudden change from the blackness of night to the brilliantly weird scene before him.

He was standing on the very verge of a fearful precipice, so close that he could peer over from the saddle down, down, far down to a rocky shore below, where the sea, in seething surf, was beating and grinding and gnawing at the black rocks scattered in wildest confusion on the strand. At his side was a vast, yawning black chasm impossible for him to fathom, shrouded as it was in the deep shadow of the bold headland beyond. Tophet itself could hardly be blacker or more fearful looking. The grim gloom of this awful abyss, at the very edge of which he was standing, made the flesh creep on his bones. One step more, and he would have plunged he knew not whither. Above this terrible place the clinging mist still veiled the scene. But Ralph could see that the hills and cliffs went soaring up till lost in obscurity.

Right from the feet of the dazed boy, but far, far down, a broad path of dancing light stretched away and away till a grey and silver cloud under the clear full moon hid it in its soft embrace, as it lay brooding over the sea.

How lovely was the dancing sea, how glorious the moon, how wondrous the violet of the deep sky of night. Ralph had never seen anything like it, and yet how near to awful death had he been.

The ghostly mist curled up over the edge of the cliff, the strange white shapes went silently floating by like ghosts of the shipwrecked dead, or a still army of spirits flying inland to visit their midnight homes. Silently as the strange scene had opened, so stilly and impalpably it faded away. In another moment all was gone, and the boy and the dark figure were alone in the thick fog, nothing visible of all that wondrous scene but themselves and the few feet of turf on which they stood. Ralph could hardly believe it was reality. Surely it must be all a dream.

"Now, my young master, believest thou? Dost understand where thou art?"

"Nay, not I; it seemeth to me I dream."

"Ay, marry, that wouldest thou soon, if indeed men do dream in that sleep which they call death," said the deep voice bitterly.

Ralph could not make out this dark figure. He had not looked at it during the fitful light which opened up that strange sight only to disappear in greater obscurity than before. He now tried to examine the form of him who uttered such enigmatical remarks in so well-cultured a voice.

He saw a tall figure, strong and well made, with a hood over its head, such as were worn by the courtiers of ages long gone by, and which Ralph had seen depicted in tapestry and illuminations of King Edward the Third's time. A tight-fitting tunic strapped at the waist by a belt, from which gleamed the hilt of a dagger, and the head of a small axe, showed he was both active and well-armed. But Ralph could see nothing of the man's face, or make out whether his clothes were of those of gentle birth or of the common stuff worn by the country men and labourers.

"Well, my master, and how long may it please you to stay here, and what may be your business?"

Ralph did not like the tone of bantering superiority the other assumed; he answered:–

"Marry, good fellow, what is that to thee? An thou canst tell me where I am, and whither to go to St Catherine's down, that is all I want of thee."

"So thou wouldest go to St Catherine's down, wouldest thou? And what may be your business there?"

"Thou art parlous curious, good knave," said Ralph haughtily. "I pray you ask me no questions, but tell me what I wish to know."

"Body o' me, this is a fine springald," said the other. "But before I tell thee what thou wouldest know, thou must tell me what I would know."

"And what is that?"

"What is thy business at this hour from the Captain of the Wight with the hermit of St Catherine's?"

"That shalt thou never know!" cried Ralph hotly.

"Then thou mayest grope here in the darkness until thy carcase becometh a prey to the sea-mews, or a feast for the crabs on yonder beach."

"Base churl! thou deservedst chastisement for thine insolence!" cried Ralph, whose temper was becoming provoked. "But I will e'en do without thy niggard help." And Ralph got off his horse, and prepared to grope his way to where the smell of smoke still met his nostrils.

"Nay, Sir Page, thou goest not thus," said the man, stepping in front of him, and at the same time putting his finger to his mouth he gave a prolonged whistle like the shrill scream of a sea-bird.

Ralph laid his hand on his sword, seeing there was evidently mischief in-

tended. But before he could draw it, his wrist was held as in a vice, and in a second his other arm was grasped, and with a quick trip of the foot, he found himself prostrate on the grass, the man kneeling on him, and holding him immovable.

"Struggle not, young master, or thou wilt suffer. Thou art powerless to do aught, so better lie still."

But Ralph was furious. With the rage of mortified pride–for he had never been mastered before–he struggled, kicked, and writhed, and even tried to bite the hands that held him with a grasp of iron. He had never felt such power in human hands before.

"Marry, 'tis a fierce youth and a strong," muttered the man. "I shall have to do him a mischief, an they come not soon. Ah! would you?" he said, as Ralph's hand wriggled to get at his poignard, and in a trice the arm was wrenched out stiff and straight, and kept pinioned to the ground. Never had Ralph believed man could be so strong. But, still unconquered, the boy struggled with his legs, and raised himself off the ground with his heels. By a violent uplifting of his knees, he hit his captor a fierce blow in the back, causing him to fall forward on his face. With a desperate heave the boy pursued his advantage, and in another moment would have upset his adversary, when he felt his legs caught and pulled roughly down, once more he was utterly powerless.

"Now, stripling," said his first assailant, still holding his arms stretched out, but getting off the boy's chest, where he had been crushing the breath out of his body, "I told you it would be all for naught your wrestling like that. Will you tell me what you have come here for?"

"Never," said Ralph resolutely.

"Then, Bill," said his captor, "we shall even have to search him."

Before Ralph knew what was happening, he felt his arms held by another man, while the first speaker carefully searched his pockets.

"There's naught here," he said, in a disappointed tone, as he turned out the contents of Ralph's small clothes and tunic, and examined the miscellaneous collection of utterly useless articles which boys, from the earliest days down to the present, have set their hearts on forming, to the detriment of their pockets, the aggravation of their female relatives, and the marring of their own figure.

"Nay, but there is," said the man who held his legs; "look'ee there, there's summat whoite i' the grass."

"Marry, so there is!" and the first speaker picked up the missive of the Captain of the Wight and turned it over.

"You base villains," said Ralph, "an you touch that, you will repent it!"

A loud laugh greeted this remark; and the first speaker, rising, held the paper up to see if he could make anything out of it.

"I can't make it out," he said. "I must e'en take it to the light."

"And what are we to do wi' the lad while you be gone? Shall us knife un and pitch un over to cliff?"

"Body o' me, no! Do him no harm; hold him till I come back."

So saying, the first speaker disappeared from Ralph's line of sight.

The moon had again come out, and as Ralph lay on his back, he could just manage, by wriggling his head, to look on each side of him. He could see that the men who held him were rough figures, clad in coarse hairy clothes, possibly skins of animals. The moonlight fell on their hair and beards, giving them a wild and ferocious appearance; and long knives, whose hilts stuck out of their belts, gleamed in the silver light. Who were they, and what could they mean by attacking him? and, above all, how could they dare, in so small an island, to defy so powerful an authority as that of the Captain of the Wight? As he lay on his back, Ralph caught sight of a light; at first he took it for a star, but it flickered and flared in so strange a way, that he soon knew it could not be.

Surely it must be a fire, and, if so, there must be men near. Ralph felt a hope of aid; he tried to shout aloud, but the first sound he uttered caused the man who was holding his arms to clap his hand over his mouth, and effectually to stop all further cries. In vain Ralph seized his arm with his disengaged hand. The other man, who was tired of holding his legs, had seated himself upon them; his arms were therefore free. He leant forward, and grasped Ralph's hand, and roughly made him let go his grip of his companion.

"Best give it up, young 'un," he said gruffly, as he held the arm in no gentle hold. "There's naught can hear thee save the Gaffer and the sea mews."

"Then what's that light?" asked Ralph, as the man relaxed the pressure on his mouth.

"'Tis the light on St Catherine, and 'tis a good mile or more away."

"Then where am I?"

"Where are you? Why, on the ground, to be sure," laughed the man.

Ralph's anger rose, but it was utterly useless, he could do nothing. After lying still for another minute or more, one of the men said,–

"The Gaffer is a long while; maybe he can't spell out them words."

"Surely he's larnt his chriss-cross row long ago," said the other derisively.

"Ay, right enough, mate, but them letters may be t'other sort."

"Well, and if they be, ain't he got Mistress Magdalen to read it for him?"

"Hold your tongue, you lubber; here he comes."

Ralph could just manage to see the head of his captor rising out of the mist, and from the distinctness with which he saw his figure develop, he knew the edge of the cliff must be very near, as indeed he had already seen.

"Master Page, here's thy missive; there's naught in it that concerneth me, so thou mayest e'en take it to the Hermit of St Catherine's; but when thou returnest

to the Castle, give this message to thy lord; thou needest not to say who gave it thee–he will ask no questions."

Ralph now felt his captors relax their hold, in another second he was free. He rose to his feet, the men had already disappeared. He looked round; there was nothing to be seen of any living being; only his horse was browsing tranquilly a few paces off, and two white bits of parchment lay on the grass.

Picking these up, he went to the edge of the cliff. The sea was restlessly seething and surging among the rocks, each ripple and wave rolling like molten silver to the iron-bound coast. Every crevice and rock stood out sharp and clear in the brilliant moonlight, only marking in blacker contrast the hideous gloom of the yawning chasm at his side. He could see no path, yet the men must have gone down that way, or else he would have seen them had they ventured to clamber down the precipice in front. He stood up and looked round–the light had disappeared. Had they told him the truth about that light? Was it the Hermitage of St Catherine's? But there was none to ask, and he felt as bewildered as ever, nay, more so, for he had utterly lost his bearings.

And then he thought of his lord's command, and of the urgency of the matter. What should he do? With the recklessness of despair, he bawled aloud,–

"You varlets, which way am I to go to get to St Catherine's?" But only the echo from the blackness beyond answered mockingly "Catherine" in quivering note, and the waves surged ceaselessly below. He cried again,–"You caitiffs, you, why don't you answer?" and the echo laughed back "answer," but none other answer came. "'Tis little use," he muttered, in sullen bitterness of spirit; "but I will yet find out where that smoke came from." He looked at his horse, how should he tether him? He saw beyond, and nearer the head of the chasm, a few bushes growing. Carefully he led his horse along the edge of the abyss, marvelling how he had escaped so awful a death, and regretfully thinking how he had chidden his noble horse, whose sensible instinct had saved both their lives.

When he reached the bushes, he saw that he was on the brink of a deep gully, but the ground was all broken and boggy, and covered with closely-growing bush, bramble, and scrub. The mist was gathering up afresh. Great banks of vapour were scudding across the moon, and flitting up the black chasm, suddenly appearing in the moonlight out of the darkness below, like steam out of a cauldron.

While he was debating what to do, he was startled by a gentle voice almost at his elbow. Turning quickly round, he saw a graceful figure standing on the edge of the gully, looking like black marble against the broad path of silver glory that stretched across the sea behind it.

"Fair sir, whither wouldst thou go?" said the voice.

"If thou art of real flesh and blood, gentle damoiselle, I would thank thee to

tell me which is my way to St Catherine's Hermitage."

"And thou wouldst not thank me if I were not real flesh and blood?"

"Ay, marry would I, an' thou wert Sathanas himself!" cried the youth impatiently, "if only I could escape from this quagmire of a hole."

"Thou art not over-courteous, Sir Page," said the gentle voice.

"Certes, fair damsel, I crave thy pardon, but I am much belated, and have been sorely bested. I cry your mercy. But tell me, an thou canst, how I can find the Hermit of St Catherine's?"

"Right easily, fair sir. Seest thou yonder hill to thy right?"

"The fire I saw was to the left, I'll wager my falcon," said Ralph; then he added aloud, "Marry, do I, fair damsel."

"Then ride straight up that hill–there is naught save a few rough stones to hinder thee; only walk thy horse carefully till thou gettest upon hard ground, as 'tis all quick about here. Nay, I will show thee," added the figure quickly; "'tis but a poor return for thy kindness to us."

"And when did I show kindness to thee, gentle damsel?" said Ralph, in astonishment.

"Thou quickly forgettest thy good deeds, I see," said the girl. "'Tis a good sign of one gently nurtured."

"But when saw I thee before?"

"I did not say thou hadst seen me before!"

"Marry, fair damsel, thou speakest in riddles. I did thee a kindness, and yet did not see thee! A-read me the riddle?"

"Nay, 'tis best to forget the kindnesses you do, so long as they to whom they are done keep them in mind. There, now, thou art on safe ground. Ride boldly up the hill. At the summit thou wilt see the beacon light. Fare-thee-well."

"But, damsel, wilt thou not tell me thy name? Who are those caitiffs who wrought me such wrong? Where dwellest thou? How camest thou here?"

"And then men call us poor women curious and prying," laughed the girl. "Good-night, gentle sir, mayest thou prosper, and have a pleasant journey;" and before Ralph realised she was gone, she had disappeared down the head of the gully.

"Well, 'tis little use following her," thought Ralph; "my business is up there. I marvel whether she told me truth; but I shall soon see."

He mounted his horse, and pursued his way as fast as he could, consistently with the steepness of the ascent.

So steep was the hill in some places, that he dismounted once more, and led his horse up. He had no idea the hill was so high or so difficult to climb, from the view he had had of it below, but at length he found the steep incline becoming rounder and more level. Mounting again, he set spurs to his horse, and galloped

over the smooth, close-cropped, wind-shorn grass.

After riding a few hundred yards, he saw a bright glow before him, and in another minute he was trotting up to a low building with a small octagonal tower, on the top of which was a cresset holding a mass of flaming tow and faggots, which cast a lurid glare all over the summit of the lofty down. It was St Catherine's Chapel and Hermitage.

As Ralph rode up, the figure of a man in a monk's dress emerged in the tower, and attended to the fire.

"Art thou the Hermit of St Catherine?" called out Ralph.

The monk turned round.

"Who is it that calls?"

"One of the Captain of the Wight's pages, who has come with a missive for thee."

"Tarry, my son, till I come down," said the Hermit.

The figure then disappeared, and shortly afterwards a low door at the base of the tower opened, and the Hermit came out, holding a lantern in his hand. He carefully scrutinised Ralph without saying anything, and took the paper the page handed to him.

After reading it attentively, he said,–

"Tell my lord there hath been no strange sail seen to-day, but as it is parlous thick to-night, and was so the greater part of the afternoon, a vessel might have passed without my seeing. Tell his lordship I will be sure to keep a trusty look-out."

"Is that all, holy father?"

"Yes, my son; get thee back as soon as may be, for it behoveth him to take measures in case a schallop hath gotten past unperceived."

Ralph turned his horse's head; the mist was now far down below, and dispersing before it spread inland. His road lay clear before him. Clapping spurs to his horse, he galloped off, and in the course of another hour was hallooing to the guard at the outer gate of the Castle to open and let him in. In a few minutes more he had dismounted at the Captain's apartments, given his horse to Humphrey, who was sitting up for him, and in another second was ushered into the presence of the Captain of the Wight.

CHAPTER IX.

HOW THE COCKEREL LEARNT HARDIHOOD.

When Ralph pushed aside the heavy curtain which hung inside the ill-fitting but massive oak door, he was for a moment dazed by the brilliant light within the room.

The chambers of the more luxurious nobles were at this time fitted up with much profusion of rich draperies, gorgeous tapestries, and splendidly carved and gilded furniture. Lord Woodville inherited and shared all the lavish tastes of his mother and his family. His brother, the ill-fated Lord Scales, had been the patron of Caxton, having himself translated and composed some of the earliest works published by the Father of Printing, and the Captain of the Wight upheld the traditions of his house.

Seated before an elaborately-carved desk, lighted by long wax candles standing in exquisitely-designed brass candlesticks, whose bold bosses and delicate spiral work reflected the light in countless sparkles and scintillations, sat the Lord Woodville, his handsome face in conspicuous distinctness with the light shining full upon it, while behind hung a gorgeous tapestry from the looms of Flanders, which had belonged to his mother, Jacquetta of Luxemburg. He was clad in a close-fitting short tunic of black stamped velvet, made very full across the chest and shoulders, and drawn in with narrowing pleats at the waist, where it was confined by a magnificent belt of scarlet Cordovan leather, richly studded with gold and jewelled mountings. A finely-chased silver-hilted poignard hung at his right side, and his shapely legs were set off to fullest advantage by his tight-fitting hose, which, after the fashion of the time, were parti-coloured, of light blue and white in alternate pieces. Long and fanciful scarlet Cordovan slippers encased his feet, and a rich purple mantle, lined with the fur of the silver fox, hung over the back of his chair. One elegantly-formed hand rested on the desk, where a few characters had been inscribed on a sheet of paper before him, while the other arm hung negligently over the back of his chair. There was a dreamy, far-away look in his eyes, and no one could have realised in that slightly effeminate figure, and almost womanish face, with its sensitive mouth and finely-chiselled nose and broad brow, round which the long hair fell in waving masses, the warrior who had fought in nearly all the bloodiest battles of those fierce civil wars, and had borne himself in ranged field or tented lists "righte hardilie, valyentlie, and of full lusty prowess." For the conflict on the battle-field was then no child's play as regards the noble, to whom quarter in those bloody civil wars was rarely or never given.

It was probably the refined tastes of the Woodvilles, while rendering them such favourites with the luxurious Edward IV. and the ladies of his court, which caused the ruder barons of that rough age to hate them so bitterly. The taunt flung in the face of Lord Rivers and his son by Warwick, when he was brought before him a prisoner at Calais, showed the malignity of hate and contempt the nobles

felt for the family, a hatred arising, no doubt, from jealousy at the Woodvilles' sudden rise to distinction, but aggravated by a contempt for their accomplishments, which were considered totally inconsistent with the stern realities of life. How was it possible that a hardy knight and well-seasoned man-at-arms could find time to paint, write, or even read? Such occupations were for jongleurs or monks, not belted knights and stout barons.

As Ralph dropped the curtain behind him, the Captain of the Wight rose from his chair, the dreamy look of abstraction giving place to the alertness of real life.

"Well, Master Lisle, thou hast been a dullard on the way; what hath made thee so late?"

"There was a thick mist abroad, my lord."

"Oh, and thou lost thy way? Like enough. These sea fogs are sudden in their uprising. But thou gavest my missive to the Hermit?"

"Yea, my lord, and he bid me say that he had seen no sail, but that, as the mist had overspread the land and sea the latter part of the day, it were very possible for a schallop to have gotten past unnoticed."

"Yea, forsooth, he sayeth well," said the Captain thoughtfully; then he added, "There was no other message?"

"None my lord, save–" and Ralph hesitated, for he did not like to tell of his mishaps, and as he thought of the strange adventure on the wild cliff, in the brilliant light of that luxurious room, he could scarcely believe it was not a dream. The utter contrast between the present moment, the elegant surroundings, the absolute security of that splendid castle, with all its guards, walls, men-at-arms, bastions, archers, and turrets, and the wild weirdness of that solitary wrestle on the verge of the black precipice, in the cold light of the moon, and the ghostly vapour, seemed too impossible. Surely he must have dreamt it.

"Save what, my child?" said Lord Woodville.

"Save that I lost my way, and–" and again he hesitated.

"Well, my page, and what?"

"And I was set on by a base caitiff."

"Ay, marry–who has dared to lay hands on one of my pages?"

"That I know not, my lord," and then Ralph narrated the adventure as best he could.

Lord Woodville listened to the end, his countenance expressing no feeling until Ralph came to the part where the man bid him take a note to the Captain of the Wight. He then looked up gravely, and said,

"Where is it, my child?"

Ralph fumbled in his pocket; he searched everywhere–he could not find it. Seeing his nervousness, the Lord Woodville said, smiling,–

"Nay, fair page, take it quietly; thou mayest have overlooked it. Search each of thy pockets one by one, and so we shall arrive at a just conclusion."

Ralph did as he was told, and displayed but few things to the amused eyes of Lord Woodville, for he had not troubled to replace the rubbish which the man had left upon the grass when he turned out his pockets. When all had been gone through, there was nothing found.

"My lord," said Ralph, abashed, "I must have dropped it when I delivered thy missive to the Hermit of St Catherine's."

"Like enough, my page; but thou shouldest be more careful. An thou didst, I shall get it in the morning; or thou canst ride in search of it. But thou art sure thou hast not been dreaming?" added Lord Woodville, with a smile.

"Nay, my lord, that I will warrant, for thou mayest see the stain of the grass and the earth on my surcoat and hose."

"Well that is somewhat, certes, but 'tis a quaint tale. Who could they be who would attack thee, do thee no harm, take no gold from thee, or strip thee of thy rich poignard and gaudy dress? For I see they have left thee thy purse and gold pieces."

"Nay, my lord, I know not; but I can show thee the place to-morrow, an thou wilt ride thither."

"What was the man like who captured you? Didst thou see his face?"

"Nay, my lord, for he ever came between me and the moon; but he was of marvellous strength, and of a wondrous bigness; and he spoke like one in authority, and of gentle birth and breeding."

"Well, 'tis a strange adventure, in sooth, and we will take thought for it to-morrow. Perchance thou mayest find the missive in thy saddle housings, or in thy dress, as thou retirest to sleep. But it groweth late; get thee now to thy rest. I shall need thee to-morrow."

So saying, Lord Woodville nodded kindly to the boy, as a sign for him to retire, and Ralph left the room, glad enough to have escaped so easily, marvelling more than ever whether what had happened had really been a dream.

Meanwhile the Captain of the Wight stood musing before his fire, for there was now need for a fire, since the season was drawing on, and it was near the end of September, while the thick stone walls of the strong building were damp and cold.

Presently he went to his desk, pressed a spring, and out of a drawer at the side he took a little scented leathern case. Opening this, he took out two very faded flowers, a long lock of wavy soft brown hair, and a golden heart. He gazed at the silent relics, his lips moved, and he crossed himself devoutly. He then, after pressing them to his lips, put them back in the case, shut the case up, and replaced it in the drawer, which he carefully fastened again.

This done, with a heavy sigh he stepped across to a *prie dieu*, and devoutly kneeling before a richly-carved crucifix, he remained absorbed in prayer. When he rose up, his face looked white and haggard. Before retiring to rest, he drew aside the curtain over his door, opened it, and called to the archer on guard to pass the word to the man who relieved him, to usher, without question, any monk who should come to him in the morning.

When Ralph awoke next morning, the events of the previous night seemed more than ever like a dream. The commonplace realities of everyday life, the bright morning sun, the boyish chaff of his companions, and the decisive tone of Tom o' Kingston as he put them through their exercises, seemed so utterly out of keeping with the romantic adventure of the night before.

Dicky Cheke seemed somewhat crestfallen this morning, and he and Maurice Woodville had each a rather swollen cheek and lip, while Willie Newenhall was decidedly puffy and red about the eye.

Even Bowerman showed signs of the manful handling given him by Ralph, who had almost forgotten the scuffle, in the greater excitement that had followed.

"I' faith, Ralph," said Dicky Cheke, "there'll be war anon, and Bowerman shall grin. What do you think? After you had gone, and the Captain had gotten well away, that rogue 'Pig's Eyes' got Bowerman to attack us; but we gave them enough work before we gave in, and that's why his eye's so wadged up, and Bowerman's nose looks so red about the bridge."

"Now, Master Cheke," called out Tom o' Kingston, "are you going to give over gossiping? I hear there's talk of a tilt toward, and that Sir John thinks two of you young men can break a lance in it. Now I'd be loth you bore yourselves boorishly, so please to give heed to all I've to say to you. Master Bowerman, you look but sadly this morning; what's come to your nose?"

"Never mind my nose, Tom," said that youth sulkily. "It's no business of yours if my nose is well or amiss. Let me have a run at you with the lance; I want to practise against a live man."

"Not this morning, Master Bowerman; you've enough to do to hit the Saracen fairly. Now are you ready. Go!"

The boys were all mounted on their hackneys horses that formed part of the stud of the castle garrison, and which were trained for the work. Each boy carried a lance about thirteen feet long, and they were this morning going to tilt at a large and roughly-made figure of a Saracen, who held a shield in one arm, and a loose club in the other. The figure, when hit on the shield, spun round, and, unless the performer were quick in his movements, caught its assailant a more or less violent blow in the back, depending upon the force with which the shield was hit.

At the word of command of Tom o' Kingston, Bowerman dug his heels into

his horse's side and rode at the figure. He hit the shield fairly, and galloped past untouched, raising his lance as he trotted round.

"That's well done, but give him a harder buffet next time. Now, Master Newenhall!" cried the instructor.

Willie Newenhall was but half awake. He was yawning desperately when he received the order to go. He had scarcely fastened up his clothes, and he looked a sodden mass of sleepy stupidity. His half-washed face, squat nose, and little eyes, which were now smaller than ever, owing to the events of the night before, did not look prepossessing, and not the uttermost vagaries of the most vivid imagination would have thought that the owner of that countenance and that appearance fancied himself to be a dangerous lady-killer, a cause of disquiet alike to the anxious husband as well as the fond father. But the nights of fancy are proverbially wild, and had anybody suggested to Willie Newenhall that he was anything else than a very handsome, irresistible youth, he would have regarded that person with the pitying scorn justly due to the envious and the blighted. Sleepy, and unfinished in the matter of his toilette–for it was seven o'clock in the morning, and Willie dearly loved his bed–he heard the order to put his horse in motion at the quintain. With another prolonged yawn he shook his horse's reins, and trotted lazily towards the post. It so happened that he had not fastened up his tunic properly. As the pace of the horse increased, and he prepared to level his spear to hit the shield, the tunic flew open, and got in the way of his arms. Forgetting, or not noticing, how near he was to the quintain, he moved his arm up to clear the dress, thus bringing the lance across his body, and before he had time to recover his position, the long spear struck athwart the quintain, and got askew between the shield and the wooden post on which it revolved, with the effect of its becoming jammed and immovable. As Willie's horse was well trained, and had increased his speed on nearing the quintain, his rider was swept out of his saddle, and over the crupper, falling to the ground like a sack of flour.

The onlookers greeted this mishap with a roar of laughter, and their instructor, with whom Willie Newenhall was no favourite, scoffingly bid him pick himself up, and "not lie there like a trussed pullet."

Ruefully the sleepy page, now rudely awakened, got up, and came limping back.

"Pick up thy lance, stupid, and go after thy nag. Beshrew me, but an I were the Captain, I'd as lief have a turnip for a page as thee. For you both grow, and that's all; saving that a turnip is good to eat, which is more than can be said o' thee." Then turning to Ralph, Tom o' Kingston said, "Now, Master Lisle, do thou show them how to do the matter."

Ralph dearly loved these exercises, and had become an apt pupil. Sticking spurs to his horse, he cantered eagerly forward. As he neared the post, with knees

and voice he encouraged his horse, and with loose reins and gathering speed he struck the quintain a vigorous blow; then, raising his lance aloft, galloped on, untouched by the swiftly-revolving club.

"By my faith, 'twas well done, young master! You'll make the best lance of them all. But, when all's said and done, that's not much praise neither."

"You're a bit grumpy this morning–Tom," said Dicky Cheke. "What's gone wrong? Has Polly Bremeskate been unkind to thee?"

"Now, Master Cheke, mind your work, and let me have none of your sauce," said Tom o' Kingston, who was supposed to cherish a fatal passion for this very buxom and florid spinster, who was the inheritor of certain lands and tenements sufficient to be a powerful attraction, over and above her other charms, to the yeomen of the island. Her suitors therefore were numerous, and she gave herself airs of importance becoming in one so happily placed.

Dicky and Maurice went through the performance very well, and after the exercise had been repeated several times, the little group was joined by the Breton knight and Sir John Trenchard.

The arrival of these important spectators caused the performers to try their best, and even the stolid Willie was roused into something like emulation.

"How do they tackle to their work, Master Tom?" asked Sir John.

"There's naught amiss, Sir John, with Master Bowerman and Lisle; they'll bear themselves well enough–leastways the last-named gentleman will; and so, for their size, will the other two young masters. But as for Master Newenhall, you'd as well mount Betty the scullery wench on Jenny the donkey, and give her a broomstick, as let him ride among press of knights."

"Go in, boys, and don your breastpieces, brassarts, gauntlets, and burgonets, and get your targets. This worshipful knight and I would see how you can bear yourselves in a tilt."

It was delightful news to all the pages, except Willie Newenhall, who in his heart detested the whole thing, and would much rather have sat at the window where Lady Trenchard's maids were looking at the sports, than have been down there, jeered at by the others, and with a strong probability of receiving hard knocks. If only he could gossip, he was happy. He could scarcely open his mouth among men, but with a garrulous woman–if only she were married, or beyond the chance of having designs upon himself–he was quite at home, and would discuss by the hour the latest fashion in 'cotes hardies,' or 'furbelows,' or any other of the mysteries usually never spoken of by men, or, if referred to at all, mentioned with bated breath, as though conscious of venturing on unknown ground, and with the usual result of bringing ridicule upon themselves, by the utter ignorance they displayed. But not so with Willie. He was as much at home when discussing women's dress or idle gossip and scandal, as his companions were at handling

the lance or throwing the bar.

In a few minutes more the pages all re-appeared, armed entirely from the waist upwards in polished steel their faces looking bright and boyish under their raised visors, with their shields on their left arms. At the word 'Mount,' they vaulted into the saddle, or attempted to do so, for although they were practised every day at this exercise, yet it was a difficult matter to accomplish in armour. Bowerman and Ralph, owing to the advantage of height, were able to do it gracefully enough, but poor Dicky ignominiously failed, while Maurice managed to scramble up with loss of dignity, but ultimate success. Willie had also failed, and received a sharp rebuke from Sir John Trenchard. When at last, by dint of great struggles, the two unfortunates had got on their horses, they were ranged in a line, sitting motionless with lance erect and visor raised.

The scene was pretty. The morning drill took place in the castle yard properly so called; the place of arms outside the walls, on the east of the castle, not being used for the lesser exercises. The five martial figures of the youths, their fresh boyish faces, contrasting with their warlike panoply, the graceful figure of the Breton knight, in his close-fitting tunic and picturesque dress, set off to advantage by the grizzled head and weather-beaten appearance of Sir John Trenchard, formed a becoming contrast to the burly form and soldierly bearing of the esquire, sitting his horse to the right of the little squad, and completing the group on the yellow gravel of the yard. Behind all, the towering keep, with its base hidden by thick brushwood, carefully trimmed and topped, stood up dark and grim against the eastern sky. To the south east, Mountjoy's Tower, and the long line of wall between, cast their deep shadows over the barracks and store-houses below; while opposite, in the bright sunlight, was the old chapel of St Nicholas, the chaplain's room, guard-room, and the noble towers of the main gateway. The Captain's apartments, on the north, commanded a view on three sides into the yard, and the boys were made more eager than ever to do well, by seeing the Captain of the Wight standing in the oriel window, looking down upon them.

About the quadrangle were grouped, some in shadow some in bright sunlight, the picturesque figures of the garrison of the castle who were off duty, while the flitting shadows on the parapet of the eastern walls showed where the sentries were pacing to and fro on their beat.

Above the keep floated the standard of England, and from the main tower

the banner of the Captain of the Wight flung its blazon in the breeze.

CHAPTER X.
HOW THE COCKEREL VAUNTED HIMSELF.

"Let the varlets tilt according to size, Master Tom," said Sir John Trenchard. "Master Bowerman, do you and Master Newenhall begin: close your visors."

This was bad news for Willie. As he turned his horse's head to take up his place, that disconsolate youth murmured through the bars of his closed visor,–

"Bowerman, I say, there's little need to tilt in earnest. I won't hit you hard, if you'll only rap on my breastpiece lightly."

But Bowerman only laughed. He was delighted to have so easy an adversary.

"Marry, 'Pig's Eyes,'" he replied, "do thy best, there's the Captain looking on."

With a deep sigh of woe-begone anticipation, poor Willie, whose bones still ached from his last fall, wheeled his horse round at the word of command, and sat facing Bowerman.

"At the word 'Ready,'" said Tom o' Kingston, in a dry, monotonous voice, "you will lay your spears in rest, holding the point on a level with your own eye, and the hand pressed well into the side, keeping the guard well up to the rest. At the word 'Go,' you will clap spurs to your horses, and ride straight for each other."

There was a pause for the combatants to settle themselves well in their saddles, look to any part of their armour that might be amiss, and generally pull themselves together.

"Ready!" called out the esquire.

Down came the lances in a graceful sweep, and the two pages sat waiting for the next word.

"Go!" shouted the instructor, and the previously motionless figures dug their spurs into their horses, and rode at each other.

The two lances struck almost at the same moment, but Bowerman adroitly caught Newenhall's lance on his polished shield, and thus caused it to glance over his left shoulder. His own spear struck his adversary under the rim of the breastplate, where it turned over to protect the gorget. Sliding along the smooth

surface of the steel, it held under the roundel which protected the right shoulder, and the miserable Willie was lifted out of the saddle, and hurled once more over the crupper to the ground, while Bowerman, raising his lance aloft, after the proper fashion, trotted round to his own place again, saluting the Breton knight and Sir John Trenchard as he rode past.

"Well and manfully done, Sir Page!" cried the latter warrior.

"*Ma foi! oui! il a fait son devoir en bon soudard*," said the sire Alain de Kervignac.

The hapless Newenhall lay still upon the ground; not that he was really hurt, beyond being considerably shaken, and bumped about the head; but he wisely thought if it were seen that he were hurt he might be sent indoors, and allowed to sit in Lady Trenchard's room, and be made a fuss of, a state of affairs he dearly loved.

"Is he hurt, think you?" said Sir John Trenchard. "I would be loth that he really got a hurt."

"Nay, Sir John," said Tom o' Kingston, winking at his chief in a knowing fashion, "he'll be all right anon. I know the habits of the lad." Then he called out, "Master Newenhall, the others are going to begin; you'd best get out of the way."

But that astute youth determined not to move. "They'll never be such caitiffs as to ride over me," he thought. However, it looked very much like it, for without any concern the esquire called out,–

"Now, Master Cheke and Master Woodville, 'tis your turn. Lower your beavers."

"You'd best take care, Maurice," said Dicky, as they rode off. "I mean to do my best, and I'm sorry for thee."

"None of thy peppercorn wit, Dicky. I'll topple thee out of thy saddle like a pint pot off a brown jack."

And so the two boys took up their positions, waiting for the word. It was soon given. Down came the lances.

"Go," called the esquire, and the two boys rode at each other manfully enough. They were very equally matched, and struck each other full on their breastplates; but in Dicky's case the lance of his adversary glanced off the sharp edge of the convex corslet, and slipped under his arm, doing him no injury, while his own lance also glanced aside, and the two boys were nearly unseated by their horses' impetus. Had they not both held on tightly by the reins, and been prevented from going backwards by the high-peaked saddle, they must have fallen to the ground. As it was, they remained with their horses stationary, each spear locked under the other's arm.

"Maurice, I shall do thee a mischief," cried Dicky Cheke, through his visor. "Thou hadst best give up, and fall off thy horse. I won't hurt thee then."

"Grammercy for thy gentleness, Master Dicky, but I'll soon have thee down," and the two boys pushed at each other, with the guards of their spears pressing against their breastplates.

"Maurice, I say, don't be such an obstinate pig! I'll give thee all my share of the marchpane of strawberries when we have it again, if thou wilt only fall off this once. I'll promise I'll do it for thee another time."

"That *is* gammon! Marry come up, my pipkin!" said Maurice ironically, and, pushing and wriggling his lance harder than ever, to the great aggravation of Dicky Cheke, he almost lifted him out of the saddle.

"Maurice, I shall get mad soon," said Dicky, "and then I shall hurt thee. Ah! would'st thou?" and Dicky, dropping his reins, and gripping the saddle with his knees, grasped Maurice's lance with his left hand, and tried to force it back out of his hold.

The two horses were pushing against each other. Suddenly Maurice grasped Dicky's lance, and at the same time backing his horse, he pulled that young gentleman out of the saddle forward, who, however held on all the time to the lance, and thus broke his fall. The moment he was on the ground, he rose to his feet, holding the spear all the time, and fiercely tried to push Maurice out of the saddle. But Sir John Trenchard called out that all was fairly done, and that both had done their devoir as right hardy varlets, but that natheless Woodville had gotten most honour, for he kept his seat while the other was dismounted.

"That's as may be," said the unquenchable Dicky, "albeit, had it been in real lists, I should have driven thee against the barrier, and so I should have won the prize."

Willie Newenhall, when he saw that the boys really were to tilt across the very place where he was lying, with no more concern for him than if he had been a log of wood, vowing vengeance on the two youngsters, rolled out of the way, and got up sulkily enough, limping back to the place where his well-trained horse was standing, and appearing in great distress. But as no one took any notice of him, with a growl of disgust at their heartlessness, he gave up the game, and stood watching the others.

"Now, Master Bowerman, an thou art in good wind again, here's Master Lisle ready for a course with thee."

"Right willing I am," answered Bowerman, who felt highly elated at the success of his first essay, and the praises he had received. In addition to this, he had long hoped to have an opportunity of effectually quenching Ralph, to whom he had taken a dislike the moment he saw him, and which had been increased by many circumstances since.

The two took up their respective positions and awaited the word of command. There was a certain swagger of easy self-assurance in Bowerman as he

trotted his horse to his post, saluting the Captain of the Wight, who was standing at his window.

By this time there was a considerable concourse of spectators, for it was drawing near chapel time, and the garrison was assembling to fall in.

Tom o' Kingston glancing at the two figures, who looked very equally matched, called out "Ready," quickly followed by the command to go.

The well-trained horses hardly needed the spur, so perfectly accustomed were they to the words of command. They broke at once into a canter, and with levelled lances the two combatants met exactly in the middle of the ground. Bowerman's lance struck Ralph full and fair under the gorget, and flew into a thousand splinters. The blow was a rude one, and Ralph staggered under it; but his own lance had been aimed at his antagonist's visor, and took far more severe effect than he intended. The visor was forced violently up, and a splinter from Bowerman's own lance, struck him full under the eye at the same moment, inflicting a severe wound. The shock of Ralph's well-aimed blow, together with the pain of the splinter cut, caused Bowerman to reel in his seat, and as the spear had caught in the bars of the visor, he was borne backwards out of the saddle, and hurled to the ground.

"My faith,'twas well done!" cried Sir John Trenchard, while all the bystanders raised a shout of congratulation, for Ralph was already a great favourite with them all.

But Ralph, directly he saw what had happened, thought no more of the tilt, and how he ought to have ridden round and saluted the judges and spectators. He only saw Bowerman on the ground, bleeding from the severe wound under the eye, which looked worse than it really was. He instantly reined in his horse, threw down his spear, and leaped to the ground.

"Oh, Bowerman, I am so sorry!" he cried, as he stooped down to help to raise him.

"Get up, you fool!" answered Bowerman, in furious wrath. "Do you think I am a girl, that I want your whinings and whimperings? Get away, you viper you, had my lance not gone all to pieces, you'd have been lying on your back instead of me. Tom ought to have given me a new one. He should have known it was sprung in the first course."

So saying, and fiercely wrathful, Bowerman spurned all offer of assistance from Ralph, and rose from the ground. The others had now come forward, seeing the blood flowing from the wound, and Bowerman was taken to Lady Trenchard to have the cut attended to.

The bell was now tolling, and the other pages had no time to doff their armour. Hastily walking their horses over to the stables, they hurried into chapel.

When the service was over they withdrew to their common room, in the

north-west side of the Captain's apartments, and talked over the events of their first trial at real tilting in armour, while they ate their meal.

Newenhall was very sulky. He complained of severe pains in his head, and said it was a great shame he was not allowed to go to the sick-room,–that Bowerman was no worse than he was, and he was always treated unfairly.

Dicky and Maurice nearly had their harmony spoilt by bickering over their contest; and Ralph was very much distressed at the accident that had happened to Bowerman, and of which he was the unwilling cause, while he was still more grieved at the evident animosity with which Bowerman regarded him.

"I tell thee what, Lisle," said Dicky, who was in a very rasping mood, "it was lucky for thee that Bowerman's spear went all to pieces, or he would have had thee out of the saddle as roughly as he knocked over 'Pig's Eyes.'"

"No he wouldn't," said Maurice. "I saw it all, and it would have gone just the same had Bowerman's spear kept sound. Lisle had got him neatly in the beaver–nothing could have kept him in his seat."

"That's all you know about it! Why, couldn't he have held on to the reins?"

"And what'd be the use of that, when he was being knocked over sideways?"

And so the boys wrangled until they were set to work by the chaplain.

After they had been working rather less steadily than usual, and Dicky had drawn down upon his head some very severe rebukes from Sir Simon Halberd, while "Pig's Eyes" was so very much more stupid than ordinary that even the gentle Sir Simon's commonly placid spirit was ruffled, and he complained loudly of his dulness, a message came that Ralph Lisle was wanted in the Captain's room.

Wondering what was the matter, Ralph hastily complied with the summons. On opening the Captain's door, he found Lord Woodville pacing up and down the room. Seeing Ralph enter, he stopped, and greeted him with a kindly smile.

"My child," he said, "thou bearedst thyself right gallantly this morning, and I liked thy courtesy and gentleness even more than thy prowess. Go on like that and thou wilt make a full, gentle, perfect knight; for gentleness, courtesy, and thought for others become a good knight quite as much as hardihood and masterfulness."

Ralph's face glowed with joy at these commendations from his lord, and he rejoiced to hear this renowned and skilful warrior using very nearly the same words as his father had done on the eve of his quitting home.

"I have sent for thee, my page, to tell thee I have heard no news of thy lost missive. Thinkest thou now that the whole matter was but a dream?"

Ralph had by this time forgotten all about the last night's adventure. It all came before him in its startling reality. It could not have been a dream.

"My lord," he answered, "I think it was no dream; how could my clothes have been all soiled with grass and earth if it were a dream?"

Lord Woodville smiled at the earnestness of the boy, and said,–

"Well, we will go a-hawking that way this afternoon, and thou shalt come with us to show us this terrible scene–perchance we may find trace of thy strange caitiffs. Thou must even don thy best, for thy fair kinswoman, the Mistress Yolande, is to be of our company."

Ralph would have given worlds not to have coloured up as he did, but he was never master of himself when that fair lady's name was mentioned.

"We shall be a large band; I would that Bowerman could be of it, but I hear his hurt needs care; it is parlous near his eye, and was a marvellous narrow chance."

As Ralph left the room he could have danced with joy at the delightful prospect before him. He went out to direct Humphrey to get his horse well groomed, and have his smartest attire put out for him, and, brimful of happiness, was returning to the room where the studies were still going on. As he passed the chapel door he found a concourse of men standing round it. Pushing in among them, he saw a parchment affixed to the door, and two shields of arms hanging up. His heart leaped within him. It was the public announcement of the tilt or joust.

Not many of the bystanders could read, and the two or three who were laboriously spelling out the words for the benefit of the rest, were bidden to stand aside to let Ralph read it aloud. Pleased to be able to make use of his superior advantages, Ralph read out, in a loud voice, the long and wordy cartel or general challenge, which was the formal way of announcing a tilt, joust, or tourney. After reciting the names and degree of the challengers, or appellants, which took up several lines, the proclamation went on to say that "they were prepared to meet all comers at a joust, to run in jousting harness along a tilt, and that they do this, not out of presumption, but only for the laud and honour of the feast"–it was to take place on St Michael and All Angels' Day–"for the pleasure of the ladies, and their own learning and exercise of deeds of arms, and to enserve the ancient laudable customs." It further went on to declare that "the said worshipful knights, Sir Alain de Kervignac and Sir Amand de la Roche Guemené, would be at the tilt-yard of Carisbrooke Castle by eleven of the clock before noon, to run six courses with any comer ensuing, the comers to choose their own spears; and if the said six courses be finished before sundown, then they may be at liberty to begin other six courses. And if any man's horse faileth before he be disarmed, then his fellow may go on and finish the course for his companion."

The prizes were a ruby ring and a diamond ring. The cartel was signed by the Breton knights, and scaled with their signets, and it was countersigned by

"Edward Wydevil, knight, commonly called the Lord Woodville, Lord and Captain of the Isle of Wight," and sealed with his coat of arms. It also further set forth that on the second day there would be a tourney with sword strokes. There were to be eighteen hand strokes, but no knight was to "foine" or thrust with the sword point, on pain of instant dismissal from the lists. The strokes were to be given on foot, and with sword and axes at barriers.

