Forest Days: A Romance of Old Times

G. P. R. James



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FOREST DAYS

A ROMANCE OF OLD TIMES.

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FOREST DAYS

A ROMANCE OF OLD TIMES.

BY G. P. R. JAMES,

AUTHOR OF "MORLEY ERNSTEIN," "THE ROBBER," ETC.

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1843.

TO

JAMES MILNES HASKILL, ESQ. M P. ETC.

MY DEAR SIR,

In offering you a book, which I fear is little worthy of your acceptance, and a compliment which has become valueless, I cannot help expressing my regret at having no other means of testifying my esteem and respect for one, who has not only always shown a most kindly feeling towards myself and my works, but has ever advocated the true interests of literature. You will, nevertheless, I am sure, receive the tribute not unwillingly, however inadequate it may be to convey my thanks for many an act of kindness, or to express a feeling of high esteem founded on no light basis.

In the volumes I send, you will find many scenes with which you are familiar, both in history and in nature; but one thing, perhaps, will strike you with some surprise. We have been so much accustomed, in ballad and story, to see the hero of the forest, Robin Hood, placed in the days of Richard I., that it will seem, perhaps, somewhat bold in me to depict him as living and acting in the reign of Henry III. But I think, if you will turn to those old historians, with whose writings you are not unfamiliar, you will find that he was, as I have represented, an English yeoman, of a very superior mind, living in the times in which I have placed him, outlawed,

in all probability, for his adherence to the popular party of the day, and taking a share in the important struggle between the weak and tyrannical, though accomplished, Henry III., and that great and extraordinary leader, Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester.

In regard to the conduct of my story, I have nothing to say, but that I wish it were better. I think, however, that it will be found to contain some striking scenes of those times; and I trust that the struggle of feelings, depicted in the third volume, may afford you matter of some interest.

Believe me to be,

My Dear Sir,

With the highest esteem,

Your most faithful servant,

G. P. R. JAMES.

FOREST DAYS.

CHAPTER I.

Merry England!--Oh, merry England! What a difference has there always been between thee and every other land! What a cheerfulness there seems to hang about thy very name! What yeoman-like hilarity is there in all the thoughts of the past! What a spirit of sylvan cheer and rustic hardihood in all the tales of thy old times!

When England was altogether an agricultural land--when a rude plough produced an abundant harvest, and a thin, but hardy and generous peasantry, devoted themselves totally to the cultivation of the earth,--when wide forests waved their green boughs over many of the richest manufacturing districts of Great Britain, and the lair of the fawn and the burrow of the coney were found, where now appear the fabric and the mill, there stood, in a small town, or rather, I should call it, village, some fourteen miles from Pontefract, a neat little inn, well known to all the wayfarers on the road as a comfortable resting place, where they could dine on their journey to or from the larger city.

The house was constructed of wood, and was but of two stories; but let it not be supposed on that account that it was devoid of ornament, for manifold were the quaint carvings and rude pieces of sculpture with which it was decorated, and not small had been the pains which had been bestowed upon mouldings and cornices, and lintels and door-posts by the hand of more than one laborious artisan. Indeed, altogether, it was a very elaborate piece of work, and had probably been originally built for other purposes than that which it now served; for many were the changes which had taken place in that part of the country, as well as over the rest of England, between the days I speak of, and those of a century before.

Any one who examined the house closely, would have seen that it must have been constructed before the year 1180, for there was very strong proof, in the forms of the windows, and the cutting across of several of the beams which traversed the front, that at the period of its erection the use of glazed casements in private houses was not known. At the time I speak of, however, glass had become plentiful in England, and, though cottages were seldom ornamented with anything like a lattice, yet no house with the rank and dignity of an inn, where travellers might stop in rainy and boisterous weather, was now without windows, formed of manifold small lozenge-shaped pieces of glass, like those still frequently employed in churches, only of a smaller size.

The inn was a gay-looking, cheerful place, either in fine weather or in foul; for, as there are some men who, clothe them as you will, have a distinguished and graceful air, so are there some dwellings which look sunshiny and bright, let the aspect of the sky be what it will. The upper story of the house projected beyond the lower, and formed of itself a sort of portico, giving a shelter to two long benches placed beneath it, either from the heat of the summer sun, or the rain of the spring and autumn; and it need not be said that these benches formed the favourite resting place of sundry old men on bright summer evenings; and that many a time, in fine weather, a table would be put out upon the green before the house, the bench offering seats on one side, while settles and stools gave accommodation on the other, to many a merry party round the good roast beef and humming ale.

Before the door of the inn, spread out one of those pleasant open pieces of ground, which generally found room for themselves in every country village in England; on which the sports of the place were held; to which the jockey brought his horse for sale, and tried his paces up and down; on which many a wrestler took a fall, and cudgel-player got a broken head. There too, in their season, were the merry maypole and the

dance, the tabor and the pipe. There was many a maiden wooed and won; and there passed along all the three processions of life--the infant to the font, the bride to the altar, the corpse to the grave.

Various were the memories attached to that village green in the hearts of all the neighbourhood; various were the associations which it called up in every bosom and various were the romances, probably much better worth listening to than this that we are going to tell, which that village green could have related. It had all the things pertaining to its character and profession: it had a dry, clear, sandy horse-road running at one side, it had two foot-paths crossing each other in the middle, it had a tall clump of elms on the south side, with a well, and an iron ladle underneath. It had a pond, which was kept clear by a spring at the bottom, welling constantly over at the side next the road, and forming a little rivulet, full of pricklebacks, flowing on towards a small river at some distance. It had its row of trees on the side next to the church, with the priest's house at the corner. The surface was irregular, just sufficiently so to let some of the young people, in any of their merry meetings, get out of sight of their elders for a minute or two; and the whole was covered with that short, dry, green turf, which is only to be found upon a healthy sandy soil. In short, dear reader, it was as perfect a village green as ever was seen, and I should like very much, if such a thing were possible, to transport you and me to the bench before the inn door on some fine afternoon in the end of the month of June, and there, with a white jug of clear Nottingham ale before us, while the sun sunk down behind the forest, and the sky began to glow with his slant rays, to tell you the tale which is about to follow, marking in your face the signs of interest which you would doubtless show--the hope, the fear, the expectation, perhaps the smile of surprise, perhaps the glistening drop of sympathy--suffering you to interrupt and ask a question here and there, but not too often--forgiving a moment's impatience when the tale was dull, and thanking you in the end for your friendship towards the good and noble who lived and died more than five centuries ago.

In truth, reader, you know not what a pleasure there is--when the mind is clear from care or sorrow, the heart well attuned, the object a good one, and the tale interesting--you know not what a pleasure there is, to sit down and tell a long story to those who are worthy of hearing one.

And now, having made a somewhat wide excursion, and finding it difficult to get back again to the tale by any easy and gradual process, I will even in this place, close the first chapter, which, by your leave, shall serve for a Preface and Introduction both.

CHAPTER II.

It was in the spring of the year, somewhere about the period which good
old Chaucer describes in the beginning of his Canterbury Tales,

> "Whanne that April with his shoures sote, The droughte of March
> hath perced to the rote,
> And bathed every veine in swiche licour,
> Of whiche vertue engendred is the flow'r:"

it was also towards the decline of the day, and the greater part of the travellers who visited the inn for an hour, on their way homeward from the neighbouring towns, had betaken themselves to the road, in order to get under the shelter of their own roof ere the night fell, when, at one of the tables in the low-pitched parlour--the beams of which must have caused any wayfarer of six feet high to bend his head--might still be seen

a man in the garb of a countryman, sitting with a great, black leathern jug before him, and one or two horns round about, besides the one out of which he himself was drinking.

A slice of a brown loaf toasted at the embers, and which he dipped from time to time in his cup, was the only solid food that he seemed inclined to take; and, to say sooth, it probably might not have been very convenient for him to call for any very costly viands--at least, if one might judge by his dress, which, though good, and not very old, was of the poorest and the homeliest kind--plain hodden-grey cloth, of a coarse fabric, with leathern leggings and wooden-soled shoes.

The garb of the countryman, however, was not the only thing worthy of remark in his appearance. His form had that peculiarity which is not usually considered a perfection, and is termed a hump; not that there was exactly, upon either shoulder, one of those large knobs which is sometimes so designated, but there was a general roundness above his bladebones--a sort of domineering effort of his neck to keep down his head--which gave him a clear title to the appellation of hunchback.