There was a general hum of applause after Ralph had finished.

"Marry, these Frenchman have done full knightly," said one.

"Ay, you may say so! but I would we had more knights," said another. "There's none now in the island who are skilled in the joust."

"There'll have to be some overrunners[*] asked over," said a third.

[*] The local name for newcomers or "foreigners" from the mainland to the Isle of Wight.

"If only that right hardy knight Sir George Lisle of Briddlesford, old Sir William's son, were in these parts now," said the first speaker.

"I never heard tell of him," replied the other.

"Why should you, comrade? 'Tis many years since he's been heard of. There's some as said he were lately come over with the Lord Lincoln to Stoke field, and died there in harness, fighting with his face to the foe, by the side of the Lord Geraldine, Captain Martin Swartz, Sir Thomas Broughton, and all those lusty Allemaynes who gave us such hard knocks ere we made them give in. But I were with the Herald when we searched the field, and never saw him there; and I should have known him alive or dead anywhere. We were boys together down Briddlesford way."

"Now you've named Sir George Lisle, that minds me," said the second soldier, "that when King Edward was alive, he was in rare favour with the king, who gave him in marriage a right lovely lady. But there was some talk of his lady, how, when he was away in France with old Bear and Ragged Staff, she went off with some one, I don't rightly remember who."

"Silence, man, an you value your tongue!" said his comrade. "That's a tale you'd best not call to mind hereabouts," he added significantly.

Ralph, full of the news, was going off to the pages' room, when he noticed the shields.

"What are they for?" he asked of the old man-at-arms who had just spoken so pointedly to his more garrulous comrade.

"I' faith, when a knight wants to take up their challenge, he smiteth on these shields, and his name and lineage are taken down by the clerk or herald

appointed to put in the roll of the tilt the names of those who come to take their challenge."

Ralph longed to be able to hit that shield.

"Are any who are not knights admitted to the joust?" he asked..

"Sometimes, but very rarely. Howbeit, the judges have the right to let in whomsoever they choose, provided he be of noble or gentle birth."

This was enough for Ralph. He would leave no stone unturned to obtain leave to splinter a lance in the approaching jousts. As he thought of it, the colour came into his face; he pictured himself riding in the lists, armed *cap-à-pié*, winning the prize under the lovely blue eyes of the fair Yolande. As he crossed the yard, deep in this delightful thought, he ran against a man in a monastic dress, who had just entered by the main gate.

"Certes, my son, thou shouldest give heed to thy steps," said the monk, as he staggered under the unprovoked assault.

CHAPTER XI.

HOW JOYOUSLY LIFE GOETH.

The midday meal was spread in the large hall of the Captain's apartments. Sir William Lisle and his fair daughter had arrived. Gaily Yolande was chatting in the large, deep, bay window at the upper end of the hall, amid a group of young men, conspicuous among whom were the strongly-marked features, bullet head, and broad chest of Sir Amand de la Roche Guemené. Beside him, but topping him by some inches, although he was more than ten years his junior, stood the strong, active figure and boyish, honest face of Ralph Lisle, gazing at Yolande with rapturous admiration, but saying never a word, listening to all she said, and to all that was said to her, with simple enjoyment. No thought of selfish jealousy crossed his mind. All men must admire so lovely a girl–what harm in that? Did not he admire her too? would not he have willingly suffered anything for her? would not he be her dog to fetch and carry, do her slightest wish, be her devoted slave, and ask for nothing more than to be near her? No greater privilege could he have than to do her behests. The boy paid her the most absolute homage of his whole soul and body. It never occurred to him to ask for anything in return. He did not know he wanted anything more than to be allowed to be always near her, adore her, minister to her slightest whims. Whatever so lovely a being did, was

sure to be right. To question the acts of so glorious a beauty, was like doubting divinity. Ralph was under the glamour of the most potent spell that ever worked on a pure and generous nature. To give utterly to the object of his worship, was to him the simplest thing. He would have given his last farthing to help a poor beggar; what would he not give to her, who was in his eyes the noblest, loveliest, purest thing in creation? Only would she want anything? There was the pain. What could he give her that she could need? Had she not everything?–homage, wealth, youth, beauty?

"And so, my fair cousin, I hear thou hast done right knightly this forenoon," said Yolande, addressing him at last, for after the first greeting he had stood aside to let the more vivacious and older Breton knights pay their respects to his cousin.

As Yolande spoke, she glanced at his large build, powerful chest, and tall figure, and then she let her eyes drop sideways on the smaller proportions of the Breton knight who stood beside him. She noticed the breadth of shoulders, bull neck, and length of arm of this latter, and thoughtfully said, without paying any attention to what Ralph blurted out,–

"And so, Sir Amand, you have proclaimed a joust. 'Twas well done of you; and all we poor damoiselles of the island owe you many thanks. But I fear me we have no knights now here will do us poor ladies justice. Alas that my stepbrother is not here!"

"Surely, fair lady, thou wilt let me be thy knight?" said the Breton gentleman. "I could not have a fairer queen for whom to lay lance in rest."

"Nay, fair sir, thou surely mockest. I have heard that the damoiselles of France are the loveliest in the world."

Yolande spoke dreamily; she still glanced sideways at her cousin, and then at the Breton knight.

"I wonder will the Captain tilt?" she asked absently, toying with a gold chain round her neck.

"Pardie, mademoiselle, I trust he will do us that honour: but it would be a marvellous gracious act."

Ralph was yearning to say something to his cousin, but he could not find the opportunity. While all were chatting gaily, waiting lor the Captain of the Wight, a varlet came up the hall and spoke a few words to Sir John Trenchard, who directly afterwards said in a loud voice,–

"The noble Captain is detained by some slight matter. He prayeth you all to forgive him, and in especial that the fair ladies will grant him their pardon; and desireth that we tarry no more for dinner. Master Gamelyn, bring in the covers."

The guests all sat down, and quickly the dishes were brought in. The Lord Abbot of Quarr was there; the Prior of Carisbrooke Priory, now belonging to the great Carthusian Monastery of Sheen; and the two Bailiffs of Newport, and their

wives and daughters, who, however, sat at another table. The Chaplain of the castle said grace, and the dinner began.

Gracefully the pages handed and carved the dishes, assisted by the varlets and serving-men; but the absence of the noble host caused a slight depression.

Yolande, as the lady of highest birth there, was placed next the vacant chair of the Captain of the Wight, and on her left sat Sir Amand de la Roche Guemené; while on the other side of the empty chair sat Lady Trenchard, and on her right the other Breton noble. The remaining guests were placed, according to their degree, all down the long table.

The conversation turned upon the approaching tilt, and all were loud in their praises of the public spirit of the two foreigners.

The chief Bailiff of Newport, who sat opposite Sir Alain de Kervignac, was deploring the sad state of the island, saying how different it was fifty years ago, when he was a lad.

"Then, my lord, there were ten thousand fencible men, and above thirty knights and esquires. But within ten years after, the which ten thousand men were anentised through pestilence and wars, and some voided because of extortioners, that there were scarce twelve hundred of fencible men, and knights never one, and esquires no more but Harry Bruyn, esquire of His Majesty's household, that might labour about wars."

"Ay, Master Gander, thou sayest truth," said Sir John Trenchard. "But my Lord of York gave heed somewhat, although he was sorely let and hindered by reason of the grievous jealousies he was subject to, and being sent over to Ireland, could never do all he minded to; but we shall show these noble gentlemen fine sport yet, I'll warrant."

"Certes, Sir John," said the other Bailiff, "you are ever i' the right. But I mind me how Master John of Newport, who is but lately dead, I hear, so peeled and oppressed the townsfolk and fencible people of this island as to cause most part of the better sort to leave the isle. And then he, being discharged by the Duke of York for his misgovernance, with others of his sect, took to the sea, and sore threatened and jeopardised the king's people of the isle, so that there was not fifteen fencible people left, and no staff of men nor archers. Truly we were in parlous sad case."

"Marry, Master Farseye, doubtless it was as you say; but we are now full powerful and well stored. And there are, as you may see, looking round at this table, and down yonder hall, plenty of stout limbs and brave hearts that will give a sensible account of themselves and the enemy in time of need, even as well and manfully as they did in the time of King Richard the Second, when Sir Hugh Tyrell, that right valiant knight–on whose soul may God have mercy–cut off the Frenchmen and utterly routed them, in so much that the lane now called

Deadman's Lane, and Neddie's Hill, were covered with the bodies of the slain."

"Ay, truly, 'twas so; but albeit 'twas a glorious battle, yet our fathers got not off scathless, for besides that Sir Theobald Russell was slain in a former attack, thirty-seven years before, Francheville and Yarmouth were burnt to the ground, and the French retired not afore they had levied a fine or ransom of 1000 marks, and our fathers had given pledges that they would submit to the Frenchmen for a whole twelve months."

"Not so bad as that, Master Farseye: they were only to submit if they should come over again," said Master Gander.

The Abbot of Quarr was engaged in pleasant converse with a buxom and jovial dame, the heiress of the old family of the Roucleys, who had come into the Manor of Brooke by marriage with the last of the Glamorgans, one of six ladies who inherited the estate from their brother Nicholas de Glamorgan, Lord of Brooke, the last male heir. This lady was Dame Joanna Bowerman, who was lately married to the eldest brother of Eustace Bowerman, and who, ten years afterwards, had the honour of entertaining King Henry VII. in her house of Brooke.

Ralph determined to have a few minutes' private talk with his kinsman the Abbot, and as he bent over him to hand him a dish of trout in jelly, a great luxury, he whispered,–

"An it please you, my Lord Abbot, may I have a word with you anon?"

"Surely, my son; there is naught amiss, I hope?"

"Nay, my lord; 'tis a matter of small import."

At this moment Lord Woodville entered the hall. All rose to do the Captain of the Wight honour. Craving pardon for his lack of courtesy, he prayed them to be seated, and then took his seat next Mistress Yolande, who greeted him with a radiant smile.

"My lord, I am right glad thou hast come. Sir Amand here hath used up all his pretty conceits, and very nearly his appetite."

"You amaze me, fair lady! Can a French gentleman fail in one or the other, and with such a theme as thy fair self to discourse of."

"Ay, truly, and with such a banquet as thy noble self hath provided. But, most puissant Captain, is it true that thou are going to break a lance in the approaching tilt?"

"Not that I know of, fair lady," said Lord Woodville coldly.

"But thou wilt an thou art asked?" said Yolande, fixing her soft blue eyes full upon his.

"Marry, fair lady, there are younger knights than me to ride courses for love of ladies. I am getting past the age for such pastimes."

"Now, nay! a thousand times, nay! Sir Amand, help me to gain our end!"

"Pardie, an so lovely a lady cannot soften the heart of the noble Captain,

how can the prayers of a poor simple knight like me do it?" said the knight, shrugging his shoulders.

"Well, Sir Captain," said Yolande, "if thou wilt not grant that request, at least thou wilt not refuse my other prayer. Wilt thou let my cousin Ralph run a course? I hear he hath done right hardily to-day."

"With right goodwill, fair mistress. I saw how well he bore himself this forenoon. I had even now minded to make him an esquire of my body."

Yolande glanced across to look for Ralph, but he was standing close behind her, and had heard every word. His joy was so great that he could scarcely fulfil his duties. In his eagerness to have an excuse to say something to his lovely kinswoman, he picked up the first dish that came to hand, and, as he bent over her to offer it, he whispered,–

"Thank you, cousin, thank you! 'tis the kindest service you could do me."

"But, fair kinsman, that is no reason you should offer me 'pasties of venison roast,' with 'plums in paste,' which I happen to be eating. 'Tis but a poor return for my kindness."

Ralph, much abashed, drew back; not, however, before Dicky Cheke saw his mistake, who made a hideous face at him, and as he passed dug his knuckles into his back, saying at the same time,–

"Poor witling! how parlous awkward it is; 'twill never make a good serving page."

Fortunately for Ralph there was a general move soon afterwards, and the horses were being brought round to the hall door. In the midst of the confusion Ralph took the opportunity of going up to the Abbot and telling him his business.

"What!" said the Abbot, amazed; "and thou calledst that a matter of small import, quotha?"

Ralph was a bad hand at asking favours–those who give easily usually are. However, he could not abandon this request.

"My lord," he said, "'tis but to advance me such sums that I may appear as becometh the ancient house of Lisle. You gave me to my lord, you would not have me disgrace my name and lineage."

Seeing how earnest the boy was, and how reasonable was his request, the Abbot began to relent.

"Marry, lad, thou art a brave youth and a good, thou shalt have the wherewithal to caparison thyself. Go to Master Longstoke, who dwelleth in Lugley Street, by the sign of the Blue Boar, he will purvey for thee what thou needest. I will look in upon him as I ride home to-night. He will then have my warranty."

All things seemed joyous to Ralph to-day. With profusion of thanks he helped the Abbot of Quarr on to his horse, and then hastened to look after his cousin; but she was already mounted, and chatting gaily with the Captain of the

Wight and his Breton guests.

When all were mounted the cavalcade rode out through the large gateway. It was a gay sight to see the long lines of varlets, with the dogs and falcons, the fair ladies riding amid groups of gentlemen, with hawk on fist, and riding-whip in hand. The crowd that had collected at the castle gates greeted each knight and lady as they came out with freely-expressed remarks; and when the Captain of the Wight appeared with Yolande Lisle riding by his side, the two Breton knights a little behind her with her old father, there were loud shouts of applause, and many complimentary cheers for the noble foreigners who were going to provide so much amusement.

The cavalcade took the way down to Shide Bridge and so up the valley of the Medina, intending to fly their hawks at the quarry that was sure to be met with among the low lands between the Medina and the Yare.

They were not disappointed; a fine heron was soon started, and the Captain's bird–a noble peregrine falcon–was cast off after it. As Lord Woodville watched the flight of his bird, he called Ralph up to him, who, as in duty bound, had been in close attendance on his person.

"Thy missive hath been found, my child," said his lord gravely. "Thou didst not dream: I would that thou hadst."

Ralph remained silent. Lord Woodville went on, in rather an abstracted tone,–

"'Twas a bold game, and I marvel how he hath gotten into the island; but he knoweth he is safe from me, except in so far as I myself may chastise him for his insolence. He hath done me far more wrong than ever he thinketh that I have done to him."

The rest of the cavalcade, now that the Captain's bird had been flown, had dispersed after their own hawks, which only waited for this signal to be cast off.

"My lord, thy falcon hath gotten a long way ahead, and maketh toward the high land yonder," said Ralph, who saw his cousin cantering gaily ahead, escorted as usual by her faithful admirer the Breton knight. Before disappearing over a rise in the land she reined up, turned round to Lord Woodville, and waved her whip aloft, inviting them to follow.

"There is Mistress Lisle beckoning to thee, my lord," said Ralph.

"Marry, is she? then we will even follow, Master Lisle, if it pleaseth thee," said the Captain, with a smile.

As they cantered over the marshy land, followed by a few varlets on foot, whose business it was to carry fresh birds on a wooden framework suspended round their necks by straps, Ralph kept close behind the Captain. When they reached the top of the rising ground where they had last seen the graceful figure of Mistress Yolande, a strange sight met their eyes. The Breton knight's horse

was sunk over its fetlocks in a quagmire, and its rider was in an almost kneeling position on its back, with the evident desire of getting as far away from the treacherous slime as possible.

"I told him not to go," said Yolande, laughing at the sad plight of the poor gentleman.

The attendant varlets were directed to assist the knight out of his difficulties, while Yolande rode off with the Lord Woodville and Ralph, who was delighted at the change.

As they rode rapidly across the lower ground towards Godshill, the page told with eager joy to his cousin how the Abbot of Quarr had promised to equip him gallantly, and he entered into all the details of the horse he would buy, the armour, and the device he would wear upon his shield.

"You must have a lady's favour, Ralph. Is there anyone you would like?" asked Yolande, smiling at him.

Ralph coloured up, and he answered shyly,–

"Cousin Yolande, will you give me yours?"

"Well, now, I *am* highly favoured. And you really would not rather have that of Mistress Bremskete, or the fair Mistress Susan Gander?"

But Ralph was not good at raillery, he was far too much in earnest to enter into a joke, and Yolande saw the shafts of her wit would only fall flat or be misunderstood.

"But, cousin Ralph, I have promised my favour elsewhere."

Ralph looked at her with bitter disappointment.

"'Tis true 'tis as well to have two strings to one's bow, and why you did not say so I don't know, for I might never have thought of it myself, and so you might have lost a very good chance. Well, what do you say; shall I give you one as well?"

"But, Yolande, may a lady have two knights in the same tourney?"

"Why, marry, yea! At least I see no reason why not. One can have them everywhere else. Let us ask the Captain."

Lord Woodville had been riding on lost in abstraction. They had left Godshill on their right. They were now skirting the high hills, the outlying spurs of Week Down. Hearing his name mentioned, the Captain of the Wight turned round; as he did so, he caught sight of a figure, and instantly his face became as pale as death, and then flushed up with angry fire.

The quick eyes of Yolande did not fail to detect the change. Her eyes glanced in the direction of Lord Woodville. She saw a man in a common dress standing by the side of an old thorn bush.

"'Tis only a hind belonging to the Priory of Appuldurcombe. I marvel what hath come to the Captain," she murmured.

The man had been standing watching the little calvacade approach, but as it drew nearer he stepped back on to a more rugged piece of ground at the foot of the steep hill behind, and which was difficult for horses, being all broken and covered with gorse.

Lord Woodville rode forward, motioning to the others to remain behind. Ralph could not help thinking he had seen that figure before. Where had he seen it?–he could not recollect.

"Marry, Ralph, 'tis a bold hind; see how he scowls on the Captain. By St Bride, he hath broad shoulders, and bears himself as if of gentle blood. I would give a good deal to know what the Captain is saying to him. I shall ride nearer."

But the Captain of the Wight heard the steps of her horse; he looked back with a stern glance, and said gravely,–

"Mistress Lisle, under your leave, I would say a few words alone."

There was no help for it; with a pettish air, but not at all disconcerted, Yolande said her nag wanted to browse on that sweet bit of grass there, and returned to Ralph.

After the interchange of a few words, the Captain rejoined the others, and the man disappeared into the tall furze behind the old thorn bush.

"We've lost our heronshaw," said Mistress Yolande, pouting.

"Nay, the varlets will bring the quarry in," said the Captain. "But what building have we here."

"'Tis the nunnery of Appuldurcombe," said Yolande. "Marry, I am sore athirst. Prythee, let us go there, and ask the kind sister for a draught of ale or hippocras."

"Right gladly, fair mistress," said Lord Woodville, and they cantered over the smooth turf towards the grey stone wall which surrounded the picturesque roofs and gables of the old Priory of Appuldurcombe, now a cell of the convent of the order of Saint Clare, without Aldgate, in the City of London. As they rode up, the chapel bell was tolling to vespers.

"Marry, 'tis later than I thought," said Yolande.

CHAPTER XII.

HOW THE COCKEREL FELT HE WAS BUT A COCKEREL.

The old Priory of Appuldurcombe was situated in a most lovely spot, nestling

in thick woods whose brown and russet foliage climbed the steep sides of the lofty downs surrounding it; the high-pitched gable of the little chapel, and the quaintly-grouped pile of grey buildings, looked serene and peaceful in that sequestered nook amid the ever-lasting hills.

Originally granted by the piety of stout Earl Richard de Redvers to his new foundation of Montsburg in Normandy, it was used as a cell for a prior and two monks to look after their farms of Appuldurcombe, Sandford, and Week. But, sharing the fate of other alien foundations, it was taken from them by Henry IV. and granted to the nuns of St Clare, without Aldgate, who eventually obtained a grant of it from the Monastery of Montsburg, and so possessed it until the dissolution of the monasteries.

The Convent of St Clare, without Aldgate, at this time was accustomed to send two sisters and a prioress to look after their interests, and used the cell as a place of peaceful resort and change of air from London. The sisters could walk in these retired woods and sheltered groves without fear of observation or molestation, and were much beloved by the labourers on the farms belonging to the Nunnery. It is quite evident from Chaucer that the nuns did not always observe the strictest seclusion, even in the Metropolis; and how well some at least of them were versed in the pleasures and technicalities of field sports is abundantly clear in the works of Dame Juliana Berners, popularly supposed to have been Prioress of Sopewell, near St Albans.

As the Captain of the Wight rode up with Yolande and Ralph, the chapel bell ceased.

"We will wait till their orisons be over," said Lord Woodville.

They had now leisure to look round, and even the matter-of-fact Ralph and high-spirited Yolande were impressed with the still loveliness of the scene. The blue smoke from the conventual kitchen and labourers' cottages curled into the quiet air, and floated away amid the rich brown leaves of the autumnal wood. The grass, green and soft, like velvet to the tread, showed the fertility of the soil, and the lowing of the cows, which were being driven from their pasture, added a pastoral melody to the sylvan scene.

An old woman and a young girl came out of a small door pierced in the high stone wall which surrounded the little settlement, and hid the lower storey from outward observation.

"What a pretty child!" said Yolande, with generous admiration. "Did you ever see such eyes?"

Ralph looked as he was told, but, boy like, paid little attention to the looks of a girl evidently younger than himself. Besides, in comparison with the brilliant Yolande, whose every movement was grace, and every word fascination, how could he admire aught else? And was not Yolande, in addition, at least four years

older than himself?

The soft eyes of the girl, however, seemed to recognise Ralph. She gave him a shy little nod of welcome and acknowledgment.

"Why, my cousin, she knoweth thee!" said Yolande. "Who is she?"

"Nay, I know not," said Ralph, not quite pleased at being nodded to in that familiar way by so poorly clad a little girl.

"Good mother," said the Captain of the Wight, "wilt thou ask the Lady Prioress if she will grant this fair lady a draught of ale or hippocras?"

The old woman only shook her head, but the girl glanced up at the Captain's face, and then said,–

"Noble sir, Gammer Audrey is deaf. I will run in and ask Sister Agnes," and the child drew her hand out of that of the old woman, and disappeared through the door.

"'Tis strange!" muttered the Lord Woodville; "her eyes are wondrous like, and the voice–old memories are stirring, methinks, to-day."

In a few minutes the figure of a nun carrying a tray on which were a flagon and some pewter cups, appeared at the narrow door, followed by the girl, bearing a dish with a few apples piled upon it.

The nun had hardly passed out of the door when she gave a little stagger, and nearly dropped the things she was carrying. Recovering herself with an effort, she approached Yolande.

"My faith, my Lord Woodville, if the girl were lovely, what think you of the sister?" said Yolande.

Lord Woodville looked at the nun, as she approached, and became deadly pale.

"How could it be!" he murmured. "I heard she was dead!"

"Well," observed Yolande, "of all strange things, this is the most parlous bewildering! Who'd have thought the unmoved Lord Woodville could be so passing stirred twice in the same hour?"

The nun poured out the hippocras, and offered it to Yolande, who took it from the fair hand of the draped and veiled figure, with the curiosity and awe which all women feel when brought face to face with one of their own sex who is utterly dead to the world. The air of mystery, romance, and sanctity which surround the convent life was not then probably so powerful as now. Then, the nuns lived more openly, and were a part of the everyday life of society. But to Yolande, with her strong love of life, its amusements, its follies, and its excitement, it seemed like being confronted with death to look at that pale face, downcast eyes, and shrouded figure.

The nun's face was strikingly beautiful. Her features were very straight, with splendid eyebrows, and a sweet mouth, whose full lips were rendered al-

[image]

THE NUN OFFERED THE WINE TO YOLANDE.

most more attractive by the little droop at each corner producing a soft dimple in the rounded cheek. The long lashes lay like a fringe over her magnificent dark hazel eyes, and as she stood, quite impassive and expressionless, only deadly pale, Yolande felt drawn towards her as she had never felt drawn to any woman before.

The Captain of the Wight kept his eyes fixed on the sweet face.

"Pious lady," he said, "we are greatly indebted to thee for thy hospitable courtesy. Hast thou been in these parts long?"

Obliged to answer, the nun, still keeping her eyes, however, steadily on the ground, said, in a low, deep melodious voice,–

"Noble sir, Sister Ursula and I came hither but three months since."

"Holy saints!" muttered the Captain, "'tis her very voice!"

Then, after a pause, he said,–

"Thou art happy and peaceful here? There is naught that frights or disturbs you?"

A little flicker passed over the statue-like features. A slight tremor of the mouth, and a quiver of the eyelids, showed the nun was suffering from some not quite controlled emotion. Bending her head a little down, and keeping her eyes more than ever on the ground, she said, in her bell-like voice,–

"Noble sir, there is naught that frights us."

"And this girl, who is she?" asked the Captain.

"'Tis a child which hath been brought hither for our Prioress to tend."

"Hath she no relatives here?"

"Nay, I know not; but she is well with us," said the nun, looking at the child with affection. It was the first expression of softer feeling that had yet come into her face.

The child returned her look with love and bright confidence.

"Thou art happy here?" said Yolande.

"Ay, truly am I," replied the girl; "now I know father will be safe."

"And who is thy father, sweet child?"

"He is a noble knight, but I may not tell his name," said the girl.

"Dost thou know, holy sister?" said Yolande, unable to repress her natural curiosity.

The nun looked a trifle surprised, as if not expecting such a breach of manners in so high-born a damsel, but she replied, as coldly as ever,–

"Nay, I know naught that passeth in the world. None who enter here have name, or kin on earth."

Yolande shivered. It seemed like talking to a ghost.

As her thirst was now assuaged, and none of the others would take any more–although Lord Woodville took an apple from the pretty child, and in doing so availed himself of the opportunity of slipping a gold coin on to the dish, the nun withdrew as silently as she came, and the girl accompanied her, giving another nod of friendly farewell to Ralph.

"'Tis getting late, Lord Woodville, and I must be riding home," said Yolande. "Where my father hath gotten to, I know not; and as for my poor Breton, good lack!" and she broke into a merry laugh.

They rode away from the peaceful vale, the long shadows of evening falling across the plain, and the chill mist of the marshland rising in white film around. They were a silent party. Lord Woodville was plunged in deep reverie. Yolande could not strike any sparks of wit out of Ralph, who worshipped her far too seriously to be quite at home and at his ease, and took in serious dudgeon the playful raillery with which his cousin treated him on the subject of the dark-eyed damsel.

"You silly boy, you think you are fond of me; but when you reach the age of manhood, and are of an age to marry, the lady of your choice will be one who is now a girl of just that little one's age. You mark my words."

"And what do you call the right age to marry?" asked the crestfallen Ralph.

"Oh, not before you are thirty or forty, or fifty or sixty. There! I'll marry you when I am sixty. So now go and be happy, and grow as fast as you can; in wisdom, at least, for your body is big enough, good lack!"

As they rode back into the more cultivated land they met parties of two or three of the expedition returning from the chase; and as they passed Arreton Church they fell in with Sir William Lisle, who had been looking for his daughter, accompanied by Sir Amand de la Roche Guemené, who was mounted on a fresh horse.

"Marry, Sir Amand, where's thy horse?" laughed Yolande.

"Pardie, mademoiselle, zat I cannot tell. I left 'im in ze vase."[*]

[*] "Vase," Anglicé "mud."

"What vase?" said the astonished Yolande. "It must be a mighty big one if it can hold a horse."

"*Foi de mon ordre!* no; it would sallow 'im as easy as anyzing, and me too,

'ad I been ze fool to stop on 'im."

"Good lack! a vase swallow a horse and man? The poor man's lost his wits!" cried Yolande, while Ralph looked very much astonished, and began to laugh.

"Vat you go for to laugh, young man?" said the disconcerted and puzzled Breton. "Is zere anyzing drole in ze vase svalloving a man?"

"Why, beshrew me, there is!" said old Sir William Lisle. "Thou hast got hold of the wrong word; 'tis mud thou meanest, not a vase. Good lack! good lack! how these munseers do show their ignorance."

As Yolande and her father were not going back to Carisbrooke Castle, they took leave of their noble host, and rode away across the downs to Briddlesford, which lay at the head of the long winding creek which flowed in from the Solent, while the others pursued their way back to the castle.

The Captain of the Wight seemed plunged into a deeper reverie than ever, and scarcely spoke one word the whole way back. Ralph's mind was full of the tournament, and of the Abbot's promise to let him have money enough to equip himself as became an aspirant to chivalry.

As soon as he had an opportunity, he took Maurice Woodville and Dicky Cheke aside and told them of his good fortune.

"My faith, Lisle, you are in luck. How much will he give you?"

"I don't know; but he said he would tell old Langstoke to let me have what I wanted."

"Well, an I were you, I'd strike while the iron is hot. I should get leave from old Jack-in-Harness to go down to-night, and lose no time. There's only six days before the Feast of St Michael," said Maurice Woodville.

"Ay, so should I," said Dicky Cheke. "And, I say, Lisle, ask him to let us go too. We can help you; you're such a simpleton, any chapman can cheat you. You big fellows always are stupid and easily overreached."

Giving Dicky Cheke a tweak of the nose, which caused that young gentleman to rush after him as he left the room, and kick violently against the door, which Ralph prudently shut, with happy promptitude, behind him, Master Lisle went off to look for Sir John Trenchard.

He tapped at the door of the knight's apartments, and hearing a voice say "Come in," he opened the door, and found Bowerman reclining on a couch, his head bandaged and his eyes closed. He was alone.

"Who's that?" said the wounded page.

"Oh, Bowerman, I am grievous sad to see you look in such parlous case," said Ralph, his conscience pricking him for not having inquired after, or been to see, his wounded comrade before.

At the sound of Ralph's voice, Bowerman's face flushed up; and in a voice

whose tones expressed concentrated hate, he said,–

"You fiend you! who asked you to come here?"

"Well, Bowerman, I don't see why you should bear me such ill-will. 'Twas not my fault you met with your mishap."

"Yes, it was. If you had not aimed at the beaver,[*] which you know well enough is the weakest part of the whole armour, I should not have got that splinter in my cheek."

[*] The visor.

"But," said Ralph, taken aback by this novel ground of accusation, "you could have aimed at mine; and, besides, the beaver would never have come open, had it been tightly clasped."

"That's all as may be! but I knew you had never done anything of the kind before, so I hit you where there was least danger; and in return for my good nature, you took a cowardly advantage of me."

Ralph coloured up.

"Bowerman, I have told you I am grieved you are hurt–if I could do anything to help you, I would; but, because you are wounded, you have no right to say such unjust and untrue things."

"There, that's just like your mean, lily-livered nature. Here I lie, unable to get up and punish you, all through your own base fault, and then you come in when no one is here, and tell me I tell lies!"

Ralph felt his temper rising, but he kept as calm as he could.

"You know, Bowerman, you are not just. But as you are suffering, I will not get angry. I can do nothing for you, then?"

"Ay, marry can you, and that speedily–get out of this room!"

At this moment Lady Trenchard entered.

"Ah, Master Lisle, that is right courteous of you, and as one of gentle birth should do, to come and visit your discomfited comrade. I marvelled you had not come afore. But I heard you were out with the Lord Captain, and so I told Master Bowerman."

Ralph felt a little uncomfortable. He did not deserve these excuses, for he had forgotten all about Bowerman. Lady Trenchard went on.

"Tell us now what sport you had. 'Twill cheer us up, and be as good as a tale for your comrade. 'Twill be kind in him, will it not, Master Bowerman?"

But the wounded page only tossed on his couch and uttered a sound, half groan, half smothered exclamation of furious rage.

"Ah, poor lad! he suffers much. I fear me these are febrile signs. 'Twill be well to have the worthy and pious Sir Simon Halbard to bleed him. He is something of a leech, and was infirmarer once, I heard, at Quarr Abbey; but thy tale will solace him, and take away his thoughts from the pain of the wound."

Ralph longed to get away, but he was too polite to refuse to do what Lady Trenchard asked him. He began–determining to make the narrative as brief as possible–to tell the chief events of the afternoon.

As he told of the Breton knight being stuck in the mud, a grunt of satisfaction proceeded from Bowerman.

"Ah! thou seest, Master Lisle. I told thee thy tale would solace him, and help to drive away his pain," said Lady Trenchard complacently.

When Ralph came to the nuns, and told how they had so willingly brought refreshment for Yolande, of whom, by the way, he scarcely spoke at all, Lady Trenchard remarked,–

"Ah, the Lady Abbess of Saint Clare, without Aldgate, wrote to me to go over and see the two new sisters who have come down of late. I am glad thou hast reminded me of this, fair page. There is one in whom she taketh much concern, as fearing for her health. She hath had trials in the world, and hath not yet gotten cured of them. And so thou rodest all day with the fair Mistress Yolande?" added the grave and erect Lady Trenchard, with a penetrating glance.

Ralph grew very red.

"Yea, my lady–that is, nay. She rode with my Lord Captain, and I waited on him, as was my duty."

"Ay, and so she rode with the Captain? Like enough, like enough!" Then, after a pause she added, as if in a soliloquy, "Ah well, she won't make much of him, poor lass. His heart's been broke these twelve years or more. 'Tis a sad story, and not one you lads would care to hear."

"Yes, I should, Dame Trenchard," said Bowerman shortly, while Ralph looked up surprised. It had never crossed his mind that so exalted a person, and so rigid as the Captain of the Wight, could possibly have a weakness or a romance.

"Nay, nay," said Lady Trenchard, sorry she had aroused their curiosity, "'tis a long and sad story, and not one that will give you joy. Besides, 'twas a kinsman of Master Lisle who married the fair girl, sore against her will; but her own true knight was away, and her father's and the king's will had to be obeyed, and so she was wed. But not for long–she soon died, they said; but who knows? 'Twas a sad story."

And Lady Trenchard nodded her head gravely, then shook it sadly, as if she saw some sad mistake occurring, and lapsed into silence.

"But what of the Captain of the Wight, Dame Trenchard?" said Bowerman.

"What hath he to do in all this?"

"The Captain of the Wight! what of him?" said Lady Trenchard absently. Her thoughts had gone off to the shortcomings of her maids, and whether Dame Joanna Bowerman would not have looked better in a black cote hardie, and lemon-coloured taffeta kirtle, than the yellow one which she wore, with a bright blue bodice.

"Not but what she tireth herself well, does Joanna Bowerman. I mind her when she was little Joanna Roucley. She always did have a liking for smart things, and she's a woman that bears them well–I will say that for her. But she lacked skill in colour."

"But what of the Captain?" persisted Bowerman.

"Well! what of the Captain?" said Lady Trenchard, with some slight asperity. "I know naught of the Captain. He hath come back, I trow?"

"Yea, but you were telling me of some love affair of his."

"Marry, was I? not that I know of. You sleep now, Master Bowerman; 'twill be best for you," said Lady Trenchard decisively.

Eustace Bowerman muttered something that sounded very like "old hag," and "obstinate old harridan," which was quite unheeded by Lady Trenchard; and Ralph took the opportunity to slip out of the room.

CHAPTER XIII.

OF THE SHARPENING OF THE COCKEREL'S SPURS.

And now the morning of the Feast of St Michael had come. All the preparations were complete, and the lists were ready decked. The green sward between the stout palings, gaily painted and bedizened with flags, was divided in the middle by a barrier, which was covered with a gorgeous hanging, and parted the lists lengthways into two equal divisions.

As Dicky Cheke and Ralph Lisle strolled round in the early morning–for there was no drill that day, and all ordinary exercises were suspended–they were delighted at the handsome appearance of the preparations. The covered gallery or grand-stands for the ladies; the numberless poles, gilded and painted, from which gay shields of arms were hung, and still gayer banners and banderoles fluttered; the lavish adornment and laborious preparations, struck them with astonishment, although they had seen the work going on for some days past.

"In sooth, Dicky, there's been great charges here. Who pays the cost?"

"Why the Captain, certes, though the Bretons pay some of it; but 'tis rarely done, i' faith. Thou'rt a lucky wight, Ralph, but thou wilt get a fall to-day, for 'tis not 'gainst 'Pig's Eyes' or Bowerman thou wilt ride, so make up thy mind to comfort thy broken bones."

"Ay, marry will I," said Ralph, laughing. "But I trust to do my devoir without disgrace. But 'twas a sad mischance Black Tom went lame," added the boy, changing his merry tone to a sad one. "He was *the* horse of all others for a tilt. Such depth of chest, such limbs and wind! Beshrew me if I can think how he could have gone lame like that, and only yesterday too. 'Twas a rare mischance," and Ralph looked very downcast.

With the money, or rather the order which the Abbot of Quarr had given to pay for all things needful to the merchant, Master Langstoke, Ralph had bought two very serviceable horses, one a great bargain. He had been guided in his choice by Humphrey, who was a likely man at buying cattle. This horse had belonged to an esquire who had been killed at the battle of Stoke, and was thoroughly broken to all the work of the tilt-yard and the battlefield. Ralph had been delighted at getting such an animal, and the congratulations he received upon it. Many old hands had told him that a good horse was more than half the battle, and all who saw Black Tom were loud in their praises of his good points.

"Ye see, Master Lisle, 'tis this way," remarked Lord Woodville's head varlet or groom. "A 'oss that's too quiet be't no good, nor a 'oss that's all fire. What you wants is a animal that's used to the work, and this 'un be, for I knows 'un."

The horse was perfectly sound the night before last. Ralph had ridden him that afternoon at a little quiet practice at the quintain first, and then at a light tilt with Tom o' Kingston, and nothing could have been better. But the next morning Humphrey came early with a very long face to say that he didn't "like the looks o' Black Tom at all, he were so tender on his near fore leg, and the pastern were all swollen like and hot."

This was bad news. All the authorities of the castle were consulted, and a careful examination of the tender hoof was made, with the result that it was found that a sharp nail had penetrated the hoof, causing severe inflammation. It was impossible that the poor animal could be ridden for some weeks, perhaps for some months.

But how had it happened? There was the mystery; and several old hands shook their heads, and did not hesitate to say that there had been foul play. Ralph's disappointment was intense, and Maurice Woodville and Dicky Cheke were profuse in their expressions of sympathy. Every one in the castle felt for Ralph's mishap, for he was now a universal favourite, his modesty, good nature, and brave bearing having endeared him to every one; and he was also well known

and liked in the town of Newport, so that the news of the strange accident had spread round the neighbourhood in very little time.

The days before the tournament had been spent in perpetual practice at the quintain, and tilting against each other in half armour and with very light lances, made so slight as to break with but little force. In this way the boys had become excellent hands at aiming their spears to the best advantage, and in becoming used to the shock of the blow, so as to grow accustomed to the knack of holding on to the saddle with their knees at the exact moment without losing their nerve. In these encounters Dicky Cheke and Maurice Woodville were very fairly matched, and such falls as they had were pretty evenly balanced, although Dicky, if he got the worst of it, invariably had some excellent reason for his mishap, and was voluble in his explanations, while Maurice took it quietly, and was even a little disconcerted by his misfortune.

Bowerman had nearly recovered, and was to be allowed to take part in the forthcoming tourney, but he was not allowed to practise at the tilting with the others, for fear of opening his wound again by any mischance. He had therefore practised at the quintain, and other exercises that taught him to aim and strike, without, however, receiving a blow in return.

Willie Newenhall had thus been left to tilt always with Ralph Lisle, and although the latter, when he had knocked his antagonist off once or twice, refrained, out of pure good nature, from putting forth all his strength and dexterity, yet "Pig's Eyes" was very wrath and sore at being so manifestly inferior to one so much younger than himself.

More than ever the five pages were divided into sides. Newenhall and Bowerman scarcely ever spoke to the other three, and never lost a chance of getting them into trouble if they could, or of making them do work which was unpleasant to themselves.

Ralph was very good-natured, and would have done anything for Bowerman, in spite of his violent language and the manifest hatred the latter bore him. But Dicky Cheke resented their treatment, and took every opportunity of annoying or crossing the others. He and Woodville were frequently the victors in this sparring of rival wits; and if only they could get "Pig's Eyes" alone, he had a very uncomfortable time of it.

Ralph had provided for the approaching pageant with considerable wisdom, in spite of Dicky Cheke's mistrust of his powers. He had been able to buy, besides the two horses, a very fine suit of tilting armour, and two splendid tunics, and close-fitting hose, with a fur mantle of the latest fashion. The tunics were slashed, and one was made of large stripes of orange tawny satin and delicate grey, with rich ruby velvet, and slashed at the shoulders, elbows, and across the chest, while the hose were also made in large stripes, but of white and pale lemon-

coloured satin; rich Cordovan leathern slippers of crimson colour protecting and adorning his feet. This suit was for wearing after the tournament the first day. The other suit was equally magnificent; for those who took part in the tilt were dispensed from wearing the livery of the Captain of the Wight for that day.

He had received by an unknown hand, a tiny silk glove, and a little scrap of paper, on which was written in a very scrawling hand,–

"An ye ware thys, ye last course ynne,
Ye shall eke lyfe and honour winne."

This was brought him by Humphrey, wrapped up in a little packet. It had been left for Ralph by a man who was unknown at the castle, but was believed to live at the back of the island, and to be a fisherman. He had been loitering about for some days past, and had latterly been accompanied by another man, who was also believed to be a fisherman, and who used to live at Wodyton, some years back. Ralph had been surprised at the enclosure, and still more so at the legend, and had secretly determined he would put the glove in his helmet before the last course, and see what would come of it. He had not yet received any favour from his cousin, and felt very moody and disconsolate in consequence.

As the boys were walking round admiring the arrangements, the light of the early sun falling on the eastern walls, towers, and battlements of the grand old castle, while the blue mist still hung over the valley, hiding the town of Carisbrooke, out of which the fine tower of the Priory church or chapel stood up like a tall rock in some grey lone sea, a varlet came out of the postern gate and called to Ralph Lisle to come into the castle-yard, where he was wanted immediately.

Ralph and Dicky Cheke followed hastily, and as they turned the corner by the well-house they saw, standing in the full light of the sun, a splendid horse, held by a groom in the livery and wearing the badge of the Lord of Briddlesford, Sir William de Lisle.

As Ralph drew near, the man held up a note, saying to Ralph, to whom he was well known,–

"My young mistress, the Lady Yolande, sends you this, with my lord's leave. 'Tis a well-trained horse, if ever there was one, and hath borne one in tilt and tourney, whom I'd like well enough to see here again. But as that mayn't be, and you bear the name of Lisle, you are to ride him; he's yours for the day–and maybe for ever."

Ralph was utterly surprised. He took the note mechanically, opened it, and read it. It was from Yolande, and said that as she could not give Ralph her favour, which he would see worn elsewhere, she had sent him the best thing she could

for him to win it. She deeply deplored the accident to Black Tom, and hoped White Will would make up in some slight way for the disappointment he had suffered. The horse had belonged to her half-brother, and was well used to his work. "Therefore," she added, "ride boldly, as I know you will, and fear not to press the horse, for 'tis your own Good luck–your loving cousin–YOLANDE."

Ralph's joy was boundless. He instantly vaulted on to the noble animal, and rode him round the yard, to the admiration of every one, excepting Bowerman and Newenhall, the former of whom looked on with scowling brow and sneering mouth; the latter in blank stolidity.

"I sha'n't be able to do for him to-day," muttered Bowerman; "but to-morrow, in the fight with axes and hand-strokes, I can do somewhat."

"But you are not allowed to take part in it, Bowerman," said Willie.

"Gammon! I'll do it somehow, trust me," answered Bowerman fiercely.

While the pages were having their breakfast, they talked of nothing but the tournament, and who were coming.

Bowerman and Newenhall, from their superior age and knowledge of the island, as well as from having seen a tournament before at London, when Lord Woodville had been one of the challengers, were able to lay down the law upon all points connected with the tilt; and Dicky Cheke, who prided himself on his great acquirements, was rather quenched.

"And the two Bretons will have two other knights to join them," Bowerman was saying. "There's Sir Richard Cornwall, a very valiant knight, and much skilled in tilts and jousts; but who the other is no one knows, but I have a good guess–leastways, he is sure to be brave, and well skilled in warlike feats."