In other respects he was not an unseemly man--his legs were stout and well turned, his arms brawny and long, his chest singularly wide for a deformed person, and his grey eyes large, bright and sparkling. His nose was somewhat long and pointed, and was not only a prominent feature, but a very distinguished one in his countenance. It was one of those noses which have a great deal of expression in them. There was a good deal of fun and sly merriment about the corners of his mouth and under his eyelids, but his nose was decidedly the point of the epigram, standing out a sort of sharp apex to a shrewd, merry ferret-like face; and, as high mountains generally catch the sunshine either in the rise or the decline of the day, and glow with the rosy hue of morning before the rest of the country round obtains the rays, so had the light of the vine settled in purple brightness on the highest feature of his face, gradually melting away into a healthy red over the rest of his countenance.

He wore his beard close shaven, as if he had been a priest; but his eyebrows, which were very prominent, and his hair, which hung in three or four detached locks over his sun-burnt brow and upon his aspiring neck, though they had once been as black as a raven's wing, were now very nearly white.

With this face and form sat the peasant at the table, sopping his bread in the contents of his jug, and from time to time looking down into the bottom of the pot with one eye, as if to ascertain how much was left. He stirred not from his seat, nor even turned his head away from the window, though a very pretty girl of some eighteen years of age looked in at him from time to time, and his was a face which announced that the owner thereof had at one time of his life had sweet things to say to all the black eyes he met with.

At length, however, the sound of a trotting horse was heard, and the peasant exclaimed, eagerly--"Here, Kate! Kate!--you merry compound of the woman and the serpent, take away the jack; they're coming now. Away with it, good girl! I mustn't be found drinking wine of Bourdeaux. Give me a tankard of ale, girl. How does the room smell?"

"Like a friar's cell," said the girl, taking up the black jack with a laugh. "Grape juice, well fermented, and a brown toast beside."

"Get thee gone, slut!" cried the peasant, "what dost thou know of friars' cells? Too much, I misdoubt me. Bring the ale, I say--and spill a drop on the floor, to give a new flavour to the room."

"I'll bring thee a sprig of rue, Hardy," said the girl; "it will give out odour enough. Put it in thy posset when thou gett'st home; it will sweeten thy blood, and whiten thy nose."

"Away with thee," cried the man she called Hardy, "or I'll kiss thee before company."

The girl darted away as her companion rose from his seat with an appearance of putting, at least, one part of his threat in execution, and returned a minute after, bearing in her hand the ale he had demanded.

"Spill some--spill some!" cried the peasant. But as she seemed to think such a proceeding, in respect to good liquor, a sin and a shame, the peasant was obliged to bring it about himself in a way which the manners of those days rendered not uncommon.

The girl set down the tankard on the table, and, with her pretty brown fingers still wet with a portion of the ale which had gone over, bestowed a buffet on the side of the peasant's head which made his ear tingle for a moment, and then carefully wiped her mouth with the corner of her apron, as if to remove every vestige of his salute.

As nearly as possible at the same moment that she was thus clearing her lips, the feet of the horse which had been heard coming, stopped at the door of the inn; and loud applications for attendance called the girl away from her coquettish sparring with Hardy, who, resuming his seat, put the tankard of ale to his lips, and did not seem to find it unpalatable, notwithstanding the Bourdeaux by which it had been preceded. At the same time, however, a considerable change took place in his appearance. His neck became more bent, his shoulders were thrown more forward; he untied the points at the back of his doublet, so that it appeared somewhat too loose for his figure; he drew the hair, too, more over his forehead, suffered his cheeks to fall in, and by these and other slight operations he contrived to make himself look fully fifteen years older than he had done the minute before.

While this was going on, there had been all that little bustle and noise at the door of the inn which usually accompanied the reception of a guest in those days, when landlords thought they could not testify sufficient honour and respect to an arriving customer without mingling their gratulations with scoldings of the horse-boys and tapsters, and manifold loud-tongued directions to chamberlains and maids.

At length the good host, with his stout, round person clothed in close-fitting garments, which displayed every weal of fat under his skin, led in a portly well-looking man, of about thirty, or five-and-thirty years of age, bearing the cognizance of some noble house embroidered on his shoulder. He was evidently, to judge by his dress and appearance, one of the favourite servants of some great man, and a stout, frank, hearty, English yeoman he seemed to be; a little consequential withal, and having a decidedly high opinion of his own powers, mental and corporeal, but good-humoured and gay, and as ready to take as to give.

"Not come!" he said, as he entered, talking over his shoulder to the landlord--"not come! That is strange enough. Why, I was kept more than half an hour at Barnsley Green to be the judge of a wrestling match. They would have me, God help us, so I was afraid they would be here before me. Well, give us a stoup of good liquor to discuss the time; I must not say give it of the best--the best is for my lord--but I do not see why the second best should not be for my lord's man; so let us have it quick, before these people come, and use your discretion as to the quality."

The wine that he demanded was soon supplied, and being set upon the table at which the peasant was seated, the lord's man took his place on the other side, and naturally looked for a moment in the face of his table-fellow; while the landlord stood by, with his fat stomach, over-hanging the board, and his eyes fixed upon the countenance of his new guest, to mark therein the approbation of his wine which he anticipated. The lord's man was not slow in proving the goodness of the liquor; but, without employing the horn cup, which the host set down beside the tankard, he lifted the latter to his mouth, drank a good deep draught, took a long sigh, drank again, and then nodded his head to the landlord, with a look expressive of perfect satisfaction.

After a few words between my host and his guest, in which Hardy took no part, but sat with his head bent over his ale, with the look of a man both tired and weakly, the landlord withdrew to his avocations, and

the lord's man, fixing his eyes for a moment upon his opposite; neighbour, asked, in a kindly but patronising tone--

"What have you got there, ploughman? Thin ale,--isn't it? Come, take a cup of something better, to cheer thee. These are bad times, ar'n't they? Ay, I never yet met a delver in the earth that did not find fault with God's seasons. Here, drink that; it will make your wheat look ten times greener! Were I a ploughman, I'd water my fields with such showers as this, taken daily down my own throat. We should have no grumbling at bad crops then."

"I grumble not," replied the hunchback, taking the horn, and draining it slowly, sip by sip, "my crops grow green and plentiful. Little's the labour that my land costs in tillage, and yet I get a fat harvest in the season; and moreover, no offence, good sir, but I would rather be my own man and Heaven's, than any other person's."

"Not if you had as good a lord as I have," answered the serving-man, colouring a little, notwithstanding. "One is as free in his house as on Salisbury-plain; it's a pleasure to do his bidding. He's a friend, too, of the peasant and the citizen, and the good De Montfort. He's no foreign minion, but a true Englishman."

"Here's his health, then," said the peasant. "Is your lord down in these parts?"

"Ay, is he," replied the lord's man--"no farther off than Doncaster, and I am here to meet sundry gentlemen, who are riding down this way to York, to tell them that their assembling may not be quite safe there, so that they must fix upon another place."

"Ho, ho!" said the peasant, "some new outbreak toward, against the foreigners. Well, down with them, I say, and up with the English yeomen. But who have we here?--Some of those you come to seek, I'll warrant.--Let us look at their faces." And going round the table, with a slow, and somewhat feeble step, he placed his eye to one of the small

lozenges of glass in the casement, and gazed out for a minute or two, while the serving-man followed his example, and took a survey of some new travellers who had arrived, before they were ushered into the general reception room.

"Do you know him?" asked the peasant. "I think I have seen that dark face down here before."

"Ay, I know him," answered the serving-man. "He's a kinsman of the Earl of Ashby, one of our people, whom I came principally to meet. He's a handsome gentleman, and fair spoken, though somewhat black about the muzzle."

"If his heart be as black as his face," said the peasant, "I would keep what I had got to say for the Earl's ears, before I gave it to his, were I in your place."

"Ha! say you so?" demanded the lord's man. "Methinks you know more of him, ploughman, than you tell us."

"Not much," replied the other, "and what I do know is not very good, so one must be careful in the telling."

"What keeps him, I wonder?" said the serving-man, after having returned to the table, and sipped some more of his wine.

"He's toying without, I'll aver," said the peasant, "with pretty Kate, the landlord's daughter. He had better not let young Harland, the franklin's son, see him, or his poll and a crab-stick cudgel may be better acquainted. It had well-nigh been so three months ago, when he was down here last."

These words were said in an undertone, for while one of two servants, who had accompanied the subject of their discourse, led away the horses to the stable, and the other kept the landlord talking before the inn, there was a sound of whispering and suppressed laughter

behind the door of the room, which seemed to show that the Earl of Ashby's kinsman was not far off, and was employed in the precise occupation which the peasant had assigned to him.