"Well, then," said Dicky Cheke, "let's see who there is for us. There's my brother, he'll be a good one; then there's Sir John Keineys, he who married old Hackett's daughter, of Knighton Gorges."

"What do you know of Knighton Gorges?" broke in Bowerman. "You hold your tongue, and listen to your betters. There's Keineys, and John Meaux, and John Leigh of Landgard, Tichborne from Lemerston, young Trenchard from Shalfleet, old Jack-in-Harness's nephew, Will Bruyn from Affeton, and Dick Oglander. They are all fair enough, but I wish they were better trained. They've all got rusty since these peaceful times have come."

"You've forgotten Dineley of Woolverton; and I hear old Bremshot of Gatecombe has sent over to young Dudley, who married his daughter; and there's–"

"Oh, you have done!" broke in Bowerman angrily. "You're always talking, and get hold of the wrong end of the story, and–"

"He doesn't," said Maurice; "and he knows as much of the island as you do, and more, too–"

"Ay, marry, do I! And what's more, before ever your beggarly family came

here, the Chekes of Mottestone were lords of Mottestone for more than a hundred years–"

A blow from Bowerman was the rejoinder to this remark, which Dicky foresaw, and avoided by ducking under the table, while Maurice and Ralph interposed to prevent any further quarrelling.

"And when do we ride our courses, Bowerman?" said Ralph, always ready to receive information, and totally devoid of all personal vanity.

"Oh, you'll know soon enough; leastways, yours'll come after mine, and then you'll find out."

It was now but an hour and a half before the tilt would begin. The two boys who were to act as pages to Lord Woodville hastened to dress, and attend upon him. It appeared he was not going to tilt, but would act as judge and umpire with Sir John Trenchard and Sir Nicholas Wadham.[*]

[*] Afterwards Captain of the Isle of Wight under Henry VII. and Henry VIII.

The three pages who were going to take part in the tilt went to get ready also, and were carefully instructed in their duties by Tom o' Kingston.

The space around the lists was becoming crowded. There was no more popular amusement than a tourney, and as the arrangements were very costly, they did not very often occur in the provinces. But in a garrison like that of Carisbroke Castle, there was always to be found some one who would share in the expense, and earn popularity and experience at the same time.

There was a greater amount of interest than usual on this occasion, because there was something international in the contest, and it was known that several of the island gentry were going to take part in it.

Punctually at a quarter to eleven the sergeant-at-arms and a body of men-at-arms drew up in front of the apartments of the Captain of the Wight. Another company of mounted archers followed, and drew up on their left. Then came four trumpeters, splendidly attired in tabards, blazoned with Lord Woodville's coat-of-arms, and another body of mounted archers followed, succeeded by a squadron of men-at-arms, who all formed to the left of the first detachment. The three knights-challengers now came out of the dining-hall, armed *cap-à-pié*, and looking splendid in their gleaming tilting armour. Each knight was distinguished by his shield-of-arms, slung round his neck, and hanging over his left shoulder, and his crest proudly surmounting his tilting helm. Their esquires were waiting outside, and their varlets were leading their horses, armed with complete body armour, and gorgeously caparisoned, up and down. The fourth knight had not yet appeared.

As each knight mounted, there was a flourish of trumpets from the four trumpeters; and as he settled himself in the saddle, and took the heavy tilting-

lance, richly painted and gilded, into his mailed hand, the war-horse reared and pranced, and shook its crested head, as if proud of the noble sport awaiting it.

When the three knights were on horseback, they drew up in front of the trumpeters, attended by their esquires and varlets on foot, all splendidly attired.

The Captain of the Wight had invited the chief families of the island, and the most important of the official world, represented by the Bailiffs of the three boroughs of Newport, Newtown or Francheville, and Yarmouth, and the Bailiffs of the various ecclesiastical bodies who held land in the island–such as the Priory of Christchurch, the Monastery of Whoreley, and of Winchester College–but the Abbot of Quarr took precedence over all the other ecclesiastics who had been invited, although scarcely any came. In fact, the Abbot ranked next to the Captain of the Wight in insular precedence.

Among the ladies who looked down from the oriel window of the Captain's apartments, the lovely face of Yolande de Lisle could be seen, and the faces of several other well-known Isle of Wight ladies.

But as soon as the knights-challengers were mounted, there was a general scramble of the guests to get good places in the stand erected for their benefit. Yolande, however, had been asked by the knights-challengers to give away the prizes, and act as queen of the tourney, she therefore stayed to be escorted in state with the Captain of the Wight, who was to conduct her to her throne.

And now it was the turn of the Lord Woodville and the judges of the jousts to take up their position in the pageant. Preceded by two gorgeously-dressed yeomen of his household, carrying silver-gilt halberds, the Captain of the Wight took the hand of Yolande, and led her to the hall, followed by her two maids-of-honour, who also belonged to leading island families, and were chosen by Mistress Lisle–one was a niece of Sir John Trenchard, the other a daughter of Master Keineys, of Yaverland. Sir John Trenchard and Sir Nicholas Wadham followed, with Dicky Cheke and Maurice Woodville in immediate attendance on the Lord Woodville.

The appearance of the Captain of the Wight and the Queen of the Tournament was greeted by a prolonged flourish. Their horses were in waiting. Lord Woodville placed Yolande on her palfrey, and then mounted himself, his nephew holding his stirrup for him.

When all were mounted, the trumpets gave another flourish. The squadron wheeled to the right. The two leading detachments marched towards the great west gateway, the trumpeters followed, then the three knights-challengers fell in, with their varlets and esquires, succeeded by the Captain of the Wight, riding beside Yolande, attended by the other Judges and their escort, and then the remaining two squadrons of archers and men-at-arms closed in the procession.

The cavalcade rode round over the drawbridge and under the north walls

of the castle to the rising ground which led up to the place of arms, not yet closed in, or forming part of the castle, as it subsequently did in Elizabeth's reign.

As they approached the lists, they were greeted with loud shouts from the people, who had now assembled in crowds.

Mounted archers kept the ground, and yeomen in liveries, and armed with partisans, surrounded the lists.

All those who were seated in the pavilion rose as Lord Woodville approached. Lifting Yolande off her horse, he handed her to her throne, which was proclaimed by three prolonged blasts of the trumpets. The Captain of the Wight then took his own seat, after bowing to the assembled gentry and people.

The knights-challengers had meanwhile ridden slowly into the lists, and after pacing round them, had halted at the further end, having previously saluted the Captain of the Wight, the Queen of the day, and the Judges.

All was now ready. But another ceremony–for it was an age which dearly loved ceremonies–had to be gone through.

First of all the herald belonging to the household of Lord Woodville entered the lists and read out in a loud voice the licence for holding the tournament; then he read over the names of three of the knights-challengers, simply describing the fourth knight "as a right hardie and worshipful knight." After which he proclaimed the rules of the jousts. The most important of which were, that whoever was unhorsed or disarmed was to be considered vanquished, and that no one, by deed, word, or sign, was to interfere with the jousts.

Meanwhile the knights and esquires who were to encounter the knights-challengers had collected at the other end of the lists, and after riding round and saluting their antagonists, and the Judges, had taken up their position outside the lists, at the opposite end to that of their opponents.

CHAPTER XIV.

HOW THE COCKEREL USED HIS SPURS.

As the tilt which was now about to take place was merely a friendly display of knightly prowess, and "for the honour of ladies and their delectation," the knights were to encounter with blunted lances and swords. The Marshal of the Lists having examined the arms, all who were in the enclosure were ordered out, and the knights only awaited the signal to begin.

Each knight was to ride three courses separately with his antagonist, and then three courses again afterwards.

There was now a lull in the busy hum of conversation that had been going on in the large crowd. Every one was on tip-toe of expectation to see the two knights who were first to encounter.

There they sat erect, a little in front of their comrades, their lances upright, the steel-clad figures stiff and immovable on their gorgeously-trapped horses. Not a movement could be seen in one or the other, only their pennons flickered in the light air, and the lambrequin or slashed cloth mantling of their helmets blew out from time to time.

As the names of the knights and esquires who were going to take part in the tilting had been affixed in the market-place of Newport, as well as on the gate of Carisbrooke Castle, for some days past, together with their coats-of-arms, the people all knew who was who.

"That's the sturdy Breton knight at that end, him in the white tabard, with the gold dragon on his breast," said a stout yeoman, who was one of a group of several men round a fair and buxom dame, whom Tom o' Kingston, being on duty, could only ogle from under his visor, and who was no other than the irresistible Polly Bremskete.

"And who's that at the other end; he looks a tough wight?"

"What, him in the gold coat and a green lion with a forked tail? That's young Sir John Dudley, him as married Mistress Bremshott up to Gatcombe."

"Marry! now who'd have thought such a small man would have looked so big. 'Tis the armour surely–how it do swell them out."

"Hush! they're going to begin."

The trumpets gave a flourish. The Marshal, after a pause, called out in a loud voice,–

"*Laissez aller!*"

At the first sound of the trumpet the two knights had brought their lances to the rest with a simultaneous and graceful sweep, causing the gay pennons to flash in the sun, they then remained motionless as before.

At the last word, they clapped spurs to their horses and rode straight for each other, bending their heads low down, leaning well forward, and covering themselves with their shields.

"Lord! what a crack!" cried Mistress Bremskete, in admiration.

"He's off! he's off!"

"No, that he bean't."

"He was parlous nigh anyway! I lay a yard o' broadcloth he'll be off next bout. But 'twas well done, leastways: that's what I will say."

The two knights had met with a violent splintering of spears in the midst

of the lists. The Breton seemed never to feel the shock at all, for he rode on, tossing away the broken handle of his lance, after waving it aloft in the air. But the English knight reeled in his saddle; only he recovered himself directly, and rode up to the other end of the lists, where he turned, reined in his horse, and waited for his esquire to bring him another lance.

The trumpet sounded. The herald shouted,–"Well done, noble knights; remember the brave deeds of your ancestors. The ladies' eyes are upon you."

When the knights had received new lances, they once more awaited the signal. It soon came, and again the gleaming figures met in the rude shock. This time Sir John Dudley's lance struck the helmet of his opponent, and carried away the crest and part of the lambrequin, while the Breton knight's lance glanced off the ridged breast-plate, and, passing under the arm, the guard struck full against the cuirass of Sir John Dudley, and the two knights were both nearly unseated. Had they not been practised riders, and reined in their horses at the same moment, they must have fallen. As it was, they remained locked together for a moment, and so stood until the herald called out,–"Enough! 'tis well done; unloose."

They then disengaged, and rode back to their own end of the lists, amid the shouts of applause of the populace, and the music of the trumpeters.

"They are right skilful knights! I don't know as I ever saw better," said Tom o' Kingston to Humphrey, who stood near him holding a spare lance for his young master. "But there they go again. Holy Thomas! but he's off; good lack, I am parlous grieved. I would it had been the other."

A groan and shout of applause mingled together, while a dull thud and clang of metal falling, announced that one of the knights had been thrown.

"Marry, I am sorry 'tis poor young Sir John; and there's his wife looking on now! Well, 'tis a pity, to be sure," said Mistress Bremskete.

"Ay, but she takes it mighty comfortable anyway. See how she's laughing with the Lord Abbot of Quarr there."

"Well then she hadn't ought, that's what I say, Look! they're picking of him up. Alack, poor man, how he do bleed! 'Tis from the mouth, seemingly. Well-a-day! well-a-day! but 'twas a rude knock."

And so amid the plaudits of the crowd and the clarion blasts of the trumpets, the Breton knight returned to his end of the list, and took his station next the last of the challengers, receiving their congratulations as he rode up, while his luckless antagonist was helped out of the lists, to be attended to in the tent set aside for the reception of those wounded in the tilt.

The next knight who rode out from the challengers' end was Sir Amand de la Roche Guemené. As he took up his place, he turned towards Yolande and bowed low to his saddle-bow.

"Why, he's wearing the same colours she's got on! Well, to be sure, that's

a merry jest! Can't she find among all our island gentry one to her taste, but she must go giving away her favours to them jackanapes Frenchmen? But 'tis ever the way with your high-born wenches; they always goes after what's strange, never mind how ugly it be, if only it be something new. It all comes of so many running after them."

"Then, Mistress Bremskete, you ought to like those Breton gents, seeing the many suitors you have," said the ready yeoman by her side, with a knowing leer, giving his buxom companion a nudge with his elbow.

"Go along with ye, Master Paxhulle! you're always fooling us poor wenches with your soft tongue."

"I'll have to trounce that Paxhulle, I see," said Tom o' Kingston savagely, to Humphrey, upon whom the merry glance of Mistress Bremskete, and the leer of her companion, were in no way lost.

"I say, that's Sir John's nephew there. I do hope he'll do well! 'Tis a nice youth; but they're all too young, to my mind. These Breton knights have been well tried in many tilts, and are tough and skilled. But there they go! Good luck go with him–ah!–'Twas well done! He's a brave youth."

After splintering their lances without any further damage, the two cavaliers cantered on to the end of the lists, wheeled round and faced each other, taking the fresh lances handed them by their esquires.

Whether it were that young Trenchard really bore himself with greater skill and address, or that his antagonist, out of knightly courtesy to the trusty friend of his host, the Captain of the Wight, forebore to use all his skill and strength, it happened that the three courses were ridden without any mishap beyond a plentiful splintering of lancewood, and a rending of knightly finery.

Sir John Trenchard was evidently pleased, and accepted the congratulations of Lord Woodville and Mistress Lisle with but half-dissembled satisfaction.

"'Tis a good lad, and will do well," he said, "an the ladies spoil him not; for he is comely, and of fair manners."

The next knight to ride out from the challengers' end was Sir Richard Cornwall, a very powerful, strong knight in magnificent armour. His appearance was greeted with a hum of applause.

"Now, that's what I call a hardy knight, and something like a man. None of your little jackanapes of Frenchmen and raw youth. Look at his bone–look at his breadth of chest. 'Tis a pity he's an overrun."

"But 'tis a strong man he's got against him. 'Tis Master Meaux o' Kingston."

"Marry! that's right. 'Tis a good Island name, and he's a stout Island gentleman, too. 'Twill be a rare tussle."

The words of caution were given. The order to go followed, and the two strong figures on their powerful horses met in the midst.

There was a shout of applause from every one. The two lances flew up into a thousand splinters, the two horses fell back on their haunches, and the steel-clad figures, erect and firm, wheeling them round, rode back for fresh spears.

"'Twill be a marvel an one of them does not get an ugly knock," said Humphrey.

"Ay, marry will it; they're tough men-at-arms–but I wish one o' them splinters would hit that Paxhulle in the eye!" said Tom o' Kingston savagely; "it 'ud stop his leering for some time."

Once more the signal was given, and this time something was bound to go. The shock was tremendous.

"Holy Thomas! he's off! he's down! Mercy! but 'twas a fine stroke! Ah! my gay gentleman, but you're on your back now. Well done, Master Meaux! The Island for ever! A Meaux! A Meaux!"

The shouts of joy and the braying of the trumpets were long sustained and hearty. It was the first triumph of the popular side, and the enthusiasm was intense.

Sir Richard Cornwall had been overthrown without any disgrace to himself. In such a shock it was clear that every leather and strap of the horses' harness would be tried to the uttermost, and the girth of his saddle breaking, and the poitral also, he was borne backwards over the crupper to the ground, saddle and all going with him, and his horse nearly falling over backwards; for, like the good knight he was, he never let go of the reins.

"'Twas a pity Master Meaux was not matched against the Frenchman," said Humphrey.

"Ay; but he'll have to meet him before all's done. Who's coming now? Oh, I see, 'tis Master Bruyn. He won't be o' no account; he's been brought up too soft," commented Tom o' Kingston.

The first Breton knight now rode out again. It looked ominous for the Squire of Affeton.

But as if divining the popular wish, and in no way desirous of winning fame only at the spear-point, Sir Alain de Kervignac rode the three courses with great skill of horsemanship, but little exercise of strength. And so the Island knight got off scatheless and with honour.

"He's a right gentle knight that Breton. He could have knocked that poor youth all to pieces had he liked; he's as courteous as he's stout." And all the crowd agreed with Master Paxhulle, and shouted their approval.

There still remained five knights, without counting Bowerman, Newenhall, and Ralph, who were eager to try their prowess with the challengers. The day was getting on; there did not seem a chance of being able to finish the courses unless some of the combatants were disabled in their first tilt. This became ap-

parent to the knights-challengers. They therefore said that as enough had been done for courtesy and love of the ladies, and time was getting on, they would now tilt hardily, and sparing neither man nor horse, and that as they knew there were some youths among their antagonists, they gave this notice to prevent their being hurt.

"The coxcombs," said Bowerman, when this was announced, "do they think to frighten us away by words? They are getting afeard for their cattle; but I'll do my best," and Ralph Lisle agreed with him heartily though silently. Not so thought Newenhall, and he determined he would willingly miss his turn when it came, and so let the others get the knocks instead of himself.

Three other knights also signified their intention of giving those who were more desirous of the honour of encountering the challengers than they were, the priority of place.

These were Sir John Keineys and Masters Dineley and Leigh, who were all men past the prime of life, and who had merely entered to support the manhood of the Island. Thus only the three pages of the Captain of the Wight, with Dick Oglander, from Nunwell, were left; for Master Tichborne, from Lemerston, had not arrived yet. Master Bowerman now offered himself.

He was greeted with applause, for the crowd had heard the announcement of the challengers, and admired the pluck of the young aspirants to fame who were left.

Everyone knew that it was the page's first tilt, and the accident from which he had been suffering, combined with the pluck he showed in not retiring when he might easily have done so without loss of honour, created a strong feeling in his favour.

The Breton knight was loth also to hurt him, and in their first encounter he hit Bowerman very lightly on the shield, receiving the lance of his opponent on his own helmet, from which the last remnant of his crest was shorn.

"Well done, Master Bowerman, thou'rt upholding our Island right manfully," called out some of the bystanders.

The next course was very well ridden also, the lances splintering, and Bowerman, although reeling from the shock, kept his seat and rode on to the end. Elated by his success, the natural boastfulness of the young man came out.

"Look to your seat, Sir Breton," he called out before the last course, "for I mean to topple thee out of it."

"Beshrew the lad for a braggart!" growled Sir John Trenchard, scandalised alike at the breach of etiquette and the boastfulness of the boy.

The Sire de Kervignac said nothing; he only courteously bowed, and awaited the signal to charge. It soon came, and they met as before, but with a different result.

The Breton knight, as expert as he was brave and strong, seeing how eager and boastful the young man was, determined to read him a lesson. As Bowerman leant well forward, too much so for a firm seat, instead of aiming his spear at the page's body, or, indeed, directing it at all, the Sire de Kervignac struck a violent blow with the handle or butt-end of his lance over the lance of his antagonist, beating it down, and breaking it all to pieces, with the further result that Bowerman, who was preparing to push with all his might against the expected resistance of the body of his opponent, meeting with no obstacle, and drawn still further over by the blow on his lance, overbalanced himself, and before he could recover his seat, a rude knock from the butt-end of his antagonist's spear, as he rode past, completed his discomfiture, and he fell headlong to the ground.

"'Twas all his own fault," said Tom o' Kingston. "The Frenchman never meant to hurt him, and would have left him alone, had he not been such a braggart. It ought to do him good."

It was so evident to all the crowd that Bowerman had drawn this fall upon himself that they applauded the knight, and had no words of sympathy for the esquire.

The only antagonist left who had not yet tried his luck was Ralph Lisle.

"That surely can't be Master Lisle, the new page?" said Mistress Bremeskete.

"Ay, but 'tis though; he sits stiffly, don't he?"

"And what a size he looks. He'll be a great knight one day. As 'tis, he looks as if he could swallow the little Frenchman at the other end."

"Marry, you're right, and 'tis a fine horse he's on. 'Twas Mistress Lisle sent him that this morning."

"My! you don't say so! And she gives her favour to that French knight, and a horse to her kinsman. Well, I'd rather be her kinsman. Leastways, he's got something."

Ralph's heart was bounding with excitement. He tried to remember all the instructions he had received. He could see Yolande seated amid the beauty and rank of the Island. She was looking his way, not at the knight who wore her favour. She had bidden him win it with the horse he bestrode. His blood rose; he would do all he could. He sat his horse with thews strung tight and nerves braced.

"Are you ready?"

Down came his lance.

"My faith! he looks a gallant knight," said the Captain of the Wight to Yolande. "I trust Sir Amand will spare him."

"I'faith, Sir Captain, I think 'twill be the other way," said Yolande. "He's well skilled, I hear, and as for strength and weight, look at horse and man."

Lord Woodville glanced at Yolande a questioning glance, and smiled.

"It's no use your smiling like that, my Lord Woodville. I know what you are thinking about; but do you, with your knowledge of the world, think I should fall in love with a boy?" and Yolande laughed a scornful laugh.

Lord Woodville made no answer; he only sighed, and turned to look at the lists. The last word had been said.

With vigorous determination in Ralph's bent back, lance close pressed in rest, and helm well under shield, the boy went straight for his prize. He had selected a heavy lance, seeing how many others had splintered, and feeling confident in his strength to wield it. With sure aim he struck the upper part of his antagonist's visor, and, forcing it up with the violence of the well-planted blow, he bent the metal back, and, still keeping his spear jammed in the twisted iron, while his well-trained horse pressed on with all his force, Ralph actually pulled the knight backwards out of his saddle, and tumbled him over to the ground.

The shouts of applause and astonishment were deafening. The people jumped, and surged, and shouted, and waved their caps and handerchiefs in a perfectly bewildering way. For some time nothing could be heard or seen but the hilarious cries and struggling crowd. It was with the utmost difficulty the men-at-arms and yeomen could keep the lists clear. Men were crowding forward to shake Ralph's hand.

[image]

HOW THEY TILTED AT CARISBROOKE.

At last order and silence were somewhat restored, and then it was seen that the Breton knight was on his legs, and had pulled off his helmet, while blood was trickling down his face from the sharp edge of the broken visor having cut his forehead. In spite of this, he was loudly praising Ralph, and saying how glad he was the boy had got the victory.

This made him very popular, and the crowd raised cheer after cheer for the noble Breton knight and Master Ralph Lisle.

"There's no older name in the island, and 'tis a right noble line," said Tom o' Kingston. "'Tis right well done, and truly a marvellous feat of arms."

Meanwhile Ralph had ridden round the lists, and had taken up his place again with perfect modesty next to Master Meaux, young Trenchard, and Master

Oglander, the only survivors of their party who could ride again.

CHAPTER XV.
HOW THE COCKEREL CROWED.

It was yet early in the afternoon, for the last courses had been finished much more speedily than was anticipated.

By the laws of the tilt, it was incumbent on the remaining knights-challengers to meet each one of the other knights who had not been unhorsed, if they desired to go on with the joust. Each of the knights who was unhorsed was disqualified from taking further part in that day's tilting.

Sir Alain de Kervignac, therefore, was left to encounter alone each of the other esquires who survived from the previous jousting. The fourth knight-challenger had not yet appeared. If he arrived before his companion was defeated, or before sundown, he might take part in the tilt.

After a little consultation with his comrades and the Marshal of the Lists, and a notification from Master Meaux that he and his companions demanded a completion of the courses, it was proclaimed that the right valiant, very hardy, and most illustrious knight, Alain de Kervignac, would tilt in succession with each of his opponents. This was delightful news to the crowd, and they cheered him vociferously, while the Captain of the Wight and Yolande sent him their greetings by the Marshal of the Lists.

It was now a little after four o'clock. The sun would not set for another two hours. The other challenger might arrive at any moment, and the chances would then be a little more equal.

Of the assailants of Sir Alain de Kervignac only two could really be reckoned formidable. Master Meaux and Ralph Lisle, from their having already tilted successfully, as well as from their greater bulk and weight, were dangerous antagonists; and although Sir Richard Cornwall had been unhorsed by an unfortunate accident, yet it was quite sufficiently evident that Master Meaux was a very formidable man-at-arms; and as for Ralph, it was abundantly manifest what he could do, in spite of his youth and inexperience.

While these preliminaries were going on, refreshments were handed round, and the competitors were regaling themselves with copious draughts of wine and hippocras. But Ralph had only taken a very moderate draught, having been

warned by Sir John Trenchard not to take much refreshment of any kind while there was an immediate prospect of more work before him, as it was likely to unsteady the eye and hand.

Bowerman's mortification at his defeat was rendered tenfold more bitter by the success of Ralph. If he hated him before, his hatred had now become ruthless and implacable, and being naturally of an ungovernable disposition, he became utterly reckless of how he expressed or concealed his rage.

The all-engrossing thought was how could he injure this swaggering upstart, this minion of fortune, this stripling successful only because of the favouritism of his antagonist?

"Don't tell me," said Bowerman fiercely to the stolid Newenhall, for the twentieth time, "don't tell me that it was not all thought on beforehand. That giddy Yolande had got the Breton jackanapes, when she gave him her favour, to promise he would be gentle to her cousin, out of kindness to her family, and then, of course, he got a fall before that blundering lout. But he shall have a fall before I've done," he added savagely.

To all these fierce threats Newenhall only stolidly grunted, until at last Bowerman's fury, eager for an object immediately to vent itself upon, turned upon the luckless Willie, and hitting him a furious blow with the haft of his broken spear, which he still held in his hand, "Pig's Eyes" was knocked off his horse, to the great delight of the bystanders.

"You egg, you, why don't you answer sensibly instead of grunting?" said Bowerman, as he struck Newenhall.

Somewhat refreshed by this exhibition of his superiority, for "Pig's Eyes" was too much bumped by his clanging armour, and felt too dispirited, to retaliate, Bowerman sat on his horse amid the crowd that had gradually encroached upon the space round the lists, outside of which those knights who were disqualified from taking further part in the jousts were standing, or sitting on their horses.

There was a decided movement of the crowd going on, and the heads of the people near the tent set apart for the knights-challengers' use, were all turned towards the pavilion.

Bowerman turned also to see what was passing. All he could see was the head of a tall man, half concealed under the folds of a voluminous hood which he wore, not unlike that worn by the jesters of the time, and very raggedly dressed. A common man, looking like a sailor, but of very powerful build, and with a swaggering expression of utterly reckless daring, was leading after him a horse, big-boned and vicious looking, and which bit at the crowd as it was led among them. On the horse's back was tied a large bundle, and two very strong lances were carried by another man of nearly as truculent appearance as that of his fellow. They were both armed with stout bills, bows and arrows, and axes stuck

in broad leathern belts, strapped round their cowhide jerkins, which were undressed, and with the hair still adhering in several places.

The men forced their way up to the gate which led into the railed-off enclosure round the challengers' pavilion, and which was decorated with the four banners and shields of arms of the knights, excepting that the shield and banner of the fourth knight were perfectly plain, with no blazon on them. Arrived at the entrance, the leading man spoke a few words to the yeoman on guard, who looked very much astonished, and after eyeing the ragged individual suspiciously, remained erect and firm before the entrance, but beckoned to one of his comrades to come and speak with him.

The result of their conference was that this latter went off, and in a few minutes returned with the Marshal and Herald.

The ragged man awaited them with perfect composure, and while they were looking at him curiously, he saluted them with easy confidence, and handed the Herald a paper.

This official opened it, and scrutinised it carefully. He then in an amazed way handed it to the Marshal, who read it over very carefully also. This done, they conferred for a few moments apart, and then the Marshal said gravely,–

"Sir, will it please you to enter? The jousts are not yet over."

The ragged man bowed to the official ceremoniously, and bid the varlets who followed him lead the horse into the enclosure, which he also entered, and disappeared in the tent.

"'Tis the packhorse and baggage of the unknown knight," said one of the bystanders.

"Well, to be sure, but he do have odd varlets! and 'tis a shabby turn out."

"But where's the knight?" asked another.

"Oh, he's follering, surely!"

"Then he'd best look sharp, for there's the Breton knight going to begin."

All eyes were now turned upon the lists again.

The Marshal and Herald had returned. After speaking a few words to the Captain of the Wight, and handing him a note which the ragged man had given them, they took up their positions, and once more proclaimed silence.

The Captain of the Wight unfolded the scrap of paper, and with evident difficulty read the contents. His brow contracted, and a deep flush passed over his face.

"By St Nicholas, but 'tis too bold! He presumes over much on my knightly courtesy and the generosity of my nature," he muttered.

And now the mail-clad figures had taken up their positions.

The cautioning words came, soon followed by the order to go, and they rode for each other. The Breton well knew the importance of avoiding any catastrophe.

Being a smaller and far lighter cavalier than the heavy man-at-arms opposed to him, he determined to husband his strength. He tilted therefore in such a way as to receive the least possible shock from his antagonist's spear, while he was little careful of doing him any harm, so long only as he maintained his own seat.

Being very skilful, Sir Alain de Kervignac attained his object completely, riding rather wide of the barrier, and so receiving the lance thrust of his adversary more athwart than directly on his breastplate.

The first two courses were ridden with no damage to either, but in the last one the Breton was struck so fiercely by Master Meaux that a part of his vambrace was bent back, and had it not broken off he must have been unhorsed; as it was, he recovered his seat to the admiration of every one, and rode back to the end of the lists, waving his spear aloft.

It was now young Trenchard's turn. No scruples of courtesy interfered any longer: the Breton was tilting for honour and to win the prize.

Changing his tactics, he charged the young man with fierce ardour, and the poor youth was hurled backwards over the crupper.

"Alack, poor lad!" said Mistress Bremeskete, "but he did right manfully."

"Now, surely that weakly Master Oglander will never try his luck?"

But it seemed otherwise, for he rode out to take up his position.

At this moment there was a loud murmur from the crowd. Shouts of derision and astonishment were heard on all sides.

"Mercy on us, what a rusty suit of armour! Surely he might have spent a little more money on his outside!" said one.

"'Tis one he's fished out o' the sea, and forgot to scrape the whelks off!" cried another.

"But he's surely no knight–only a poor hobbler," said Humphrey.

"Nay, he's a knight, sure enough; look at his gold spurs, and the collar round his neck–why, 'tis the 'suns' of York. He'd best be well befriended if he wears that; who can he be?" said Tom o' Kingston, eyeing the martial figure, firm seat, and knightly bearing of the new-comer, who, in spite of his somewhat old armour, which had been furbished up as brightly as possible, but which long use and many rough campaigns had soiled with rust and dints beyond all the labour of a diligent esquire to eradicate, looked every inch a tough man-at-arms.

"'Tis a powerful vicious-looking beast he rides, too; but where can he have come from? I never saw him go into the tent. The only man as I see go in was that mountebank sort of chap in that old hood," said Humphrey.

"Well, 'tis a parlous strange matter! We shall see something though," answered Tom o' Kingston.

One of the sailor-looking men accompanied him, carrying another strong spear. The other man had gone into the crowd again, and soon returned leading

a girl by the hand; and, elbowing his way to the front, he secured a good position for his young companion and himself close to the lists, and not far from the Judges' gallery.

"Why, Lord Captain," said Yolande, "there's the little damsel with the large eyes we met at Appuldurcombe Priory."

Lord Woodville looked in the direction indicated, and was immediately moved in the same unaccountable way he had been at the time when he first saw her. "The same eyes, the very same eyes and brow," he murmured.

The "Rusty Knight," as the crowd called him, cantered to the end of the lists, saluted his companions, to whom he was apparently quite unknown, and also bowed gravely to the Captain of the Wight. He was entirely encased in armour, and the heavy tilting helmet hid his head and face completely.

Sir Alain de Kervignac was just preparing to tilt with young Oglander when the "Rusty Knight" entered the lists. He saluted the new comer, and offered him his place, which "he of the rusty armour" declined.

"Don't be rough on weakly Johnny," called out some of the crowd, as they saw the Breton prepare to charge him, but their kindly remonstrances were of little use, beyond serving to unnerve the youth they were intended to aid. His spear feebly struck the shield of his antagonist, while at the same time he received that of the Sire de Kervignac on his helmet, and was unseated immediately.

It was now Ralph's turn, and as he rode out to take up his place, the interest of the crowd was very great.

"'Tis only 'rusty irons' you've got to tackle, Master Lisle."

"Hit him where they've been a-scouring the whelks off of him," called out another; "the iron's sure to be thin there. You'll soon skewer him."

"Silence, you caitiffs!" called out the Master of the Lists, "or I'll have you whipped. Sergeant, smite one of those scurvy knaves over the costard."

This produced tranquillity for a short time, and the increasing excitement helped to keep the crowd quiet.

"Well now, 'tis just like David fighting Goliath!" cried Mistress Bremeskete, in admiration.

"Maybe," said Master Paxhulle; "but Goliath's got parlous rusty harness; and as for David, we can't see if he be ruddy or of a fair countenance; besides, I can't mind that ever they fought a horseback–"

"Nay, marry, what do that matter? we know Master Lisle's face is ruddy enough inside–"

"Oh, ay! I don't doubt. We's mostly ruddy inside, but David was ruddy outside."

"Marry! and good lack for your poor wits, Master Paxhulle! I don't mean his insides, but inside his helmet–but look at that little damsel with the large

eyes. What's she doing?"

"Which? What, that little wench next the rough-looking varlet there?"

"Ay, that's her–she's making signs to Master Lisle surely."

"Well, now, so it seems. But he don't take no notice."

"What a state she is getting in! she'll begin crying soon. Poor little thing, be there no one to notice it for her?"

"Why, you see, Master Lisle is that cased in in his iron harness he couldn't see Bevis o' Hampton himself, or the giant Ascupart neither, if they was i' this crowd, so how is it likely he'd see a small wench like that?"

"Couldn't you, Master Paxhulle, go and jog his arm?"

"What, and get rapped over the costard by the Marshal's men?–not I."

"Well then I shall have to ask Master Tom o' Kingston. How fine he do look, to be sure, in his armour."

"Oh, I'll go, Mistress Bremeskete, with right good will, too, if it's to pleasure you; but what shall I say?"

"Tell him a little maid in the crowd is wishful to speak with him."

"Well, but I don't know as how that'll do much good. There's a good many wenches i' the crowd as 'ud like to speak with so fine a gallant as Master Lisle; but I'll try, if it's to please you, Mistress Bremeskete."

So saying, with much difficulty Master Paxhulle forced his way down to the other end of the lists, and requested one of the yeoman on guard to tell Master Lisle's varlet that a young wench in the crowd was making earnest signs to him.

"Tell him," added Master Paxhulle, "she's holding up a little glove, and waving it at him."

Humphrey was soon after seen speaking to Ralph, who instantly remembered the note and the enclosure he had received.

"Give me that glove I gave you to mind for me, Humphrey," said Ralph.

When he had taken it from his varlet, he looked in the direction where the little girl was, and waved the tiny glove in answer; then he bent down his head so that his esquire could place it in his helmet. This done, he sat erect, awaiting the order to charge. It was not long in coming.

"Are you ready?" Down came the spears. "Are you ready? *Laissez aller.*" And away the two steel-clad figures sped to meet in the rude shock of the tilt.

"That knight don't mean to get unhorsed yet awhile," said Tom o' Kingston, who had been watching him narrowly.

"No, nor he don't mean to do Master Lisle any harm. Look how wide he rode, and how lightly he smote him," said Humphrey.

Bowerman was in a furious passion.

"What do they all mean by letting that upstart have it all his own way? Why, that 'Rusty one' could knock him all to bits an he liked. What is it that lets

him from doing it? It is a vile plot to win favour."

But he had no one to listen to him now, for Newenhall, disgusted at his treatment, had moved away.

Ralph rode his three courses manfully with the unknown knight. However hard he strove to unseat his antagonist, it was quite clear that "the Rusty one," as the mob called him, did not mean to tilt in earnest with Ralph. This evident partiality for the young favourite of the crowd evoked a feeling of sympathy for the unknown knight.

"If he's rusty, I can see he's trusty," said Master Paxhulle, attempting a feeble joke.

"An they didn't make your outside very bright, you've got a good heart inside, I can see," said Mistress Bremeskete approvingly.

Fortune seemed now to smile on the assailants, for in the next course Sir Alain de Kervignac was unhorsed by the superior weight and freshness of Master Meaux. His fall was greeted by loud shouts of applause, mingled with consoling remarks, such as "There's no shame to you, Master Breton, you've done right manfully; a horse and man can't go on for ever. Never did knight do better than you've done." To all which, Sir Alain, who had mounted his horse again, bowed his acknowledgments.

Master Meaux and Ralph Lisle were now left to tilt against the new comer.

"Let Master Meaux tackle him," shouted the crowd. "You've done enough, Master Lisle."

After a little consultation, it was agreed that the unknown knight should encounter Master Meaux. The interest again became very intense.

"'Twill be a tough bout this time, but I'd lay odds on Master Meaux."

"I dunno, Master Tom, 'tis a big 'oss the other rides, and he's a good lance. Ah! he's off. Body o' me, what a crash!"

There was a universal shout from the spectators, of amazement and disappointment.

"The Rusty Knight," as he was ignominiously called, had entirely changed his tactics, riding closely along the barrier, and urging his large horse to its utmost speed. With helm well down behind his shield, and his body bent forward, he struck Master Meaux a fierce blow with his powerful lance; there was no resisting the vigour of that thrust, and the weight of horse and man propelling it. The blow was aimed at the right shoulder, and blunt as the spear-point was, it broke through the steel pauldron, or shoulder-piece, and, driving in the gusset of chain mail, inflicted a severe wound, carrying the unfortunate Master Meaux over the saddle backwards.

The success was as complete as it was unexpected. No one, not even the most experienced knight there, had any idea that the new comer would have

displayed such skill and enormous strength. For to unhorse a man-at-arms of the weight and address of Master Meaux, required a very great exercise of both qualities. There now only remained one survivor on each side. There could be no doubt of the issue, after such an exhibition of power.

"'Tis the best lance I have seen," said Sir John Trenchard.

"Ay, he's a stout lance, but I have seen a better," said the Captain of the Wight, smiling; "but let us see what he will do now."

To the astonishment of everyone, the unknown knight rode the next three courses exactly as he had previously done in his last encounter with Ralph, only in the last round he carried off the little glove on the point of his lance, which fluttered in Ralph's helmet.

As this closed the day's proceedings, the knights who had taken part in the tilting had now to ride round the lists, with their faces uncovered, that all might see who had done bravely. There was great curiosity to see the face of the unknown knight, but he, after having spoken a few words to the Marshal of the Lists, who communicated with Lord Woodville, did not open his visor, to the great disappointment of the crowd.

"Certes, 'tis like Sir Launcelot, or Sir Tristram, when they came among press of knights disguised," said Yolande; "I marvel who he is! Do you know, Lord Captain?"

"'Tis a custom the laws of the tourney allow," said the Lord Woodville, "so long as the Herald and the Judges know; but they are bound to secrecy."

This was a very evasive answer, but it was the only one Yolande was likely to get.

As the competitors rode round the lists–such of them, that is, as could appear–there were loud shouts of applause for the two Breton knights, Master Meaux, and, above all, for Ralph Lisle.

The strange knight would have received applause, had not his refusal to comply with the usual custom created a feeling of resentment in the crowd.

"I don't know but that he bean't as crusty as he is rusty," said Master Paxhulle.

"Maybe his face isn't that pleasant that we'd be any the better for seeing it," said Mistress Bremeskete, with a toss of the head.

As Ralph Lisle passed the place where the little girl was standing smiling at him with a happy smile, he looked at her, curious to discover who she could be, and was startled at seeing in her the same poor beggar maid whose old father he had befriended at Thruxton, when he met them as he was flying his gerfalcon for the first time.

She was holding up the other tiny glove, the fellow to the one he had worn in his helmet, and which he did not know he had lost.

"I am so glad," said the little girl, as he rode past.

CHAPTER XVI.
HOW THE COCKEREL WAS PETTED.

Ralph Lisle had now reached the happiest hour of his life, and, in common with all humanity, he discovered that no happiness existed without alloy.

As he rode round the lists, somewhat embarrassed at the shouts of applause with which he was greeted, the openly expressed opinions of the more matronly part of the fair sex, and the less public, but scarcely veiled admiration of the younger members of that all-powerful half of humanity, Bowerman, who rode next to him, kept saying, in a tone of intense scorn and hatred,–

"Certes, Lisle, you are an impudent braggart, an you take all this balderdash to yourself. You know full well you'd never have gotten off as you did had you not been shamefully favoured."

Ralph felt very angry. He was deeply mortified, for he could not help knowing that there was great truth in the assertion, the power and address of the unknown knight having been clearly proved in his joust with Master Meaux.

"You can't say it was by favour I unhorsed the Sire de la Roche Guemené."

"Ay, but I can, and do. 'Twas that minx of a cousin of yours who brought that about."

"Bowerman," said Ralph, his face flushing up, and his mouth working, "if you dare to call my cousin a minx, I'll beat you to a jelly."

"Marry, will you? Forsooth, this braggart is growing apace! I shall call whom I like what name I like; and if you think you are going to stop me, you had better try. So there, master upstart!" and Bowerman snapped his fingers in Ralph's face in utter contempt and malignant defiance.

As they were exchanging these hasty words, they were passing, on their way out of the lists, the little girl and her rough attendant. This latter eyed Bowerman significantly, and seeing that he did not notice him, for both Ralph and Bowerman were too heated with their words to take notice of anyone in the crowd, the man nudged the leg of the latter as he passed, and so drew his attention to him.

As soon as Bowerman saw who it was, he changed colour.

"Hullo, my Trojan, what do you want?" he said, assuming a careless air.

"Take this, 'twill tell its own tale," said the man, handing Bowerman a dirty scrap of paper.

Meanwhile Ralph had noticed the little girl, and seeing how pleased she seemed, he reined up his horse and spoke to her.

"Well, little maid, and where have you left your old father?"

An amused expression passed over the child's face, and her eyes shone with mischief, as she replied,–

"Ah, poor old man! He's so infirm, think you, as to be scarce able to walk? Well, 'twas very kind of you to lend us your pony, and you will never be sorry for it."

"Where do you live?" asked Ralph, surprised at her voice, and trying to remember where he had heard it.

"Why, you know you saw me at Appuldurcombe Priory."

"Marry, so I did, but I was busy with my Lord Captain then."

"Ay, and with some one else, too. No marvel you had no eyes for me."

This was a remark Ralph did not appreciate.

"And what are you doing there?"

"I'm being brought up by the nuns. But, do you know, Sister Agnes–'twas she who brought out the hippocras–has been ill ever since you came? She did nothing but sigh and weep, and weep and sigh, from the time she got in till now. The only thing that comforts her is when I am with her, and I ought never to have left her to-day, only father sent orders for me to come here."

"Why, your poor old father sending orders to the Prioress of Appuldurcombe! that is a likely tale," said Ralph, smiling incredulously.

"And who do you think my father is?"

"Why, that poor old beggar whom I put on my pony, sure enough."

The girl broke out into a merry laugh.

"Like enough, like enough," she said; and then went on in a different tone,–"So you found the Hermit of St Catherine's, did you? 'Twas a rare foggy night, wasn't it?"

"Why, what do you know about that?" cried Ralph, in astonishment.

But again the only answer was a merry, mischievous laugh, and before Ralph, who did not like being mystified, could ask her any more questions, the rough man who was taking care of her, having finished his conversation with Bowerman, came up, and led her away, giving Ralph a peculiar look as he passed.

The crowd had now become a disorganised mob. The lists were invaded, and children were picking up the broken splinters of the gaily-painted lances, or gazing in awe at the fine ladies who were being escorted from the pavilion. The great centre of attraction was the tent of the knights-challengers. Every one hoped to obtain a glimpse of the mysterious knight as he came out, but in this

they were disappointed; no one came out except those who were well known, and at last, after waiting in hopeful curiosity for some time, the people gave it up, and went off in search of other amusements.