The serving-man wisely held his tongue, and, in a minute after, the door opened, and gave entrance to a man somewhat above the middle size, of a slim and graceful figure, the thinness of which did not seem to indicate weakness, but rather sinewy activity. He was dressed in close-fitting garments of a dark marone tint, with riding-boots, and spurs without rowels. Over the tight coat I have mentioned, coming halfway down his thigh, was a loose garment called a tabard, of philimot colour, apparently to keep his dress from the dust, and above it again a green hood, which was now thrown back upon his shoulders. His sword peeped from under his tabard, and the hilt of his dagger showed itself, also, on the other side. His air was easy and self-possessed, but there was a quick and furtive glance of the eye from object to object, as he entered the room, which gave the impression that there was a cunning and inquisitive spirit within. His face was certainly handsome, though pale and dark; his beard was short and black, and his hair, which was remarkably fine and glossy, had been left to grow long, and was platted like that of a woman. His hand was white and fine, and it was evident that he paid no slight attention to his dress, by the tremendous length of the points of his boots, which were embroidered to represent a serpent, and buttoned to his knees with a small loop of gold. His hood, too, was strangely ornamented with various figures embroidered round the edge; and yet so great was the extravagance of the period, that his apparel would then have been considered much less costly than that of most men of his rank, for his revenues were by far too limited, and his other expenses too many and too frequent, to permit of his indulging to the full his taste for splendid garments.

As this personage entered the room, the sharp glance of the serving-man detected the figure of Kate, the host's daughter, gliding away from the opening door, but, turning his head discreetly, he fixed his eyes upon

the new-comer with a low reverence, advancing at the same time towards him.

The Earl's kinsman, however, either did not, or affected not to know the person who approached him, and the lord's man was obliged to enter into explanations as to who he was, and what was his errand.

"Ha!" said Richard de Ashby, "danger at York, is there? My good lord, your master, has brought us down here for nothing, then, it seems. I know not how my kinsman, the Earl of Ashby, will take this, for he loves not journeying to be disappointed."

"My lord does not intend to disappoint the Earl," replied the serving-man; "he will give him the meeting in the course of to-morrow--somewhere."

"Know you not where?" demanded the gentleman; and, as the servant turned his eyes, with a doubtful glance, to the spot where the peasant was seated, the other added, "Come hither with me upon the green, where there are no idle ears to overhear."

If his words were meant as a hint for Hardy to quit the room, it was not taken; for the hunchback remained fixed to the table, having recourse from time to time to his jug of ale, and looking towards the door more than once, after Sir Richard and the lord's man had quitted the chamber.

Their conference was apparently long, and at length, first one of the gentleman's servants, and then another, entered the little low-roofed room, and approached the table at which the peasant sat.

"Hallo! what hast thou got here, bumpkin?" cried one of them--"wine for such a carle as thou art!" and, as he spoke, he took up the tankard from which the serving-man had been drinking.

"That is neither thine nor mine," replied Hardy, "so you had better let it alone."

"Heyday!" cried the servant of the great man's kinsman; "rated by a humpbacked ploughman! If it be not thine, fellow, hold thy tongue, for it can be nothing to thee! I shall take leave to make free with it, however," and, pouring out a cup, he tossed it off.

"You must be a poor rogue," said the peasant, "to be so fond of drinking at another man's cost, as not to pay for your liquor even by a civil word."

"What is that he says?" cried the man, turning to his companion--for, to say sooth, although he had heard every word, he was not quite prepared to act upon them, being one of those who are much more ready to bully and brawl, than to take part in a fray they have provoked--"what is that he says?"

"He called thee a poor rogue, Timothy," said his companion. "Turn him out by the heels, the misbegotten lump!"

"Out with him!" cried the other, seeing that his comrade was inclined to stand by him, "Out with him!" and he advanced, menacingly, upon the peasant.

"Hold your hands!--hold your hands!" said Hardy, shaking his head--"I am an old man, and not so well made as you two varlets, but I don't 'bide a blow from any poor kinsman's half-starved curs!--Take care, my men!" and as one of them approached rather too near, he struck him a blow, without rising from his stool, which made him measure his length upon the rushes that strewed the floor, crying out at the same time, in a whining tone, "To think of two huge fellows falling upon a poor, deformed old body."

It so happened that the personage whom the peasant had knocked down was the braver man of the two; and, starting up, he rushed fiercely upon his adversary; which his companion espying, darted upon Hardy at the same moment, and by a dexterous kick of his foot knocked the stool from under him, thus bringing the hunchback and his own comrade to the ground together. He then caught their enemy by the collar, and held his head firmly down upon the floor with both hands, as one has sometimes seen a child do with a refractory kitten.

"Baste him, Dickon--baste him!" he cried.

"I'll give him a dip in the horse-pond," said the other; "his nose will make the water fizz like a red-hot horseshoe."

At that moment, however, the noise occasioned by such boisterous proceedings called in pretty Kate Greenly, the landlord's daughter, who, although she had a great reverence and regard for all the serving men of Richard de Ashby, was not fond of seeing poor Hardy ill-treated. Glancing eagerly round, while the peasant strove with his two opponents, she seized a pail of water which stood behind the parlour door, and following the plan which she had seen her father pursue with the bulldog and mastiff which tenanted the back yard, she dashed the whole of the contents over the combatants as they lay struggling on the ground.

All three started up, panting; but the gain was certainly on the part of Hardy, who, freed from the grasp of his adversaries, caught up the three-legged stool on which he had been sitting, and whirling it lightly above his head, prepared to defend himself therewith against his assailants; who, on their part, with their rage heightened rather than assuaged by the cool libation which Kate had poured upon them, drew the short swords that they carried, and were rushing upon the old peasant with no very merciful intent.

Kate Greenly now screamed aloud, exerting her pretty little throat to the utmost, and her cries soon brought in the lord's man, followed, somewhat slowly, by Richard de Ashby. The good landlord himself--having established as a rule, both out of regard for his own person and for the custom of his house, never to interfere in any quarrels if he could possibly avoid it, which rule had produced, on certain occasions, great obtuseness in sight and in hearing--kept out of the way, and indeed removed himself to the stable upon the pretence of looking after his guests' horses.

The lord's man, however, with the true spirit of an English yeoman, dashed at once into the fray, taking instant part with the weakest.

"Come, come!" he cried, placing himself by Hardy's side, "two men against one--and he an old one! Out upon it! Stand off, or I'll break your jaws for you!"

This accession to the forces of their adversary staggered the two servants, and a momentary pause took place, in which their master's voice was at last heard.

"What! brawling, fools!" he exclaimed. "We have something else to think of now. Stand back, and let the old man go! Get you gone, ploughman; and don't let me find you snarling with a gentleman's servants again, or I will put you in the stocks for your pains."

"I will break his head before he's out of the house," said one of the men, who seemed to pay but little deference to his master's commands.

"I will break thine, if thou triest it," answered the lord's man, sturdily. "Come along, old man, come along; I will see thee safe out of the place, and let any one of them lay a finger on thee if he dare!"

Thus saying, he grasped Hardy's arm and led him forth from the inn, muttering as he did so, "By the shoulder-bone of St. Luke, the old fellow has got limbs enough to defend himself!--It's as thick as a roll of brawn,

and as hard as a branch of oak! How goes it with thee, fellow?"

"Stiff--woundy stiff, sir," replied the hunchback; "but I thank you, with all my heart, for taking part with me; and I would fain give you a cup of good ale in return, such as you have never tasted out of London. If you could but contrive to come to my poor place to-morrow morning," he added, dropping his voice to a low tone, "I could shew some country sports, which, as you are a judge of such things, might please you."

"It must be early hours, then," replied the serving-man. "Those that don't come to-night will not be here till noon to-morrow, it is true: but still I think I had better wait for them."

"Nay, nay--come," said Hardy; "come and take a cup of ale with me," and, after a pause, he added, significantly, "besides, there's something I want to tell you which may profit your lord."

"But how shall I find my way?" demanded the serving-man, gazing inquiringly in his face, but with no expression of surprise at the intimation he received.

"Oh, I will shew you," answered the peasant. "Meet me at the church stile there, and I will guide you. It is not far. Be there a little before six, and you shall find me waiting. Give me your hand on't."

The serving-man held out his hand, and Hardy shook it in a grasp such as might be given by a set of iron pincers, at the same time advancing his head, and adding, in a low tone,

"Take care what you do--you have a traitor there! One of those men is a nidget, and the other is a false hound, come down to spy upon good men and true."

Thus saying, he relaxed his hold, and, turning away, was soon lost in the obscure twilight of the evening.

CHAPTER III.

The animal called the sluggard has greatly increased in modern days. In former times the specimens were few and far between. The rising of the sun was generally the signal for knight and yeoman to quit their beds, and if some of the old or the soft cumbered their pillows for an hour or so later, the sleeping time rarely if ever extended beyond seven in the morning.

The sky was still grey when the stout yeoman, whom we have mentioned under the title of the lord's man, but whose real name was Thomas Blawket, sprang lightly out of his bed, and made that sort of rapid, but not unwholesome toilet, which a hardy Englishman, in his rank of life, was then accustomed to use. It consisted merely in one or two large buckets of clean cold water poured over his round curly head and naked shoulders, and then, with but some small ceremony of drying, his clothes were cast on, and bound round him with his belt. The whole operation occupied, perhaps, ten minutes, and a considerable portion of that space of time was taken up in rubbing dry his thick, close, short-cut beard, which curled up under the process into little knots, like the coat of a French water dog.

"Give thee good day, host, give thee good day," he said, as he issued forth. "I will be back anon;" and, sauntering forward leisurely on the green, he stood for a moment or two looking round him, to prevent the appearance of taking any preconcerted direction, and then walked slowly towards the church, which stood behind the row of trees we have mentioned. After gazing up at the building, which was then in its first

newness, he made a circuit round it, and passing the priest's house, he reached what was called the Church Stile, where two broad stones, put edgeways, with one flat one between them for a step, excluded all animals without wings--except man, and his domestic companion, the dog--from what was then called the Priest's Meadow.

On the other side of this stile, with his arms leaning upon the top stone, was Hardy the Hunchback, whistling a lively tune, and watching the lord's man as he came forward, without moving from his position till the other was close upon him. Their salutation was then soon made, and crossing the stile, the good yeoman walked on by the side of his companion, sauntering easily along through the green fields, and talking of all the little emptinesses which occupy free hearts in the early morning.

The first hour of the day, the bright first hour of a spring day I mean, appears always to me as if care and thought had nought to do with it. It seems made for those light and whirling visions--not unmingled with thanks and praise--which drive past the dreamy imagination like motes in the sunshine, partaking still, in a degree, of sleep, and having all its soft indistinctness, without losing the brightness of waking perception: thoughts, hopes, and fancies, that glitter as they go, succeeded each minute by clearer and more brilliant things, till the whole, at length, form themselves into the sterner realities of noonday life.

The two men wandered on in that dreamy hour. They listened to the sweet birds singing in the trees; and it was a time of year when the whole world was tuneful; they stopped by the side of the babbling brook, and gazed into its dancing waters; they watched the swift fish darting along the stream, and hallooed to a heron which had just caught one of the finny tribe in its bill.

"Now had we a hawk," said the peasant, "we would very soon have Master Greycoat there, as surely as foul Richard de Ashby will catch pretty Kate Greenly before he has done."

"Think you so?" said the lord's man, certainly not speaking of catching the heron. "Will she be so easily deceived, think you?"

"Ay, will she," answered the peasant. "Not that the girl wants sense or learning either, for the good priest took mighty pains with her, and she can read and write as well as any clerk in the land. Nor has she a bad heart either, though it is somewhat fierce and quick withal--like her mother's, who one day broke Tim Clough's head with a tankard, when he was somewhat boisterous to her, and then well-nigh died with grief when she found she had really cracked his skull. But this girl is as vain as a titmouse, and though I do believe she loves young Harland, the franklin's son, at the bottom, yet I have often told him that it is as great a chance she never marries him as that the river will be frozen next winter; and now I see this fellow come down again and hanging about her as he did before, I say her vanity will take her by the ears, and lead her to any market he chooses to carry her to."

"Alack and a-well-a-day!" said the lord's man, "that a gentleman like that cannot let a far off place such as this be in peace, with its quiet sunshine and good country-folks. He may find a light-o'-love easily enough in the great cities, without coming down to break a father's heart, and make a good youth miserable, and turn a gay-hearted country girl into a sorrowful harlot! I hope he may get his head broke for his pains!"

"He is like to get his neck broke for something else," replied the peasant, "If I judge rightly. But we will talk more of that anon. Let us get on."

Forward accordingly they walked, passed another field, and another, and then took their way down a narrow, sandy lane, which in the end opened out from between its high banks upon a long strip of ground covered with short grass, and old hawthorn trees, with many a bank and dingle breaking the turf, and Showing the yellow soil beneath.

"Why, you seem to live on the edge of the forest, ploughman," said the serving-man; "it must be poor ground here, I wot?"

"It's good for my sort of farming," replied the other, shooting a shrewd glance at him, along the side of his very peculiar nose; "you have a mile to go yet, Master Yeoman, and we may as well go through a bit of the woodland."

"Have with you, have with you!" replied the yeoman. "I love the forest ground as well as any man, and often, when the season comes on, I turn woodman for the occasion, and, with my lord's good leave, help his foresters to kill the deer."

"Dangerous tastes in these days, Master Yeoman," said the peasant, and there the conversation dropped again, each falling back into that train of thought which had been awakened in their minds by the reference to Kate Greenly, and her probable fate; for, although we are accustomed to consider those as ruder times--and certainly, in the arts of life, man was not so far advanced as in the present day--yet the natural affections of the heart, the sound judgment of right and wrong, and the high emotions of the immortal spirit within us, do not depend upon civilization, at least as the term is generally applied, but exist independent of a knowledge of sciences, or skill in any of man's manifold devices for increasing his pleasures and his comforts. They are rather, indeed, antagonist principles, in many respects, to very great refinement; and the advance of society in the arts of luxury is but too often accompanied by the cultivation of that exclusive selfishness which extinguishes all the finer emotions, and leaves man but as one of the machines he makes.

The mind of the stout yeoman, following the track on which it had begun to run, represented to himself what would be the feelings of the rustic lover, to find himself abandoned for a comparative stranger, and not only to know that the girl he loved was lost to him for ever, but degraded and debased--a harlot, sported with for the time, to be cast

away when her freshness was gone. He had no difficulty in sympathising from his honest heart with the sensations which young Harland would experience--with the bitter disappointment--with the anger mingled with tenderness towards her who in her folly blighted her own and his happiness for ever--with the pure and unmitigated indignation against him who, in his heartless vanity, came down to blast the peace of others for the gratification of an hour. He thought of the father, too; but there, indeed, his sympathies were not so much excited, for it needed but to see good John Greenly once or twice to perceive that there was no great refinement in his virtue--that self was his first object--and, after meditating over that part of the subject for two or three hundred yards, as they walked on through the hawthorns, he said aloud, with a half laugh, "I shouldn't wonder if he would rather have her a lord's leman than a countryman's wife!"

"Not at first," answered Hardy, understanding at once what he meant; "he will take it to heart at first, but will soon get reconciled to it." And again they fell into thought, walking on over the smooth turf, upon which it was a pleasure to tread, it was so soft, so dry, and so elastic.

As they proceeded, the hawthorns became mingled with other trees; large beeches, with their long waving limbs not yet fully covered with their leaves, stood out upon the banks, here and there an oak, too, was seen, with the young leaves still brown and yellow; while patches of fern broke the surface of the grass, and large cushions of moss covered the old roots that forced their way to the surface of the ground.

The trees, however, were still scattered at many yards' distance from each other, and cast long shadows upon the velvet green of the grass, as the sun, not many degrees above the horizon, poured its bright rays between them. But when the yeoman looked through the bolls, to the northward and westward, he could see a dim mass of darker green spreading out beyond, and showing how the forest thickened, not far off; while, every now and then, some cart-way, or woody path, gave him a

long vista into the very heart of the woodland, with lines of light, where the beams of day broke through the arcade of boughs, marking the distances upon the road.

That they were getting into the domain of the beasts of chase was soon very evident. More than one hare started away before their footsteps, and limped off with no very hurried pace. Every two or three yards, a squirrel was seen running from tree to tree, and swarming up the boll; and, once or twice, at a greater distance, the practised eye of the good yeoman caught the form of a dun deer, bounding away up some of the paths, to seek shelter in the thicker wood.

The way did not seem long, however, and all the thousand objects which a woodland scene affords to please and interest the eye and ear, and carry home the moral of nature's beautiful works to the heart of man, occupied the attention of the stout Englishman, as they walked onward, till the distance between the trees becoming less and less, the branches formed a canopy through which the rays of the morning sun only found their way occasionally.