"Certes, Master Ralph," said Dicky Cheke, who met that successful youth as he was dismounting in the courtyard, amid the plaudits of the garrison and the congratulations of the visitors, who were standing about waiting for the evening festivities, which would shortly begin, preluded by a state banquet in the Captain's hall,–"certes, Master Ralph, you are in luck's way; but why that should make a little wench in the crowd pinch my arm, I can't tell. 'Twas the oddest thing! The little quean asked me if I was your friend. I stared at her, and said,–'Ay, marry; but I didn't see that gave her a right to pinch my arm.' Whereupon she laughed. 'What are you laughing for?' said I. 'Because you're such a merry little boy,' said she. 'Grammercy, little girl,' said I. Whereupon she began to laugh more than ever; and I had to say I'd send the leech from the castle to give her something to stop her going on like that before she made an end of it; and when she did, she finished up with,–'Oh, do let me tell you what I wanted to, before I die of laughing at such a merry little tom-tit.' There! I solemnly declare she called me a tom-tit, though, certes, I doubt if you'd credit it."

"Well, what's all this about? when are you coming to the point?" said Ralph.

"Marry! that is just what I said to the little wench, and she did nothing but laugh. At last she quieted down, and said, if I was your friend, I was to be sure and look after you and Bowerman. She said she did not like that boy–fancy Bowerman's joy! I'll tell him she called him a boy; and there I agreed with her. She seemed to think Bowerman meant to do you a mischief, and i'faith I shouldn't marvel. 'Twas he who had something to do with laming Black Tom, I'll wager; and he's as mad with rage and spite against you as 'tis possible to be without choking. I only wish he would! So now, young man, I shall look after you. Don't be down-hearted; I am near you; I'll take care of you. But who'd have thought it! She called me a tom-tit! Dicky Cheke a tom-tit! Richard Cheke, page-in-waiting to the high and mighty Captain of the Wight, tom-tit! Good lack! good lack!"

"Well, 'tis a comfort you'll take care of me, in sooth," said Ralph, as he went up the narrow winding stairs to his room, which he shared with Dicky, and which was next that of Bowerman, at the top of a turret overlooking the courtyard.

Humphrey followed his young master, and unbuckled his armour.

"Marry! Master Ralph, what'll they say down Thruxton way?"

"'Tis a piece of luck, Humphrey, and I can't claim any credit in the tilt. But why do you think that unknown knight showed me such favour?"

"Beshrew me if I know; but 'tis clear enough he did let you off. Well, no matter! I'faith, all the better, say I. You'll be sure to have the ruby ring: I heard every one say so."

"Do you think I shall have the prize?" cried Ralph, astonished and delighted.

"Ay, marry, do I! That rusty one won't have it, albeit he deserves it. They always give it to a young one like you, if they can in reason."

"Well, I almost wish I may not get it," said Ralph thoughtfully.

"And why, Master Ralph?"

"Because of course I don't deserve it, and 'twill make Bowerman more jealous of me than ever, and he will have cause, certes, for saying I have been favoured."

"Oh, never fear him! You take my advice, and give him a good trouncing. You can easily do it, and he'd be all the better for it. Not but what he's a spiteful lad; and 'tisn't only me as thinks he knows more about Black Tom going lame than he'd like any one to say."

"Have you heard who that knight was?"

"Ay, there's a many as knows. Some says 'tis Sir Robert Clifford, him as is a known Yorkist, and who's been looked for for some time past. Others say 'tis my Lord Lovell, who's never been heard of since Stoke field. There's some as say even 'tis King Richard himself, got well of the wounds as laid him low at Bosworth. I'faith, there's no end to the tales they all swear is the truth."

"And what do you think, Humphrey?"

"Well, I doesn't just know what to think; but I'se sure he be a Yorkist, because of his collar. But then I can't think why the Captain didn't have him placed in safe keeping. 'Twill look ugly at Court, I'm thinking, and the King won't be best pleased when he hears of it."

By this time Ralph had stripped off all his armour, and was dressing himself in his gay new suit, which set off his well-knit, graceful figure to perfection. As he finished, and Humphrey was admiring his young master, the step of somebody ascending the narrow stairs could be heard, and soon afterwards Bowerman entered his room and shut his door.

When Ralph came into the hall he was almost dazzled by the brilliancy of the scene. He found himself the centre of attraction, and it would have been strange if his head had not been a little turned by the attentions he received. While standing in the lower part of the hall, Dicky Cheke, who was now splendidly dressed, but in the livery of a page, came up to him with an air of great importance.

"Lisle," he said, in a loud tone, and looking superciliously at the guests who were talking to Ralph, "the Lord Captain of the Wight is wishful to discourse with thee."

This was a high honour; and Ralph, bowing to the worthy esquire to whom he was talking, followed Dicky to the dais at the end of the hall, where Sir Nicholas Wadham was talking to the Sire de Kervignac, and Yolande was gaily

chatting to the Captain of the Wight and the other Breton knight. Ralph felt very shy as he came up, all eyes following his splendidly-dressed, graceful figure. He held his plumed velvet bonnet in his hand, and his wavy brown hair hung in luxuriant masses on each side of his frank, boyish face.

Lord Woodville greeted him very kindly.

"My fair esquire," he said, "I am right joyous at thy gallant bearing. Thou wilt make a good knight ere long; and albeit thou hast won thy fame by the favour of thine adversary, yet thou hast shown to all men how well thou canst tilt, and what promise there is hereafter."

"*Ma foi!*" said the Sire de la Roche Guemené, shrugging his shoulders, and smiling; "I vould zat ze damoiseau had shown me a leetle favour. It vas a rude knock he gave me."

"Cousin Ralph," said Yolande, smiling at him with her sunny, radiant smile, "I am full glad thou art so puissant a chevalier, and right proud am I that thou and I bear the same name. 'Tis the noblest name in the island, and full nobly hast thou held up its fame."

Ralph could only look intensely pleased; he could not speak a word. He simply gazed at his cousin with eyes brimful of admiration and affection.

Seeing his confusion, the Captain of the Wight said,–

"Noble Judges, we are all here now. To whom shall we award the prize in this day's tilt?"

Sir Nicholas Wadham gave his opinion in favour of the unknown knight, but the Captain of the Wight produced a scrap of paper, part of which was torn off in which it was declared, on behalf of the unknown knight, that he tilted for no prize, looking for a higher guerdon and more deadly tilt a entrance as his reward hereafter.

"That, then, settles the matter," said Sir John Trenchard, "for the only other man-at-arms who was not unhorsed was Master Lisle."

"Then, my noble friends, I may take it that we all agree the prize belongs to Master Lisle?"

The others assenting, the Captain of the Wight made a signal to the trumpeters, who gave a prolonged flourish, after which, amid dead silence, the Captain briefly declared the opinion of the Court, praising the courtesy and generosity of the Breton nobles, and significantly declaring that "he knew all men there were right wishful to requite courtesy by courtesy, and would fain send back over the seas such a goodly company as would show their Breton kinsmen how greatly they valued their friendship and good fellowship against their common enemy of France," a sentiment which was received with gravity by the older knights and esquires present, but was rapturously applauded by the younger men. After this Lord Woodville handed to Yolande the ruby ring in its casket, declaring Ralph

Lisle to have duly won it by his skill and hardy prowess.

There was prolonged cheering as Lord Woodville finished, and the shouts were deafening as Ralph knelt down and received the ring from his cousin, who handed it him with a sweet smile and gentle words. He took it rapturously, and stammered a few words of thanks to her, the queen of the tourney, and to the Breton nobles who had given the prize; and then, before rising from his knee, he gave it back to his cousin, asking her to keep it in remembrance of that day, and for his sake. Yolande took the trinket with evident pleasure, and a well-feigned air of surprise, thanking Ralph cordially, who rose from his kneeling position, and was about to retire, when old Sir William Lisle, who was standing by, a smile of pleasure softening his grim and determined features, said,–

"By'r Lady, Ralph, thou art a damoiseau in sooth, or thou wouldest know there is another prize thou canst claim, an thou likest, and the guerdon, by all the laws of the tourney, may not be withholden."

Ralph looked up with a puzzled air, while Yolande held down her fair head, and pouted with a half-vexed air.

"Nay, father, cousin Ralph knows full well what is best to be done. Go, fair cousin, 'tis a custom better honoured in the breach than the observance."

"Humph!" chuckled Sir William. "An thou callest it by that–"

But Lord Woodville hastily interrupted, well knowing the humour of the old knight.

"Master Lisle," he said, smiling, "Sir William means that by the laws of the tourney and chivalry the winner the most laud and guerdon may claim a favour from the Queen of the Tilt, which she may not refuse. In other words thou mayest–"

"Nay, nay, my Lord Captain," broke in Yolande, "thou hast said enough. Cousin Ralph, the ceremony is over," she added hastily, and with a heightened colour; "thou art keeping all the company from their converse and pastime."

Ralph stood looking on somewhat abashed, and at last, making a low bow, and dropping once more on one knee, he gracefully took his cousin's fair hand, and imprinted a kiss of respectful love and homage. Then rising, amid the hum of congratulation from the company, he retired into the body of the hall.

"Well, times are changed," said Sir Nicholas Wadham; "I'd never kiss a fair maid's hand if I could have her lips, and cheek, for the asking or taking."

"Then you are a ruder man than I took you for, Sir Nicholas, and I shall tell Lady Wadham what you have said. I am glad my cousin hath learnt better ways," said Yolande, tossing her head, and giving Sir Nicholas a severe look.

The guests were now all assembled, and the banquet was ready. A prolonged blast on the silver trumpet of Lord Woodville's trumpet-major announced the beginning of the feast, and soon the hum of voices gave place to the clatter

of knives and jingle of plate. There was the usual medley of fish, flesh, and fowl served up in the quaint fashion of the time, and succeeding each other, with fantastic sweets intervening, after the mode of the age. Subtleties and jellies, baked meats and roast; soups of divers sorts, and some resembling rather sweet syrups than the modern soups, rapidly succeeded each other, or adorned the long tables set down the hall, while gaily-dressed serving-men and varlets handed the dishes and washed up the plates, at a large table or dresser at one end. In a gallery above, the musicians played tunes both gay and plaintive, according to the taste of the age, for fair ladies were supposed to be quite as much pleased with the sufferings of their knights as with their valiant deeds, and a gentle knight who could not suffer becomingly, had not learnt a very important part of his education in the court of chivalrous romance. In the intervals of the music a jongleur recited the adventures of Sir Tristram and the fair Yseult, while the jester belonging to the household of the Captain of the Wight interrupted him from time to time with broad jokes, dry remarks, or riddles which he answered himself.

After the banquet, the tables were hastily cleared, while most of the company adjourned to the castle-yard and sauntered round the noble quadrangle, where the soft light of the moon threw quaint shadows down over the grass and walls of the castle.

The minstrels took up their position on a platform near the wellhouse, and the gentlemen and ladies paired off in readiness for the dancing to begin. The music soon struck up, and away the couples went in the stately "Pas de Brabant."

Ralph was standing in a state of dreamy joy watching the graceful figures of the ladies, before whom each chevalier bent the knee as he revolved in the intricacies of the dance. He was thinking how lucky he was, and how kind and lovely Yolande looked as she danced with sweet grace in a set with the Captain of the Wight for her partner, and the Sire de la Roche Guemené, with a pretty girl dressed in exquisite taste, as their *vis-à-vis*.

As Ralph stood looking on, Newenhall came up to him.

"Lisle, there's a young damsel wishes to speak with thee. She's outside the main gate, and cannot come in. Jock Osborn's sergeant of the guard; he'll let thee out, an there's any hindrance."

Ralph's thoughts instantly flew to the events of the tilt. Somehow this little girl seemed to have a strange influence on his destiny.

He went to the gate. The deep shadows of the huge towers were impenetrable in their opaqueness. He stepped out of the bright moonlight, his graceful figure gleaming in its gay attire, and flashing in the silver light, before he disappeared into the black shadow. The guards were keeping but a lazy watch. He pushed aside the little wicket-gate in the huge iron-studded door, and stepped out into the blackness, rendered all the blacker by the brilliancy of the landscape

beyond. The shadow of the two noble towers and main ward was thrown clear and distinct across the drawbridge and road outside, while all beyond shone and sparkled in the moonbeams. A silver haze spread over the valley in the distance, and the sounds of music and revelry gaily vibrated behind.

Ralph could see no one. He looked into the shadow of the great gate. There was a sound there–a faint rustle.

"Little maid, is that you?" said Ralph.

A sharp spasm, a burning pain, was the sudden answer, and Ralph knew no more.

[image]

A SHARP SPASM WAS THE SUDDEN ANSWER.

Half a minute after, and Dicky Cheke sprang through the door.

"Ralph," he cried, "Ralph, come back, 'tis a trap!" but all he saw was a figure disappearing in the silver haze over the brow of the steep hill.

CHAPTER XVII.

HOW THEY WERE AT FAULT.

As Dicky Cheke darted after the figure which disappeared in the mist, he stumbled over some obstacle on the ground, and nearly fell. Recovering himself hastily, he stooped down to see what it was. The moon had risen higher, and the black edge of the shadow of the castle was receding before the silver light.

"Holy Saints!" gasped Dicky, as he stooped down, and saw with horror that what had caused him to tumble was the body of Ralph Lisle, the gleam of his gay dress plainly telling who it was. "I have come too late."

Then springing up, he called to the guard to bring a light, and run for a leech. The shouts of the boy soon brought assistance. Three archers on guard hurried out of the gate, carrying a lighted cresset with them. By the lurid glare of the smoky light Dicky, who was kneeling down by his insensible friend, could see a dark stain marring the rich colours of the tunic, and a black pool under the right side of the prostrate boy.

"He's been hard stricken," said one of the men.

"Here's been foul play. But who'd hurt Master Lisle?" said another.

"Now, none of your talking," said Dicky. "Get some water and cloths." At the same time he tore up his fine white linen tabard and laid the pieces over the small puncture from which the blood was welling in ominous streams. "I' faith, the poor lad will bleed to death, an the leech comes not."

"Here he comes," said the other archer, as a tall figure in a long fur gown came out of the wicket-gate, attended by several others, among whom the weather-beaten face of Sir John Trenchard was visible.

"How's this? how's this?" he inquired peremptorily. "How came the lad out here?"

No one answered.

"Which of you men was on guard?"

"Please your worship, 'twas my guard," said one of the men, knowing that Sir John Trenchard would be sure to find out, and thinking it best to make a virtue of necessity.

"Then how came this about?" said the Seneschal sternly.

"Marry, Sir John, 'tis more than I know. 'Tis parlous dark under the gateway, and belike he slipped out while my back was turned."

"Get you to the guard-room. There'll be more of this anon," said Sir John sharply. Then turning to the leech, he asked, "Is the boy dead?"

"Nay, Sir John; 'tis a deep wound, but not mortal. There's no artery severed, as thou mayest see by the darker colour of the blood. Had it been of a scarlet colour, 'twould have been useless for me to come. The flow is already stayed. We must get him to his bed, but that gently."

While the archers were raising Ralph with great care, Sir John Trenchard closely questioned Dicky Cheke as to how he came to find Ralph, and elicited from the page how the mysterious warning had been given him by the little girl, and how Bowerman had been designated as cherishing vengeful designs on Ralph.

"Where is Bowerman?" said Sir John Trenchard.

"Nay, I have seen him not," answered Dicky Cheke.

"Bid the pages be called to my apartment," said Sir John to one of the yeomen who attended on him. Then turning to Dicky, he said, "And who is this little wench?"

"I know not, Sir John. I never saw her before to-day."

"Hast thou any cause to suspect any one? Thou mayest speak freely; 'tis a case will have to be carefully inquired into."

Dicky Cheke hesitated; he had the natural disinclination all honest, manly natures have to incriminate any one, or harbour a thought that might do an injustice to another. Like all the rest of the garrison, he strongly suspected that

Bowerman was at the bottom of the cruel trick which had been played on Black Tom, and he more than mistrusted him in this present case.

"Well, Master Cheke, hast thou no answer to give? 'Tis a grave matter. Thou wilt have to answer. Dost thou mistrust Eustace Bowerman?"

"Yes, Sir John," said Dicky, slowly and reluctantly.

"Ay, marry, and so do I. But we shall see anon."

They had now entered the courtyard. At the sight of the little procession–the four stalwart men walking in time, and the pale face of the insensible boy–the dancers all stopped, and came crowding round; but at a word from Sir John Trenchard, and a polite request from the Captain of the Wight to continue their festivity, the guests resumed their dancing, only Yolande insisted on going into the hall with her injured cousin, and old Sir William Lisle attended her. The leech now carefully examined the wound, and his verdict was anxiously awaited.

The usual remedies were resorted to for restoring animation, and, to the joy of Yolande, after a little quiver of the eyelids, they slowly opened, and Ralph once more looked upon the world.

The leech, seeing that all immediate danger was over, and that the hæmorrhage was yielding to the treatment, directed a bed to be made ready in a room adjoining the hall, and then dilated upon the excellencies of his remedies, to the great impatience of Yolande.

"But, Master Leech, will he get well? Is it a dangerous wound?"

"Nay, fair Mistress Lisle, science answereth not such bold questions as these but with silence. To get well is in the hands of God; we can but speak of how science and medicine knoweth what is the best course to adopt. 'Tis well known to those admitted to the occult arcana of the heavenly influences that the celestial bodies exercise a strange influence on our poor bodies of clay. Sol draweth unto him during the day the blood of our systems, gentle Mater Nox appeaseth the heat of our sanguine flow, and settleth the blood in our extremities. As at the third hour the bile subsideth, so that its acrid properties be not blended with the flow of the blood, so also at the second hour the atrabilis subsides, and in the eventime the phlegm abateth–"

"Marry, Master Surgeon Barber, thy discourse causeth my head to buzz. Tell me plainly an thou canst, is my cousin in danger of death?"

"Noble lady, to give a short answer becometh not the dignity of my art. There are hopes in that chaste Luna is in the ascendant, and Æsculapius ruleth the seventh house, that what is natheless a deadly thrust may yield to my remedies. But as the learned Averroes–than whom my old master, the worshipful Master Thomas Morstede, knew no–"

"Beshrew me, Master Barber, thou wilt drive me mad!" cried the impatient Yolande. "Canst thou not answer me plainly, instead of talking thy jaw-breaking

jargon?"

But the leech or barber was incensed at this want of respect, especially coming from a young lady, and he briefly replied he must wait before giving an opinion until Aldeboran reached the third house.

Compelled to be satisfied with this answer, Yolande saw her cousin moved to his new couch, and then, recognising the absolute necessity of not disturbing him, she returned to the festivities, over which a cloud had been cast by this strange event.

Meanwhile Sir John Trenchard had gone to his apartment, and thither Maurice Woodville, Willie Newenhall and Dicky Cheke followed him.

"Where's Master Bowerman?" inquired the Seneschal.

No one answered.

"Who saw him last?" was the next question.

Newenhall moved uneasily, but looked as stolid as ever.

"Master Newenhall, thou art the eldest; tell me where you last saw Master Bowerman."

"An it please you, Sir John, 'twas after the banquet was over."

"Well, where was he? Was he dancing?"

"He was dancing."

"How long agone was that?"

Newenhall twisted his cap round, and looked more stupid and vacant than ever.

"Come, Master Newenhall, brush up thy wits and give a short answer–time presses."

"Maybe 'twas an hour ago," said the page sullenly.

Sir John Trenchard, seeing that Newenhall, either through stupidity or on purpose, would give no useful information, turned to Dicky Cheke and bid him narrate all the circumstances of his finding Ralph.

When he heard of the figure disappearing over the steep declivity on the other side of the road, Sir John rated Master Cheke soundly for not having bid one of the archers pursue him; and in spite of Dicky's protestations that he was so flurried by the sight of Ralph's body lying bleeding in the road, as to think only of helping him, that young gentleman was severely reprimanded for his absence of mind.

"One who would be a useful knight, and serve his prince well, should never forget what is the right course, never mind what may be the obstacles," said the Seneschal, with stern sententiousness.

Maurice Woodville could give no information; he had been in close attendance on the Captain of the Wight, and had not seen Bowerman at all.

Orders were now issued to have the castle searched for the missing page,

but with no result. He was not found, and no one had any doubt that it was Eustace Bowerman who had struck the blow.

The guests all dispersed to their homes soon afterwards, many of them being accommodated for the night in the castle as guests of the Captain of the Wight; among whom Sir William Lisle and his daughter, with the Abbot of Quarr, were the most honoured.

The next morning, the first visitor to inquire after Ralph was his cousin Yolande. It was joyful news to her to hear that he had passed a quiet night, and, although very weak and faint from loss of blood, was doing well. No one had as yet questioned him on the strange accident, and it was still a mystery why he had gone outside the castle at all.

"'Tis a rare mischance, Maurice," said Dicky Cheke, as they went downstairs together to begin the duties of the day; "Ralph might have gotten the prize of this day's tourney also."

"'Twas Bowerman that dealt the foul stroke," said Maurice, without heeding the other's remark. "Where can he have gotten to?"

"Ay, where indeed? But he can't escape; I hear there's orders been sent out to search all boats that leave the island."

"Marry! why he could have gotten clear off before the alarm was raised. They ought to have scoured the country for him last night, they'd have taken him then withouten any doubt."

Dicky looked rather foolish. He remembered how he had been rated by Sir John Trenchard the night before.

"Dost think Newenhall knows aught of the matter?"

"Humph!" answered Dicky. "He didn't like Ralph, and he wouldn't stop any harm coming to him, but I don't think he's got the pluck to do him a wrong himself."

"His ways were odd last night. Didst mark how he couldn't answer old Jack-in-Harness's questions?"

"Couldn't? Wouldn't, you mean," said Dicky. "Ay, I marked it sure enough. Well, old Jack's as sharp as a needle–he'll find it all out."

The conversation was interrupted by their arriving at the door of their lord's apartment, and being ordered to enter by the archer on guard.

The account of Ralph Lisle's favourable condition was joyfully received throughout the garrison, and the news had already spread to Newport.

"So I hear there was a young lad slain last night in a drunken brawl after the revels," said the same rough fisherman who had spoken with Bowerman the day before, to a countryman whom he met coming out of Carisbroke.

"Ay, so they say; leastways, if it warn't two or three as was killed. Holy Thomas! they castle folk be a woundy lot of gallants. They'd as soon kill each

other as the French, so long as there's nought else to kill."

"Marry, and you're right; but I hear there'll be blows anon."

"Ay, sayest so? Well, well; but where away? All's quiet i' the land, bean't it?

"Seemingly. But there's them as'll be moving soon. They've not done with the White Rose yet. Howsever, 'tis blows in France as'll soon be going. 'Tis rumoured over t'other side o' the water that our Captain's a-going over there with a power of men."

"No! you don't say so; and who's he going to fight?"

"Why the French, to be sure; all along o' the Duke of Bretagne having helped King Henry when he were in hiding there."

"Then 'tis the King of France as backs the t'other side–eh?"

"Ay, ay; and another powerful princess."

"Oh! and who's that?"

"Why, 'tis the good Duchess of Burgundy, as was sister to our brave king, to be sure."

"What, she as I heard say gave that Simnel lad so much money? Well, now, she be a kind lady. But, i' faith! I'm sick o' wars. 'Tis the ruin of all our lives and fortunes; and surely we've had enough i' the past years."

"Marry! my lad, there's always a picking when knights are pricking. 'Tis wars makes poor men rich, and rich men poor, an you only know the way."

"Ay, ay, but you beant as old as I be. I've worked on Swainston Manor for a matter o' twenty-four year come next Lammas. My lord then were the great King-maker, as he were called–Old Bear and Ragged Staff. And what came to him? why, he were slain in battle at Barnet field. Then arter him, my lord were the Duke of Clarence. Well what came to him? why, all along o' being a king's brother, and not having such a good headpiece as t'other brother, he were put i' a butt o' Malmsey–so they sez, leastways–and so were drowned. And now, who's my master? why him, poor lad, as they've got mewed up i' Lunnon Tower. And all for what? because, poor lad, he's his father's son, and bears the name of Warwick, like his grandfather; and like enough he'll come to a bloody end too."[*]

[*] He was executed for trying to escape from the Tower with Perkin Warbeck, in 1498.

"Well, well, I shall be late for the sword strokes an I stop here. Are you coming, gaffer?"

"Marry am I. There'll be a sight worth seeing, I hear. Who'll win the prize to-day, think you?"

"Certes, there's not much question. 'Twill be the stout knight in the plain armour."

"Oh, ay! and who be he?"

"That'll be known soon enough; but come along."

So saying, they walked off to the place of arms, where the tilting had taken place the previous day.

There was the same concourse of spectators, but the interest was not nearly so great as it had been the day before, the hand-to-hand encounter with swords not affording such opportunities for spectacular effect as the mounted contests.

However, there were some very fierce encounters, Sir Alain de Kervignac exchanging several hard blows with Sir John Dudley, who had recovered sufficiently to take part in the proceedings. It was unfortunate that the only combatants on the assailants' side who could fight at all on equal terms were incapacitated by the severe wounds they had received; and in order to prevent the sport becoming too tame, permission was given by the Judges to Sir Richard Cornwall and the unknown knight to meet the two Breton knights.

That evening Ralph was so much better that Dicky Cheke and Maurice Woodville were allowed to see him. The lively account given of the day's proceedings by the former young gentleman will describe the fighting better than a mere narrative of the sword-strokes exchanged.

"'Tis a pity, Ralph, thou wast not there. 'Twas rare sport. Sir Richard Cornwall caught the Breton–the Sire de Kervignac, I mean–such a crack over the costard, I thought he had split his skull; but he's a tough little wight, that he is. He no more minded it than if it had been a fleabite. Up he sprang, and waving his sword in the air, he brought it down like a flash of lightning right athwart Sir Richard's sword, which he held to guard his head; he hit so hard that he cut it right in two, and then, swinging it round, he gave him a buffet on the side of his salade–for he wore a salade and not a burgonnet to-day–that, big man as Sir Richard Cornwall is, he staggered, so that I verily bethought me he was going to fall to the ground, and thou knowest how big a man Sir Richard is. And all the while Sir Richard had no sword to smite in turn; but he made a brave fight of it, for he rushed out round the barrier and seized the small Breton in his arms. Then we did shout; oh, how I shouted!"

"Yea, and got rapped over the costard for doing it," said Maurice Woodville. "And serves you right, too; I felt quite grieved for thy want of manners."

"Now that is a scurvy tale! Why, Maurice, thou knowest thou wast going to shout too, only thy mouth was so full of apple puff that thou hadst filched from Polly Bremeskete's basket, which was open as thou chancest to pass, that thou couldst not make a sound saving a gruesome, pig-like snort. Come, that won't do."

"Marry will it. I did not make a braying jackass of myself, as thou didst."

"No, because thou hadst already made a pig of thyself. But there! 'twill be long ere I finish my tale, if thou breakest in in this way."

"Then cut it short, Dicky, or, better still, I'll go on. Well, Ralph, the Marshal stopped them. He bade Sir Richard let go, and said both had done their devoir full well. But the best sport of the whole was when the Rusty Knight–I marvel who he is–tackled the other Breton–him whom thou toppledst over, thou knowest. There was a slashing and rashing! The sparks flew like the sparks at the armourer's forge when Tom works the bellows, and at last the Rusty one smote the Breton so fierce a blow that he fell to the ground and never moved, and all men thought him dead. Then the people shouted, and–"

"Yes! and thou hadst finished thine apple puff then, so thou shoutedst too," broke in Dicky, who was fuming and fidgetting at the story being taken out of his mouth.

"Thou wert told to be still, and not make a noise, Dicky. We shall have old Mother Trenchard after us an thou art not quiet. Well, as I was saying, the Rusty Knight having no–"

"You weren't saying it!" broke in Dicky again. "You were saying–"

"What an egg thou art, Dicky! Wilt thou be still, and let me finish?"

"Why, 'twas I who began, and I ought to finish."

But here Lady Trenchard was attracted by the rising voices, and coming in, bade both the boys begone.

Placing her cool hand on Ralph's brow, the kind lady remarked she was glad to see him looking so well; and then, sitting by his side, she went on with her work, while she told him, in a more connected way, the events of the day.

Ralph was relieved to hear that Sir Amand de la Roche Guemené was not seriously hurt, only stunned by the terrific blow of his antagonist.

"But who is he, Lady Trenchard?–knowest thou?"

"'Tis a deadly foe to the Lord Captain, for he openly challenged him to mortal combat," said Lady Trenchard gravely.

"What! he dared to challenge the Captain of the Wight?" cried Ralph, in amaze; "and what said he?"

"He accepted his challenge."

CHAPTER XVIII.

HOW THE RUSTY KNIGHT LET THE SUN GO DOWN ON HIS WRATH.

On the evening of the last day of the jousts, just as the sun was setting in a blaze of stormy grandeur, tingeing crag and headland and far-off swelling down and beetling cliff with fiery glow, two men were making their way from the steep summit of the high down above the dark fissure in the cliffs where Ralph Lisle had so nearly met his death.

"'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' saith the Lord," the older and less active figure was saying to his companion.

"Maybe, maybe," said the other testily. "And I never counted much of disputation, but I know this, that even in Holy Writ evil-doers were punished, and made to atone for their wrong-doings."

"But their punishment came not from those who were wronged. 'Evil shall hunt the wicked man,' it is true, but it says not we are to be the instruments of our revenge–and, as I have often-times told thee, there is not the least proof that thou hast received any wrong at his hands."

"Man, man, talk not with me thus!" broke in the other with hot passion. "She loved him or ever she saw me–and she hated me from the time she took me for her lord and master, even if she hated me not from the time of first seeing me; and when a woman hateth one and loveth another, and the one is her husband and the other her–"

"Listen, my son," interrupted the older man in turn, "and thou wilt learn how little thou reckest of all he hath done for thee, in his knightly courtesy and chivalrous forbearance, framing his conduct on the model of the most noble of Christian champions."

"I will not listen, an thou art going to give him, my mortal foe, laud and honour. I have sworn to have his blood, and his blood I will have, or he mine; and he hath given me his word he will meet me," added the speaker, with an evil glitter in his flashing eye. "So say no more, worthy friend; I know my duty, and I will do it. In slaying him, I shall be doing my devoir to my liege lord, my country, and to my own honour. And slay him I will, ere this moon shall have run her last course, for to this end he hath plighted his word as a belted knight."

"My son, I have been a knight, as thou well knowest, and in mine hot youth I also bore a feud against one who, in sooth, had wronged me. I slew him, and albeit there was no question of his evil-doing, yet I rue me of his blood, and in my lonely orisons I implore mercy for my blood-guiltiness. I would fain spare the lonely hours of sorrow and remorse that will await thee, if thou livest,–him, if he slay thee. For the dolour to him will be great; and as I well know his knightly heart and gentle and joyous nature, so–"

"Now beshrew me for a soft-hearted chitling an I hearken to aught more of his laud. If thou hast no more but this to say, I will e'en take my leave, holy father. The sun is set, and I have matters to hasten withal."

"Fare thee well then, my son," answered the old man, with a sigh. "At least be mindful of thy daughter; and if evil betide thee, see that as little as may be befall her, pretty innocent. But fear not. As is my bounden duty, all that I know of thy party, thy plots, and thine hopes is sunk deep in the inmost chambers of my mind, and thou needst not fear that I will bewray thee. I urged but thy duty as a Christian, and minding well the words, 'Blessed are the peace-makers.' Mayhap the time will come soon, sooner than thou or I know, when thou wilt wish thou hadst hearkened to the voice of the Lord, through me, and hadst not hastened thy feet to shed blood. Farewell, my son, and fain would I that I could say, with any hope of its being true, *Pax vobiscum!*"

So saying, the old man turned away, and took the path, or rather sheep-track, which led over the down behind him. When he had climbed some distance up the steep, wind-shorn slope of brown grass, he paused, and turned to look over the lovely view behind him.

The sun had set, and storm-clouds were working up on the horizon. Above their deep, livid masses a clear, pale yellow sky, flecked with golden and purple patches of wind-torn vapour, told of the change that would shortly come.

The wide-stretching "wine-dark sea" lay far below, as yet still and glassy, its surface only heaving with the long swell which rolled into the Channel, telling of a storm far off in the mysterious deserts of the yet boundless Atlantic.

The roar of the surf, grinding among the rocks on that iron-bound coast, surged up to the giddy height whence the Hermit of St Catherine gazed out to the west and mused on the monotony of earthly passions, their dreary recurrence, and how they are blotted out by death and eternity.

"'Lord, what is man that Thou art mindful of him, or the son of man that Thou so regardest him? Man is but a thing of naught, so soon passeth he away and he is gone.' Ay, truly! but Thy word abideth."

And with a weary sigh the old man once more turned to climb the steep-backed hill.

Meanwhile the other had disappeared over the edge of the cliff. A path scarcely to be made out led down the face of the western wall of the fearful chasm. Tufts of grass, and a few wind-cropped, stunted bushes, gave foothold or hand-grasp to the hardy climber. When he had nearly reached the middle of the chasm, and was but half-way down, he paused and looked about him.

"Ay, ay," he muttered, "'tis all right. They've not come back yet. There's the plank, where it ought to be."

The man then climbed down a little further to where a ledge in the cliff allowed a little more room to move. Against the face of the precipice was a somewhat larger bush of stunted thorn. Protruding from underneath its boughs was the end of a plank. The man drew it out. It was long and heavy. With

ease, however, it was drawn to the edge of the little platform, and balanced for launching out to rest on the edge of a similar platform in the face of the opposite precipice.

After swinging the plank backwards and forwards two or three times, the man at last darted it violently forwards, and with such vigour and dexterity that it rested some inches on the opposite ledge. He then proceeded to walk steadily across it, and, having reached the further side, he drew the plank over after him. In this way he cut off all access to his standing-place. Behind him were a few bushes; stepping up to the largest of these, he disappeared behind it.

Had any one been observing him, it would have seemed that he had vanished into the face of the cliff, so close did the bush grow, and so bare and beetling did the face of the rock seem.

But behind the bush was a narrow rent in the cliff, wide enough to allow one man to pass through, and opening out inside into a space of sufficient size to accommodate three or four people.

Striking a light with a flint and steel, the man soon kindled a fire, the smoke of which, instead of curling out through the entrance, found its way to the upper air by some other exit.

Having thrown more fuel on the fire, the man sat down on a spar, which looked as if it had come from some wreck, and fell into a deep reverie.

The flickering light fell full upon his face and figure, showing dark, weather-beaten features, marked with deep lines, but bearing evidence of a strong will, high courage, and pride. His frame was very powerful, although the rough dress he wore did little to set it off. But the sinewy hands and strong neck, combined with great breadth of chest, showed a man capable of vast exertion. In spite of the rude dress, there was a certain air and look which told at once of superior position, and any stranger meeting him would at once have addressed him respectfully, in spite of his surroundings and attire.

"And so the hermit bids me lay aside thoughts of revenge," he muttered. "'Tis easy to say that, when he himself confessed that he had taken his revenge. Can I have been mistaken? Did she not run to him? The pretty wanton, having made me her sport, she spread her wings to other lures. But now he shall atone for it. Dead is she? 'Tis all a lie; part of the false fooling of his wanton wit. Traitor hath he been to his party, to his king, and to the cause. But his day is over. Mistrusted by Henry, he will be led away by his own conceit. Abandoned by a subtle and cold-blooded tyrant, he will die on the scaffold, or on the battlefield, sold to France, to secure his master's ends, if he die not by my own hand, as I devoutly pray he may. And as for me? What hath my life been, and what hath been his? Because I have been true to my king and cause, I am disinherited by my father, and am a beggar, a fugitive, and an exile. Because he hath a fair sister,

forsooth, he rises into favour, then changes sides when he sees which way the wind blows, abandons his party, and becomes a noble, a high power in the land, and Captain of the Wight. But his day will soon be over. And what hath life left to offer me? My father hath cast me off, my friends are mostly slain, and there are dark rumours of traitorous practices among such as are left. The gold of Henry of Richmond is doing its deadly work. But there's Simon's voice," he broke off, as a loud halloo interrupted his sombre thoughts.

Getting up, he went to the door of the cave. It was now dark, and no objects could be distinguished in the depth of that gloomy chasm. The tide had risen, and the damp mists from the sea mingled with the spray which dashed among the fallen boulders far below. One step, one false move, and the man would have been dashed to pieces on the rocks beneath.

"Sir Knight, art there?" bawled a gruff voice out of the blackness opposite.

"Ay, Simon; I'll place the plank anon."

The wind had now risen a little, and whistled and moaned amid the fissures of the gorge; but above it, or in lulls of the breeze, the knight thought he heard sobs.

"Marry, Simon, whom hast thou there?"

"'Tis the little wench, master. She would come. I found her on the hill yonder coming from Appuldurcombe."

"Why, what's come to her?"

But before the man could answer, a tearful voice called out,–

"Oh, father, they've killed Master Lisle," and then the sobs broke out in uncontrolled emotion.

"Nay, nay, fair daughter, he is well enough; I learnt that much before I left the lists."

The plank having now been safely adjusted, two figures advanced over it, and stepped into the light of the fire, which gleamed in fitful glimmer out of the fissure behind the bush. The childish figure threw itself into the arms of the stalwart gentleman, crying out as she did so,–

"Oh, I am glad! I should have grieved so sadly had aught evil happened to Master Ralph."

"Humph! Sweet wench, thou takest over much thought for the safety of thy young kinsman. But 'tis a brave lad and a true. I grieve he should have suffered harm. But come in. Simon, I have heard news. I would I could get me to France."

While father and daughter were talking together, the serving-man, who was the same rough fisherman who had spoken to Bowerman after the tourney was over the evening before, had lighted a torch, and was spreading a simple meal on the top of a chest, which served for a table. There was the same strange mixture of gorgeousness and squalor in the appointments of the repast as in the

food itself. A richly-chased silver flagon contained wine, which, from its fragrance and colour, seemed the very choicest Burgundy. Coarse bread flanked an enamelled bowl of Limoges ware which held the butter, stale and rancid from the time it had been there. A meat pasty was served in a pewter dish, while a richly-chased knife was ill assorted with a wooden trencher.

After they had eaten, the knight and his varlet talked earnestly for some time. The young girl sat apart. After putting away the remains of the supper, and washing up the things, she sat down on a chest near the fire, and seem to pay no heed to the conversation of the others.

She was a pretty child, with long dark-brown hair, which waved and strayed from under her little close-fitting red cap. Her large soft brown eyes had a wistful expression in them, and her flexible mouth, which usually was parted in merry smiles, or arch fun, was now pursed up in grave thought. Her face was sunburnt, and her dress simple and patched.

Suddenly her attention was caught by hearing her father mention a name she knew.

"Oh, father!" she broke in, unable to master her suspicions, and her impulsive indignation overcoming her habitual awe of her father, "I hope they will catch that Bowerman. What a base caitiff, to stab his friend so foully!"

"Marry, little wench, who told thee to speak?" said her father, stroking the glossy hair.

The child was always in much awe of her father, and nothing but the hot impulse of her anger would have made her burst out as she had done.

She now hung her head a little lower, but looking up shyly after a moment, she said, in a soft, winning tone,–

"But, father, think of it! You are noble, and would never injure your foe save in fair fight and face to face. How I wish all this fighting was over, and there were no such things as foes. Oh dear," she sighed, "I am so tired of it all!"

"Tush, child, you should not have come away from Appuldurcombe: the sisters should not let you roam like this."

"'Twasn't their fault, father; I stole out to help John see to the cows, and then I thought I would come on over here and see you."

"But, by St George, thou must not play these pranks, little wench. Thou hast had too much freedom by far. No marvel," he broke off, with a fierce look of anger, "when thou hast been left to bring thyself up, with only such care as I can give thee."

"But, father, thou dost not like that Bowerman?"

"Marry, wench, what is that to thee? He is a friend to the cause, and, though young, is useful, and may be more so. How know I whether he gave the stroke or not? Wait till thou knowest before thou judgest."

"Ay, but I know full well," added the girl, under her breath, not, however, daring to speak her thoughts aloud.

At this moment a noise was heard outside.

They all kept quite still, and the fisherman dropped a sail across the entrance, so as to prevent the firelight being seen outside.

The noise was repeated. It sounded like a groan.

"Go, Simon, see what it is," said the knight.

The man passed outside; the other two listened.

A groan, as of some one in pain, could be distinctly heard, and then a few half-uttered words.

"Who can it be, father?" whispered the girl, drawing closer to her father.

She was not a timid child, but the strange sounds in that gloomy chasm recalled the tales she had heard of the place being haunted.

"'Tis the plaint of some one in dolour," said her father.

"Simon, ask who it is."

The moaning ceased as the seaman's voice resounded in the echoing chasm.

"'Tis a water-sprite, my lord, that's what it be," said the man, coming in.

"Tush, man! 'tis some one in pain, who hath fallen over the cliff maybe. Stay with the child while I go and see."

Taking the torch in his hand, the knight went to the entrance, the girl and seaman following him close.

It was a weird scene, as the lurid light of the flickering torch shone on the wall of rock opposite, while the inky blackness of the gorge, yawning at their very feet, caused a shudder to pass through the child as she thought how near they all were to a fearful death.

"Holy saints!" a faint voice gasped, in awe-struck accents; "are these spirits or fiends? and have I fallen to the bottomless pit?"

"'Tis as I thought," said the knight. "'Tis some poor wight fallen down, and, by some marvel, he hath lighted on the only ledge that could save him. 'Tis the hand of Providence hath saved him from rolling into that black pit." Then he added, in a louder tone,–"Art hurt, man? Canst stand upon thy feet? Who art thou?"

No answer came. All was silent as the grave.

"Put the plank over, Simon; I will go see who it is."

In a few moments the plank was put across.

"Oh, father, take care! Maybe 'tis a trap to catch thee!" cried the girl in terror.

"May be, my lord, 'tis even so," added the seaman; "best let me go."

"Nay, man, nay; hold the torch while I step across."

So saying, the knight handed the light to his attendant, and, drawing his

sword, stept warily over the plank.

The other two remained in breathless silence.

"Hold the torch higher," called the knight.

Again there was deathly silence.

"Father! father! what is it?" called the girl.

"I know not; I can see naught–ay, but I can! Why, my fair master, what mayest thou be doing here?" added the knight, addressing some one.

Then he called out in a relieved tone,–

"Come here, Simon; 'tis Master Bowerman, and he hath swooned away."

CHAPTER XIX.

OF THE PERPLEXITY OF THE LITTLE MAID.

"Bowerman!" said Magdalen, intensely astonished as well as relieved; "what could he have been doing here?"

However, there was no longer any cause for anxiety, either on the score of her father's safety or from the vague terrors of superstition.

With considerable difficulty the knight and his servant carried the senseless esquire over the plank and into the cave. On examination, it was found that the young man had cut his head against some point of rock in his fall, and had received other injuries, none of which, however, seemed severe.

"'Twas a marvellous chance," said the knight.

"Ay, truly: but now he's come, he'll be of rare use to us, an he getteth over this," said the seaman.

"Humph! he was of more use where he was," was the knight's comment.

Then, looking at his daughter and seeing she was listening eagerly, he added sharply,–

"Now, child, bestir thyself; get water and bandages, and give Master Bowerman a cup of wine."

With evident reluctance the girl obeyed her father, sighing to herself,–"Ah, me! why must my father take so much concern for this Bowerman, who, I know full well, tried to kill Master Lisle?"

It was not long before the wounded esquire opened his eyes and stared round him in amazement.

"Marry, Master Bowerman, thou knowest us not. Recall thy wits, and be-

think thee of what hath happened," said the knight.

But Bowerman had not yet recovered the full use of his faculties.

"Newenhall, thou dolt!" he muttered, "what art cowering here for? why art not a man for once? The horse will never hurt thee. There, 'tis done–ah, he won't ride him for some time," and Bowerman chuckled mockingly.

"I knew it! I knew it!" cried the girl; "the cowardly caitiff. He hath confessed he lamed Black Tom."

"Silence, wench," said her father sternly. "Dost not see the lad raveth?"

Gradually the young man recovered his senses, but it was some time before he could be made to understand what had happened. At last he recognised the rough seaman, and then he knew who the other man was. He would have risen to do him reverence, but the knight restrained him.

"Nay, Master Bowerman, this is no time for idle courtesies; I know thy breeding. Take another draught of this, and turn thee to sleep; thou canst talk to-morrow morn, an thou art well enough."