"Why, Master Ploughman," said the lord's man, at length, "you seem plunging into the thick of the wood. Does your dwelling lie in this direction?"

"In good sooth does it!" answered the ploughman;--"it will be more open presently."

"Much need," rejoined the yeoman, "or I shall take thee for a forester, and not one of the King's either."

The peasant laughed, but made no reply, and in a minute or two after, the yeoman continued, saying--"Thou art a marvellous man, assuredly, for thou art ten years younger this morning than thou wert last night. Good faith, if I had fancied thee as strong and active as thou art, and as young withal, I think I should have left thee to fight it out with those two fellows by thyself."

"Would that I had them for but half an hour, under the green hawthorn trees we have just passed," said the peasant, laughing--"I would need no second hand to give them such a basting as they have rarely had in life--though I doubt me they have not had a few."

"Doubtless, doubtless!" answered the yeoman--"But word, my good friend, before we go farther: as you are not what you seemed, it is as well I should know where I am going?"

"I am not what I seemed, and not what I seem either, even now," said the peasant, with a frank and cheerful smile, "but there is no harm in that either, Master Yeoman. Here, help me off with my burden; I am not the first man who has made himself look more than he is. There, put your hand under my frock, and untie the knot you will find, while I unfasten this one in front."

So saying, he loosened a little cord and tassel that was round his neck, and with the aid of his companion, let slip from his shoulders a large pad, containing seemingly various articles, some hard, and some soft, but which altogether had been so disposed as to give him the appearance of a deformity that nature certainly had not inflicted upon him. As soon as it was gone, he stood before the honest yeoman, a stout, hearty, thick-set man, with high shoulders indeed, but without the slightest approach to a hump upon either of them; and regarding, with a merry glance, the astonishment of his companion--for those were days of society's babyhood, when men were easily deceived--he said, "So much for the hunch, Master Yeoman. Had those good gentlemen seen me now, they might not have been quite so ready with their hands; and had they seen this," he added, showing the hilt of a good stout dagger under his coat, "they might not have been quite so ready with their swords. And now let us come on without loss of time, for there are those waiting who would fain speak with you for a short time, and give you a message for your lord."

The yeoman hesitated for an instant, but then replied--"Well, it matters not! I will not suspect you, though this is an odd affair. I have helped you once at a pinch--at least, I intended it as help--and you will not do me wrong now, I dare say."

"Doubt it not, doubt it not," said the peasant--"you are a friend, not an enemy. But now to add a word or two to anything else you may hear to-day, let me warn you as we go, that one of those two men you saw struggling with me last night is a traitor and a spy. Ay! and though I must not say so much, I suppose, of a lord's kinsman, I rather think that he who brought him is little better himself."

"Hard words, hard words, Master Ploughman, or whatever you may be," said the lord's man, with a serious air--"I trust it is not a broken head, or an alehouse quarrel that makes you find out treason in the man. Besides, if he be a spy, he can only be a spy upon his own master."

"And who is his own master?" demanded Hardy. "Come, put your wit to, and tell me that."

"Why, Sir Richard de Ashby, to be sure," replied the man; "Truly!" answered Hardy. "Methought the cognizance of the house of Ashby was a tree growing out of a brasier?"

"And so it is," said the man, "and he has it on his coat."

"And what has he on his breast?" demanded Hardy. "Three pards, what they call passant?"

The man started. "Why that is the King's!" he cried.

"Or the Prince Edward's," added Hardy. "So now when you return, tell your lord to look well to the Earl of Ashby's kinsman--if not to the Earl himself. We had tidings of something of this kind, and I remained

to see--for you must not think me such a fool as to give a serving-man hard words for nothing, and bring blows upon my head without an object."

"Did you see the leopards, then?" demanded Blawket. "Did you see them with your own eyes?"

"I grappled with him when he sprang upon me," answered his companion, "and with my two thumbs tore open his coat, while he thought that we were merely rolling on the floor like a terrier and a cat. Under his coat he had a gipon of sendull fit for a king, with three pards broidered in gold upon the breast. When I had seen that, I was satisfied; but that mad girl Kate thought I was brawling in earnest, I suppose, and dashed a pail of water over us, which made us all pant and lose our hold, and as for the rest, you know what happened after. He is no servant of Richard de Ashby; the poor knave keeps but one, and, on my life, I believe, that having long ago sold his soul to the devil for luxury and wastel bread, he has now sold the only thing he had left to sell, his friends, to some earthly devil, for gold to win away pretty Kate Greenly."

The yeoman cast down his eyes on the ground, and walked on for a step or two in grave deliberation.

"Marry," he said, at length, "if this tale be true,--that is to say, I do not doubt what you say, good comrade,--but if I can prove it to my lord's content, I shall be a made man in his opinion for discovering such a trick, and get the henchman's place, which I have long been seeking.--I never loved that Richard de Ashby; though he is as soft and sweet as his cousin Alured is rash and haughty."

"It will be easily proved," replied his companion. "Charge Sir Richard boldly, when your good lord and his friends have met, with bringing down a servant of the King, disguised as his own, to be a spy upon their counsels."

"Nay, nay--not so," replied the serving-man. "I am more experienced in dealing with lords than thou art. That will cause my master to take up the matter, and may make mischief between the two earls. Nay, I will pick a quarrel with him in the inn kitchen, will make him take off his coat to bide a stroke or two with me; and then, when we all see the leopards, we will drag him at once before his betters."

"First tell your lord the whole," said Hardy, somewhat sternly. "It may behove him to know immediately who he is dealing with."

"I will--I will!" replied the man; "and I will let him know my plan for proving the treachery. But what have we here?--Your cottage, I suppose? --Why, you have a goodly sight of sons, if these be all your children. Shooting at the butts, too, as I live! Ay, I see now how it is!"

CHAPTER IV.

As merry a peal as ever was rung, though not perhaps as scientific a one, ushered in the month of May, and as bright a sun as ever shone rose up in the eastern sky, and cast long lines of light over the green fields, glistening with the tears of departed night. The spring had been one of those fair seasons which have but rarely visited us in latter years, when, according to the old rhyme,

"March winds and April showers
Had brought about May flowers."

Almost every leaf was upon the trees, except, indeed, in the case of some of those sturdy old oaks, which, in their brown hardihood, seemed unwilling to put on the livery of spring. The snowdrop had had her season and was gone, but the violet still lingered, shedding her perfume in the shade, and the hawthorn flaunted her fragrant blossoms to the wooing air. It was, in short, the merry, merry month of May, and her ensigns were out in every hedge and every field, calling young hearts to gaiety and enjoyment, and promising a bright summer in her train.

Many a maiden had been out, before the sun rose, from behind the distant slopes, to gather May dew to refresh her beauty, and many a youth, seeking the blossom of the white-thorn, had met, by preconcerted accident, the girl he loved under the lover's tree, and kissed her as warmly as under the mistletoe. Young Harland, however, had looked for Kate Greenly at the place where he had found her on the same day in the former year, but had looked in vain; and, as he returned homeward, somewhat disappointed, had found her with a party of gay girls, sometimes laughing with their laughter, sometimes falling into deep and gloomy thought.

Her young companions broke away to leave her alone with her acknowledged lover; and Kate walked quickly home by his side, with a varying and a changeful air, which we must notice for a moment, though we cannot pause to tell all that passed between them. Sometimes she was gay and saucy, as her wont; sometimes she was thoughtful and even sad; sometimes she affected scorn for her lover's gentle reproaches; sometimes she raised her eyes, and gazed on him with a look of tenderness and regret that made him sorry he had uttered them. Her demeanour was as varying as an April day; but that it had often been before, and he saw not a deeper shadow that spread with an ominous cloud-like heaviness over all. They parted at the door of her father's house, and young Ralph Harland turned him home again, thinking of

the pleasure of the merry dance and all the sports that were to come, and how a little gift, which he had prepared for her he loved, would quiet all idle quarrels between him and fair Kate Greenly.

The village green, the sweet little village green which we have described, was early decked out with all that could be required for the sports of the day. The tall May-pole in the centre, surmounted with a coronet of flowers, streaming with ribbons and green leaves, and every sort of country ornament, was prepared for the dance around it, which was soon to take place. Every tree was hung with garlands, and even the old well was decorated with wreaths and branches of the hawthorn and the oak. The inn itself was a complete mass of flowers; and, before the door, at a very early hour, were arranged the various prizes which were to reward the successful competitors in the rustic sports of the day. There was a runlet of wine stood beside the little bench beneath the eaves, and in a pen, formed by four hurdles, was a milk-white ram, with his horns gilded, and a chaplet twisted round his curly pate; and further off, leaning against the wall, stood a long yew bow, with a baldric, and sheaf of arrows, winged with peacock's feathers, bearing silver ornaments upon the quiver.