The air of authority with which this was said helped to pacify the injured man even more than the draught, and he soon sank into a deep sleep.

The knight now turned to his daughter, and bid her retire to a recess in the cavern, where a couch, made of old sails and other lumber, served as a bed, before which a sail was hung as a curtain.

After the child had disappeared, the two men entered into a deep conversation in low tones.

"There be a story afloat of a new plot," said the man. "But there be naught in it, be there?"

"Maybe there is, but matters are not ripe yet. An we could only get Henry embroiled with France, we should have better help than from the Dowager of Burgundy. And I have hopes that he will send a force to aid the Bretons. But I can do naught until I have met Woodville."

"And when will that be, your worship?"

"Not for a few weeks, I fear me. He hath other matters, and this attack on his esquire hath put him out."

"Thou wast wondrous kind to the lad at the tilt. All men marvelled what could be the cause."

"A wish of my daughter's, as thou knowest. The lad was passing gentle to us as we came hither; and he is a good lad, and one of my own house too."

"But he's parlous sweet on Mistress Yolande, and there's them as says she means to marry him, and old Sir William is going to make him his heir."

The knight's face grew black.

"Enough! enough! I would I could get me to France. I hear the Lord Daubigny will be returning shortly. We must join him at Southampton. Dan

has got the old boat mended?"

"Ay, ay; she'll do for us as far as Southampton, or, for that matter, we could make shift over to Barfleur in her ourselves."

"That's well; and now leave me, I would think awhile."

The next morning Magdalen was sent back to the cell at Appuldurcombe, much to her discontent. Before she left, however, she had the further dissatisfaction of learning that Master Bowerman was not only in a fair way of recovery, but that he so plausibly accounted for his being in hiding, and having run away from Carisbrooke Castle, that her father not only seemed to believe him quite guiltless of the attack on Ralph Lisle, but even appeared to look upon him with much favour as an injured man, and a sufferer by reason of his inclinations towards the exiled Yorkists.

It was important to make as many friends as possible, and the Bowermans were likely to become more influential in the island by reason of their recent alliances.

The story Bowerman gave was, that being outside the castle on the evening of the first tilt, he had heard of the mysterious assault on Ralph as he came back, and well knowing how he would be suspected, and being also–he could not deny it–disgusted with the favour shown that fortunate young man, he had determined to get away. He had had some previous relations with the other seaman, who had smuggled articles into the castle for him, and had been useful to him in many other ways before; and he had been already sounded on the subject of the late plot to annoy the Government, and had entered into correspondence with the Yorkist secret agents. Although he knew about the fugitives, he did not know where they were in hiding, the knight's two retainers being far too cautious and trusty to betray their secret. He, however, resolved to remain in concealment until he could get away, and for that purpose he had come over to the wildest part of the island, as being the safest place, and also where he was most likely to meet with Dan the fisherman.

The account he gave of his accident was, that having been hard pressed that day by some of the garrison of Carisbrooke who had been sent out to find him, he had climbed down the cliff and remained there until dusk. Hearing fresh steps, he had tried to get further round the face of the cliff, and had slipped on to the ledge where they found him. That he was partially stunned, and seeing the light in that awful place, he had thought they were spirits, and he had fainted away, as a result of physical exhaustion and supernatural dread.

It suited the knight's purpose to listen favourably to this tale, and with an air of belief, and he even went so far as to sympathise with Master Bowerman in his wrongs and grievances, and the accident to Ralph Lisle was never afterwards referred to.

Magdalen, who was allowed very often to see her father, whose secret appeared fully known to the Prioress of the little community, and who belonged to a well-known Yorkist house, was dismayed to find how very intimate Bowerman had become, and was still more embarrassed to discover that he was desirous of ingratiating himself with her. One morning, about a month after the tourney, when she had come over earlier than usual, the girl noticed a decided stir going on in the little cave. Armour was being burnished up, and a couple of stout lances were being critically examined by her father. There was never much effort at keeping matters secret from Magdalen, and the conversation, or rather few remarks which fell from her father, were hardly interrupted by the arrival of the young girl, who brought over a supply of fresh butter and eggs, with a few other necessaries. Magdalen had always to be very careful when she came near the gorge, lest any stray country folk should see her. But this part of the island was thinly populated, and she had never yet met with any one. The Hermit of St Catherine's knew her secret, and she looked upon the good old man as one of her best friends. While she was arranging the contents of her basket, she heard her father say,–

"Thou wilt see that all is ready, and in case of ill befalling, I trust to thy bearing this missive to Sir John Clifford. Dan will go with thee. The boat is all ready."

"In sooth, my lord, I will do thy bidding. But I fear no mischance. I have seen myself thy prowess, and heard more. He cannot stand before thee for one course even."

"Humph! 'Tis a good lance, and there are risks always; but I have my just cause, and I trust in the right."

"Thou wilt have Dan and Simon there also?"

"Ay, ay. They can come, and fully equipped, too; but they must take no part, whate'er betide."

Magdalen noticed a peculiar look in Master Bowerman's eye, and detected a meaning glance exchanged between him and the most sinister-looking of the seamen.

What could they be talking about? she wondered. She always dreaded some terrible fate befalling her father. She knew his stern, fearless disposition, and she also knew that he nursed the most inveterate hatred to the Captain of the Wight. He had never told her why, but if ever his name were mentioned, she noticed that he seemed to lose all control over himself, and would utter the most dreadful maledictions on his name and family.

"There is going to be some fearful fight, I know there is," she murmured. "Oh, if only I could find out when it takes place and where. Perhaps Bowerman would tell me. He seems to wish to please me; why, I don't know."

She little knew that if only the Yorkist party, whose hopes were centred on the imprisoned Earl of Warwick, could upset the present government, her father would be a person of great distinction, and she would be the heiress of the Lisle property. It was well worth Bowerman, or any other aspiring youth, doing all he could to win her favour. Besides these substantial worldly advantages, she was a very sweet girl, with a fair face and noble nature. Entirely unspoilt by luxury, and brought up in the severe school of poverty and hardship, she had often compared herself to the "Blind Beggar's Daughter of Bednall Green," and would shyly wonder if her fate would be like that of "pretty Bessie," and whether her adventures would end "with joy and delight," and she should have for a bridegroom "the gentle young knight

"Who lived in great joy and felicitie,
With his fair ladie, dear pretty Bessie."

When she had neatly put all the things away on some ledges of the cave which served for shelves, she went to the entrance and looked out. She noticed that the old boat, which was usually hidden under a deep cleft in the rock, out of reach of the highest tides, was now hauled down, and lying ready for launching, and that there were sundry kegs and bundles in it, looking as if there were preparations for an expedition.

The salt smell of the sea came up fresh and keen from the tumbling waves below, and the girl looked wistfully towards the south.

She felt very lonely, more so now than ever, for her father, always preoccupied before, seemed gloomier of late, and to notice her less than he used. There had been much going to and fro on the part of the seamen, and Magdalen had herself brought a missive from the Hermit only the day before, which had caused a great display of feeling on the part of her father, a flush of fierce joy passing over his countenance, as he muttered, after reading the cartel,–

"At last! Thank the saints! the matter will be settled once for all."

While Magdalen stood looking down the strange water-worn chasms, she was startled by hearing Bowerman say in a scoffing voice, but in an undertone, to Simon,–

"Marry, Simon, we are to take no part in the fray, eh?"

And then he laughed derisively, while the seaman added gruffly,–

"Not us! Well, I never; that be a good 'un. But I'll have some of their fine harness and gew-gaws, if I swing for it."

"Tush, man! thou canst have them easy enough; but 'tis their lives first we must have. He's sure to be there. He makes such a stir about him; all the

more since this wound of his. Curse the weak stroke! why couldn't it have gone home?" broke off the esquire bitterly.

"Ay, ay, 'twas a bungling business that. He was but a greenhorn at that sort of work, whoever he was," said the seaman, eyeing Bowerman with a grim twinkle in his bleared eyes, as he went on furbishing up a steel breastpiece. "But he's a fine youth, that I will say," he added.

Magdalen changed her position so as to get a view of the faces of the speakers, but trying to draw as little attention to herself as possible. She noticed a flush pass over Bowerman's face as he bit his lip, but said nothing, only he felt the edge of a sword he had been scouring.

"We'll make better work of it, Simon, this time–eh?"

"Faith we will, or you may call me landlubber for the rest of my days. I owe him a grudge for having had me put in the stocks for nothing at all. 'Tis a chance will never come again. Think of his being such a fool as to trust hisself alone in a fight with our master. But he won't live long to repent it, if I get this knife into him," added the man, with an ugly "job" of the blade into a balk of timber on which he was sitting.

Magdalen shuddered. What were they talking about? She dreaded to think. There was something terrible going to take place. How should she find out? She resolved to ask her father. She stepped past the two men, and entered the cave. She found her father busied with the unusual and difficult operation of writing. He took no notice of her, and she sat still by his side, watching him laboriously forming his awkward letters.

"Father, can't I help you?" she ventured to say at last.

"What, little wench, you here still? I thought you were gone long since. What will the worthy Prioress say?"

"Oh, she won't mind; she bid me stay as long as I could help thee. But Sister Agnes looks most after me."

"Ay, and who is Sister Agnes? But there," seeing the child was going to enter upon a long account of her doings at the nunnery, "I am parlous busy now. Thou canst stay an thou mindest, and in the evening Bowerman can see thee on thy way home."

This was not at all to Magdalen's taste.

"But may I not aid thee now, father? Thou knowest I can write; and I have become a better scribe lately?"

"Hast thou so, my little wench?" said her father, stroking her head. "But these are matters beyond thee." He paused, and then went on. "Magdalen, my child, thou wilt always be a good girl, and do what the worthy Prioress tells thee. If aught taketh me away, thou wilt mind what I have said, and there will be those who will care for thee. Thou must learn to look kindly on Master Bowerman,

and thy fortunes may one day be happier than now seemeth likely. But leave me now; I must settle these matters, and the time is not over long."

Magdalen, well knowing the reserved nature of her father, and not caring for the escort of Master Bowerman, especially after what she had overheard, resolved to go back to the nunnery; but she also made up her mind she would see the Hermit of St Catherine's on her way, and tell him of her anxiety.

She therefore took leave of her father, who seemed more affectionate than usual; and declining Bowerman's offer of accompanying her, she climbed the difficult path up the cliff, and disappeared over the brow of the gorge.

CHAPTER XX.

HOW THE CAPTAIN KEPT TRYST.

It was about a month after the tourney, when Ralph, who had entirely recovered from his wound, was summoned to attend the Captain of the Wight.

On entering the Lord Woodville's room, he found that nobleman standing before the fire in a contemplative attitude, and Ralph stood for a few moments in respectful silence.

Presently Lord Woodville looked up, and, noticing Ralph, resumed at once his usual manner.

"My young esquire," he said, "I have sent for thee because there is no one of my household whom I can trust more than thee."

Ralph coloured up with pleasure; he noticed with pride the change of title. He was no longer a page, but esquire to his lord. But what went to his heart far more than this was being addressed in such affectionate and trusting terms. Lord Woodville had won the boy's heart from the first by his noble bearing, handsome appearance, and lonely life. In the midst of a gay and martial household, always dignified, placid, and reserved, Lord Woodville seemed to him like some hero of romance, some knight-templar who had consecrated his life to God, and, unlike the common herd of monks, who withdrew from the world in timidity or selfish sloth, he remained in it to face the temptations, the pleasures, and the vices, and to face them not merely as an idle spectator, but as a splendid protest against the vanity of the world. Not pledged or bound by any such bonds as those by which weaker mortals sought to guard themselves from the allurements of life; not fleeing for protection to the feeble chains of monastic institutions, or even

the semi-monastic life of the great military order which alone survived, but like a stout pinnacle of indestructible granite round which some stream for ever dashes its ceaseless waves, now striving to wear it away with the soft embrace and gentle murmurs of its softly wooing current, then dashing against the calm rock in the wild tumult of its turbid waters, and seeking to topple it from its base with the rage of its fierce turmoil, so stood out the life of the Lord Woodville in its tranquil strength.

Outwardly cold, but inwardly burning with the desire of martial fame; always the first in all warlike enterprise; a strict disciplinarian, but a most kind and gentle knight to all in distress or suffering, the Captain of the Wight was the beau ideal of a *preux chevalier*. In every battle of the fierce civil wars he had shown himself a daring man-at-arms, as well as a prudent chieftain, and, like his accomplished brother, he was devoted to the arts in times of peace. He was a strict observer of the religious life of the times, and although not blind to the many shortcomings of the clergy, yet he did all in his power to promote the influence of religion, and to improve all with whom he came in contact.

A deep sorrow had fallen upon him in his domestic relations. His gallant father, the Earl of Rivers, together with his brother, Sir John Woodville, had been beheaded barbarously by the orders of the great Earl of Warwick. His brilliant brother, the Lord Scales, died under the executioner's sword at the cruel mandate of Richard, Duke of Gloucester, for no other crime than attachment to his nephews and his widowed sister. His two nephews had perished, no man knew how, in the Tower of London; and he himself had been blighted in his affections at an early age. His mother had laboured under the accusation of sorcery and witchcraft–a most dangerous charge in those days. His sister, the lovely Elizabeth Woodville, was mistrusted by the cold and calculating Henry; while his niece, the young and still more beautiful Elizabeth, although consort of the King, was not yet crowned Queen, in spite of having been married more than a year and a half, and having borne an heir to the two rival houses.

To relieve his active mind and vigorous frame from these anxieties, the Captain of the Wight welcomed every chance of wielding his sword or plying his lance in the stern excitement of war.

At this moment there was going on across the water a contest which had peculiar fascinations for a chivalrous mind. The aged and weak Francis, Duke of Brittany, with his young daughter, the celebrated Anne, the future wife of two kings, and mother of one Queen of France, was now being besieged by the whole force of that kingdom. The English King was repeatedly solicited to bring or send over assistance, and he was strongly tempted to interfere in the quarrel, on the urgent grounds of private gratitude and national policy; but, only just secured on his throne by a victorious battle over a desperate enemy, and well

aware how many secret foes he had, Henry VII. was unwilling to draw upon himself the active hostility of France, as well as the perpetual machinations of the Dowager Duchess of Burgundy. He therefore listened to the ambassadors of both the contending powers, but publicly refused to interfere by men or money.

Many, however, of Henry's subjects, tired of inaction, and early inured to arms, longed to take part in the struggle, and no one believed that the King would really be sorry if private adventurers undertook what he was prevented from doing ostensibly from reasons of State policy.

The Lord Woodville was well acquainted with the cautious, cold, and calculating disposition of Henry VII. He had known him in exile, when they both fled to the hospitable Court of the Duke of Brittany, where the young Earl of Richmond had given promise of his virtues and his faults, and he had little doubt that, although he would forbid publicly any interference in the wars in Brittany, he would secretly be grateful to any one who would help to save that province from becoming an actual part of France, and thus inflict another blow on England's hereditary enemy. For no one then doubted that whatever weakened a neighbour was a gain to oneself.

The Captain of the Wight had lately pondered deeply over these matters, and he was urged by his inclination, as well as by motives of ambition, to take part in this struggle. He was also influenced by a strong impulse. His life had latterly become well nigh unbearable. Old memories of the lady he had loved so ardently had been strangely stirred. He had been strongly reminded of her by the face of the nun. He knew he was accused by his lost love's husband of having received her when she fled from her home–driven away by her own misery and the cruelty of her husband. Pledged to each other by mutual affection in early youth, Sir Edward Woodville had been separated by the animosities of the time, and his own want of fortune, from the object of his youthful love. Her father, a fierce Lancastrian, had died in the merciless battle of Towton, and the young lady, by the death of her father now become a ward of the Crown, was given, as a reward for his support, to young George Lisle, who had disobeyed his father, and taken part in the civil wars, on the side of the White Rose. The young esquire was knighted by Edward IV. on the battlefield, and from that time forward was first in tilt and fight, and the most devoted of the adherents of the House of York. But as the marriage was the result of compulsion on the one side, and of ambition on the other, no happiness could ensue; and the neglect of the husband, combined with his fierce temper and ungovernable ways, acting upon the passionate disposition of his wife, who fought against her destiny like some imprisoned bird against the bars of its cage, caused such misery to result, that at last, after the birth of an only daughter, the wretched wife fled, no one knew whither; but all men who knew her story suspected to her old love, Sir Edward Woodville, who was in exile. The

successful fight of Bosworth Field reversed the situation, and the husband had to become the exile in turn, while Sir Edward Woodville, restored to his rank and position, succeeded his murdered brother in the lordship of the Wight. The two rivals had never met since the marriage, excepting once, about a month after that event. It was at a tournament, and Sir Edward Woodville purposely chose the opposite side to that on which Sir George Lisle was challenger. The shock was fierce, and both knights were unhorsed; but Sir Edward Woodville, in the second encounter, hurled his antagonist from the saddle, and carried off the prize of the tourney. After this, Sir Edward Woodville was employed on affairs of State which kept him away from the Court, and during the whole of the last reign he had resided abroad.

Equally with the rest of the world he was ignorant as to what had become of Lady Lisle; and although he was well aware that he was credited with aiding in her flight, and, indeed, of secretly providing her with a refuge, he was far too haughty to take any steps to contradict this statement, merely contenting himself by remarking that, 'if men wished to believe lies, certes he could not prevent them.'

"Ralph," said Lord Woodville, "I have need of a trusty esquire. I have noticed thy hardihood and devotion to me; wouldst thou wish to be put still more to the proof?"

"My lord, only try me; there is naught I would not do in thy service."

"Then, my fair esquire, as thou art now full strong again, and art in good trim to ride forth in harness, at ten o' the clock this evening thou must be on the road to Gatcombe, armed *cap-à-pié*, and mounted on thy stoutest charger. Thou wilt wait there, at about a mile from the castle, until I meet thee, and wilt go forth with me where I shall lead. It may be a dangerous service; that, I know well, will only make thee all the more wishful to go. But I would not willingly imperil thy young life, and I fain trust there is naught that will do thee hurt. Thou must tell no man, and prepare thee for the coming venture. Go now, therefore, and take rest, eat well, and make all ready against the time appointed."

Full of joyful pride at the thought of his lord's confidence, and delighted at the prospect of the mysterious adventure to be undertaken alone with the Captain of the Wight, Ralph retired.

"Why, Ralph, how joyous thou seemest," said Dicky Cheke, whom he met in the courtyard. "What's come to thee, man?"

But Ralph only gaily twitched his ear in passing, and went out to the stables to look at his horse, his favourite, White Willie. The injury to his other war-horse was so severe that it was still unfit for service, and those learned in horse-flesh gave it as their opinion that it was doubtful whether he could ever be of use again.

Although very careful search had been made for Eustace Bowerman, he

had not been seen or heard of since the night of the attempt on Ralph's life. In the inquiry that followed, the fact of Newenhall having given Ralph the message which sent him to the gate told very greatly against that young man. Asked to explain, he said he was told to give the message to Ralph by an unknown man; and when asked to describe the stranger, he said it was so dark he could not make him out. As all this was very unsatisfactory, and as his conduct was totally unsuited to a page or esquire in the service of so martial a chief as the Captain of the Wight, Newenhall had been dismissed, and was now, much to the delight of the other pages, enjoying the tranquillity of his own home. Two new pages had lately come to take the place of Bowerman and Newenhall, who were merry, high-spirited boys, and with whom Dicky Cheke and Maurice Woodville got on very much better. Ralph had so greatly distinguished himself that he was far removed over the heads of the others, and, had it not been for his naturally sweet disposition, might have become spoilt by such rapid advancement.

The rest of the day was passed by Ralph in carefully examining his arms. Humphrey had seen to everything during the time his young master was laid by, and all the parts of his armour, or harness, as it was called, were in first-rate condition. In addition to his sword and lance, Ralph took a beautifully-made and accurately-weighted *martel de fer*, or mace, a most deadly weapon for close combat, where its keen and powerful edges, combined with its weight, told terribly in breaking up an opponent's armour.

As the hour approached, Ralph's impatience became more and more uncontrollable, and in order to hide it, he went for a stroll on the castle battlements.

It was now the second week in November. The weather had been mild for the time of year. As Ralph stepped out into the courtyard, he noticed that the moon, now at its first quarter, was rising over Mountjoy's Tower, projecting the shadow of its well-proportioned battlements across the quadrangle. A yellow haze round the moon gave signs of a change in the weather, and the breeze seemed to come keener over the north-east wall, causing the ivy to rustle and the vane over the chapel belfry to creek and rattle. As the young esquire paused, a melodious boom vibrated on his ear. It was the big bell of Quarr Abbey sounding the curfew.

"The wind is in the east," thought Ralph; "there will be snow anon; but 'tis time Humphrey came to arm me. I marvel he cometh not. Ah, there he is," he added, and joyfully turned to go to his room.

The arming did not take long, and clad in complete steel, wearing a plain tabard, with only the red cross of St George on it, like any other man-at-arms, Ralph strode down to the hall door. He had told no one of his coming expedition, and had carried out his lord's commands as to secrecy implicitly.

Humphrey soon brought round his noble war horse, and the young esquire

mounted immediately.

How exciting it seemed to him as the horse's iron shoes clanked over the drawbridge, and he heard the massive chains grating over the wheels as it was drawn up again. He rode out into the misty night, and turned his horse's head southward.

This was the first time in his life he had gone forth on a service of danger fully armed and prepared to face a foe. There was something thrillingly exciting in this night adventure alone with the Captain of the Wight. What could it mean? What danger could there be? And why, if there were any, should he, the lord of the island, go forth attended but by one esquire to affront it alone? The delight of uncertainty and mystery hung round the future, and heightened still more the glory of being the only sharer in his Captain's peril. Ralph felt he could dare anything in the presence and on behalf of such a master.

He had now reached a lonely part of the rough track which had been his road on the night when he was so nearly being dashed to pieces over the edge of that cliff. Ralph had not visited the place since, and the whole adventure seemed more than ever like a dream. As he recalled the circumstances, his thoughts reverted to the tournament, and as he thought, he suddenly recollected the curious episode of the little glove. He had never before dreamt of connecting the wearing of that glove with his success in the tilt. It now all came before him, and he pondered deeply on the strange circumstance. While thus lost in thought, he did not notice the distant sound of a horse's hoofs, and was abruptly recalled to life by seeing a steel-clad figure gleaming in the moonlight coming steadily towards him.

With the prompt action of one well trained in the skill of a man-at-arms, Ralph grasped his lance, which he had hitherto been carrying slung behind him, and placed it in rest, holding his horse in readiness to charge, and wheeling him round so as to face the newcomer, for he could not tell whether he were friend or foe.

But in another moment he brought his lance to its erect position again, and saluted his lord. It was the Captain of the Wight. He was fully armed, and wore a tilting helmet, but perfectly plain, only a little ribbon fluttered in the breeze from the spike on the crown of the helm. He looked a splendid figure of knightly grace and strength, as he sat with perfect seat his powerful horse. Round his gorget was suspended his shield, but there was no blazon on it, and he wore no tabard or surcoat over his magnificent suit of ribbed Milanese armour. The light of the moon gleamed on his steel helmet, his globular corslet, and the taces cuisses, or thigh pieces, and steel jambs which protected his legs. He carried his long lance slung from his right arm, and the butt resting in a socket at his right stirrup.

"Well met, Master Lisle," called out Lord Woodville through his closed helm.

"Thou art true to tryst; 'tis a fair promise of thy worth. But haste we onward. I would be loth to be last in the field."

Wheeling his horse round, Ralph rode after his lord, keeping at a respectful distance. In this way they rode for some three miles, when the Lord Woodville called to Ralph to come up.

"My son," he said gravely, "I have sure trust in thee, as I have told thee before; that is why I have brought thee with me. As no man knoweth what may be in store for him, I have left on my table, in a casket of wrought metal, a missive. In case aught should befall me, thou wilt ride back, and have a care to take that casket with the missive to Appuldurcombe Nunnery, and leave it for Sister Agnes. Thou comprehendest perfectly? But whatever befalls, bear in mind that no word of what I have told thee get to other ears."

Ralph promised obedience, and they once more lapsed into silence.

After riding steadily for some two miles more, Lord Woodville left the beaten track, and descending a steep slope in the downs, from which the open sea was visible in all its sparkling beauty, he rode along a secluded dell towards the bold height of St Catherine's down. Having reached an old withered thorn-bush which grew in weird loneliness by the sedgy bank of a little stream, the Captain of the Wight halted.

"Certes, we are on the ground first: I see no signs of aught living."

Ralph scanned the surrounding landscape. There was a haze abroad, hindering the view for any distance. All he could see was a level sward extending towards the sea, and of considerable width, covered with close herbage, and admirably suited for a tilting match, forming a natural list.

Meanwhile the Lord Woodville had dismounted, and was tightening his horse's girths.

"Pace thy horse down the centre of yon lawn, Ralph," said his lord, "and when thou hast ridden some bow-shot length, turn back, but mark well the ground, to see if it be rough or swampy."

Ralph did as he was bid.

"There is not a hole or spongy place anywhere, my lord," he said, as he returned to Lord Woodville.

"Aha! here they come–but," said the Captain of the Wight, "I did not count on more than one."

As he spoke, Ralph looked round and saw four figures approaching. Two were mounted, and two were on foot. The mounted figures were also in complete armour, and Ralph had an impression that he had seen both before.

Lord Woodville mounted the moment he saw the new-comers approaching, and rode slowly forward to meet them, at the same time bringing his lance round, and holding it on his hip in readiness for use. Ralph having no orders, thought

it best to imitate his chief, and holding his lance prepared for instant action, he followed the Captain of the Wight. When the two little groups had approached within speaking distance, Lord Woodville reined up, and lowered his lance in courteous salute to the knight opposite him–a courtesy the latter returned with much formality. Ralph noticed that the man-at-arms, who rode a little behind his chief, reined up his horse out of hearing of Lord Woodville, and appeared to be giving some directions to the two foot men, who seemed well-armed, sturdy knaves. He determined to keep a close watch on the movements of these latter, especially as he thought he recognised them as the same men who had attended on the unknown knight, and one of whom seemed intimate with Bowerman.

CHAPTER XXI.

OF THE COMBAT *À OUTRANCE* .

After the Captain of the Wight and the stranger knight had gravely saluted each other, there was a pause. The silence was broken by Lord Woodville.

"Sir Knight," he said, "you have challenged me to mortal combat. You have flung charges in my teeth that are false and foul. You have aspersed the name which you, of all men, ought most to reverence, and yet, rebel as you are, you have put yourself in my hands as Captain for the King. I come here as plain Edward Woodville, knight and simple gentleman. The Captain of the Wight has laid aside his authority to give the lie to your words, and to prove on your body the truth of his. But before we try the judgment of battle, for the sake of one who is utterly free from the vile taunts you have flung forth, I would fain tell you that as that moon floats pure and serene in yonder azure sky, so that name is as unsullied, and that life as chaste. If you are still fain to try the hazard of battle, maugre my solemn statement, here am I ready to meet you, as man to man, and may Heaven defend the right. Thou well knowest thou hast done to me the cruellest wrong one man can do to another on this earth. Thou hast blighted two lives, and thou wouldst defame them as well. If any man longed for vengeance, 'twere certes I who ought to pray for it. Yet, Heaven knoweth, I harbour no thoughts of revenge, and I would be well content that thou and I should never meet. Thou hast taken a bold step, and one that doeth credit to my knightly honour more than all thy base aspersions have done to assail it, by coming to my government, and putting thyself in my power, well knowing that for a private wrong no belted knight who

deserved the name would use the power of his office to wreak vengeance on a personal foe by means of the authority given him by the King. But in sparing a fugitive from Stoke field, and in not handing him up to the royal power, I may be tried for my life, and lose all worldly renown in a traitor's death. Knowing this, thou hast put it to the hazard, and to wreak vengeance on me hast cared naught that in sparing thee I am running the chance of dying on the block. Trusting to my chivalry, and safe from my authority, because thou knewest I would use no power over thee but such as my own arm and stout lance could give me, thou hast yet dared to jeopardise my life and fame, only to meet me in mortal fight. Sir Knight, thou hast done ill, but no worse than thou hast done in all thy life."

The strange knight listened silently to the Lord Woodville. He waited to hear if he were going to say more; but after a little pause, seeing that the Captain of the Wight had finished his speech, he replied, briefly and bitterly,–

"Sir Edward Woodville–commonly called Lord Woodville,–I am here to fight, not to bandy words. I believe thou art a full worshipful knight, and therefore I did thee the honour of trusting to thy courtesy, and I was not mistaken; but as for what thou sayest, I believe not one word. Well know I that the trained and pretty merlin will return to the hand of him who trained her–while even the lanner will go back at the call of the lure. Say no more. That thou hast left me unmolested, I thank thee; for the ill thou hast done, I hate thee, and mean on thy body to take full vengeance for mine own dishonour. Let us waste no more words, but begin; I scorn thee, hate thee, and thirst to be revenged on thee."

No more words were spoken. The two knights wheeled round their horses, and paced back a sufficient distance. Then turning about, they faced each other.

The scene looked strange and spectral. The moon, blurred by a flitting mist, which flickered over its face, shone down on the ghostly figures of the gleaming horsemen. The two esquires, encased, like their lords, in complete harness, sat motionless on their horses a little behind the chief actors in the coming duel. The dark forms of the two foot men were dimly to be seen to the left of the horsemen; while beyond the silent group, the grey sea stretched away and away until it seemed to rise to the leaden clouds which hung like a livid pall beneath the silvery moon. On either side rose the dim downs, and over all a light mist clung to the shimmering landscape, making the weird figures seem more phantomlike in their faint and misty vagueness. There was nothing human in the scene. The grim forms, the strange-shaped helmets, the utter absence of all external signs of life in those steel-cased horsemen, their powerful chargers weirdly hidden in polished steel, all combined to make them look like huge monsters of a far-gone age returned to visit by the pale moonlight the haunts of their prehistoric life. Only the steam from the nostrils of the warhorses gave the least sign of actual existence to the scene. Around were the everlasting hills; beyond, the

ever restless sea; above, the infinite vault of space, with the scarred and blighted face of the vapourless moon looking down on the puny strife of men whose little lives and passions are to the universe but as the indistinguishable pulses of the tiniest of microbes or as the froth of a bubble floating in infinity.

Without waiting for any word, the two knights, as if by a common impulse, clapped spurs to their chargers, and with lance in rest, and bodies well down under their shields, rode fiercely for each other. This was no gentle tilt with blunted lances, but each knight knew his existence was at stake, and that in the keen thrust of the gleaming spear-point lay life or death. They met in a hurtling crash, and the noise of splintering wood and clanging metal rang through the silence of the night. For a moment no one knew what had happened; but as the two horses broke away, it was seen that they trotted off without their riders.

Scarcely waiting to see what had happened, Ralph caught his lord's war-horse, and returned to his place. Eagerly he looked to see what had been the result. One knight had risen from the ground; the other was attempting to do so, but only feebly moved. Ralph rode nearer, and the other three figures advanced also. The excitement in Ralph's heart was intense: what should he do if his dearly loved lord were slain? A fierce thought rose. He would hurl himself on the others, and either avenge his master, or die in the attempt.

But as he drew nearer, his bitter anxiety was changed to joy. It was Lord Woodville who was on his feet, and standing over the writhing body of his antagonist.

"Yield thee, Sir George Lisle!" said the Captain of the Wight, in a stern, but feeble voice.

"I yield to no man!" came back the fierce answer, still more faintly hissed through the closed helm. "Do thy worst!"

For a moment Lord Woodville seemed uncertain what to do. He held his keen poignard in his left hand, and his drawn sword in the other, and held the point of it to the narrow opening in the close-shut helm.

But before he could form a decided resolve, a fierce voice called out,–

"Upon him, and revenge your lord."

And with lowered lance the man-at-arms charged the Captain of the Wight, while the two sturdy varlets sprang at Ralph. But the young esquire, hearing the words and seeing the movement, with a touch of the spur leaped his horse in front of his lord, and received the lance-thrust of the man-at-arms on his shield, dealing his assailant a fierce buffet in return.

"Ah, caitiff!" cried Ralph. "Vile traitor that thou art, thou shall rue thy villainy!"

"Shall I, in sooth, sir upstart?" sneered a well-known voice. "Thou hast escaped me once, but now I have thee. See, thy lord is falling to the ground."

Ralph turned instinctively to look, and at the same moment received a stunning blow on the side of his helmet which nearly knocked him out of the saddle; but he quickly recovered himself, and flinging down his lance, he seized his *martel de fer*, or mace, and reining his horse backwards, he dealt the varlet who was attacking Lord Woodville a terrific blow on the head, instantly felling the man to the ground. But it was true, Lord Woodville had fallen to the ground, and the other footman was upon him. Ralph, without a moment's hesitation, sprang from his horse and struck wildly at the man, who was just wrenching off Lord Woodville's helmet. The blow took only partial effect, but it drew the attention of the man to him, and with an oath he turned savagely upon the young esquire.

The odds were terribly against him.

"Have at the coxcomb, Dan; he's only good for tilting before ladies, and only then when they bribe their lovers to spare his dainty youth," called out the man-at-arms, as he prepared to strike Ralph again with his uplifted sword. But Ralph did not yet lose hope. The love of life was strong in him. He closed with the half-armed varlet, and dealt him a blow with his poignard, which he had now drawn. The man uttered a fearful imprecation, and cut at Ralph with his axe; but the harness of the young esquire was good, and the weapon only glanced aside. Seeing how little use was his axe, the man dropped it, and drew his dagger also, closing with Ralph, and trying to drive the point through the bars of his visor. But the boy had been well taught, and he parried the thrust on his steel gauntlet, dealing his foe a deep stab with his right hand.

"Strike him, youngster, strike him!" shouted the man, in fierce rage. "What art standing there for seeing him murdering me?"

"How can I strike him without doing thee a mischief, old stockfish? Get thyself away, and I'll soon do for him."

But Ralph fully understood his advantage, and wrestled with the man until they both fell to the ground over the prostrate body of Lord Woodville.

The man-at-arms now got off his horse and came to the assistance of the varlet who had fallen upon Ralph, but was severely wounded.

"Drive thy sword through his visor," gasped the man, whose arms were held by Ralph, who was struggling to regain his feet.

The keen point played around the helmet of the esquire, who by twisting and turning his head prevented the thrust from taking effect, but, held as he was by the weight of the varlet above him, he could not hope to avoid the blow much longer.

"Wrench off his helm, man!" cried the impatient man-at-arms.

"How can I? Don't you see he's got hold of my arms?" said the other, in a gruff voice, which was growing fainter. "Stab him! why don't ye? Stab him!"

Ralph made one more desperate effort; he drove his dagger into the caitiff

[image]

"HE DROVE HIS DAGGER INTO THE CAITIFF ABOVE HIM."

above him, who with a deep groan ceased struggling and rolled over, thus freeing Ralph, who sprang to his feet and turned upon the man-at-arms.

The young esquire still had his mace hanging from the chain slung round his right arm. Seizing it in his gauntleted hand, and transferring his dagger to his left, he struck furiously at the steel-clad figure before him, parrying at the same time with his dagger a dangerous thrust aimed at his visor. The mace crashed on the helmet of his foe, and a smothered exclamation of pain and rage came from out the barred morion.

Cutting wildly at the gorget of the young esquire, the man-at-arms turned and made a dash for his horse.

"Stay, man-at-arms! Turn, caitiff that thou art!" called Ralph after him. "Ah, recreant esquire, get thee gone, then, coward that thou art!" and Ralph, who was thinking more of his lord than of the pursuit of his cowardly assailant, turned back from following him to attend to his prostrate chief.

As he bent over Lord Woodville, he noticed a dark patch on his shining armour. There was a deep dent in the globular breast-plate, and the broken end of a lance head was sticking in it.

Ralph was in despair; the Captain of the Wight lay motionless in his harness; the silence was broken only by the cry of a sea-fowl as it circled over head, and the distant thud of the sea as it rolled on the shore below. Was Ralph the only living thing in that lonely valley among the solemn hills?

He undid the buckle of his lord's helmet, and reverently removed the cumbrous tilting-helm. As he did so he heard a faint sigh from the stricken knight, and as the moonlight fell on his noble features he opened his eyes.

"My lord, my lord, thou art not dead!" cried Ralph in joy. But no answer came back, the eyes had closed again, and despair once more seized on the young esquire.

What could he do? He looked round. What was it that flickered against his face? The air was piercingly cold, and the moon had become obscured by a thickening of the air. Ralph had opened his visor, that he might attend his lord more easily. Again something flickered in his face, cold and feathery. It was snowing.

Here was a fresh cause for anxiety. Alone in that sequestered valley, who could bring them help? And he did not dare to leave his lord alone, for fear that

caitiff should return to finish the murderous work. As Ralph looked round in despair at the dreary scene, his heart sank within him. The landscape was fast becoming one grey indistinguishable blot, and the feeble light of the hidden moon was turning to a sickly livid hue. In a short time, too, he knew the moon would set.

A faint noise on the left caused Ralph to look round. The four bodies lay still and stark; but there was something moving out of the grey obscurity of the distance. Ralph closed his visor and handled his sword. The dark object drew nearer, and a yellow spark seemed to be coming with it. Ralph called out,–

"Whoever thou art, hasten thy steps; if foe, that I may handle thee, or if friend, that thou mayest help my lord."

"'Tis a friend, my son, and I come apace as fast as my stiffening joints will let me," cried a deep voice.

"Thank Heaven!" murmured the esquire. "Then my lord will not die."

By this time the dim shadow had come nearer, and Ralph saw that there were two figures–one tall and burly, the other short and slight. Both were draped in long cloaks, partially covered with the fast-falling snow. The taller of the new comers carried a lantern.

Dim and ghostly the figures looked in their peaked hoods and long mantles, entirely concealing face and form.

"Ah! we have come in time: no, no, too late!" and the slighter figure uttered a shrill and bitter cry of pain, as it bent over the lifeless mass of armour which held the unknown knight.

"Look to my lord first," said Ralph shortly.

"My son, 'tis the young child's father; my lord will wait," answered the elder stranger mildly, as he went to help his childish companion.

But Ralph barred the way.

"Whoever thou art, thou shall see to my lord first," he cried, in a resolute tone.

Seeing the fierceness of the youth, the old man quietly answered,–

"As thou wilt, my son; but thou shouldest respect youth, old age, and filial grief. But go thou and help the child, while I attend to thy lord."

Ralph, rebuked, did as he was told, there was such dignity, gentleness, and authority in the voice and manner of the tall stranger.

It was now very difficult to see. The moon had set, and the snow was falling fast, while the wind sighed mournfully through the withered boughs and twigs of the lonely thorn tree.

"May God have mercy on all dying souls!" murmured the dim shadow as it bent over the pale face of Lord Woodville; and Ralph could have sobbed aloud in anguish of heart as he felt his lord was dead.

"Oh, help me! help me! Master Lisle!" cried the agonised voice of the other stranger, shivering with cold and pain of heart. "Undo his helm or he will die, an he be not gone already," and a piteous sob of utter woe broke from the crouching figure.

Ralph, thinking only of his sorrow, did not notice the keen grief of the other, but he hastened up nevertheless, and speedily undid the helm.

"Oh, father! father!" sobbed the shivering voice; "speak, father!"

But no sound came from the set mouth, and the child broke out into piteous distress, sobbing and choking as though her heart would break.

Ralph was touched. Even in his own stony sorrow he felt for the poor child.

"Nay, nay, he may not be dead," he said, trying to comfort her. "See, he moves!" he cried, noticing a quiver of the gauntleted hand.

"Let me look, my son," said the gentle voice of the other stranger. "Go thou, catch yonder horse; thy lord lives, and will recover."

"Will he?" cried Ralph joyously, springing up and going in search of the horses, which, well trained as they were, were standing under the shelter of the thorn-bush out of the fast-driving snow.

When he returned leading the two horses, he was delighted to find Lord Woodville sitting up.

"My fair boy," said the Captain of the Wight, in a faint voice, "thou must help me on to my charger and lead me home. I have been hard stricken, albeit the wound is not mortal. But before thou aidest me, see to the state of Sir George Lisle: I would be loth he should die."

Lord Woodville spoke with difficulty, and paused between his words.

Ralph did as he was told, and found the two shrouded figures still bending over the inanimate knight.

"The Lord Woodville hath sent me to make inquiry of the knight–how fareth he?"

"Make answer that he is sore stricken, and in parlous case; but an we may get him to a place of shelter, he may do well."

Ralph returned and reported the message.

"Is there no other horse but mine? If not, take mine and leave me here," said Lord Woodville simply.

He had drawn his sword, and was holding it by the blade before him. The sword thus held had all the proportions of a Latin cross.

"'Thou shalt love thine enemies. Do good to those who hate thee,'" murmured the wounded Captain of the Wight.

"My lord, there is the knight's own horse, or he can have mine."

"Haste thee, then! gentle youth, for his wounds and mine are growing stiff, and there is need of shelter," faintly gasped the wounded Captain.

With rather more difficulty Ralph caught the other horse, and led it up to the little group in the snow. Then, by dint of hard exertion, the Hermit of St Catherine's–for it was he who had come to their aid–and Ralph lifted the wounded knight on to his horse, and the old man holding him in his high-peaked saddle, with the slight figure leading the horse by its bridle, they disappeared in the grey obscurity.

Ralph now returned to his lord. To his surprise and joy he found the Captain of the Wight had risen to his feet. The Hermit had removed the corslet, extracted the spear-head, and staunched the wound with some balsam and simples for healing sword or lance wounds. With effort he was able to mount his horse, and with Ralph holding the bridle, and ready to steady his lord in his saddle should he feel faint or giddy, the two figures wended their way over the snow towards Carisbrooke Castle.

It was a weary journey, and Ralph never felt so relieved in his life as when he descried the noble pile standing up black and grand in the midst of the white landscape.

With wonderful courage and resolution Lord Woodville sat erect in his saddle as they entered by the little postern gate, at which only one archer was on guard. He so carried himself until they reached the door of his own apartments, then, dismounting with Ralph's aid, he staggered to a settle in the hall and fainted away.

Ralph had presence of mind enough not to disturb the house. He went to Lady Trenchard's apartments and called her. That prudent lady soon came, and with her husband's assistance they managed to get the Lord Woodville to his room. Seeing his lord in safe hands, Ralph left to look after the horses. But Humphrey had already led them away, and in a few moments more Ralph, with the aid of his trusty varlet, had taken off his harness, and was soon fast asleep.

When he awoke next morning, the chapel bell was tolling, and he could hear the merry voices of the other pages as they lounged round the hall door before going into chapel. All things seemed as usual, but one more strange adventure had added its experience to the life of Ralph. He could scarcely believe it was little more than half a year since he had left his home.

CHAPTER XXII.

OF THE VOICE OF THE CHARMER.

During the next two months events of importance had occurred. The Captain of the Wight had recovered from his wound in time to attend the splendid ceremony of his niece's coronation, and his faithful young esquire had accompanied him to London. It was a joyful time. On their march from Southampton to the metropolis, Ralph obtained leave to visit his home.

Attended by Humphrey, he separated from the retinue of the Captain of the Wight at Southampton, to join it again at Guildford. By riding fast he would be able to make up for the longer distance, and would thus obtain time to spend one night at home.