These prizes were the first object of curiosity, and at an early hour many a group of boys and girls, and youths and maidens, gathered round the pen where the fat, long fleeced ram was confined, and pulled him by the gilded horns, while others looked at the bow, and every now and then stretched out a hand to touch and examine it more closely, but were deterred by a loud shrill voice from one of the windows of the inn, shouting, "Beware the thong!"

No season of merriment occurred at that time in England without bringing together its crowd of minstrels and musicians; and even then so populous had the gentle craft become, and so dissolute withal, that laws and regulations were found necessary for the purpose of diminishing the numbers of its followers and regulating their manners.

"Free drink for the minstrels" was a general proverb assented to by all, and the consequence was, that having the opportunity, they seldom wanted the inclination to pour their libations too freely, a good deal to the inconvenience, very frequently, of their entertainers. The class, however, which came to a May-day merry-making in a common country village was, of course, not of the highest grade, either in musical skill or professional rank; and the first who appeared on the village-green was a piper, with his bag under his arm, producing, as he came, those extraordinary sounds which are found to have a very pleasant effect upon some portions of the human species, but are almost universally distasteful to the canine race. Upon this occasion almost all the dogs in the village followed him, either barking or howling. The good piper, however, did not seem to consider it as at all a bad compliment, but sitting himself down upon the bench before the inn door, played away to his square-headed auditory, till some human bipeds, and amongst the rest Jack Greenly himself, came forth with a jug of humming ale, and set it down beside him.

The piper drank, as pipers will drink, a long and hearty draught, then looked around him, and as a matter of course, commended liberally to the ears of his entertainer the preparations which had been made for the May-day games.

A floyter, or player on the flute, was not long behind, and he himself was succeeded by a man with a rote but the great musician of all, the performer on the viol, without whom the dance would not have been perfect, like all other important personages, caused himself to be waited for; and at length, when he did appear, came accompanied by his retinue, consisting of two long-eared curs, and a boy, carrying his viol, carefully wrapped up in the recesses of a fustian bag. With great airs of dignity, too, he took his way at once into the house, and both prudently and humanely tuned his instrument in a room where few if any ears were nigh to hear.

Fain would I, dear reader, could such a thing be permitted, indulge in a long description of the May-day games of old England. Fain would I tell you who in the wrestling match won the milk-white ram, or shot the best arrow, or hurled the best quoit; but there are more serious things before us, and to them we must hurry on, leaving to imagination to undertake the task of depicting not only these, but the still greater struggle which took place amongst many a hardy yeoman for a fine horse. of Yorkshire breed, given by Ralph Harland himself in honour of her he loved.

Suffice it then, for the present, that the sports of the morning were over, that the noonday meal, too, was at an end, that the girls of the village had rearranged their dress for the lighter amusement of the evening, and were gathering gaily under the group of trees to begin their first dance around the Maypole. Ralph Harland stood by Kate's side, and was asking anxiously what made her so sad, when suddenly he raised his eyes, and his countenance became even more overcast than hers.

The sound which had made him look up had certainly nothing unusual in it on that busy morning. It was but the tramp of three or four horses coming at a rapid pace, but the young man's heart was anxious; and when his eyes rested on the face of Richard de Ashby, who rode in, followed by three men, and dressed with unusual splendour, well might the young franklin's bosom be troubled with feelings bitter and indignant, especially as he saw her whom he loved turn red and white, and read in the changing colour the confirmation of many a dark suspicion.

The personage who had produced these sensations seemed at first to take no notice of the gay groups around him, but advancing at once to the low inn door, which was nearly blocked up by the jovial person of John Greenly himself, he sprang to the ground lightly and gracefully, asking, in such a tone that all around could hear what he said, whether the Earl of Ashby had yet arrived.

On finding that such was not the case, he turned round with an indifferent air, saying, "Good faith, then I must amuse myself as best I may, till my fair cousin comes. What have you going forward here--a May-day dance? Good sooth, I will make one. Pretty Kate," he continued, advancing to the spot where she stood, "will you give me your hand to lead you a measure round the Maypole?"

"It is promised to me," said Ralph Harland, in a stern tone, before Kate could reply, bending his brows angrily upon his rival.

"Is it, indeed!" cried Richard de Ashby, gazing at him from head to foot with that cool look of supercilious contempt which is so hard to bear, and yet so difficult to quarrel with.--"Well, but she has two hands; she shall give you one and me the other, and this pretty little damsel," he continued, to a girl of some twelve or thirteen years of age, who stood by listening, "this pretty little damsel shall take my other hand--so that is all settled. Come, Master Violer, let us hear the notes of the catgut! Come, sweet Kate, I long to see those lovely limbs playing in the graceful dance."

Poor Ralph Harland! it was one of those moments when it is equally difficult to act and not to act, especially for one inexperienced, young, and brought up in habitual deference for superior rank and station. A direct insult, an open injury, he would have avenged at once upon the highest head that wagged in all the realm; but the covert scorn of the manner, the hidden baseness of the design, he knew not how to meet; and following, rather than accompanying, his light-o'-love sweetheart to the dance, he joined in a pastime to which his heart was but ill attuned.

It is under such circumstances that those who are wronged have always the disadvantage. Ralph was fierce, silent, gloomy; while Richard de Ashby was all grace, self-possession, smiles, and cheerfulness. His speech and his glances were for Kate Greenly alone. His looks and his voice were full of triumph, his eyes full of meaning; and many a time and

oft, as they danced gaily round, he whispered to her soft things, of which no one heard the whole, although there was a keen and eager ear close by, listening for every sound to fix a quarrel on the speaker.

At length the notes of the viol stopped, and the dance came to an end, just as Richard de Ashby was adding a word or two more to something he had been saying in a low tone to the fair coquette beside him, while her colour changed more than once, and eyelids were cast down. The sudden silence rendered the last half of the sentence audible. It was--"Then lose not a moment."

Ralph Harland cast her hand from him indignantly, and fronting Richard de Ashby, exclaimed--"To do what?"

"What is that to thee, peasant?" demanded Richard de Ashby, colouring as much with anger at his words having been overheard, as with pride.

"Everything that she does is matter to me," replied Ralph, fiercely, "if I am to be her husband; and if I am not, woe be to the man that makes her break her promise."

"You are insolent, peasant," replied the Earl's kinsman, with a look of scorn; "take care, or you will make me angry."

"It shall be done without care," replied Ralph Harland, feeling no more hesitation, now that he was fully embarked; "let go my arm, Kate, and I will soon show you and others of what egg-shells a lord's cousin can be made.--What brings you here to spoil our merriment, and mar our May-day games? Take that as a remembrance of Ralph Harland!" and he struck him a blow, which, although Richard de Ashby partially warded it off, made him stagger and reel back. But at that very moment, the three servants he had brought with him, who had hitherto stood at a distance, seeing their master engaged in a squabble with one of the dancers, ran up, and one of them, catching him by the arm, prevented him from falling.

His sword was now out of the sheath in an instant; the weapons of his attendants were not behind, and all four rushed upon the young franklin, exclaiming, "Cut off his ears! The villain has dared to strike a nobleman! Cut off his ears!"

All the villagers scattered back from the object of their fury, except two--Kate Greenly, who cast herself upon her knees before Richard de Ashby, begging him to spare her lover, and Ralph's old grey-headed father, who, running up from the inn door, placed a stout staff in his son's hand, exclaiming, "Well done, Ralph, my boy! Thrash 'em all! Ho! Greenly, give me another stick that I may help him!"

One of the serving-men, however, struck the old franklin with the pummel of his sword, and knocked him down, while the two others pressed forward upon Ralph, and the foremost caught his left arm, just as Richard de Ashby, putting Kate aside, came within arm's-length of him in front, reiterating with fierce vehemence, "Cut off his ears!"

It is probable that the order would have been executed unmercifully, had not a sudden ally appeared upon Ralph Harland's side.

Leaping from the window of the inn, a man clothed in a close-fitting coat, and hose of Lincoln green, with a sword by his side, a narrow buckler on his shoulder, a sheaf of arrows under his left arm, and a leathern bracer just below the bend of the elbow, sprang forward, with a pole some six feet long in his hand, and at three bounds cleared the space between the inn and the disputants. The third leap, which brought him up with them, was scarcely taken, when one blow of his staff struck the man who held Ralph by the left arm to the ground, and a second sent the sword of Richard de Ashby flying far over his head.

At the same moment he exclaimed, looking at the servant whom he had knocked down, "Ha! ha! my old acquaintance; when last we had a fall in yonder inn together, I thought we should meet again! Fair play!

fair play!--Not four against one! Get you in, Kate Light-o'-love! out of harm's way! The day may not end so well as it has begun. Fair play, I say, or we may take odds too!"

Richard de Ashby looked round, furiously, after his sword, and laid his hand upon the dagger that hung at his right side; but the sight he saw, as he turned his eyes towards the inn, was one well calculated to moderate, at least, the expression of his rage, for some eight or nine men, all habited alike in close coats of Lincoln green, were coming up at a quick pace from behind the house, and their apparel, and appearance altogether, could leave little doubt that they were companions of him who had first arrived, and in whom he recognised with no slight surprise, the same blue-nosed old peasant whom he had found contending with his servants not many nights before. The hump, indeed, was gone, and the neck was straight enough. All signs of decrepitude, too, had passed away; but the face was not to be mistaken, and Richard de Ashby's countenance fell at the sight.

He was no coward, however; for, amongst the swarm of vices, and follies, and faults, which degraded so many of the Norman nobility of that day, cowardice was rarely, if ever, to be met with. They were a people of the sword, and never unwilling to use it.

His first thought, then, was to resist to the death, if need might be; his next, how to resist to the best advantage. Snatching his sword, then, which one of his servants had picked up, he looked to the clump of trees, but Harland, and the man in green, with a whole host of villagers, whose angry faces betokened him no good, were immediately in the way, so that his only resource seemed to be to retreat to the inn door.

The first step he took in that direction, however, produced a rapid movement on the part of the yeomen, or foresters, or whatever the green-coated gentlemen might be, which cut him off from that place of refuge, and, at the same moment, the voice of Hardy exclaimed, "Stop him from the church path, Much! This rat-trap of ours has too many

holes in it, but that will close them all--Now, Master Richard de Ashby, listen to a word or two. You come here with no good purposes to any one, and we want no more of you. But you shall have your choice of three things:--You shall either get to your horse's back, and go away, swearing, as you believe in the blessed Virgin, never to set foot in this place again,--I don't think you dare break that oath,--or--"

"I will not!" replied Richard de Ashby, fiercely.

"Very well, then," said Hardy; "if that is the case, you shall stand out in the midst, cast away sword and dagger, betake you to a quarter-staff, and see whether, with the same arms, young Ralph Harland here will not thrash you like a sheaf of wheat."

"Fight a peasant with a quarter-staff!" cried Richard de Ashby. "I will not!"

"Well, then, the third may be less pleasant," said Hardy. "I have nothing else to offer, but that we all fall upon you and yours, and beat you till you remember Hendley-green as long as you call yourself a man."

"Murder us, if you will," said Richard de Ashby, doggedly; "but we will sell our lives dearly."

"I don't know that, worshipful sir," said the man with the purple nose; "we have no inclination to thrash more men than necessary, so all your servitors may take themselves off, if they like. Run, my men, run, if it so please you. But make haste, for my quarter-staff is itching to be about your master's ears!" And so saying, he made it whirl round in his hand like the sails of a mill.

One of the men needed no time to deliberate, but betook himself to his heels as fast as he could go. A second hesitated for a moment or two, and then saying, "It is no use contending with such odds," moved slowly

away. The third, however--Hardy's old adversary in the hostelry--placed himself by Richard de Ashby's side, saying, "I will stand by you, sir!" and added a word or two in a lower tone.

"Now, Much--and you, Tim-of-the-Mill," cried Hardy, "let us rush on them all at once, beat down their swords with your bucklers, and tie them tight. Then we will set the bagpipe before them, and flog them half way to Pontefract. Quick! quick! I see the priest coming, and he will be for peace-making."

The first step was hardly taken in advance, however, when the blast of a trumpet sounded upon the high road, and a dozen different cries from the villagers of----

"Hold off! hold off!"

"Forbear! Here comes the Sheriff!"

"Run for it, Master Hardy--they are the lords Greenly talked of!"

"Away--away, good yeomen!" all uttered at once, gave notice to the gentlemen in green that some formidable enemy was in the rear.

In a moment after, two or three gentlemen of distinguished port, riding slowly at the head of some fifty horsemen, came down the road upon the green; and Hardy, as he was called, seeing that the day was no longer his own, was passing across to join his companions on the other side, when Richard de Ashby cast himself in his way, and aimed a blow at him with his sword. The stout yeoman parried it easily with his staff, and struck his opponent on the chest with the sharp end of the pole, thus clearing a path by which he soon placed himself at the head of the foresters.

"Come with us, Harland," he cried, "you will be safer away."

Richard de Ashby, however, shouting aloud, and waving his hand to the party of gentlemen who were advancing, soon brought some of them to his side. "Stop them! stop them!" he cried, pointing to the men in green. "I have been grossly ill used, and well-nigh murdered!--Let your men go round, my lord, and cut them off."

A word, a sign, from an elderly man at the head of the party, instantly set some twenty of the horsemen into a gallop, to cut off the foresters from the road to the church. They, on their part, took the matter very calmly, however, unslinging their bows, bending them, and laying an arrow on the string of each, with a degree of deliberation which shewed that they were not unaccustomed to such encounters.

The villagers however, scattered like a flock of sheep at these intimations of an approaching fray; the girls and the women, screaming, and running, and tumbling down, took refuge in the neighbouring houses, or ran away up the road. The greater part of the men decamped more slowly, looking back from time to time to see what was going on; while some six or seven stout peasants and the yeomen stood gathered together under one of the trees, armed, in some instances, with swords and bows, and one or two displaying a quarter-staff, but all seeming very well disposed to take part in the fray, on one side or the other.

Things were in this state, and that hesitating pause had intervened which usually precedes the first blow in a strife of any kind, when the priest, who had been seen before to quit his house, now hurried forward to the group of gentlemen who, without dismounting from their horses, had gathered round Richard de Ashby. His errand was, of course, to preach peace and forbearance; and although his face was round and rosy, his body stout, and indicating strongly a life of ease and a fondness for good things, it is but justice to say, that he not only urged the necessity of quiet and tranquillity with eagerness and authority, but he rated Richard de Ashby boldly for his conduct in the village, and showed that ho knew a great deal more of his proceedings than was at all pleasant to that personage.

"Sir, you are one of those," he said, "who are ever ready to play the fool with a poor village coquette, who, if in riding through a place they see a poor girl proud of a neat ankle or a jimp waist, are ever ready to take advantage of her vanity to work her ruin; and if such men put themselves in danger, and get a broken head, they must take the consequences, without running on to bloodshed and murder."

The priest was still speaking; the yeomen were slowly retreating towards the church, without at all heeding the horsemen in their way; two or three elderly noblemen were listening attentively to the works of the good clergyman; and two young ones, a step behind, were holding themselves somewhat apart from each other, with no great appearance of friendship between them, when the one on the left hand of the group suddenly put the magnificent horse on which he was mounted into a quick canter, and rode straight towards the foresters.

At first, supposing his purpose to be hostile, they wheeled upon him, raising their bows at once, and each man drew his arrow to his ear; but seeing that he was not followed, they assumed a more pacific aspect; and, while one of the old lords whom he had left behind, called to him loudly, by the name of Hugh, to come back, he not only rode on, but, to the surprise of all, sprang from his horse and grasped young Harland warmly by the hand.

This proceeding for the time drew all eyes in that direction, and the end of the priest's speech was but little attended to; but, at his request, one of the gentlemen sent off a servant to the horsemen near the church, telling them not to act without orders.

In the meantime a brief conversation between the young nobleman and the franklin took place, after which, remounting his horse, the former came back to the group, and said, "May I venture a few words, my lords?"

"Of course, Lord Hugh will take part against me," exclaimed Richard de Ashby, "or old Earl Hubert's blood will not be in his veins!"

"Not so," replied the young gentleman; "all old feuds between our families have--thanks to God and the wisdom of those two noble Earls--been done away. No one more rejoices in the friendship which now exists between our houses than I do--none will more strenuously strive to preserve it. I came merely to tell that which I know and that which I have just heard. The young man I have been speaking with is as honest and true as any knight or noble in the world. He once rendered me a good service, and no one shall harm him; for that at least I pawn my name and knighthood. He tells me, however, that this worthy gentleman here, having taken a fancy to his promised bride, thinks fit to intrude on their May-day sports, and, stretching somewhat the privileges of a gentleman, makes love to the girl before his face. His endurance, it seems, does not reach that length, and he struck our friend Sir Richard, who fell upon him again, sword in hand, with his three servants, when these good foresters of Barnesdale interfered to see fair play."