The talk of all the garrison of Carisbrooke Castle and indeed of all the south of England, was the approaching war with France. No man doubted, and all men wished, that Henry VII. would be driven to take the part of his old benefactor, Francis, Duke of Brittany, in the defence of his duchy against the troops of France, led by the young King Charles VIII. It was so obviously the policy of England to prevent this powerful duchy being united to the French crown, which was already giving signs of the power it possessed, under the crafty rule of Louis XI., that far-seeing English statesmen like the Bishop of Ely, Master Christopher Urswick, and Sir John Edgecomb, the prototypes of England's diplomatists, could not doubt that Henry must see the vast importance of keeping France disunited, and of maintaining such an "*imperium in imperio*" as Brittany in semi-independence. Englishmen still longed to wipe out the disgrace of their expulsion from France, and any prospect of war with that country was hailed with joy. For war meant, according to the views of the time, not an impoverishment of both contending nations, but an increase of wealth to one or the other. Every esquire or common soldier might return a rich man. If, now-a-days, young men go forth to the ends of the earth to dig for gold, or spend their young lives in isolated exile in the wilds of the far West, or the savannahs of South America, or the rainless plains of Australia, with what eagerness would they have turned to war, where strength of arm and average good fortune meant glory, social distinction, and personal wealth? The capture of a rich prisoner in war meant the payment of a large ransom; and, as a wise man-at-arms knew, the best investment of his money was in forming a troop; the capture of one rich prisoner resulted in the decrease of power to his country's foe, as well as the personal aggrandisement of his captor. And all this brilliant prospect of success was enhanced by the scene in which the aspirant to fame displayed his prowess. Not drearily working at dull, monotonous manual labour far from the surroundings of civilisation, but in the very heart of social life carving out wealth, and fame, and name. No wonder war was popular.

To the eyes of the English people there never had been a time better suited for recovering the Duchies of Normandy, Guienne, and Gascony, since their final loss, but thirty years before. France's extremity had always been England's op-

portunity; and it was through Brittany and Normandy that English men-at-arms had poured to the conquest of France–to such splendid victories as Crecy and Agincourt. As Scotland was the thorn in England's side, so Brittany and Burgundy were the sharp points wherewith to rasp the French.

By a strange coincidence, the two capitals of Burgundy and Brittany, similar in name–Nancy and Nantes–received the mortal remains of their two last dukes within ten years of each other. In 1477 the last male of the house of Burgundy was borne from the field of battle to his splendid tomb in Nancy, leaving his only daughter to be despoiled of her inheritance by the craft of Louis XI.; while in 1488 the last male of the house of Brittany was entombed in the magnificent pile erected to his memory in the church of the Carmelites at Nantes, leaving also an only daughter to be fought for by an emperor, a king, a royal duke, and a puissant lord of the Pyrenees. And, by another singular fatality, the same Prince became the husband of both heiresses. Maximilian won, but speedily lost, both Mary of Burgundy and Anne of Brittany.

The common talk of all men, therefore, was the expedition that would shortly sail for France. The Captain of the Wight made no secret of his intentions, but determined to obtain the royal sanction first.

Full of the exciting prospects before him, and proud of his rapid progress, Ralph rode eagerly home.

With what joy he saw the blue smoke curling over the brown trees which hid the old manor house.

"See, Humphrey, there's the gilded vane on the west gable, and now I can see the stacks of chimneys. Whoop, lad, get on;" and the joyous boy urged his horse to a quicker pace. In a few minutes more he had turned the corner of the road, and before him lay the picturesque range of old gables and low windows.

He had not been able to let his parents know of his coming. He cantered up to the gate, jumped off his horse, and in another minute was in his mother's arms.

There is no need to describe the pride and joy of his parents, or the half-concealed awe of his brother Jasper. His younger brother had gone to Oxenford, and sent home from time to time accounts of his progress. After a delightful visit, all too short for Ralph and his parents, the young esquire set out to rejoin his lord. He arrived in time at Guildford, and the next day they entered the capital.

The King had already returned with his nobles and men-at-arms from the progress he had been making in the north, and the next day the ceremony of the coronation of the Queen was to take place. Ralph was in immediate attendance on his lord, who, as uncle of the Queen, held a high place of honour in the ceremonies. The esquire was witness of the installation of fourteen Knights of the Bath, and was astonished at the grandeur, solemnity, and state of the pro-

ceedings. But what amazed him most was the gorgeous procession of barges, all gilded and bedecked with flags, which accompanied the Queen on the Thames. He was forcibly reminded of Yolande as he saw the lovely young Queen, with her fair yellow hair rippling in golden masses down her back, intertwined with strings of jewels, and crowned with a golden crown; dressed in "white cloth of gold of damask," and with a richly furred ermine mantle over her shapely shoulders. But the palm of beauty was carried off by her second sister Cicely, the loveliest woman of her time, whose romantic life had not yet reached its most romantic period. Ralph little knew that that exquisite face and queenly figure would one day reside in a humble manor-house but three miles from his future home, and that her husband would be lower in social station than himself.

He attended on the Captain of the Wight as one of the suite, at the coronation banquet in the great hall, and Ralph was again surprised at the gorgeous pageant. But he did not like to see two such fair damoiselles as the Lady Catherine Grey and Mistress Ditton sitting under the table at the lovely Queen's feet, and could not understand why the Lady Oxford and the Lady Rivers should hold up, from time to time, a handkerchief before that sweet face, while he pitied their having to kneel through such a long state ceremony.[*]

[*] Leland. *Collectanea.*

He heard how urgently his lord strove to obtain the sanction of Henry VII. to enlist men-at-arms and archers for the aid of the Bretons. But the presence of the French Ambassadors, chief among whom were the Lord Daubigny, a Scotch nobleman in the service of the French crown, combined with a fear of internal troubles in case he should engage in foreign wars, kept that cautious monarch from giving any permission.

It was the opinion, however, of Lord Woodville, as well as of most of the English nobles and statesmen, that the King would not be at all averse to an expedition being fitted out privately, which he could disavow in public. Indeed most men thought he would be very much gratified by such an exhibition of zeal.

Full of these ideas, and encouraged by the promises of assistance he received from many experienced knights, as well as by numerous offers of service from men of lesser rank, Sir Edward Woodville returned to his island government.

The coronation had taken place in November; it was now the middle of January 1488. The next two months were employed in sounding the principal inhabitants of the island.

The Breton gentlemen had gone back to Brittany trusting to the promised

aid, and carrying with them exaggerated ideas of Lord Woodville's position and power.

Ralph and the other pages enjoyed their lives as healthy boys engaged in the manly employments of life in a mediæval castle must have enjoyed them. Hawking, hunting, daily drill and exercise, boating and fishing, such were their occupations. Ralph had never breathed a word of the midnight duel, nor did he know what had become of the wounded knight. The Captain of the Wight never referred to it, and he kept his own counsel. The valley was once revisited by him, as far as he could recollect its whereabouts; but in the coombes and dells of the downs there were so many level swards at their base, that he was in doubt whether he had come across the right one. There were no traces of any combat about them, there was the thorn bush in one and another, and a little sedgy stream, but no fresh mounds or splintered spears.

Ralph had seen much of his cousin Yolande, and his affection and admiration for her were unbounded; but he could not disguise from himself that although she treated him with absolute candour and sisterly affection, yet she always grew silent if the Captain of the Wight were near, and hung on every word that nobleman spoke. It never crossed Ralph's mind to be jealous, only he wished the Captain of the Wight did not appear quite so often upon the scene.

But the thoughts of that nobleman were far removed from such trivial subjects, if credence was to be placed in his words and actions. By sound of trumpet and proclamation the inhabitants of the Isle of Wight were summoned to a general muster at Shide Bridge, a place already celebrated by a previous muster to take account of the military strength of the island in the reign of King Edward the Second, held by John de la Hoese and John de Lisle.

Thither on the day appointed the gentry of the island, with the yeomen and country people, wended their way. The Bailiffs of Newport, Newtown, Yarmouth, and Brading, accompanied by the richer of the burgesses of those boroughs, attended. There were the bailiffs and stewards of the various estates held by the ecclesiastical bodies of Winchester College, Whorwell Monastery, Christchurch Priory, and Ashey; while the Abbot of Quarr, the Prior of Carisbrooke, representing the Carthusian monastery of Shene, and the Bailiff of Appuldurcombe, for the nunnery of St Clare, without Aldgate, were also present. There came, besides, the reeves of the manors belonging to the imprisoned Earl of Warwick, from Brixton and Swainston. There were representatives of all the island families: Sir Nicholas Wadham, Sir John Oglander, Sir William Lisle of Wootton, Master Meaux, recovered from his rough handling of five months before, a Bowerman from Brooke, Trenchards from Watchingwell and Shalfleet, a Dineley from Woolverton, a Cheke from Mattistone, the Bowermans of Austerborne or Osborn, John Racket of Knighton, and his relative by marriage, Leigh of Woolverton in

Bembridge, a Hawles of the ancient family of De Aula from Stenbury Manor. There were Urrys, Keyneys, De Heynos, Bruyns, with many others too numerous to mention, and a crowd of the lesser yeomen and common people. When all were assembled, the Captain of the Wight, in full armour, but with bare head, mounted on his splendid charger, and surrounded by his seneschals, esquires, and pages, addressed the crowd.

In a stirring speech he explained the situation. He told how many evils the French had inflicted upon their forefathers. How in Edward the First's reign they had threatened the island, but were daunted by the stout preparations of the ancestors of many there present. How again in Edward the Third's time they harassed the island by their evil depredations, until under the brave Sir Theobald Russel of Yaverland, who gave his life for his people, they were driven out with loss and shame. How again in Richard the Second's reign the whole island was overrun, and cruel damage inflicted, when all their towns were in flames, and no place safe but the Castle of Carisbrooke. But here again the ancient valour of their race broke out, and under the stout Sir Hugh Tyrrel, "that right hardy knight," they chased the false Frenchmen to their ships, slaying them by scores, "insomuch that from that day Deadman's Lane went by no other name, and Neddie's Hill is still there to show the burial place of the marauders." Again how valorously they drove off Waleran de St Pol, that "noble knight of haut lineage," and frightened away the caitiffs again a few years after; while in Henry the Fifth's time they slew many who were running away to their ships.

"Shall we then," went on the Captain, "not recover from these false robbers the wealth they have gotten from us? Shall we not avenge on them the wrongs they have done to us? Think, all ye brave knights and sturdy yeomen, of the wealth ye will gain. Think all ye young esquires and right hardy varlets of the honour and renown ye will acquire in the eyes of your fair mistresses. And, above all, think of the glory of being the first to lead the way to victory, and recover for England and our King the ancient lands and duchies of which she hath been so foully robbed. I will stake life and fortune on the venture. I will warrant all men against loss. You will do an action pleasing to all England, and will save an oppressed people, an aged duke, and a fair princess from the cruel hands of the ravisher. They are Bretons, so are we. They hate the French, so do we. The tongue they speak is the native tongue of our sovereign lord the King. Their hero is Arthur; their country is the home of Lancelot-du-lac, Merlin, and all whom we reverence as our own. Shall we not bring help, if in so doing we enrich ourselves, destroy our enemies, win everlasting fame and name, and save our lives and the lives of our children from future outrage? Shall we not bring help? Who are our allies? The King of the Romans, Lord of Austria, Italy, Allemayne, Brabant, and Flanders; the Duke of Brittany, the Duke of Orleans, the Prince of Orange, the

Lord d'Albret, and many more of high lineage, great estate, and mighty valour. Did fate ever offer such a chance? and shall we throw it all away? Rather than let France, our bitter foe, rule over our ancient ally, I myself will go with only my own household, and with my single lance will venture my life for such a cause, losing it with ready will, if so it must be. But, noble knights, gallant esquires, worthy burgesses, and sturdy yeomen, shall we not all go together? Shall we not win wealth, renown, safety, and the everlasting gratitude of our King, our country, and our children?"

There was a deep murmur of applause. Every one was moved. Even the more reflecting portion of the crowd recognised the truth of many passages in the rousing speech of their Captain. The enthusiasm of the younger men was wild. They applauded vociferously, drawing their swords and waving them over their heads, and it was with difficulty the voice of Sir William Lisle could be heard. He was speaking in support of their Captain, and relating the terror the fears of French invasions had roused throughout the island, so much so that his own ancestor had withdrawn to the mainland, like many others of the island population.

When he had finished, many other speakers followed; and at last it was resolved that the Captain of the Wight should be asked to select such as would be most serviceable in the cause, while such as could not go should give of their substance to properly equip the poorer sort.

So ended this memorable meeting; and, greatly pleased with the success of the day, Lord Woodville returned to Carisbrooke.

In the course of the next week, so many gentlemen and yeomen presented themselves eager to go on the expedition, that Lord Woodville and his officers had some difficulty in making a selection. But by the end of the week forty gentlemen, and about four hundred yeomen, were enrolled, and directed to hold themselves in readiness to sail early in the following week.

The excitement in the island was at this time intense. The inhabitants felt the eyes of England were upon them; they felt proud of themselves and of their gallant Captain; and there was scarcely a family, whether rich or poor, which did not contribute some member–in many cases several–to the forthcoming expedition.

Ralph was very busy, like every one else in the castle. Weapons and armour were given out, drill was incessantly going on, and all the tailors in Newport were hard at work making surcoats for the men-at-arms and archers. Every man of the expedition was to wear a white tabard with the red cross of St George blazoned on it.

At last the important day arrived. Ralph had received permission to visit his relations the evening before. It was an exquisite spring evening, and the scene

was lovely as he rode over the long hill between Newport and Wootton.[*] Before him lay the winding creek embowered in thick oak woods–those woods which gave the name to his kinsman's branch of the Lisle family, and perhaps a name to the little hamlet of Wodyton. Beyond stretched the undulating land which hid the Monastery of Quarr, whose deep-toned bell was sounding to complines across the still woods and glassy waters of the creek; while away in the purple distance stretched the gleaming Solent, unruffled by the slightest breeze, and bounded by the dim Sussex shore.

[*] Wootton, in Domesday Book "Odetone;" called Wodyton in Bishop Woodlock's Return of the Parishes in the Island; Woditone in the account of the watches kept in the 18th of Ed. II., and in Cardinal Beaufort's Valuation, Woodyton; and in the 8th of Ed. III. Wodyton.

Ralph rode down into the valley, where the grey mist floated in mysterious wreaths, from out of which the blue smoke of Briddesford Manor rose like a faint column in the still atmosphere, only to hang above the mist in a greyer cloud.

The young esquire felt sad for the first time. He found his cousin awaiting him in the dark old porch. After a few words of friendly greeting, Ralph became silent.

"Why, cousin Ralph, what aileth thee?" said his cousin.

"I hardly know, sweet cousin mine, and yet I do know, only thou wilt laugh at me; and so I would not say what yet I fain would."

Yolande smiled a sad smile, but she said quietly,–

"Nay, fair cousin, say it not. I know what thou thinkest. It may never be. I told thee months ago. Thou wilt some day know how true I spoke. We cannot all have what we wish; and even if we could, we should soon wish for something else."

"Well, I would like to try," said Ralph bluntly.

"Ay, and so should I," sighed Mistress Yolande. "But, Ralph, promise me thou wilt look well after thy lord. He is over venturesome, and, I fear me much, he careth naught for life; indeed I sometimes think he would rather go hence." Yolande's voice became tremulous. She recovered herself after a pause. "Thou wilt watch over him, Ralph? I know not why, but I feel I shall never look upon him more!"

And so his lovely cousin had no more words for him than that he should take care of his lord? No matter, Ralph felt he only lived for her. He would willingly die to give her happiness. He simply answered,–

"I will do my duty."

They then went into the house, and Ralph took a respectful adieu of old Sir William Lisle.

"Go forth, my kinsman, thou art a worthy son of our noble house. I would well that thou, when thou returnest, shouldst take daughter and lands, and rear up a stalwart line. But it will be as God wills it. Take my blessing, and go forth to victory."

So Ralph left his kinsfolk, sadder at heart than he had ever been in all his life, but resolved to bring back his lord in safety and glory to the Wight, or die with him in France.

As he rode back over St George's Down–for he took a longer way back, being in a dreamy and melancholy mood–the soft light of the young moon shone in the pale primrose of the western sky. The night-jar uttered its melancholy note, and flapped heavily past in the silence of the evening, while a distant owl raised its plaintive cry from the dark woods which faded in the grey and ghostly mist of the northern valley. This was his last night in England. How many would see their homes again of all that gallant band of high-spirited men?

But a step near at hand roused him from his reverie. Two figures passed him almost unobserved. The slighter one turned to look, gave a little sigh, and went on with its taller companion, who seemed to walk with difficulty.

CHAPTER XXIII.

HOW THEY LEFT THE WIGHT.

The stirring sound of trumpets awoke Ralph at an early hour the next morning. All the castle-yard was already busy with hurrying men-at-arms, archers, and varlets. Sir John Trenchard, Tom o' Kingston, and the other officers were giving orders and getting the men into their places.

The great gates of the castle were wide open, the drawbridge was lowered. Lady Trenchard and the domestics of the Captain's apartments were looking down from the oriel window. The chapel bell was ringing, and as many as could find room in the little building were reverently assisting at the Mass, the last they should ever hear in England performed by their worthy chaplain, who was going with them.

In another hour the troops were drawn up, and a fine body of men they looked. All those from the West Medene, or western division of the island, had

mustered at the castle. Those from the East Medene were to muster at St Helens, where the embarkation was to take place. But in spite of being little more than half their strength, the small body of about two hundred and fifty men looked very smart and serviceable.

On the right of the line drawn up in the courtyard were the men-at-arms, a body of some forty cavaliers, armed from head to foot in complete plate armour, and wearing the picturesque white tabard with the red cross over their breastplates; behind these were the custrils and grooms, all armed also, but with less complete body armour. All this body of cavalry carried lances, daggers, and stout long swords, while the men-at-arms, in addition, had the formidable mace hanging from their saddle-bow.

Next to the men-at-arms, on their left, were the mounted archers–a most serviceable force–nearly all armed with back and breastpieces, over a stout leathern jerkin, with plates of steel strapped on their sleeves and thighs, and armed with round targets, crossbows, slung behind their backs, long swords and knives. On their heads they wore the salade, or open helmet, with the gorget and chinpiece to protect their necks and upper part of the chest. Many of them wore chain-shirts, or brigandines, under their steel breast-plates, while these, like the men-at-arms, wore the white tabard and red cross of St George.

The mounted archers rode stout ponies, called hobbies, and were attended by another body of grooms, drawn up behind them. To the left of all were the infantry, composed of the archers, armed with their long bows, the celebrated weapon to which England owed all her victories, and cloth-yard shafts hung in their quivers, a stout sword on thigh, and a long keen knife in the belt. Some were protected by defensive armour, but most were simply clad in leathern jackets and stout leggings, with a steel cap on the head. Like all the rest of the force, they wore the white tabard and red cross. The billmen were armed and equipped like the archers, without the long bows. Behind this division were the grooms and camp followers, while on the left of all were the pack animals and baggage train.

A loud flourish of trumpets now proclaimed that the Captain of the Wight was mounting at the door of his hall, and in another minute Sir Edward Woodville, in complete armour, only wearing a velvet bonnet ornamented with an ostrich plume placed jauntily on one side of his head, rode out in front of the line–

> ”On his brest, a bloodie crosse he bore,
> The deare remembrance of his dying Lord,
> For whose swete sake that glorious badge he wore,
> And dead–as living ever–him adored.
> Upon his shield the like was also scored–

For soveraine hope, which in His helpe he had."

Glancing down the line, and acknowledging the general salute with which he was greeted, the Captain of the Wight gave the order to march, and placing himself with his esquires and pages in the centre of the column, the little force moved off. They tramped over the drawbridge, amid the cheers of the small body of men left to garrison the castle, and defiled down the steep road to Newport. The march through the town was one long leave-taking.

Master Paxhulle looked at the cavalcade with mingled feelings of satisfaction and chagrin. He was glad to have so formidable a rival as Tom o' Kingston removed out of his way, but he did not at all like to see the interest Mistress Bremskete took in him, or the sobs of grief, intermixed with ejaculations of admiration, which broke from her from time to time.

"Marry, Master Paxhulle, that's what I call a man. Oh! when shall I see his like again?"

"Cheer up, Mistress Bremskete, there's a-many as good as he, and much more likely to make an honest woman comfortable."

"Nay, nay; 'tis a parlous brave man, and one of a brave heart withal. 'Tis a tender man, and one as'd let a woman have her own way. And to think of his going to be killed in France!"

"Nay! Now nay! Mistress Bremskete, 'tis the French they're going to kill!"

"Ah, well, 'twill be a weary time for many a loving heart 'till they be come back again."

And so it seemed, to judge by the weeping women who were bidding their friends good-bye. The head of the column was now passing over Copping Bridge, and their glancing spear-points and fluttering pennons could be seen over the hedges of the long lane which led up to the central ridge of the island. After they had mounted the crest of Arreton Down, which divided the fertile and sunny vale of Newchurch from the dense woods of the northern shores of the island, a glorious view met their eye. The gleaming bay of Sandown, bounded by the beetling cliffs of Culver on the east, looking like walls of ivory rising from the azure sea; while on the west loomed up the grandly swelling ridge of Boniface Down, and the dim headland of Dunnose. Below lay the fertile land, smiling in the morning sun, with hamlet, farm-house, and church nestling in sheltering copse or woody dell.

"'Tis a fair land and a rich," said Lord Woodville, reining in his horse to look at the lovely view. His glance took in the steep acclivity above Appuldurcombe, and rested upon the darker shadow which marked where the little Priory stood. With a sigh the Captain of the Wight shook the reins of his horse and turned to

pursue his march. He gave no look to Briddelsford, which lay amid the northern woods, and towards which Ralph was looking with wistful eyes, and spake but little until they reached the end of Ashey Down.

Then a cry broke from the head of the column, for there lay the ships that were to take them over the sea to the sunny land of France, and it came home to all men that they might be looking on their own fair home for the last time.

They descended to the valley below, and passing through Ashey village they crossed the Brading road a little to the north of that borough, where they were joined by a large body of men led by young Oglander of Nunwell; they then skirted the beautiful Brading creek, until rising once more they reached St Helens Green, and descended for the last time to the old church by the sea. Here they found all the rest of the band, and a great crowd of relations and friends come to bid them God speed.

Ralph revelled in the busy scene, and, together with Dicky Cheke and Maurice Woodville, superintended the embarkation of the baggage. The four ships which were to take over the expedition were lying in the narrow channel at the entrance to Brading Haven.

As the expedition marched down the steep declivity from St Helens to the sandy spit thrown up by the winds and waves to form a breakwater for the broad expanse of Brading Haven, the vessels were being warped alongside the shingly beach. The tide was falling fast, and by the time the baggage animals had reached the sea beach, the sea had left the wide extending flat of sand and shingle, so as to allow of all going alongside the flat-bottomed unwieldy hulks of the transport vessels.

The work of embarkation went on all day, and by the time the tide had risen over the beach again, every one was on board.

It was an exquisite evening, and its still beauty impressed all hearts.

Astern of Ralph's ship lay the three other awkwardly-built, high-prowed vessels, the rising tide seething past their anchor cables, which quivered and vibrated in the rushing eddy. Every rope and pulley, mast and yard, and fluttering bannerole stood out velvety brown against the pale primrose, the orange gold, the purple and grey of the western sky, while the still waters of that large mere reflected the solemn shadowy hills, and the brilliant light of the departed sun. The grey green mist of evening was creeping over the distance, and the evening star flickered its glinting light across the purling water. There was silence in nature, but not in man. Sounds of merriment arose from the idly floating ships; songs and laughter, and shouts to their friends upon the shore, where the flickering firelight showed that many were camping out to take the last view of their relatives.

Ralph could have wished to be alone: the noises jarred upon his feelings. He moved away from the taffrail, where he had been sitting watching the bubbles

of the tide as it eddied under the stern post.

Dicky Cheke met him. That youth had already assumed quite a nautical air, and was casting his eye aloft with all the assurance of an old sea dog.

"Well met, Ralph," he said. "We shall have an air o' wind anon, when the moon's set, and the tide's done flowing. You mark my words. And hark ye, my son, doubtless as this is thy first trip to sea thou'lt feel squeamish a bit, I reckon. Now, take my advice, eat a hunk o' fat bacon, and quaff off a pint or so of good ale; 'twill fortify thy stomach, and things won't come so much amiss afterwards. I'm going to have a right merry feed with Maurice by-and-by. Thou hadst best join us." And Master Cheke rolled off in proper sea-going fashion, whistling, much to Ralph's amusement.

But certainly that part of his remarks about the breeze was true. A crisp little puff came off the land, blurring the soft reflection of wood and hill, and star and purple sky; and as the tide had nearly done, the skipper of the Captain's ship gave orders to weigh anchor and set sail.

[image]

HOW THEY LEFT ST. HELENS, I.W.

This was joyous news. The cable was shortened until it was nearly up and down. The large jib was run up to the foremast, and the foresail dropped down from the yard, and with a "Yeo, heave, yeo, break her out, my boys," the heavy anchor was hauled up to the cathead, and the voyage had begun. Slowly the ship moved through the still flowing tide, but as each sail was set, and the night breeze came stronger, she gathered way and rippled through the whispering sea. The vessels astern had followed the example of the Captain's ship, and were stemming the tide behind.

Cheer upon cheer came from the shore, answered by ringing shouts from the ships. The decks and rigging were crowded with lusty men, waving scarves and caps, and cheering till the welkin rang again.

The enthusiasm was unbounded, and Ralph had never felt such excitement, not even when he won the prize of the tourney.

As the ship drew out from the land the breeze came fresher still; and the creaking yards and bellying sails, with the gurgling sound of the rushing sea, told how well they were going.

Overhead the stars were shining in brilliant glitter, and the dark outline on their right faintly indicated their island home. Should they ever see it again? But scarce one of all that crew of lusty men gave a thought to such a foreboding. For

them, life and wealth, and name and fame, lay away in the south across the sea, and the present was joyous. What more could they want?

"Well, Ralph, my son, we are well at sea now. They'll be shifting over those cloths, I'm thinking, for the breeze is coming more over her stern. Ah! I thought so; look out for that lee sheet, thou hast got thy leg foul of the slack. I' faith! what a thing it is to be a landlubber."

"Certes, Dicky, thou art a mariner–at least thou thinkest so; but art sure all thy terms are rightly applied?" said Ralph, laughing at the nautical Dicky, who had now put on a suit of yellow oiled clothes, and smelt very unpleasantly. "Faugh! Dicky, how parlous nasty thou art! and why hast put on this strange suit?"

"Certes, Ralph, thou art simple! 'tis a right proper dress, and one that suiteth the sea; had I had time, I would have bid thee get one too," said Dicky, who secretly had determined to surprise his comrades by his thorough knowledge of nautical matters, and would not have told them beforehand for worlds.

They had now lost sight of the island, and the ship was made snug for the night–strict discipline was observed on board, and watches set, only the pages were allowed to stay up on deck as long as they liked.

Dicky Cheke now prepared for his feast. He chose a sheltered place under the weather gunwale; and finding three coils of rope ready to hand, he placed his various luxuries in their protecting folds. There was a large game pasty, a very substantial ham, a conserve of plums, and a cheese, with new bread and a large jar of ale.

Ralph and Maurice Woodville sat down on some old sails and helped to arrange the feast. Dicky Cheke had become more nautical than ever, and would insist on walking about. The breeze had gradually freshened, and they were surging through the sea in splendid style. The other ships were hull down astern, not one of them being such a fast sailer as the ship which carried the Captain of the Wight.

Maurice Woodville had arranged the places, and bid Dicky sit down. But that young gentleman would persist in showing them how well he kept his feet in spite of the rolling of the ship, which was now running through the strong eddies of St Catherine's. However pride, as ever, goeth before a fall. He was bending down, with legs astride, to adjust the game pasty before he opened it, when the ship gave a heavier roll to port, and Master Dicky sat down abruptly in a pail which Maurice Woodville had thoughtfully put to catch him if he should fall. Dicky's collapse caused the pail to capsize, and the luckless youth, together with the pail, went rolling over into the lee-scuppers, bumping against the main hatchway in his fall.

"Blessed Thomas!" ejaculated Dicky, "what in the name of all sticky things

is this?" He had caught hold of the fore halyards, and so recovered his feet again, but he found he could not relax his fingers: they were all glued together. "Ralph! Maurice! come hither! I am bewitched! There's some vile trick been played upon me. I am all stuck together: my coat's sticking to my arms. I can't move my sleeves, and my hands are stuck to this rope. Mercy on me! come quick!"

But Maurice and Ralph were choking with laughter, and could not, or would not, go to his help. At this moment, to make Dicky's discomfort still greater, the ship gave a heavy yaw, and sank down in the trough of a wave, while the man at the wheel brought her head up again to the next sea somewhat too rapidly, with the effect of sending a deluge of water over the head of the unfortunate Dicky, whose hat had come off, and was lying under the lee gunwale. Dicky, gasping, shivering, and spluttering, was violently thrown off his legs, and waved in the air for a moment; then he banged his shins against the sharp end of a heavy iron cleat, uttering a howl of anguish; and finally, with a violent wrench, he got his hands free from the rope, and scrambled over the slippery deck to his friends and guests.

"Well, Dicky, what's the matter with thee?" said Ralph, scarcely recovered from his fit of laughter.

"Body o' me knows," said Dicky ruefully; "but methinks I am bewitched. I can't lift up my arms; and oh! mercy! I'm stuck together every way; and and how the water does trickle down my neck. Ugh! it's got down my back now: I feel it running down my backbone. Ugh! oh! hold on, one of you, or I shall be off again," and Dicky grasped at the coil of rope nearest to him, to save himself going backwards once more as the ship rolled over again.

But he had caught hold of a treacherous support. The rope flew out of the coil, and once more Dicky rolled over. But this was not the worst of the mishap. The ham, the conserve of plums, and the cheese had been placed in this secure receptacle. They were displaced by the running rope, and followed the struggling Dicky. The cheese only hit him on the nose, and rolled merrily on to join the hat, which was floating in the salt water in an angle of the bulwark stanchions, where both were quickly joined by the ham; but the conserve of plums broke from its cover, and the luscious fruit, with its fragrant but sticky syrup, were thrown in the face of their miserable owner.

"Oh! ah!" gurgled Dicky, as a large and mellow plum caught him in the eye, already smarting from the salt water, while further remarks were rendered incoherent by another one going plop into his open mouth.

Ralph and Maurice were in imminent danger of joining the struggling Dicky. They were convulsed with laughter, and were totally incapable of helping him. At last Dicky once more scrambled up again, very wet, miserable, and disconsolate. He sat down with his back to the gunwale, and broke out into dismal

grumbling.

"Well, you are scurvy knaves; you might at least have lent me a hand; and–why, where's the cheese? and I don't see the ham: it couldn't have been that which hit me on the nose! Oh, misery! and to think, after all, that beautiful ham and cheese are gone overboard! I chose them both myself! But perhaps they're only over there to leeward. Just step over, Maurice, and see."

"Nay, Dicky, let's stow the game-pie first, 'twill be best to get that out of the way," said Maurice, who had been longing to begin on the noble pie before him for some time.

"Marry! that's sound advice–hand it over here. Why, what's gone wrong with my jacket? I'm all stuck together. Oh, murder! whatever is this?"

Maurice again burst into a roar of laughter, which made Dicky furious.

"Maurice, you addled egg you, what do you see to laugh at?"

But Maurice only laughed the more.

"Ralph! rap him over the costard for me, and then do thou cut that pie. I'm too sticky to do it myself; and, to tell truth, my appetite's a'most gone with all this wet, and banging and shaking. I don't marvel I've got a headache, and feel a bit queer. Ugh! oh! oh, my! I wish she would not roll and pitch so," said poor Dicky ruefully.

Ralph did as he was told, and by the bright light of the stars and the lantern which swung in the rigging aloft to show the Captain's ship, he cut a large slice, and handed it to Dicky. But poor Dicky shook his head, and gave a little groan.

"I'll go and shift my clothes," he said, in a shivering voice. "I'm as wet as a drowned rat; and I can't think why I am so parlous sticky. I hope you fellows will eat up the pie, and have a merry time," added poor Dicky bravely.

This touched Maurice.

"Certes, Dicky, you are out of luck. But I'm grievous sad I put that–"

He broke into a peal of laughter, and could not go on, as he thought of the ridiculous scene.

"Well, Maurice, I don't see there's much to laugh at," grumbled Master Cheke.

"Oh–oh–I'm soothly grieved," gasped Maurice repentantly, trying to speak gravely, and then bursting out into a fresh fit of uproarious mirth.

At this moment the gruff voice of a man in the bows sung,–"Sail ho!" "Where away?" rang out from the Master. "On the starboard beam," came back the answer. "She's bearing up to cross us."

"Lower away that lantern, and luff a bit–so, steady," sung out the Master, who, after scanning the strange sail, went below to tell the Captain.

In a few moments more the crew came tumbling up the hatches, and the Captain of the Wight appeared in his armour.

Ralph and his fellow-pages went hastily below. The report had spread through the vessel that the stranger was a French ship, and that they intended fighting her. This was exciting news to the boys; they quietly armed themselves, and were returning on deck, when the piteous voice of Dicky Cheke stopped them.

"Oh! I am so bad, and I can't get off my coat!–whatever has come to it?"

"Why, it's all over tar," said Ralph. "You've sat down in a tar bucket."

Maurice's laughter again broke out uncontrolled, but Dicky, who now saw the trick that had been played upon him, made a sudden dash upon him, and pushed his tar-covered elbow in Maurice's face, which effectually stopped all further laughter, and the two boys fell over on the floor of the cabin, tussling and struggling, until a kick from the sergeant-at-arms made them get up and separate; and a ludicrous sight they both presented as they stood looking at each other. Dicky's yellow oilskin suit was all blotched and stuck together by great splashes of tar, while his hair and face were smeared with the same adhesive substance. Maurice was in very much the same condition. There was a large smear over his mouth and nose, and one eye and the side of his cheek were completely blackened.

"Well you be nice young gentlemen to be pages to the Lord Captain," said the man-at-arms sarcastically. "You'd best get some one to scrape you. I'm too busy;" so saying, the sergeant left them, to follow Ralph on deck, where nearly the whole ship's company was assembled under arms.

"They means to lay us aboard, my lord," said the Master.

"Certes, let them," answered the Captain of the Wight.

"Then all hands had best lie down–some along the lee gunwale, but most under hatches–or else, as they range up, they'll be afeared when they see how strong we muster," said the crafty old seaman.

This order was promptly given, and in another minute the decks looked as deserted as usual, only the ordinary watch required for working a merchant vessel being left visible.

CHAPTER XXIV.

OF "LA BEALE FRANCE."

There was a faint, pale light away in the north-east, telling of the coming dawn.

Looming up dim and indistinct against the grey horizon, Ralph, who was armed, and stood near the Captain of the Wight, saw a dark hull and lofty sails.

The breeze was fresh, and they were now about mid-channel. The strange sail came topping the waves, which curled and seethed under her broad bow as she rose on their crests and dipped again in the trough of the sea. Swiftly she ran down before the salt sea breeze, and a gallant sight she looked.

"You'd best hide the gleam of your harness, my lord," said the old master, "or they'll be smelling a rat."

Without stopping to inquire how a gleam could assist a sense of smell, the Captain of the Wight, accompanied by Ralph, stepped off the lofty poop and took their stand under the lee gunwale.

"Luff!" sung out the Master, who was carefully watching the movements of the stranger; and a cloud of spray dashed over the bow as the head of the ship came more round to the sea.

"That'll do; keep her going so. Ay, ay, my beauty, I sees ye; but ye need not be in such a hurry–we're a-waiting for you, but 'twon't do to let you think it; so now up with the helm, and let her fall off a bit. There, keep her jogging like that: they'll be alongside in another minute."

From where Ralph stood, by screwing his head a little he could just see the top of the masts and the round "crow's nests" in the "tops." The main and fore yards were braced square, and the great bellying sails stretched out tight as drums before the fresh breeze. The masts looked so close, he thought she must be aboard of them, and expected every moment to hear a crash as her stem cut into the broad stern of his own ship.

"Halloa! you there! you'll be aboard o' us an' you take no more care," sung out the Master through a speaking-tube.

But no answer came back; and Ralph was suddenly startled by seeing a long black pole slowly come creeping past the side of their ship, followed by a high black mass, and then the whole of the fore part of the vessel seemed to grow suddenly up abreast of where he was standing. He could plainly hear the sound of the sea as it dashed against the bluff bows and hurtled between the two hulls.

"Hola! Messieurs les Anglais! rendez-vous," bawled a hoarse voice.

"Come aboard, then, and take us!" called out the Master, at the same time motioning to the helmsman to put the helm down, so as to let her range alongside.

The two vessels were now broadside to broadside, and were both surging through the sea. The Frenchman had shortened sail so as to keep alongside of the Captain's vessel. Ralph could see a crowd of people on board. In another moment a stout rope with a grapnel attached was thrown on board the Captain's vessel at the stern, and another caught in the fore chains forward. The two ships were now lashed alongside.

"'Tis all right now, my lord," called down the Master; "I'll see to their not getting away while you tackles them on deck."

The Frenchmen had already begun to board the Captain's ship. A burly Norman seaman, wielding a formidable pike, had leapt over the bulwark on to the deck, and was rushing forward to knock down Dicky Cheke, who had suddenly caught sight of his cheese, when the Frenchman stepped upon it and instantly slipped up with a fearful exclamation.

"You villain! 'tis my cheese, and you have spoilt it for ever!" shrieked Dicky Cheke, in a rage.

And without a moment's hesitation he drove his sword into the Norman's body, amid the cheers of Ralph and the crew, who had watched the scene.

But now the men-at-arms and archers came pouring up from below. The Captain, closely followed by Ralph, sprang forward, shouting "St George for England!" And the Frenchmen, seeing they had caught a Tartar, sprang back to their own ship, followed fiercely by the men of the Wight.

The Frenchmen offered but a feeble resistance. They were not nearly so numerous as the English, and were armed with far less complete armour. It was an age of cruel reprisals, and it would have been thought no reflection on the humanity of the Captain of the Wight had he put the crew of the captured vessel to the sword. But beyond the few who were killed in the first excitement of the moment, no further bloodshed followed, and the French prisoners were transferred to the Captain's vessel, while a sufficient crew was placed on board the prize, with orders to keep in company and sail for Guernsey.

This was a glorious beginning, and every one hailed it as a joyous omen.

The glow of the coming sun flushed up over the pale grey sky. Creamy and crisp the crests of the tumbling sea sparkled and flashed in the ruddy light, and the sea dew glittered on spar and mast and straining sail.

Ralph never tired of watching the bows of the prize as she crashed through the curling waves, and he felt more than ever the joy of the full pulse of healthy, vigorous life.

Dicky Cheke had quite recovered his spirits. He felt his reputation was now firmly established, and he was rendered quite happy by discovering his ham inside his oil-skin hat. It was soaked in salt water, it was true, but, as he wisely remarked, that would only improve the flavour, after it had been dried before the galley fire.

The sun now rose out of the tumbling, restless sea, and Ralph and the two boys went below to turn in for a short sleep. In another three hours a loud cry on deck roused them suddenly out of their troubled doze.

Hastening on deck, they saw a few dark specks, and a high rock, over which the sea was dashing and leaping; beyond it a black mass loomed up like a tall hay-

cock, and away over the grey sea was the dim shadow of some high land.

"Where are we? what is it?" asked Ralph.

"'Tis Alderney, and yon is the Casketts, and the Ortach; and there's a swingeing tide carrying us through," answered an old seaman.

And so it seemed, for they flew past the rocks, and staggered along before the still fresh breeze.

Ralph went below, and dozed off once more. When he awoke again the motion of the vessel had ceased, but the noise on deck was great.

"Rouse up, Ralph," called Dicky Cheke. "Here's Guernsey, and we're to wait here for those heavy-sailing tubs of ours, that haven't got as far as Alderney yet, I'll warrant."

The whole of that day they spent at anchor off Peter Port. Ralph admired the grey castle Cornet, and the picturesque outlines of Herm, Jettou, and Sark, and marvelled greatly at the wonderful maze of rocks.

About mid-day the masts of the other vessels could be seen round the south-eastern point under St Martin's, and in a short time they dropped anchor abreast of the Captain's ship. Their arrival was greeted by loud cheers from the latter vessel, and the ringing cheers which came back showed that the others had seen the captured Frenchman lying inshore of the Captain's ship, with the Cross of St George waving over the Lilies of France.

The same evening they weighed anchor again, but as the wind dropped, and the tide was on the turn, the Master thought it better to run in for Jersey and wait for morning.

The next day at early dawn, with a favouring breeze, they once more weighed anchor, and stood out of St Helier's Bay. In another two hours they sighted the high land of Cape Frehel, and with a fresh breeze and flowing tide they entered the intricate channel of St Malo.

"So, this is France, is it?" said Dicky Cheke. "Marry, 'tis a barren place enough. I thought they called it a fertile land. They must be parlous odd plants as would grow on these bare rocks. Did you ever see such a lot of stones? Why, they've so many of them, they've been forced to throw them into the sea, and so fill up their harbour; or did they place them here to frighten strangers away?"

They were scudding past the Cezembre, and all its dangerous reefs; past the Grand Jardin, and in a short time had dropped anchor in St Malo roadstead.

The arrival of such a squadron as five English ships was an event in the usually tranquil lives of the inhabitants of St Malo. The town was held for the Duke of Brittany by a force of men-at-arms and demi-lances, and a force of Swiss or Allemaynes, as the English called them, had already arrived, sent by the King of the Romans to assist his betrothed wife.

The Captain of the Wight was speedily visited by the Governor of the place,

and Ralph was delighted to see, accompanying that official, his old friend the Sire de la Roche Guemené, who greeted him with frank courtesy, and welcomed him to Brittany. The capture of the French vessel was looked upon as a lucky omen.

In the course of the afternoon the vessels were able to come into the harbour and lie alongside the quay, when the Captain of the Wight landed in state, and was escorted to his quarters in the town.

Dicky Cheke was in raptures at the size of the town, there being no place at all to compare with it in the Isle of Wight. Southampton was the only port with which he could compare it; and he was astonished at the volubility of the French children.

"What scholars they be," he said. "They all talk French as easy as I talk English. But–faugh! I say, Ralph, they like it strong about here. Oh! I say, these French don't mind rank smells. Phew!"

"Humph! It is something out of the common," said Maurice.

But this was their first experience of French towns and French sanitation. Not that the towns of England were much better in those days. But the English, like most Teutonic races, had a habit of spreading their towns rather more, and the love of a plot of ground, so inherent in the English mind, kept freer currents of air in their back premises than in the narrow, cooped up streets of the French municipalities, hemmed in with lofty walls, and whose enormously tall houses shut out all daylight from the streets below.

The next few days were occupied in drilling the expeditionary force, and the Bretons admired the tall, stalwart figures of the men of the Wight, their martial bearing, and thorough equipment.

The knights and men-at-arms gave a tourney in the level plain at the back of St Malo, in return for the jousts which the Breton knights had given in Carisbrooke Castle, and many gallant feats were done, Ralph Lisle distinguishing himself greatly. Both he and the other young men enjoyed themselves very much, and they won universal praise by their courteous bearing and gallant looks.

Hawking and hunting, and the many duties of garrison life, passed away the time pleasantly enough. But Ralph longed for a more active scene. He did not care for dances and the gaieties of the lively French society, and while Dicky Cheke was in his element talking execrable French with easy self-assurance, Ralph was moping on the ramparts, or leaning over the parapet of the harbour mole, watching the fishing-boats and the busy life of the crowded harbour. He made many expeditions up the Rance and among the numerous islands of the rocky archipelago, and was fast becoming a hardy sailor, well acquainted with the set of the tides and the intricacies of the many dangerous channels. One long expedition he made with Maurice Woodville as far as the harbour of Cancalle, through the difficult passage of La Bigne, and gazed upon the marvellous pile of

Mont St Michel, rising out of the desert of sand, and he longed to visit it. But it was held by a French garrison, the most proud and enterprising in all France; for there, in the noble "Salle des Chevaliers," had been instituted in a solemn chapter the Knights of the Order of St Michel, in 1469, to commemorate the fortress never having fallen into the hands of the English, and to perpetuate the brave defence of Louis d'Estouteville in 1427.

There was some danger in this trip, not only from the sunken rocks and eddying tides, but from the chance of capture by the boats belonging to the garrison of Mont St Michel; and once they had a narrow escape from one of these latter, for as they emerged behind one great pile of granite they saw a boat drawn up on the rocks on the other side, left high and dry by the tide, and the crew were busy collecting shellfish on the rocks below. They heard one man shout out, "Voila! les Anglois," and they saw the others hasten up to look after them; but evidently they thought it hopeless to try to catch them, as before they could launch their unwieldy boat the light shallop of the two boys would be far beyond their reach. It was a narrow escape, however, and Ralph determined not to go so far away again.

There was no danger in making expeditions up the Rance, for Dinan was garrisoned for the Duke of Brittany, and all away to the west towards St Brieuc and Treguier was faithful to its native prince. One day, as Ralph returned from one of these expeditions, he was surprised to see a great stir in their camp. The Allemaynes had already marched out, and their long pikes and swaggering plumes could be seen over the hedges, on the road to Rennes. He hastened up to the Captain's quarters, and learned that orders had come to break up their camp and march at once to relieve Fougéres.

This was joyful news. The little force was by this time perfectly disciplined, and in a very short time the tents were struck. The squad was drawn up, the companies formed, and the column awaiting the order to march. The two Breton knights were directed to accompany the English and act as guides.

The Captain of the Wight, in full armour, attended by Sir John Trenchard and his esquires, put himself at the head of the main body, and ordered his banner to be unfurled. The trumpets sounded, and the order to march immediately followed. To Ralph was assigned the honourable post of accompanying Tom o' Kingston with the advanced guard.

As they left the sea, the country became more and more fertile. Sunny orchards and rich pastures, interspersed with pleasant farm-houses, bore witness to the truth of the proverbial fertility of France; but traces were also seen of the ravages of war. They were now approaching Dol, whose grey cathedral could be seen to the east of a rising bluff, conspicuous in the level landscape. Great care was requisite in passing this town. The Swiss were halted in a neighbouring

field, and the whole force marched past the walls in battle order, for Dol had lately been taken by the French troops, and an attack might be made on the column as it defiled past the grey old town.

As it was, Ralph saw for the first time in his life a shot fired with murderous intent. The garrison of Dol, more from defiance than with hope of doing any execution, trained a coleuvrine upon the head of the column which was marching past with banners displayed, drums beating, and trumpets sounding, in all the insolent pomp and bravery of war. But the shot fell short, and a derisive shout was set up by the Switzers and English archers. The rest of the march to Rennes was performed without further adventure. They encamped the first night at the Chateau de Combourg, near the little stream of the Dore, which belonged to the Comte de Chateaubriand, who was then marching upon Rennes with the Duke of Orleans, and the rest of the army of the Duke of Brittany.

The hearts of all beat high as they approached Rennes, and heard the sounds of martial music, and saw the glint of spears, and flash of steel helmet and polished cuirass. Ralph felt very proud as he rode in front of the English division, beside Tom o' Kingston, clad in complete armour, and carrying his lance erect, while he entered the streets of Rennes, the capital of Brittany. The populace had all turned out to see the redoubted English and Swiss march through their streets, as allies and friends, and they were greeted cordially. A very splendid appearance they presented. The uniform of the men of the Wight, their complete equipment, and their soldierly bearing, were loudly admired, while the swash-bucklering air of the Swiss pikemen, with their huge puffed leathern jerkins, great bonnets lined with steel, and ornamented with feathers, their long swords and stout pikes, excited much astonishment, for this formidable mercenary force was as yet only just beginning to be appreciated, and had never been seen before in Brittany.

There were eight hundred of the Swiss, all wearing the black imperial two-headed eagle on their padded and slashed buff jerkins. They marched through the city, and were encamped outside the walls, on the north.

Fresh troops were continually arriving, and in three days afterwards the main body, under the Duke of Orleans, the Prince of Orange, and the Lord d'Albret, marched into the city. Ralph attended upon the Captain of the Wight, who was sometimes called Lord Rivers by the Bretons, and enjoyed the spectacle of all this fine body of men and so many well-known nobles and knights defiling before him. There was the ducal ermine of Brittany; the golden lilies of France, with the silver label of Orleans–the lilies quartering the purple of Albret, the silver bend sinister abating the regal lilies of Dunois; and the red cross, with its silver escallops, blazing in a golden shield, with its azure eagles, for Laval. Ducal, princely, noble banners passed in gay procession before the eyes of the delighted page, while the splendidly armed cavaliers, attended by their esquires and var-

lets, rode past at the head of their squadrons. There were four hundred steel-clad men-at-arms, and eight thousand foot, with a large train of artillery, the first that Ralph had ever seen for use in the field, for the English still trusted to their own peculiar weapon, the famed long bow of England, for winning victories in the open field.

In addition to the great names of the feudal chiefs, there were other Breton lords. The Marechal de Rieux, lately returned to his allegiance to his lawful Duke; the Lords of Chateaubriand, Leon, Crenettes, Pont l'Abbé, Plessis, Balines, and Montigny Montuet, and Ralph was astonished at the gallant show and numbers of the Breton force.

He little knew what fatal jealousies were burning in the hearts of those baronial figures as they proudly rode past to the great square before the Parliament House of Rennes.

There was a great council of war held in the ancient steep-roofed building. The Captain of the Wight attended, and received a flattering greeting, as uncle of the Queen of England, and son of the Lady of Luxemburg. But it was at once apparent to his observant eye how many difficulties were to be surmounted in handling this heterogeneous band of high-spirited, proud, and impracticable men. There were present representatives of five languages–the German, the French, the Breton, the Basque, and the English; while the guttural speech of the Gascon nearly made a sixth. And the aims and objects of their leaders were as diverse as their tongues. Two suitors for the hand of the Duchess Anne were present in person; the troops of a third were there to enforce his claims; while opposed to them all were the armies of the fourth candidate. The jealousies of personal rivalry were increased by the prejudice of race. The Bretons disliked and mistrusted the French. The French, with their *amour propre* and personal conceit, were disgusted at the braggadocio and pugnacity of the Gascons; and the English and Germans did nothing to disguise their natural antipathy and contempt for the Latin races; while the stubborn Breton opposed with national and hereditary obstinacy every plan he did not himself see the use of, or which would bear directly upon the interests of his land.

After long debate nothing was decided; only the differences of the Duke of Orleans and the Lord d'Albret were rendered more conspicuous, and the nobles dispersed to their respective quarters.

The following week was spent in inaction, much to the disgust of the Captain of the Wight. The French army, under the celebrated young commander, Louis de la Tremouille, Vicomte de Thouars, was pressing hard upon Fougéres, and all men longed to march to its relief. At last all differences appeared to be accommodated, and the Duke of Orleans, who was appointed Commander-in-Chief, gave the order for the army to march. The following night the whole

force encamped at Andouille, a small village half-way between Combourg and Fougéres. Here another two days were wasted in settling a somewhat serious quarrel that had broken out at night between the Gascon followers of the Lord d'Albret and the French followers of the Duke of Orleans. In the midst of these bickerings, a dusty and heated messenger arrived to say Fougéres had fallen, and that the victorious French army was marching to attack them.

Instantly all was confusion. But the startling news had this good effect–all, with one consent, agreed they must march at once on Orange, with a view to occupying St Aubin du Cormier, which lay on the direct road from Fougéres to Rennes.

They also hoped to be able to effect a junction with the garrison of Fougéres, who had surrendered upon terms that they might march out with bag and baggage.

But on reaching Orange, which was a small hamlet some six miles from St Aubin, they heard that the French army was close upon them. They therefore halted, and spent the night there, prepared to fight a decisive battle the next day.

"Well, Ralph, we shall see some fun to-morrow," said Dicky Cheke. "'Tis Sunday, too; our good folks at Mottestone will be in church."

"Ay, and where shall we be?" said Ralph thoughtfully.

CHAPTER XXV.

OF ST AUBIN DU CORMIER.[*]

[*] So called from the Service Tree, or Serb Apple Tree, which grows in profusion all round the village, and to distinguish it from St Aubin d'Audigné nearer Rennes.

The grey mists of early morn were clinging to the dank earth when Ralph awoke after such snatches of sleep as he could get amid the noise of that large body of ill-assorted men.

It was Sunday morning, the 27th of July–a day Ralph well remembered, for it was this very day a year ago he had left his father's house to seek his fortune in the household of the Captain of the Wight. What events had taken place since then! He thought of it all, and his heart beat as he turned to look over the leafy woods, the steep slopes of the hilly country, with its fresh valleys,

whence, amid the rich foliage of orchard and copse and wide-reaching forest, the spires of the village churches and the steep gables of nestling farm-houses rose above the steaming verdure, or peeped out in shy suggestion. The birds were warbling blithely all around. There was a tinkle of distant bells, a hum of awakening life, and the soft, warm fragrance of a midsummer night still floated in the balmy morning air.

Ralph could not believe that in another few hours he and all that host of lusty, careless men would be fighting for fame and name, and very life itself. He had only twice had experience of the fierce struggle of deadly fight. But his whole training had accustomed him to it, and he gave little thought to the battle. But the deep bells from a neighbouring monastery stirred softer thoughts. He thought of his mother and father, of Thruxton Manor away over the sea, and then of his cousin Yolande and his promise.

But the trumpets sounding the *réveille* interrupted all softer thoughts. The reality of life had begun.

"Well, Ralph, my boy," said the cheerful voice of Dicky Cheke, "'tis a fine morning for our sport. Marry, I trust you and I will win our spurs to-day. But come to breakfast. There's a right pleasant smell of fried eggs and bacon over yonder, and thy man Humphrey hath gotten a rare fat capon out of some farm hard by. I've asked young De Rohan to come and share with us, 'twill improve thy French; only he talks it with such a sad Breton accent I fear me he will mar my fine tongue. But come along–there he is."

Ralph sauntered back with Dicky. The four boys were soon laughing and talking over their breakfast. The young Seigneur de Rohan was a merry addition to their party, and kept them in constant laughter by his attempts to talk English.

By eight o'clock orders came from the Duke of Orleans for their division to prepare to march. There had been a very stormy council of war, and the suspicions of the Breton infantry were so strong, that to quiet them it was arranged that the Duke of Orleans and the Prince of Orange should dismount and fight on foot among the pikemen, a very dangerous service, and one which showed their courage in the highest degree. But the jealousies between the infantry and cavalry had reached such a high pitch, that it required very strenuous exertions to prevent the former marching off the ground; the Bretons affirming that the French princes only used them to make cat's-paws of them.

Young De Rohan astonished the pages by saying that seventeen hundred of the Breton infantry were going to wear the same uniform as the men of the Wight, in order to make the French think there were more English than there were. This was a great compliment, and rejoiced Dicky's heart, for he knew how much more important the Captain of the Wight would be if he commanded two thousand instead of four hundred men.

In another hour the whole army was equipped and marching to its position to the right of a vast forest, the Forêt de la Seve, and there was already promise of the great heat the coming noon would bring. The bells of Orange were sounding for morning service, and the faint tinkle of the other village bells could be heard over the forest and hills. A deep blue sky spread overhead, and a mellow haze floated over the horizon. There was scarcely a breath of air, and the banner of the Captain of the Wight hung in white and crimson folds down its gilded shaft.

The men of the Wight were now drawn up–the men-at-arms on the right, the infantry in the centre, and the mounted archers on the left. All were completely armed, and they had now become a thoroughly well-disciplined, splendid body of men, typical of the British army–"The best in the world, if only there were more of them." The Captain of the Wight, mounted on his black charger, armed like himself in full plate-armour, rode in front of the line, and glanced down it with martial pride. Only a few words he said, but they were fiery, knightly, encouraging words, such as a brave leader and chivalrous knight knew how to say. He told them of the compliment the Duke of Orleans was paying them in reinforcing them with seventeen hundred Breton foot all clad to look like Englishmen. He reminded them of Crecy, Poictiers, and Agincourt. He bid them think that the eyes of England, of France, and of their own dear island home were upon them; and he bid them fight as became the ancient valour of their name and race. Their quarrel was a just one, and their foe the natural enemy of their hearths and homes.

"Men of Yaverland and Brading, remember Sir Theobold Russel, and how he died for you. Men of Newport, remember Deadman's Lane and Neddie's Hill. Men of Yarmouth and Newtown, remember your burning homes and ruined boroughs. Men of the Wight, you are here to show your manhood, your skill, and your hardihood; that Frenchmen may see and feel how vain are their vapourings, how keen are our swords. And here before you all, in the glorious light of that splendid sun, I draw my blade, vowing never more to sheath it till the victory is won, or my hand can hold it no more."

As the Captain of the Wight spoke, his sword-blade flashed in the sun, while he held it aloft over his crested helm.

A ringing cheer answered these stirring words, and Dicky Cheke murmured to Ralph,–

"In sooth, he is a hero, this Captain of ours, and I am sorry for the French. We won't be too hard on them, Ralph. I sha'n't ask for more than a couple of thousand crowns for my prisoners, unless I take the Sire de la Trimouille himself, and then, as it won't do to spoil the market, I must make him pay a good round sum–perchance fifty thousand pistoles, or so; only I will let him off the last ten if he pays up well;" and Dicky Cheke became quite pensive as he thought how

he would spend his money, and bumped against Sir John Trenchard, who had ridden down the line with the Captain to inspect the men.

And now the Breton infantry marched up, all clad alike, and the eye of their commander kindled as he welcomed them to his battalion.

"They are sturdy little fellows," said Dicky, surveying them with a critical air. "But they want beef; they haven't got our breadth of chest and length of limb."

"You atom, you imp, you," said Maurice Woodville, "when will you be done with your coxcombery? Why, they are all big enough to eat you, boots and all."

"Now, Maurice, none o' your sauce. You've never been the same varlet since you fell into the mud at St Malo, when you were so frightened by the old cherry woman from whom you filched those cherries."

Maurice was going to give Dicky a cuff, only Sir John Trenchard happened to look round, and he drew in his hand again, muttering, "I'll give it you afterwards; you look out this evening."

But all further talk was put an end to by the arrival of the Marechal de Rieux, an old and experienced warrior, who had lately had his castle and town of Ancenix burned to the ground by the French, and who was eager to revenge himself upon his enemies. He saluted the Captain of the Wight and his division, and briefly exchanged a few words with the former. After which Lord Woodville turned to his escort and said with satisfaction,–

"We have been paid one more courtesy. We are to be the vanguard of the army, and the very puissant knight the Comte de Rieux is to lead us."

The order to march now came, and the whole division broke into column, and took the road to St Aubin, the old Marshal and the Captain of the Wight with drawn sword riding at their head.

After marching some three miles, and when the houses of St Aubin du Cormier were just visible over the orchards, they came to a highroad which their road intersected. Here a halt was called, and the men were allowed to refresh themselves. The heat was getting very oppressive.

Ralph and Dicky Cheke wandered off to see the rest of the army come up.

"Oh, I wish I had put a cabbage leaf inside my helmet," groaned Dicky. "I shall be roasted like a chestnut inside its coat. I'm stewing in my own juice–oh!"

"'Tis a lucky chance we are wearing tabards; look at those men-at-arms riding with my Lord d'Albret; they must needs be grilled. They've neither lambrequin nor surcoat, and shine in the sun like fresh-caught mackerel," answered Ralph.

"What a fine lot they all look! and look at those Allemaynes! I do like those swash-bucklering varlets. Certes we are a fine show! I get more and more pitiful when I think of those jackanapes of Frenchmen yonder. If only they knew it,

how much better it would be, and what a lot of waste of moist humours it would save, if they just came in and sorted themselves out among us. What a comfort it would be! Ugh! how parlous moist I am!"

"Look, Dicky, at those coleuvrines and dragons! I am all agog to see them fire; we've a right plentiful store of artillery, I trow!" said Ralph. "Not but what I don't believe our archers are worth a hundred of them, and more, too; but we shall see. Oh, I wish they would begin. Where are the French, I marvel. Look, our men are falling in; let's hasten back. There's something going on."

And so there seemed. The English division, forming, with some Breton men-at-arms and the seventeen hundred infantry, the vanguard of the army, was standing to its arms. The cavalry were mounting, and a body of mounted archers was thrown forward under Tom o' Kingston.

The rest of the army had come up, and the main battle, or middle ward, as it was called, under the Lord d'Albret, in which was the fine body of Swiss infantry, conspicuous among whom were the Duke of Orleans and the Prince of Orange, was drawn up to support the vanguard.

The rear ward was commanded by the Comte de Chauteaubriand, whose castle had also been lately razed to the ground by the army of Charles VIII. The artillery was brought up and placed upon the flanks of the vanguard, and a small body of mounted archers was drawn up in support of the clumsy cannon.

As the two boys rode back to their lord, they could see the general disposition of the army, and their hearts beat high with pride and excitement.

"This is something like!" said Dicky. "They'll think great things of us at home when I tell them. I would give a crown our old varlet, Nick Goodall, saw me here. He'd never say I wasn't good for much again. Ah! and I wish that saucy little wench who called me a tom-tit could just see me too. Tom-tit, indeed! Tom-tit, quotha!"

When they reached their own division, they saw the mounted archers halted on the brow of the rise in front, and the burly form of Tom o' Kingston sitting his powerful horse, with lance resting on his steel solleret.

The sun was now pouring down its unclouded heat. The divisions of the army were all in battle array at half a bow-shot's length from each other, and were echeloned along the high road from Fougéres to Rennes, with the great wood of La Seve in their rear.

As Ralph, sitting his horse, his cousin Yolande's present, by the side of the Captain of the Wight, turned round to look at the splendid sight behind him, where helm, and crest, and spear point flashed in the glowing sun, and where the gay banners of the nobles gently fluttered in the light summer air, he heard a whizz, and turned quickly round.

"Hullo, Ralph!" said Maurice Woodville, "what's that archer tumbled off his

horse for? Is he in a swoon from the heat, think you? and look, they're beginning to shoot. Why, it must be the enemy on the other side of the hill."

"We shall know directly. Look, there's old De Rieux going forward, and so are we. Now, Dicky, you'll get your money, look to your lance," said Ralph, as the Captain of the Wight and his esquires put spurs to their horses and rode up to the crest of the hill.

"Ma foi, c'est de l'Hôpital, et ses gaillards. Je le connais par ses armoiries. Et voila! Gabriel de Monfalzois, c'est lui, a gauche, le petit, monté sur le grand hacquené. Aha! mon rusé soudard, c'est toi qui a brulé mon chateau," said the Marechal de Rieux, pointing to a squadron of men-at-arms who had halted out of bow-shot in the valley below. Two or three arbalisters had dismounted, and one had advanced within shot, and it was his quarrel which had struck the English archer off his horse; but Ralph was delighted to see a shot from one of their own men, who had also dismounted, take effect on the Frenchman, for he threw up his hands and fell to the ground.

"Who's that?" said Lord Woodville, who had seen the shot. "What! is't thou, David Urry? here's a gold piece for thee for having dropped the first Frenchman to-day."

"Shall we charge them, my lord," said the Captain, turning to the old baron.

"Mais non, milord, ce n'est rien," replied the tough Marshal.

The vanguard, however, was advanced to the brow of the hill; the cannon were also brought forward, and the enemy retired.

Another hour of broiling heat ensued. The men became restive. Murmurs at this prolonged inaction could be heard on all sides; and here and there the cry so fatal to French arms, and, at the same time so useful to explain their defeats, was heard–"Nous sommes trahis."

At last, about one o'clock, the gleam of lances could be seen among the trees which skirted the road below, and the cloud of dust, which rose above the foliage, told of a moving host.

"They're coming now, Dicky," said Ralph; "we shall soon begin."

"Poor fools!" said Dicky, contemptuously; "I am sorry for them; but, after all, 'tis what we've come for. I shall keep my eye on a knave in a good suit of armour, and well mounted, too. None of your scurvy beggars for me. And, Ralph, I'll stand you a good supper to-night, if I am not all melted away. Marry, I am hot!"

"Look at the cannon they are bringing up," said Maurice. "Humph! I hope our fellows will knock them over."

"They've brought them near enough. Why ever don't our knaves begin? Ah! there they go," added Dicky, as a flash and cloud of smoke flew out, and a loud report followed, causing all the horses of the men-at-arms to prance and

rear, and unseating several of their riders.

"Well, that did do a parlous deal of harm! there's more off on our side than there is on the other," said Dicky. "But, mercy on us, what a whizz!" he added, ducking his head; "whose head's off, I marvel!" as a round shot came hurtling through the air, without doing any harm, however.

"We'd best retire our men behind the brow of the hill," said Lord Woodville. The division was, therefore, ordered back a few yards, and moved a little to the right, so as to be out of the line of fire.

The artillery duel greatly amused the boys, and Dicky longed to dismount and catch one of the iron balls as they came bounding along, until he saw one strike a stout Swiss pikeman, and knock him down, where he lay a dreadful sight.

"Certes! I'm glad I thought better of it," said Dicky. "Who'd have thought there was such might in those bumping iron bowls."

"'Tis a game where you'd best not be a ninepin," said Ralph; "but when are we to move? Oh! I am roasted alive! I would I could look over the brow of the hill and see what our artillery is doing. Ah! there goes another. Mercy on us! but it's knocked over four at once–and–ah! 'tis a fearful sight. How they writhe! Poor wretches! Look! there's Tom o' Kingston down, and Oglander, and–ah! why don't we charge; they've got our distance. Ah! they've stopped, thank the saints!" and Ralph became calmer as the noise ceased.

"Look, Ralph, there's a smash! Cannon, and master gunner, and all, gone to bits. What a shot!"

But this was the last shot. The smoke blew away, causing Dicky to sniff and sputter at the smell of the saltpetre.

"Faugh, what a foul mixture. Phew! Ah, it's got down my throat. Hullo, what are we up to now? Oh, I see, we're to become footmen. Well, I'd rather be a-horseback. But there, there; it's all one in this roasting heat. Body o' me, I'm swimming in my harness."

But only the Captain of the Wight, and Ralph, with the rest of the esquires, and the Marshal de Rieux, dismounted. Dicky Cheke and Maurice Woodville were ordered to take their lords' horse, with the other animals, to the rear, and bring them back when the fight was over. This was grievous news to the two boys. But there was no help for it, and they retired with a very crestfallen air.

The dismounted knights and esquires had barely time to get inside the square of pike men when the fluttering pennons of the enemies' men-at-arms could be seen over the brow of the hill.

"Here they come," said Tom o' Kingston, who had had his horse killed under him, but was not otherwise hurt. "Now, my knaves, think what they'll say at home, and let us play the man."

And now the serried ranks of the French men-at-arms, their helms well

[image]

HOW THE MEN OF THE WIGHT WITHSTOOD THE FRENCH.

down, the shields before their left arms, and with lances in rest, came cantering over the rise in front.

"Now, archers, let fly your shafts," cried the Captain of the Wight, and a twanging sound instantly followed, for every archer knew what was coming, and had already put his arrow on the string. The rushing sound which fluttered in the air was succeeded by a splintering crack or dull thud, or heavier groan, as the shafts flew home. And many a gallant man-at-arms fell to the ground in the death sob. But still fresh ranks came topping the hill, and fierce shouts arose. "A bas les Anglais! Tuez les!" from the steel-clad figures who cantered onward in grim resolve.

Some few of the foe would not be refused, and in spite of cloth yard shaft and sturdy pike, pushed home into the first ranks of the square, but only to perish under the daggers of the footmen, or be kept as prisoners to be held to ransom afterwards.

The bravery of these men-at-arms was very conspicuous. They rode up to the face of the square and thrust fiercely with their long lances at the pikemen, and bodies of two or three would charge at full speed upon the halberds, and then leap their horses over the first ranks. But the men of the Wight stood firm, and although a heavy groan or occasional scream would tell of a deadly wound or ghastly thrust, no opening had been made, and still the grey goose shaft did its deadly and silent work.

"Well done, my merry men," called out the clear voice of the Captain of the Wight. "We will tell of this round many a cheerful yule-tide fire."

But Ralph did not like this way of fighting. He had pictured the battle to himself as a charge of gallant knights, where individual prowess would have a chance of distinction. As yet he had exchanged no blows, and he longed to get out of the stifling mass of crowded infantry.

There now came a lull. The closely thronging men-at-arms seemed daunted by the bold face of the English footmen. They drew off, and retired behind the brow of the hill, followed by the deadly arrows of the archers.

"Bravo, Messieurs les Anglais," said the deep voice of the tough old Marechal de Rieux. "I vish nevare to be vid more better fantassins. I mak you mes felicitations."

The hill became thick with lances, and a tall and very graceful knightly

figure could be seen riding amid a press of splendidly armed knights.

"Aha, voila, Monsieur de la Trimouille! C'est un jeune homme tres capable, et un chevalier sans peur et sans reproche. Il est Capitaine pour le Roi, et Vicomte de Thouars. Enfin notre affaire, va commencer!"

The cavalry seemed now to avoid the vanguard, and the men of the Wight had every reason to be proud of themselves. They had driven off the foe, and had made themselves respected. Most of the young men of the Wight thought the victory was won, and exchanged many a merry jest at the expense of the defeated French.

CHAPTER XXVI.

HOW "THE FLOWERS OF THE FOREST WERE A' WEDE AWAY."

In this pause of the battle, Dicky Cheke and Maurice Woodville, with the custrels and varlets who were looking after the horses of the dismounted knights and esquires, took refuge in the square, and the men began to take the affair a little more easily.

The dismounted knights got on horseback again, and Ralph was delighted to see that the time was coming when they would be the attacking party. He longed to break a lance with some of those swaggering French men-at-arms who rode past them, waving their spears and jeering them with taunting words. But the time had not come yet. In the interval the wounded were attended to. Surgical science was at a very low ebb, but what little the surgeon-barbers did know, was applied to the relief of the sufferers, most of whom, however, bled to death. The men of the Wight had hitherto suffered very little; two men had been killed outright by a cannon-ball, and some dozen or so had received more or less serious lance thrusts. The men who served the artillery, however, had been very severely handled, and the Isle of Wight men, few of whom had seen cannon-shot wounds, were shocked at the awful results of those few minutes of artillery practice at close quarters.

Clumsy and badly served as those primitive guns were, the execution they did was murderous; and the Captain of the Wight, who possessed such large experience of mediæval warfare, noted the change those deadly weapons must produce, and determined to urge upon King Henry the importance of employing more largely in the field these engines of destruction.

Dicky, Ralph, and Maurice were all mounted and standing together. From their superior position on horseback they could see through their visors all that was going on, as far as it was possible to make out anything in that forest of spears. The boys could not understand why they stood inactive spectators.

"Marry, Ralph, why don't we give it these varlets as they ride past us? A good charge now would knock over dozens, and I am longing for my prize-money. Look at that fat Frenchman! did you ever see such a jack-pudding?"

"T wish I could make out what is going on," said Ralph, who had been trying to pierce the bewildering masses of steel-clad men, who seemed never to end as they trotted past with lance on hip and fluttering pennon. "Hullo, here come the footmen; now look out."

But the free archers only drew up out of bow-shot, and watched the men-at-arms. It was evident by their gestures they could see something the vanguard could not see.

The Captain of the Wight seemed uneasy and restive. He was urging something in a low tone on the old Marshal de Rieux, who only shook his head and muttered,–

"Pas à present; ce n'est pas le moment."

"Then it will never be the moment," said the Lord Woodville impatiently. "Look there!"

"Body o' me, Ralph!" said Dicky in consternation, "the Bretons and Gascons are running away. Look, there goes the banner of Laval; down goes the golden flag with its fiery cross and blue eagles; there goes d'Albret. Fie on its golden lilies and purple flag! where are Orleans and Orange! Look! the Allemaynes are being cut down. Mercy on us! see how the sword-strokes flash. Why don't we charge?"

The impatience of all the men of the Wight became very great. They uttered their grumblings aloud.

"Let's charge them, my Lord Captain. Don't be kept back by that old dotard of a Frenchman. He's changed sides twice; maybe he'd fain do it a third time."

This was a very awkward suspicion, and one at such a moment most sinister in its influence on the minds of the English and Breton troops.

The Captain of the Wight saw he could restrain them no longer. He also longed to take an active part in the battle. He turned to the Marechal de Rieux.

"Sir, I can keep my people together no longer. We must charge and retrieve the fortunes of the day, or die in the attempt."

"Comme vous voulez," said the Marshal, shrugging his shoulders. "Mais tout est perdu. On ne peut plus."

The Captain of the Wight turned in his saddle–he raised his sword.

"Men of the Wight, now is our time. Men-at-arms, close your ranks.

Archers and billmen, prepare to charge. Let all men follow me."

A loud and ringing cheer broke from all that eager band of armed men, and with a fierce alacrity the square broke up. The little force of men-at-arms in front, the infantry forming their serried ranks behind.

"'Tis too late!" muttered Tom o' Kingston, and many of the older and cooler heads agreed with him.

"'Twould be better to march off the field as we are," said Sir John Trenchard; "they'll never dare to touch us–they've had too much of it already, and we could join the garrison of Fougéres, who are marching upon Rennes."

But these experienced soldiers kept their grumblings to themselves, and prepared to do their duty, even though they knew death to be the reward.

As Dicky Cheke rode behind his chief, he noticed a wounded archer, and was struck by his calm courage. The man had lost one leg from a cannon shot, but he was still sitting up supporting himself on the other and shooting steadily at the French. When he saw his comrades were about to leave him, without a word or thought of himself, he called out to his comrade,–

"Dickon, have thou mine arrows, I can go no more. There are still three left. Take them and riddle yonder Frenchmen. Give my love to Sue, poor lass! I'll just lay me down a while."

And so the archers parted; and Dicky rode on more grave than he had ever been in his life.

"Ralph," he muttered; "Ralph, dear boy, if I should be left behind too, there's a gold chain I would like thee to have, and my goshawk, she's been well trained, and thou wilt be kind to her, I know. There's little Alice, my sister, too, give her my bells and jesses; and to mother–No, certes, Ralph, I'll not play the girl. Art not ashamed of me, Ralph?" and Dicky tried to whistle a tune, but it only came in a melancholy pipe from out his barred helm. "Marry, 'tis the heat," said Dicky ruefully.

"Nay, Dicky, cheer up. There's thy Frenchman in the gay armour a-head. Think of the ransom thou art going to get."

"Ah, Ralph, my boy, methinks 'tis the ransom Sir John Merlin told us had been paid for all of us long years gone by that I shall win to-day. I wish I had paid more attention to my prayers–But marry, come up! here we go! Oh! this is something like! Have at them! A Cheke! a Cheke! say I. St George for merry England!–Ah!"

His voice suddenly changed, and the poor boy reeled in his saddle, as a fierce and burly French man-at-arms drove his lance into his corslet and broke off the point. Dicky's head fell forward. He dropped his lance and clutched the pommel of his saddle. Everything swam before his eyes, and he fell from his horse with a groan.

But Ralph had well revenged him. His lance caught the Frenchman under the gorget, driving the chain shirt into his neck, and bore the man-at-arms out of his saddle to the ground.

The melée had now become fierce. The French, who were well handled by their skilful young leader, the Vicomte de Thouars, who was only twenty-seven years old, had kept a body of men-at-arms behind their infantry in reserve, and to watch the movements of the Breton vanguard. This fine body of troops, under the celebrated James Galliotti, seeing the change of formation of the square, charged at once, and took the vanguard in flank. The infantry were cruelly handled, and orders were issued to spare not a single man who wore a red cross. Out-generalled, and abandoned by the rest of the army, for the main battle had been utterly broken, the Swiss pikemen were doggedly holding their ground, or slowly retiring before the fierce onslaught of the French, while the rearward, seeing how hardly the battle was going, had fled without striking a blow. The men of the Wight and their Breton comrades were gallantly upholding the honour of their race. Shoulder to shoulder, and back to back, the pikemen stood, fiercely exchanging thrust for thrust with the eager warriors of Gaul. But numbers were against them, and gradually their ranks were thinned.

The Captain of the Wight, boldly seconded by his knights, esquires, and men-at-arms, had plunged into the midst of the French cavalry.

Three knights the Lord Woodville had himself unhorsed, his lance was gone, but his sword still flashed, and rose and fell, and Ralph still rode beside his lord.

Seeing how fierce was the little band of men around the Captain of the Wight, the French men-at-arms turned aside to easier conquests, and the battered and wounded knights and esquires were fain to rest grimly on a little rising ground they had gained to the right of the battle-field.

How different was the scene from the morning. Of all that gallant, gay, and careless army, no coherent mass remained. The dusty road was covered with piles of dead and dying men. Broken pikes, splintered lances, pools of blood lay all around. Here and there fainting men, sore stricken, leant upon the end of their halberds, or sank swooning to the ground. A weary group of English still held together, and repelled the relentless onslaught of the French; but they had no hope, and had nowhere to go. No quarter was offered or asked, and their only object was to sell their lives as dearly as possible.

Ralph looked wearily round. Dicky Cheke had gone. Maurice, poor lad, could scarcely sit his horse. His head ached, and his pulses throbbed with the fearful heat of the day, and he had received a terrible blow from a bill across his thigh. The taces of his armour had saved his leg, but it had shorn away the upper part of his genouilliere, or knee-piece, and exposed the bone of the knee.

Ralph himself was badly wounded on the left arm, but he could still wield his mace. His sword had been broken long ago, and he knew scarcely anything of the fight. His head swam, and he felt giddy and faint. The Captain of the Wight was also desperately wounded, and had raised his visor for more air. Tom o' Kingston leant forward on his horse's neck, and Sir John Trenchard reeled in his saddle. Master Meux had gone. No other knight or esquire remained. They could be seen, easily distinguished by their white surcoats and red crosses, lying still and motionless, either apart or amid a pile of their enemies.

At this moment a fresh body of men-at-arms, among whom were two or three knights in very rich armour, rode back from the pursuit of the flying Bretons.

"They give us no quarter: let us die in harness," said the Captain of the Wight. "Yonder are all that are left of our gallant fellows; let us go and die with them."

No one answered. Ralph still thought of his promise. Although Yolande would never know it, he would save his lord from death, or die with him. But they were utterly weary with fighting. Their arms were stiff and nerveless. Ralph could form no thought, he only kept saying to himself, "I will do my duty, I will do my duty."

"Now, gentlemen," said the Captain, in a voice still clear and resolute, although feeble from pain and weariness, "this is the last time we shall speak to each other on earth. My friends and comrades, do you pardon me for having brought you into such great misery? I humbly ask your forgiveness, and it sore repenteth me of the dolour I have caused."

"My lord, say no more," said Sir John Trenchard: "may God assoil thee as freely as I do. 'Tis the lot of all men to die. We have done our duty, and shall do more yet before we go hence. Let us charge the enemy."

[image]

THE LAST CHARGE AT ST. AUBIN.

"Ay, before our wounds grow stiff," muttered Tom o' Kingston. "But I would fain some one could tell Polly Bremskete how I played the man."

But Ralph thought of nothing that was said. He only saw a grey mist–a crimson sunset glow–brown purply foliage, and a lovely face with large blue eyes, a crown of waving yellow hair, and two soft lips saying, "Thou will watch over him, Ralph;" and he kept saying to himself. "I will do my duty."

And now the time had come. The group of weary horsemen rode down

to meet their death. Grimly they settled themselves in their saddles, and sternly they handled their weapons. The setting sun glowed on their battered armour, their fluttering tabards, and on the blood-red cross on their breasts–

"The deare remembrance of their dying Lorde."

All the gay splendour of pompous war was gone, there only remained the iron will of stern and fixed resolve animating those war-worn figures, awful in their grim and reckless daring. They rode to seek their death.

The French men-at-arms, seeing them coming, were struck with admiration at their gallant bearing; but the orders of their captain were strict. No one who wore a red cross was to be spared. They therefore prepared to meet the little troop. Their leader was no less a person than Sir James Galliotti himself. With generous chivalry, seeing the Lord Woodville had no lance, he threw away his own, and drew his sword. The little squadrons met, and for a moment it was difficult to tell how the shock had gone. But in a minute more it was seen that the Captain of the Wight was still on horseback, and fighting against fearful odds. But the gallant Sir James Galliotti was down, and so were Tom o' Kingston and Sir John Trenchard. The former had singled out a huge Frenchman, and cleft his helm in twain, but had, at the same time, been pierced through his visor into his brain by another man-at-arms. Sir John had also killed his man, but had received a mortal wound in doing so, and lay grimly still waiting for death to relieve him. "I would my good dame could have had my body for burial, for she ever kept such fine linen for my winding-sheet. But it is as God wills, and it will serve for her own cere-cloth. 'Tis hard for her I die, seeing her own age. I misdoubt me if she can find another husband now. But 'tis ever as God wills."

Ralph still struggled beside his lord. He had set his teeth, and his gauntlet seemed to have grown to his mace. In front of him was a well-armed cavalier, who was aiming a deadly thrust at the Captain of the Wight. Ralph smote down the spear, and attacked the foe with such strength as was left him. He threw himself upon the man-at-arms, and split his helmet with his mace. But his antagonist had also struck him, and the fierce back-handed stroke shore off the upper part of his casque, exposing Ralph's wavy fair hair and weary eyes.

"What! Is it thou, De Lisle?" cried the voice of his foe. "Then I am right joyous. Never more shalt thou leave this field. I have sought for thee everywhere to-day. At last my hour hath come."

"Ay, and so it hath," said Maurice Woodville, who with a last faint effort, thrust his dagger through the visor of the man-at-arms, and both fell to the ground together.

Ralph, still thinking only of his lord, and heeding nothing that concerned

himself, turned round to see where he was. In wild despair he leapt from his horse. The Captain of the Wight was down; but over him stood a tall knight, who was defending him against the thrusts and blows of the enemy. Ralph rushed forward, parrying a fierce cut at his exposed head with his wounded left arm, and the Frenchman, seeing no more glory was to be won, turned away to look after their fallen leader. Ralph stooped down over his lord. His head swam, he reeled and fell. All sense left him, and he lay in a dead faint. He must have lain some time unconscious, for when he was recalled to life by some cooling bandage to his head, the sun had sunk, and the pale primrose of the evening sky was fading into the ashy grey of night. There were faint sounds near, voices, and dreary moans, and above, the stars were shining down on that grim scene of woe, as they had shone on thousands before and would shine on thousands after. He listened to the faint voices near. Was he in England? Who were they?

"Then I have thy pardon, noble knight? Would to God I could have His too! Ah, evil have been my days, and fierce my life, but from henceforth I vow to humble myself before Him, and lay aside the sword for ever."

Ralph listened. Who could it be?

A faint voice answered with great difficulty and many pauses.

"I thank God I have had this meeting before I die–He hath ever been merciful to me, sinful man that I am–but in no wise hath His mercy been more marvellously proven than in saving me from the sin thou wottest of.–Thou didst her and me cruel wrong. I say no more of that–I thank God I die, and I thank Him all the more in that thou knowest now how guiltless she and I have been. Not of mine own strength did I resist temptation, but, as is written in Holy Writ, 'Noe temptacion hath o'ertaken thee, but what God will withe ye temptacion alsoe makke a waie to escape.' I am near my end now." The voice became weaker. "I cannot forgather my thoughts. Thou wilt see her. Tell her–ah!–I shall see her too, where there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage, but where we 'are as the angels of God in heaven.'" And the voice, scarcely audible in the last few gasps, ceased for ever.

The other voice broke out,–

"Ah, Sir Edward Woodville, noble Captain, gentle knight, how thou wert head of all Christian knights, and now thou liest dead! Ever wast thou the pattern of all true knights. The courtliest wast thou, that ever bare shield, the truest friend to thy lover that ever bestrode horse. Ever wast thou the goodliest person that ever came among press of knights. The meekest and the gentlest that ever loved woman. The sternest to thy mortal foe that ever laid spear in rest. And now thou art dead! And I live. Ah, me. What dolour and grief is this; that I could not give my life for thy life! Ah, sinful man that I am. How shall I atone for my evil life? How dolorous hath been this day. And the departing out of this world of all this

meynie of joyous and gentle men!"

Ralph listened, as in a dream. The voices ceased, and the whirr of a night-jar hummed above the low wail of the deserted battle-field. The faint sound of inarticulate pain rose and sank on the gentle night breeze. The still air seemed to vibrate with pain.

Presently a soft hand touched his brow. He looked round. A slight form was bending over him, and a gentle voice murmured,–"'Tis a friend; but speak no word, there is yet danger around."

Ralph lay still, his senses had not yet recovered their usual vigour. He liked lying still, as the balmy night air of midsummer fanned his brow, watching the solemn stars blinking down, and the flitting bats as they flickered to and fro. He felt desperately thirsty, and turned his head to see if the mysterious figure were near.

"Father!–father!–ah me, how dolorous is the time! Father, shall we not get hence? Alack! he heareth not! Father! the night grows damp, thy wounds will stiffen. Alack! alack! he heedeth not!"

Again all was silent over that dismal scene. The heaps of dead men glinted in the starlight, and the night wind stirred the torn and tattered tabards till they rustled in the wind.

Ralph began to recover his senses as the chill air of night fanned his forehead, but as he awoke to the reality of life, a numbing sense of bitter pain passed through his heart. Where were all his friends? Where were those gallant four hundred who had gone in all the pride of strength and joyous manhood to win fame, and name, and fortune in the sunny land of France? Where was Dicky Cheke? Alas, poor Dicky! Did he need no ransom now? Had his thoughts come true? Was the only ransom he would ever require the great ransom paid for all? There they lay, with solemn upturned faces, whiter than their white tabards, and signed with the ruddy sign of their "deare Lord." The solemn stars shone for their funeral torches, and the rustling leaves of the deep, still forest whispered a dirge for the silent dead.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"OF THE CRAWLING TIDE."

What happened during the days immediately following the fatal battle of St

Aubin du Cormier, Ralph Lisle never clearly knew. All he could remember was an indistinct nightmare of strange faces, rough and coarse, sometimes fierce and cruel, but amid them all he always saw a pale oval face, with large, wistful, brown eyes, and masses of wavy, dark hair, and then he felt quiet. He could recollect nothing until one night he seemed suddenly to awake, and found himself in a low, rough room, with a strong smell of burnt peat, and a fresh breeze blowing in through an opening in one side. It was nearly dark, save where the bright light of the moon fell upon the rude clay floor, all littered with straw and refuse. Through the opening, which served for window and door alike, he could see a broad gleam of glancing light which he did not trouble himself to think about. He wondered where he could be. There were no sounds in the room. He raised his head to look round. He could not do it. Was he still in a dream? he wondered. Why could he not move himself easily? He lay still again, and must have dozed off, for when he again looked round there were some figures in the room, and one–that of a girl–was softly stealing away from him towards a tall man, and he could hear her say in a low tone,–

"He is sleeping gently."

"That is well, my daughter, go thou to rest now. Marie will see that he is cared for."

Ralph made a little movement; the girl stopped, and looked round. There was a small rushlight on a table; its light fell on her face. Where had he seen that gentle, winsome head and eyes? Ralph said,–

"Where am I? What has happened? Why, what's come to my voice?"

"Oh, father, I am so glad!" cried the girl, and turned quickly back to the couch where Ralph lay. The tall man stepped across the room, taking the rush-light in his hand.

Ralph could not recall the face or figure; he felt sure he had never seen either, and yet he had heard the voice.

"Thou art on the road to health, my son," said the man. "Thou hast been like to die for a week past."

"Where am I?"

"Safe in the cottage of a hind. But thou shalt know all to-morrow an thou art in trim to hear news."

So saying, the tall figure removed the light, and in a few minutes more all was quiet in the cottage.

The next morning found Ralph much better. He now learnt where he was, and who had saved him.

"But there is great risk still," said the girl, "and I know not how we may fare. Jean is very rough, and I doubt he is not to be trusted far. His wife Marie is as true as steel, but alack! we English are not overmuch liked, and I hear there are

men-at-arms beating the country side. But now thou art better, we can move," she added cheerily.

Ralph saw how nobly these strangers had acted by him. He could not understand why. They had risked their lives to save him, and this, too, when the chances were very small that they could ever nurse him through the fever, which resulted from the exhaustion, heat, and wounds of that dreadful day of St Aubin. He did not yet know all.

"But who are you?" he asked languidly.

"Ah, now, who do you think?"

"You are not–no, you can't be. Well, I don't know who you are. But I seem to have seen you before."

"Where? Can't you call it to mind?"

"Was it in the lists at Carisbrooke?"

"In sooth it was," said the girl, laughing; "and somewhere else, too."

"Not at Appuldurcombe, was it?"

"Ay, marry was it, and elsewhere, too. At it again." But then seeing the effort of memory was too much for Ralph in his weak state, the girl added,–"There, you can't think now. Lie still, and I will tell you. Do you mind lending some poor vagrants a pony at Thruxton? Do you mind a certain night, when you were nigh going over the edge of a cliff near St Catherine's Down? You never knew who it was that spoke to you that night in the mist? And you never knew who sent you the glove? Ah, well! 'twas lucky for you you wore it, or father would have knocked you off like all the others. And why do you think I did it?" she said, with an arch smile.

"I can't tell," said Ralph, dreamily.

"Well, but you might think." Then seeing that Ralph's thoughts were far away, she added, in a pitying tone,–"Why, because thou wast so kind to father and me that day at Thruxton. You little knew who I was."

"And who are you?" said Ralph absently.

"Oh, that is a merry conceit. Don't you know now?"

"No; tell me. How can I tell?"

"Why, I'm Aunt Yolande's niece."

"Aunt Yolande's niece!" cried Ralph in amazement, utterly astounded at the unexpected answer, and not at all able to take in the truth of the remark.

"Yes I am, although you may find it hard to credit, and my father is Sir George Lisle, and he fled for his life from the field of Stoke, trusting to the generosity of the Captain of the Wight, who, he thought, was his greatest enemy, but whom he knew to be a very noble knight."

"And he was not wrong," said Ralph, sadly but proudly.

"Nay he was not wrong. But he tried to give his life for the Captain's,

when he found out how great an injury he had done him. Do you remember Sister Agnes that day I saw you at Appuldurcombe? Do you know who she is?"

"No. Who is she?"

"She is my mother," said Magdalen, softly and sadly.

"Your mother!" said Ralph in astonishment. "But she is a nun."

"Yes, she is now; but she was Lady Lisle. I can't call her much to mind at that time, for she left me when I was only four years old."

"Why did she leave you?" said Ralph, becoming more interested.

"'Tis a sad story, and I know not if I know all myself. But she was not happy, and could not bear her life. She took the veil in London, and became a Sister of St Clare."

"And how did you find out she was your mother?"

"Do you mind that night in the snow when father and the Captain fought? You did not know it was the Hermit of St Catherine's and I who came. I only found out too late; but I could not have done anything to prevent their fighting had I known sooner. After father was so sore wounded, the Hermit, who has been a knight himself, and knew father as a boy, took him to the good Sisters of Appuldurcombe to be nursed, and for a long time father was between life and death. In his ravings, Sister Agnes–that's my mother, you know–who took her turn to nurse him with the others–but not at first, because she had been very ill herself–heard him call her by her real name, and she knew him, of course, directly she saw him. She then for the first time heard how cruelly he had mistrusted her in her flight, and that he–well, she made up her mind to tell him everything if he should get well. I don't know what happened, but father became quite altered. He was a long time getting well; and then you all went on that dolorous journey. But you never saw me passing you that evening near Wootton. Father's life was at stake if he should be discovered; and he heard that there were spies of the King's looking out for him; for a rumour had got abroad of an unknown knight, wearing a Yorkist collar, having been at a tourney at Carisbrooke–and it might have been the missing Lord Lovell. Well (but I shall never get done), we managed to get on board a Norman ship of St Vaast, come over with salt, which took us over to Barfleur; and then we heard for the first time that Eustace Bowerman had gotten over there, and was being made much of because he said he could tell the French governor of the province all about what was going on here. I also heard he had vowed to kill some one against whom he had a deadly hate, and I knew that must be you. As Master Bowerman was a likely-looking youth, and well spoken, and not wanting in a ready address and lying tongue, he got on marvellous well, and indeed he helped the French; for they, who thought the Captain of the Wight was a very powerful prince, seeing he was uncle to our Queen, and who dreaded he would bring over a very powerful meynie, were full glad to hear how small a

force he could muster, and that made them right hardy and joyous; so that they fought on that bitter day with greater heart than they are wont to do when they meet with us. For they knew right well that those other seventeen hundred in red crosses were but poor weak Bretons. My father, who was a well-known Yorkist, all of which faction were welcome in France as being useful to keep our King in check, was readily allowed his freedom, and he offered his sword to the Seigneur de la Trimouille in the hope he might save some of our poor men's lives, but most of all he longed to save the Captain of the Wight, and to tell him how sad he was at the wrong he had done him. He never knew how vilely those caitiffs had set upon you until I told him, and he always hated Bowerman ever after, and Bowerman returned his hate."

This account had astonished Ralph. It seemed so surprising–so like a tale told by a jongleur. That he should have helped his relative, Yolande's brother, and her own niece, in such an accidental way; that this should have led to his triumph at the tourney, and finally to the saving of his own life, seemed so like a romance, that he could not think it was all true.

"And so that is your father, Sir George Lisle, and you are my cousin after all," said the young man dreamily. "Well, I shall believe it all, I dare to say, some day, but now I seem more in a dream than ever."

"But here is father himself," said Magdalen, as the tall figure of the knight entered the room.

Ralph would have risen and done reverence due to the rank and kinship of this man who had so mysteriously interfered in his life, since he left Thruxton without his knowing it.

Sir George, however, forbade his moving, and greeted his young kinsman as kindly as his somewhat austere manner would let him.

"So thou knowest all now, my young cousin. The next matter is to get thee safe to St Malo or Dinan, where I hear the Marechal de Rieux is holding out. Ah, the bad captainship of that old soldier! Had–but there, 'tis no use–'tis no use," broke off Sir George Lisle sadly, and almost fiercely.

Magdalen tried to turn the conversation to other matters, but after several attempts she gave it up, and they all became silent.

As Ralph grew stronger, his memory came back to him, and he asked for details of the battle. He knew they were defeated, but he did not know the extent of the catastrophe. Gradually the fearful nature of the defeat dawned upon him; but it was long before he could realise it. The noble Captain of the Wight, Maurice Woodville, all these strong and lusty men, Dicky Cheke, all gone! It was too much. Ralph turned away, and sobbed. The utter desolation of it all, his own physical prostration, and the dreary prospect before him, completely overwhelmed him, although he did not think of himself. He wished he had died. He

did not care to live. For some days after he learnt the news, Ralph was listless and morose, and the knight seemed nearly as miserable. It was with the utmost difficulty the girl was able to get either to take any food, and she, poor child, at last was beginning to lose all interest in anything. Their life was very uncomfortable. There was nothing to divert them from their own sad thoughts. The Breton peasants with whom they had taken refuge belonged to one of the Breton nobles, who had fallen at St Aubin, and had hitherto proved themselves faithful enough. But there was nothing beyond their natural good nature to keep them so. It was true the money the fugitives had brought with them was ample payment for the services performed, but when that was gone there seemed little left to restrain the Bretons betraying them. In spite of the proud boast of the Seigneur de Rohan–"Jamais Breton ne fit trahison"–there was only too much likelihood that in a few days the three fugitives would be delivered up to their enemies.

One day as they were sitting listlessly outside the cottage on a boulder of granite, gazing wistfully at the sea sparkling among the innumerable rocks which encumbered the large bay before them, the peasant woman came out, and looking about her, approached the girl. After talking earnestly for some time she went back to the house, and the girl turned to her father with a face paler than usual.

"Father," she said, "we must get away at once. Marie says she has heard men-at-arms are coming this evening, and we have but little time to escape. She has given us warning at the peril of her life, so she says; and there is an Englishman, she tells me, who has been asking about us all round the country. He is a one-eyed young man, she says."

Ralph looked up. He had now heard of the treachery of Bowerman. He now knew that the knight who had saved him was no other but Sir George Lisle, and that the girl whose glove he had worn in the tournament was Magdalen Lisle, niece of Yolande, and heiress to all the Lisle estates, if only her father were restored to his proper position.

Magdalen had taken no pains to conceal her dislike of Bowerman, and her pleasure on finding that her father no longer trusted him, and that he equally shared her dislike, was very great. In the necessity of their prompt escape from the battlefield, all examination of the dead was precluded, and neither Sir George Lisle nor his daughter knew whether Bowerman had survived. But now Marie told them of this Englishman, the girl's fears were aroused. Bowerman had urged his suit with her father during their intercourse in France, and Sir George Lisle had received his advances very coldly, and Magdalen dreaded his finding them, especially as her father's conduct in defending the wounded Captain of the Wight must have been observed.

The danger was imminent. The little hut where they had taken refuge was

on the edge of a rocky bay not far from St Malo, but the intervening country was scoured by the French troops, and escape by land was next to impossible.

"We must go by sea," said Sir George. "There is Jean's old boat."

"But the tide is out, father! look where it is!" said Magdalen, pointing in dismay to the long stretch of sand, strewn with boulders and piles of sharp rocks protruding in all directions, while away on the edge of this waste the sea was breaking on a reef of ugly points of granite, black with the weather and time, and grinning like the teeth of some wild animal, amid the foam and froth of the sea. It was too true; the tide would not come in enough to float the clumsy boat before it would be dark, and from what Marie said, the men-at-arms would be there before dusk.

"We must try and push the boat down," said Sir George.

They went back to the hut, and searching in the shed where the few tools belonging to the labourer were kept, Ralph found some spars that would serve for rollers.

Sir George had taken the precaution, when they escaped under cover of the darkness from the field of St Aubin, to bring his own armour and that of Ralph Lisle with him. He had dismissed his servants, bidding them shift for themselves, and the horses had been sold by Jean to provide money for their expenses, and also to prevent suspicion arising, if such animals were seen in the neighbourhood of his cottage.

Carrying to the boat the few effects they intended taking with them, and hastily collecting such food as Marie could provide them with, the fugitives went down the beach to where the boat lay. They anxiously looked at her. It seemed utterly impossible they could move her. Ralph was still very weak, and they soon found their fears were too true. They could not possibly move it.

"'Twill be three hours yet before she floats," said Sir George.

"Any way, we can carry out the anchor as far as this warp will let us," said Ralph, "'twill give us greater help to pull her out, and here's an old sail we can set all ready for the first lift of the tide. The wind is right off the land."

Anything being better than standing still doing nothing, they set up the mast, and got the old brown sail ready for hoisting. Everything was now in, when Magdalen suddenly exclaimed,–

"Why, see how fast the tide is rising! It is already past that reef of rocks there! It won't be nearly as long before she floats as we thought."

The tide was indeed rising fast, and the distant reef of rocks had disappeared entirely. A few jagged peaks were sticking up here and there on some of the higher patches of rock, soon to be hidden by the inrushing tide, leaving their sharp points a few feet below the surface, with nothing to show their dangerous position.

The sun was setting over the low, sandy shore on the western side of the bay. The long shadows of some of the strangely-shaped rocks stretched far across the yellow sand, and the shrill cry of the sea-mew called to its mate. In a few minutes more the sun would set, and the grey mist of the sea would come creeping over the hot land from the cool ocean. The tide had now reached the boat; the anchor was already covered.

"Get in Magdalen," said her father; "we will stay to push her off, if may be."

Sir George and Ralph had both taken off their shoes, and, bare-legged, were standing in the fast rising tide.

Suddenly Magdalen saw a shadow moving over the sand–she looked round.

"Oh father, there they are," she cried in horror.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HOW THE SEA MIST ROSE IN TERQUETE BAY.

The startled cry of Magdalen called the attention of the others to the shadows flitting over the sand.

There, against the red glory of the departed sun, were figures of horsemen looming up on the dark line of jagged rocks which edged the western sky.

"There are three, four, five–ay, a dozen or more, and they are coming apace. Up with the sail, Ralph," cried Sir George Lisle, jumping into the boat.

There was already a foot or more of water all round her, and the sea spreading out over the flat sand made the boat look as if she were far out in deep water.

The sail was run up the mast, and Ralph, still in the water, pushed with all his might, while Sir George Lisle hauled hard at the warp.

"She's moving, she's moving," cried Magdalen, in an ecstasy of excitement, jumping about, and trying to help with an oar. At the same time, a fierce cry came over the water, and the distant sparkles on the edge of the ripples told of a horseman having plunged into the sea.

"Push, push," cried Magdalen, "or they will be here after all."

They strained and tugged, but the boat would not move. The splashes sounded nearer, the fierce cries became louder.

"Oh! oh! if only there were quicksands," cried Magdalen.

"There are," said her father. "The bay is full of them as the tide rises."

"Sir George Lisle! Sir George Lisle!" called out a well-known voice. "Your

life is safe, and that of Mistress Lisle, if you attempt no escape–and no escape is possible; but I cannot vouch for your safety if you persist in trying to get away."

But the fugitives gave no answer.

"There she goes," gasped Ralph, as he strained more than ever with his shoulder against the square stern of the ill-shaped boat.

"Oh, Ralph, you will do yourself a mischief," said Magdalen, "and you hardly well yet from your illness."

The boat was moving, however. Sir George Lisle kept pulling in the warp, and the sand was stirred up all round.

"Ah, what's that?" said Sir George, as something whizzed past him and stuck in the sail. "Lie down, child, they are shooting from their crossbows."

The splashes of the approaching horsemen seemed very close; one especially was urging his horse to its utmost speed.

"'Tis Bowerman," said Magdalen despairingly.

But their boat was really moving now. Hand-over-hand the warp kept coming in. The breeze off the shore came fresh and strong.

"Jump in, Ralph," cried Sir George.

With a last push and a violent leap, Ralph clambered over the stern, and fell in a heap into the bottom of the boat.

"Thank the saints we are off," said the knight, as he pulled in the rude anchor over the bows of the old boat, which was now rippling through the water.

Ralph had picked himself up, and was looking astern at the splashing figures of two or three men-at-arms who were still pressing on through the shallow water.

"Aha, my friends, you'll have work enough to scour your harness after this, but you won't–Marry, what's the matter!" he broke off in alarm, as the sail came tumbling down on their heads.

"'Tis a quarrel hath cut the halyards," said Sir George in a smothered voice, as he tried to disengage himself from the thick sail.

A loud shout of triumph from their pursuers told how near the enemy were, and of their certainty of success.

"Not yet, my fine custrils," shouted Ralph, as he quickly climbed the mast to reeve the broken end of the rope through the sheaf again. A dangerous work, considering the excellence of the crossbow practice; and so it proved, for had not Ralph put on his back and breast-pieces before leaving the hut, he would have been mortally wounded, for one of the bolts rattled against the cuirass like a hammer riveting iron.

"'Tis done, Messieurs, thank you," said Ralph, sliding down, and quickly bending the rope on to the yard, the old sail was run up the mast again amid a defiant cheer from Ralph and Magdalen.

"Look at them," said Ralph, "you can see them safely through that hole in the gunwale. They are floundering along finely. Nay, my fine sir, 'tis not to your mind, I can see. Aha! 'tis best to go back. There they go; they have given it up," and Ralph bust into a roar of derisive laughter, in which Magdalene joined with her merry rippling voice.

One cavalier alone seemed loth to give up the chase.

The water had already risen up to the girths of his horse, but he kept spurring the reluctant animal all the time.

"I will have thee yet," shouted the man-at-arms, through his visor, as he shook his gauntleted hand at the boat. "Ralph Lisle, thou shall not escape me this time.

"What! is it thou, Bowerman?" called back Sir George Lisle. "Nay, man, get thee back before the sea swallow thee, and repent thee of thine evil deeds and treachery ere it be too late. There are quicksands, man, and the tide is rising apace. Thou gettest us not this time."

The grey mist of evening was rising all around. Out to sea a livid wall of impalpable vapour was veiling the breaking crests of the waves as they surged among the countless points of rock, whose sharp peaks projected in bewildering danger on all sides. The breeze had died down, and the brown sail flapped idly against the mast. The tide was still only at half flood, and was sweeping into the bay.

"We must row," said Sir George. "Magdalen, do thou take the helm. Steer between yonder black rocks."

[image]

"WE MUST ROW," SAID SIR GEORGE.

The two men took the clumsy oars, and soon the swish and gurgle under the bows told of the progress they were making. They had escaped. Their pursuers could go no further. After rowing silently for about ten minutes, Magdalen suddenly called out in perplexity,–

"Where are the rocks? I don't see them."

Sir George looked round. There was nothing to be seen but the bows of the boat as she lifted over a longer swell than usual, or surged down into the long trough of the heaving water. All else was grey, indistinguishable gloom.

"'Tis the sea mist. We must have a-care, or we shall be on some of these rocks," said Sir George.

They rested on their oars. Astern they could still see the dim figure of the

horseman, who was now urging his horse as hastily to land as he had spurred it towards the boat. But the creeping mist was fast pursuing him. Even now the yellow streak behind the purple shore was becoming bleared and blotted, and the harsh voices of the troopers, as they called to each other, or laughed at the struggles of their more hardy comrades, came deadened by the thickening air across the shallow water of the rock-strewn bay.

"I doubt if ever Bowerman will reach the land," said Sir George, after looking at the dim speck which was now all but invisible in the gloom.

But their own situation called for all their wits. It was most important that they should reach the head of the western point before the horsemen, who would be sure to ride there, and perhaps get a boat from the fishermen who lived in the bay round the promontory. The great danger now lay in the innumerable rocks which lay all round. After pulling for a few minutes, Magdalen called to them to stop. She was sure there was a rock near. She had heard a sharp sound.

They all listened attentively. The surging of the sea under the bows was all that they could hear.

"There! don't you hear it?" said Magdalen? as a sawing sound, sharp and swishing, rose over the silence of the waves.

"'Tis the sea grinding against a sharp rock," said Sir George, "and 'tis not far off. Can'st tell where it is, Ralph, thine ears are keener than mine?"

Again they all listened. The boat had lost all way, and was lying still in the glassy sea. All round was impenetrable gloom. It was not absolutely dark. They could distinguish each other in the boat, but they could see nothing, even an oar's-length away. All was grey, impalpable, vague opacity.

The sound of the sea among the points of the rocks grew fainter.

"The tide is setting us in shore," said Sir George; "we must row again."

Just as they were about to take to their oars a shout came over the water. It was a shout of terror, a blood-curdling shriek of agony.

Magdalen shivered.

"'Tis some of those men-at-arms; they have lost their way in the mist, and the rising tide has overtaken them," said Ralph, and he began to row, in order to deaden the noise, and distract the girl's attention.

But the cries became more piercing, they seemed to be nearer.

"We can't have turned round?" said Sir George. "Are we rowing ashore?"

They again paused. All was silent as the grave. The breeze seemed to have got up a little. Their sail began to fill, and the water rippled under the stern.

"This is getting parlous hazardous. I would we knew which way we are going. Put thine oar over the side and see if thou cans't feel the bottom," said Sir George Lisle.

But before Ralph could do what he was told, and while he was standing

up to fathom with the oar, there was a crash–a grinding, splintering sound, and Ralph was thrown over the after-thwart into Magdalen's lap, who gave a little scream and then sat still.

They well knew what had happened. It did not need the water, which was fast rising in the boat, to tell them they had struck upon a rock, and were rapidly filling with water.

All three were used to danger, and they did not lose their presence of mind. Ralph, as soon as he had picked himself up, went forward and looked over the side. He could just see a brown patch through the clear water. He sounded with his oar. It was not more than six inches below the surface. He called to Sir George Lisle to sound over the stern and to their dismay they found that the oar could only just touch the bottom when held at arm's length under the sea. The boat was fast filling, and would soon slip off and sink in deep water. Without a moment's hesitation Ralph jumped over on to the rock. He took out the anchor, and wading as far as he could, he threw it out on the other side of the rock, and was glad to see it sank some depth. Then going back, he pulled as hard as he could on the warp, and thus prevented the chances of the boat slipping off.

"If the tide doesn't rise any more, we are safe from drowning, anyway," said Ralph.

In order to prevent the stern settling down any more, they placed the two oars upright on the rocks, as far out as they conveniently could, and then lashed them to the gunwale.

"There! we have done all we can now," said Sir George.

And they sat silent and anxious, watching if the tide were rising any more. They had been so busy with their work, that they had not noticed the cries of distress that had been growing more and more desperate. Suddenly they were startled by a gurgling sound quite close to them, a few gasps, splashings, and a voice in agony calling for help.

The sudden sound, the words shrieked in English, the blood-curdling struggles, quite upset Magdalen. She screamed and clung to her father.

They peered into the gloom and could see nothing. The sounds had ceased; a gurgling sound only could be heard, and then all was quite still.

Ralph would have swum off in the direction of the sounds, but the knight restrained him.

"You can do no good, and would never find him. He has sunk by this time."

The silence of the night seemed doubly oppressive. The swell of the sea rose over the sunken rock without breaking, and the old boat rose with the heave, grinding on the sharp point which had pierced her planks, and then settled down. They could not see that the tide was rising any more, and Ralph made a couch for Magdalen with the old sail, and wrapped her up under the lee of the bows,

where she was well out of the night air, and away from the water.

"It must be past high-water by now," said Sir George. "'Tis a mercy the night is quiet. I marvel where we can be?"

It was not long before Ralph, looking over the gunwale, said,–

"The tide has fallen a good bit. The rock is quite dry under her bows."

With the rapidity with which the sea had come in it now rushed out again, swirling round the rock and bubbling under the stern. In a very short time the boat was left high and dry, and Ralph got out to climb down the rocks. The mist had by this time lifted, and he was astonished to see how close they were to the shore. He could not yet make out where they were, but he thought he saw a light.

Reaching the firm sand, he walked towards the light, and on his way stumbled over what he took to be a rock. Looking down, however, he found it was a helmet, and a little further on was a breastplate. It was clear it was the armour of the men who were caught by the tide, and who had taken it off to enable them to escape by swimming.

On reaching the beach he lost sight of the light, and began to think he must have been deceived, when a gruff voice called out,–"Qui va la?"

Ralph, utterly taken aback, did not know for the moment what to do. He stood quite still looking about him. The Frenchman repeated his demand, and by the sleepy accents of other voices, combined with the clank of metal, the esquire knew there were several men encamped there, and that it was the sentry who had challenged him.

He did not dare to retrace his steps, lest he should draw the pursuit to the boat. He longed for the mist to grow thick again, and stooping down as low as he could, he set off running towards a dark mass of rocks on his right.

The twang of a bowstring, and the whizz of a bolt past his left ear, told him what to expect. He ran at full speed along the shore, and reached the rocks in safety. He paused to take breath, and looked round to see how he could best get back to the others without being seen.

The moon had now come out, and, to his chagrin Ralph could easily distinguish the mast and black hull of the boat perched on the rocks not far away.

A shout from the men, who were all aroused now, told him that they also had seen the boat, and that all hope of escape was at an end.

In a few minutes more he saw a party of men-at-arms, their weapons gleaming in the moonlight, ride across the sand in the direction of the boat. They halted when they came to the armour lying in the sand, and Ralph could hear one say,–

"Tiens! c'est le harnois de l'Anglais!"

They then rode on to the rock, and three or four dismounting, climbed over the slippery stone. In another minute Ralph saw Sir George Lisle and Magdalen climbing down the rocks amid their captors.

"It is all over," sighed the young esquire. "I may as well give myself up too."

However, he stood still a little longer, and watched the party returning over the sand. He saw the slight form of Magdalen held in front of a man-at-arms, who was joking loudly to another trooper beside him.

Sir George Lisle was disarmed, and walked between two other steel-clad figures. The whole cavalcade was chatting loudly and laughing merrily. It appeared that all had escaped from the rising tide, excepting one man-at-arms, and that one was the Englishman. No one seemed to pity him, and Ralph felt the justice of the retribution which had so swiftly cut off Bowerman in the midst of his traitorous attempt to capture his own Countrymen–a victim to his own malignant hate. Ralph was as yet undecided whether to give himself up, or keep free as long as he could, in order to avail himself of any chance of helping the others.

He decided he would wait a little longer. He watched the Frenchmen, with their prisoners, join the main body, and then placing another sentry over their captives, they lay down to sleep out the rest of the night.

CHAPTER XXIX.

HOW THERE'S NO CLOUD WITHOUT ITS SILVER LINING.

As soon as Ralph saw all was quiet, he made up his mind he would return to the boat to put on the rest of his armour and get some food.

The moon was shining brightly, and away in the north-east the faint pale light above the horizon told of the coming dawn. It was an exquisite summer night. The sea mist had gone inland to refresh the orchards and meadows of the rich valleys and uplands of fair Normandy and rocky Brittany. The long, quaint shadows of the grim boulders, and weird piles of granite, stretched across the white sand of the vast bay. Their rugged clefts and fantastic fissures, in black distinctness against the gleaming light which bathed their southern slope, lifting their hoary, weather-worn summits to the full brilliancy of the moon, and in turn throwing their twice borrowed light across the beach and prostrate forms of the sleeping men-at-arms. Away on the far edge of the bay the leaping flash of tumbling water told of the sea, whose tranquil depths seemed as far removed from that sleeping shore, and those towering piles of crumbling rock, as the fullness of summer from the barrenness of winter.

The only living thing seemed to be the solitary man-at-arms as he rested

on his long spear, his shadow stretching behind him in grotesque distortion–the man a pair of compasses, the lance a scaffolding pole.

The distant crow of a cock, and the faint moan of the ceaseless sea grinding on the rocks far out in the bay were the only sounds that broke on the perfect stillness of that exquisite harmony in silver and grey.

But Ralph gave scarce a thought to the poetry of the scene, he quietly clambered down on the shady side of the rocks, and stealthily creeping over the sand under shelter of the long shadows of the pile he had left, he was able to reach the farther side of the mass of rocks which had proved fatal to their escape, without the sentry seeing him.

Pausing a moment to look round before he climbed up the steep and slippery boulders, on the apex of which the old boat was perched, some thirty feet or more above his head like a miniature Noah's ark on the sunken top of another Ararat. Ralph's attention was attracted by a white patch some ten or twelve yards away to his right. He looked at it attentively, and with a growing sense of dread. Drawn irresistibly towards it by a horrible fascination, Ralph found it was the face of Bowerman, ghastly and contorted, his body being wedged in between two huge rocks, where the sweep of the tide had washed it. Hastily leaving the place, the boy climbed up to the boat, and managed to get out the things he wanted without being observed. Armed with his sword and dagger, and protected by his helmet and body armour, he descended the rocks, edging carefully away from the livid face, which gazed out from the dark mass, and reached his former post of observation without incident.

The day had now begun to break, and objects were becoming visible. There was no stir as yet among the detachment on the beach, who were still sound asleep, their horses tethered and browsing on the scanty growth of herbage which cropped up here and there amid the sand and dry seaweed.

The pile of rocks where Ralph was ensconced was higher than any others near, and from its summit the boy obtained a fine view over the country round.

The sun had not yet risen, and a mist still hung over the land.

Not far off, however, Ralph saw a horse feeding, fully equipped, but without a rider. "It must be one broken away from the rest," he thought, and the idea came into his head that he would catch the animal and make use of him.

He was just going to climb down to carry out his plan when his attention was arrested by some moving object away to his right. He had now turned round, and was looking in the direction of St Malo. He could not mistake the objects. They were spear points, and the little pennants were fluttering in the light morning air.

"'Tis lucky I saw them before I moved. They must be the lances of another body of French men-at-arms."

So thinking, Ralph lay still, not overmuch liking his position, for he was now almost certain to be descried as this new troop came near.

The sun was just rising, and its first rays were glinting on each rock and tree and distant church spire, which stood out above the mist. Ralph watched the approaching spear points. He could not yet see the riders.

He turned round to look at the little encampment There was already a stir. Men were up and grooming their horses; others were stretching themselves; all was noise and life. Ralph could see Magdalen sitting disconsolately by her father, and glancing round from time to time to examine their captors.

The breeze blew straight from the camp to the advancing body of men, and the bustle and stir was carried down the wind.

"They have halted," thought Ralph, seeing the spears did not advance any nearer. "But here comes some one. How warily he comes. Why! No! Yes! Can it be? They must have put on the surcoats of some of our poor fellows. They've got red crosses!"

And Ralph, with renewed interest, watched the movements of the man-at-arms or mounted archer, who was riding out of the mist with great caution, putting every bush and rock between himself and the place whence the sounds came.

"Why, there's another away to the left, and here's another. They are masters in their work, anyway," muttered Ralph, as he watched the picturesque figures, fully accoutred, and well mounted, pushing their small horses over the coarse grass. The boy was so intent on the motions of these men that he did not give sufficient care to cover himself, and he was suddenly startled by the nearest horseman reining in his horse and dropping the reins, while he took deliberate aim at him with the crossbow he held ready at his hip, calling at the same time,–

"Come down, thou French jackanapes thou, or I'll–"

Ralph needed no second bidding.

"They are English; they are English," he almost screamed with delight, as he scrambled over the boulders, and at length stood by the side of the archer.

It took but few words to tell the scout who he was, and what was going on, and in another minute Ralph found himself amid a group of splendid knights and men-at-arms, with a strong force of archers on foot and horseback behind them.

"What!" said a cheery voice. "Whom have we here? As I live, 'tis my young hero of the lists at Carisbrooke. Marry, and I am right glad."

Ralph had turned to the speaker, and was rejoiced to find it was no other than Sir Richard Cornwall. After the greetings were over, he explained briefly how urgent the need was for pressing on at once, and cutting off the retreat of the Frenchmen with their prisoners, and in a few minutes more the young

esquire had the delight of being mounted on a stout horse, armed with a lance, and riding in the front rank of the men-at-arms between Sir Richard Cornwall and Lord Broke, who were listening to his account of the battle of St Aubin du Cormier, and all that had happened since, and learnt in his turn of how it came about that the English troops were there.

It seemed that the news of the disaster which had occurred in Brittany was at first disbelieved in the Isle of Wight. The catastrophe was too awful for any one to believe. At last, as more certain news arrived, and there was no longer any room to doubt, the distress was terrible. Depopulated as the island had been previously, and just as it was now recovering its prosperity under the able rule of Sir Edward Woodville, assisted by the favourable treaties of peace with France and the Low Countries, this sudden calamity plunged the whole island into despair. There was scarcely a family, rich or poor, who had not lost some relative; and the total absence of any particulars made it all the more distressing. No one knew whether their relations were dead or not. At first it was reported that every man was killed, but a later account said that it was believed some few were alive, desperately wounded, and like to die, but as no names were mentioned, the anxiety and doubt were only rendered all the more acute.

As soon as Henry VII. heard of the disaster, he despatched at once Robert Lord Broke, Sir John Cheney, Sir Richard Cornwall, and many more "lusty and courageous captaynes," with eight thousand men-at-arms. But, like many other recent English expeditions, the force arrived too late, and although the troops were of the best quality, there was not enough of them.

It was a detachment of these troops that Ralph fell in with. Lord Broke having only arrived two days before at St Malo, and having taken the earliest opportunity of making a reconnaissance in force.

The knowledge of the arrival of these reinforcements had spurred Bowerman on to greater activity, for he knew if he did not discover the whereabouts of the fugitives before the English arrived, he would not be able to do so afterwards.

Acting on the knowledge of the country, and position of the French troops, which Ralph possessed from his survey that morning, Lord Broke kept his men out of sight of the French, and sent a detachment round in order to cut off all retreat.

Ralph having dismounted, had approached cautiously, and looking round a rock, saw the enemy happily engaged in preparing their breakfast. So utterly unconscious were they of any foe near, that many of them had not put on their heavier armour.

"Marry, they are not worth lance thrust," said Sir Richard Cornwall in contempt. "'Twill be but an idle slaughter. 'Tis a pity we cannot give them warning."

The knight and the esquire having made their report, Lord Broke gave or-

ders to advance upon the enemy. The movement was executed with such precision and rapidity, that no resistance was offered by the astonished French men-at-arms. Ralph had galloped straight for Sir George Lisle and Magdalen, and stood by them until all chance of harm was over, and as soon as the prisoners were disarmed, and the column reformed, he led them to Lord Broke.

This nobleman had known Sir George Lisle in former days, and was well acquainted with his history. He would much rather not have fallen in with him, for his safety was probably greater in the French army than as a Yorkist prisoner in the hands of one of Henry the Seventh's captains. But having heard from Ralph how he had tried to save the life of the Captain of the Wight at the imminent risk of his own, Lord Broke hoped he might be able to plead this service with Henry.

He received Sir George Lisle therefore very courteously, but intimated that he must still consider himself a prisoner.

Mistress Lisle was treated with every courtesy, and the rescued English were sent under a guard to St Malo.

As Ralph Lisle was, so far as was known, the only survivor of the luckless expedition under Sir Edward Woodville, he was ordered by Lord Broke to return at once to England; and Sir George Lisle and his daughter were also sent back in the same ship.

Lord Broke forwarded very favourable reports of the young esquire, and also strong recommendations to mercy on behalf of Sir George Lisle, who, seeing how hopeless were the aims of the Yorkist party, and conscious of the treachery that was going on within their ranks,–weary of the world, and sick at heart of his conduct towards his wife, as well as of his unjust suspicions of the Captain of the Wight, determined, if his life were spared, to become a monk, like an ancestor of his who had founded, and himself became the first arch-priest of, the little Oratory of Barton. Lord Broke, knowing this resolve, mentioned it as a further inducement to obtaining the royal pardon. However, on the arrival of the ship at Southampton, Sir George Lisle was taken at once to Winchester Castle, and kept there a close prisoner of state until the royal pleasure was known.

Magdalen Lisle was not allowed to be with her father. Ralph promised he would take her to her grandfather at Briddlesford; and the same day that Sir George Lisle was carried off under a strong guard to Winchester, he and his cousin sailed for Wootton Creek.

The news of the arrival of the only survivors of the expedition caused much stir, and Ralph found himself a greater hero than he had any wish to be.

Fortunately for him it was expected he would come to Newport, and so he was enabled to reach Briddlesford unmolested.

He dreaded the meeting with his relatives, as indeed he would have avoided, had it been possible, coming to the island at all. So many painful mem-

ories would be stirred by the sight of the sorrow-stricken people; but he had his duty to perform, and must go through with it.

His meeting with old Sir William was easily got over. The old knight welcomed him heartily, and was evidently prepared to take to his grandchild Magdalen. Ralph was rejoiced to see this, for he had rather feared a stern reception for the poor desolate child, who had seen so much hardship in her young life, and had had so little of the pleasures of youth. However, events had occurred of which Ralph knew nothing. After the greetings were over, and Magdalen felt a little less strange, the old man said,–

"Now, my son, thou must see Yolande; she is awaiting thee in the parlour yonder."

Ralph passed across the hall, and paused at the door of the little room. He tapped timidly. A low voice answered "Come in," and Ralph entered.

He found his cousin sitting in a deep window-seat, the last glow of the setting sun streaming in through the narrow quarries of ill-made glass. The autumn tints were already blending with the still deep green of the thick oak woods. Along the valley the evening mist was rising, and the knell of the Abbey bell came deep sounding over the hills and water between.

"Ralph, my brave cousin, welcome back home," said the low sweet voice of Yolande.

Ralph could not speak for a moment or two. He crossed the room, and taking the hand of his cousin, which she held out to him, he bent down and pressed it to his lips. The action recalled that happiest moment of his life, when in the hall of Carisbrooke he had received the prize of the tourney amid the congratulations of that gay assembly, of which scarce a man was left alive.

The recollection was too much.

They neither of them spoke for some minutes.

When Ralph had mastered his emotion, he began to talk to his cousin, he hardly knew what; but he felt confused, excited. Her very appearance shocked him. So much had Yolande altered since last she bid good-bye to that gallant band who had so joyously gone forth to seek name and fame and fortune in the sunny land of France.

Her lovely complexion was still there. Her eyes were larger and more meltingly blue, but her cheeks were thinner, and her youthful bloom and freshness were gone. Her lips had lost their fullness, and her figure its bewitching softness. Suffering and grief were in her face and in her deep black dress.

As the young moon rose over the russet oaks, and the still landscape made its subtle beauty felt, Yolande, who had hitherto said nothing, but let Ralph babble on, whispered quietly, "Tell me."

Ralph knew well what she meant. He told her all, even the words he heard

the Captain of the Wight say as he lay dying on the battlefield.

Yolande listened. She made no sound. When he had finished, she simply said, "Where there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage, but we are as the angels of God in heaven. Yea, I knew it could never be. How nobly he died–" and then she remained silent for a while.

Ralph said nothing. Presently he said in a low, half-timid tone,–

"Yolande, thou art not vexed with me? I tried to do my duty. I would willingly have died so he could have lived."

"My noble boy, I know it. Art not thou the hero, the knight? I know thou foughtest as none could fight better. 'Twas God's doing. But he hath been faithful unto death–" and then she mused again.

After a long pause, Ralph said,–

"Cousin Yolande," but no answer came. Ralph looked round. His cousin was kneeling in the darkling room. The pale light of the young moon fell upon her crown of golden hair, which curled and waved about her face and over her shoulders. Her hands were clasped, and her eyes were shut, and behind was the dark room, and above the pale calm moon.

Ralph spoke no more. He gazed upon her in wondering admiration. How very beautiful she was. How very unearthly she looked. He knew his boyish dream was over. He knew her heart was buried in the little churchyard of St Aubin beside the unknown grave of the good knight, Sir Edward Woodville, sometime Lord and Captain of the Isle of Wight.

As the moon rose higher, its light fell on a polished shield behind Yolande's face, and the startling brilliancy of her ethereal head against the shining metal, while all the rest of her figure was in darkness, made her look like some saint with a glowing halo round her.

Presently she rose from her knees, kissed Ralph with a sisterly kiss, and said in a calm, soft voice,–

"Cousin mine, I have vowed myself to God. Henceforth I belong not to this world."

Ralph bowed his head over her long thin hand, and pressed it to his lips. He could say nothing.

In another few minutes a step was heard outside, and old Sir William Lisle entered the room, attended by Magdalen carrying a lighted sconce. Yolande at once resumed her tranquil every-day manner, and placed her father's chair beside Ralph. The old man sat down heavily, with a little sigh.

"So, Ralph, thou art getting on right well, I hear. That's well. But thou must not think of parting yet. The good folks up to Thruxton can spare thee a while longer. There's Magdalen here will want thee to ride over the country side, and 'tis thou must see to her, since she's seen so well to thee. Turn and turn about,

say I."

And so they talked of other things, but Ralph could only think of his cousin, and wished he was lying in far St Aubin churchyard.

But what Sir William Lisle had said was very true. Magdalen Lisle had seen very well to Ralph, and it was to her sharp wits and ready hands he owed his life.

Hitherto they had been like brother and sister; but as Ralph grew stronger, Magdalen's manner slightly changed. She became shyer, more reserved.

Yolande had taken at once to the child, and they spent much of their time at the little nunnery of Appuldurcombe, where sister Agnes was allowed to see her daughter.

Ralph had been to Newport, and after seeing the relatives of nearly all who had fallen, and gone over the events of the battle until he was utterly wearied, he thought he would set off for Thruxton. While he was thinking of this, sitting listlessly at the hall door, and idling with a pretty goshawk, a figure rode up the rough road across the meadow in front of the manor. Ralph looked up. Not many strangers passed this way. The figure came nearer. Who could it be? It looked like a well-known face–and could it be? Surely that was the voice of one he ought to know?

"Well, Ralph, I'm parlous sorry to claim my bird, but I didn't think I should want it again, and it was only given with an 'if,' you know."

Ralph sprang to his feet.

"What! Dicky!" he cried in amaze.

"Marry, yes, that's my name, if you are very familiar, otherwise I am called Richard Cheke, Esquire, or Master Richard Cheke; but don't let us be too formal."

"Why, Dicky, however did you come to life again?" cried Ralph, utterly astounded. "You're not a ghost, are you?"–for Dicky did look very ill and thin.

"Don't call a fellow names, Ralph Lisle; you did not use to do so. I fear you have learnt bad manners since I have been away. It's well for you I've come back. But there's no time to be lost. Let me have something to eat, for I am parlous hungry."

And so Dicky Cheke really had returned. He gave an amusing account of his escape. It appeared that during the night some of the ghouls, who live by stripping the dead, took off his armour. The next morning he recovered consciousness, and when they were searching the field to bury the chief knights and lords, Dicky, thanks to his bad French, pretended to be a Breton. He was taken to a neighbouring cottage, and was carefully nursed by a kind peasant, who, believing him to be a young Breton of a noble family–for Dicky had quickness enough to pass himself off as a kinsman of poor young De Rohan–took great care of him, and he was eventually able to get to Rennes, which still held out for the Duke of Brittany, and from there his return was an easy matter. He fell in with Lord

Broke, who rewarded the peasant, and sent Dicky over to the island as soon as possible.

Great were the rejoicings over Dicky, and the natural self-complacency of that young gentleman was considerably increased. He became a great hero in Newport, and was a very popular character throughout the island.

It was said that he paid considerable attentions to Mistress Magdalen Lisle, now not only the greatest heiress, but declared by those who admired brunettes the loveliest girl in the island.

He still resented that young lady having called him a "tom-tit," but was willing to forgive her if she would consent to share his nest. But report said that Mistress Lisle was waiting for someone else.

Ralph went back to Thruxton, and lived for some years with his father and mother, when the former died full of years and honour. Jasper came into the property. Ralph, now Sir Ralph Lisle, had previously been invited over to Briddlesford, and before old Sir William Lisle died, he had the satisfaction to know that the Knight, for whom his daughter waited, had arrived at last.

When Yolande heard of it–for Ralph rode over to Appuldurcombe to tell her–she said,–

"Ah, I told you true! Do you mind my saying–'When you reach the years of manhood, and are of an age to marry, the lady of your choice will be one who is now a girl of just that little one's age?' That little one was my niece, albeit I knew it not, and now you are of an age to marry, and she is to be your wife. So you see I was a true prophet, and you will marry the niece instead of the aunt. But why do I recall so much of the world? Go, my sweet nephew, make her as true a husband as thou hast been true knight. No more happy fate could he have wished thee than that a brave and noble man should possess the fairest lands and the fairest maid of all the fairest isle the blue seas of England gird."

And now, as old Dan Chaucer hath it, "Ther is ne moe to saie."

The Battle of St Aubin du Cormier was one of the most bloody, as well as hardest fought, as far as the vanguard of the Breton army was concerned, that ever took place on French soil. The French lost the brave James Galliot and twelve hundred men-at-arms, while the Breton army lost six thousand men, including Lord Woodville, and all those who wore red crosses; and among them the Breton nobles,–the Comtes de Leon, De Montfort, and Pont l'Abbé; while the poor young Seigneur De Rohan, who was only fifteen years old, was slain with the English pages and esquires.

The Duke of Orleans and the Prince of Orange were taken prisoners.

The latter only saved his life by throwing himself down among the Swiss

infantry and pretending to be dead. He was discovered by a French archer, and sent prisoner to Lusignan. The Duke of Orleans would have been beheaded had it not been for the prayers of his deserted wife, the "good Lady Jane," daughter of Louis XI. He was imprisoned for some time, but eventually lived to marry, not only the lady who was the cause of all this strife, but also, as his second wife, the lovely young Tudor Princess, Mary, great-niece of the last Lord of the Wight, who had fought and died so valiantly by his side at St Aubin du Cormier.

The wily old Marechal de Rieux retired to Dinan, and held out there until the general pacification, which ensued soon after; while the Lord d'Albret also saved himself by flight.

The disastrous consequences of the ill-fated expedition of Sir Edward Woodville were indicated by a Statute, which was passed with a view to increasing the population. No individual was to hold a farm, or land, or tithe of more than ten marks annual value.

Sir Reginald Bray, a very distinguished soldier, and old follower of Henry VII., was sent to govern the island, but no nobleman was henceforth invested with the independent power and authority of Lord of the Wight, the future governors being styled Captains and Governors. Sir Reginald Bray was succeeded by Sir Nicholas Wadham, after whom the first of the Isle of Wight branch of the Worsley family came into the island as Captain of the Wight.

But the last Lord and Captain of the Wight died valorously in harness among his knights and esquires, in the sunny land of France, as became a valiant gentleman of England, and no man after him was ever invested with such name and state.

THE END.

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