"The whole is true, I doubt not," cried the priest, "for----"

"Look! look!" cried Richard de Ashby, fiercely; "while you listen to such gossip, they are making their escape! They are going into the priest's house, as I live!"

As he spoke, a loud voice from the other side of the green shouted, in a laughing tone, "For Richard de Ashby's bonnet!"

All eyes were instantly turned in that direction, where, at the door of the priest's house, two or three of the foresters were still to be seen, the rest of them having gone in one by one. In front of the group stood the man they called Hardy, and he repeated again, with a loud shout, "For Richard de Ashby's bonnet!"

As soon as he saw that he had attracted attention, he suddenly raised the bow he held in his hand, drew it to the full extent of his arm, and an arrow whistled through the air. Richard de Ashby had started slightly on one side as soon as he saw the archer take his aim, but the forester altered the direction of his arm, with a laugh, even as he loosed the shaft from the string, and the missile, with unerring truth, passed through the hood that it was intended for, and would have fallen beyond had it not been stopped by a jewel in the front. As it was, the arrow remained hanging amongst his black hair, and when he drew it forth, with a white cheek, and a somewhat trembling hand, he read imprinted in black letters, on the wood just below the feather, "Scathelock. Remember!"

The nobles handed the arrow one to another, read the name, and the word that followed it, and then gazed in each other's faces with a meaning look.

"Call back the horsemen," said one of the elder gentlemen. "These men are gone; and it is as well as it is."

CHAPTER V.

Such events as we have described in the last chapter were by no means uncommon in the fairs and merry-makings of England at the period of history in which our tale is laid. The sunshiny gaiety of the morning, in the April day of states and societies, is too often changed into sorrow and clouds ere night.

The sports were not resumed upon the village green; and all the amusements and occupations with which a May-day generally closed--the fresh dances by the moonlight, on the delights of which old Fitz Stephen so fondly dwells, the parting of the garlands, the gifts of flowers, the light song, and the gay tale amongst the young; with the merry jest, the wassail cup, and the game of chance amongst the elder, were all forgotten. The villagers and country people dispersed each to their several homes, and the inn, with such conveniences as it could afford, was given up to the nobles and their train. Arrangements were made for accommodating all the men of high degree with chambers, if not suitable to their rank, at least possessing some degree of comfort. Truckle beds were found for pages and squires, and straw was laid down for the yeomen, who were accustomed to lie across the doors of their masters' rooms. Much bustle and confusion was of course created by all these proceedings; horses had to be taken care of as well as men; and the voice of the good host was heard frequently shouting aloud for his daughter Kate, or grumbling low at her giddy idleness in being absent at such a moment as that.

"Ay, Master Greenly, Master Greenly!" said the tapster--"it is May-day evening, remember. Pretty Kate has twenty lads courting her by this time, if you could but see. I should not wonder if she and young Harland were kissing and making-up behind the church, at this moment."

"Not they," replied the host; "it will take her a fortnight to get over that matter. Kate's a silly girl, she could'nt do better for herself than young Harland. Why his father, old Ralph, is as rich as an abbey, and as hospitable as a county knight; his table is never without a pie or a pasty from ten in the morning till vespers, and there's ale for whoever chooses to draw it. I would sooner be a franklin in these days than a baron by half. Run out, Bessy, and see if you can find Kate anywhere."

In the meanwhile, after some conversation on the green at the door of the inn, the lords had taken possession of the little room of common reception, while their chambers were prepared for sleeping; and a cook,

who had been brought with the party, established himself in the kitchen, and, aided by his own particular assistant, or knave, as he called him, together with two women belonging to the household of John Greenly, was preparing a supper for his masters from all that he could lay hands on in the place, in addition to a large body of capons, young ducks, and pigeons, which, as well as spices and other rich condiments, had been brought thither on two sumpter horses. The scanty number of personages assembled in the little hall, indeed, did not justify the great profusion of good things which the cook was so busily concocting, but he very prudently considered that he himself was to be fed as well as the host, to whom, in case of civility and obedience, he made a point of extending his bounties, and that all the chief servants of the different gentlemen present, with his special favourites and friends in the retinue of his own master, would also expect to be regaled, at least as well as their several lords.

To that master and his companions, however--amounting, in the whole, to the number of ten personages--we must now turn; but it is only of four, out of the whole party, that we shall give any particular description, having already said enough of Richard de Ashby, and the five others being gentlemen, whose history, though mixed up in some degree with the fate of those we are most interested in, did not affect it so immediately as to require us to present a minute portrait of each to the eye of the reader.

The Earl of Ashby himself was a man considerably past the prime of life, and of what was then called a choleric temperament, which does not alone mean that he was hot in temper and disposition, but that he was constitutionally so. Age, indeed, had in some degree tamed his fiery blood; and a good deal of indulgence in the pleasures of the table, with no great distaste for good old wine of any country, had tended to enfeeble him more than even time had done.

He had still a great opinion of his own importance, however, and looked upon his skill in arms, wisdom in council, and judgment in matters of taste, as by no means inferior to the first in the land; and, to say the truth, when once upon his horse's back, and armed at all points, he would bide a blow, or lead a charge, with any man, although his knees bent somewhat under him when on foot, and he was glad enough to be freed from the weight of his armour as soon as possible. His judgment, too, was a sound one when not biassed by passion, though there was a certain degree of wavering unsteadiness in his character, proceeding more from temper than from weakness of mind, which rendered him an insecure ally in trying circumstances. He piqued himself much upon being just, too, but like many other people who do so, his justice had almost always a tinge of prejudice in it, and was in fact but a perception of specious arguments in favour of the side that he espoused.

His son, Alured de Ashby, resembled his father in many points; but many of his mother's qualities entered into his character likewise. The old Earl had married a foreigner, a sister of the King of Minorca--kingdoms being, in those days, very often but small things. Her dowry had been in proportion to her brother's territory; but to her husband she brought an accession of dignity, and increased his pride by her own. That pride was, perhaps, her only bad quality, for a strong and pertinacious determination of character, which she also possessed, was, of course, good or bad according to the direction in which it was guided. She, herself, being of a fine mind, and a high-spirited though tender heart, had employed the resolute firmness of which we speak to struggle against the misfortunes that beset her father and her brother during her early years, and to give them support and strength in resisting a torrent which seemed destined to sweep them away.

Her son, however, nurtured in prosperity, and pampered by praises and indulgence, possessed her pride in its full force, without the mitigating influence of her kindness and tenderness of heart; and, neither having so good a judgment, nor such high motives, as herself,

what was firmness in her became obstinacy in him--an obstinacy of a harsh and unpleasant kind. He was by no means without talents, indeed,--was as stout a man-at-arms as ever sat in the saddle, had a natural taste and genius for war, and had distinguished himself in many of the expeditions, or *chevauchées*, of the time. He was a high and honourable man, too, kept his word strictly, wronged no one but through pride, and was generous and liberal of his purse. Thus he was esteemed and respected more than liked, and was more popular with his inferiors than with his equals.

One knightly quality, it is true, he wanted. He cared little for love, there being only one person in the world, after his mother's death, for whom he ever felt anything like real tenderness. That person was his sister. She was nine years younger than himself; he had held her on his knee when she was an infant; she had been a plaything to him in her childhood, and an object of interest during her whole life. Perhaps the reason that he so loved her was, that she was the very reverse of himself in all respects: gentle, yet gay, and lively almost to wildness; tenderhearted, clinging, and affectionate, yet with a spice of saucy independence withal, which often set rules and regulations at defiance, and laughed at anger which she knew would fall but lightly on her head.

As we shall have to speak more of her hereafter, however, we will now turn to another of our group, and talk of the good Earl, whose trusty man, Blawket, we have already introduced to the reader's notice. Hugh, Lord of Monthermer, or Mo'thermer, as it was generally pronounced--and whom, as his name is not a very musical one, we shall more frequently call "the Earl"--was in the fifty-ninth or sixtieth year of his age; and--as he had seen many perils by land and sea, had been in wars against the heathen, both in Spain and Palestine, and had spent the greater part of his life in the tented field, and on the battle plain--his frame was somewhat worn and shaken, though he had once well merited the name which had been bestowed upon him in early years, when people, from the hardships which he endured unshrinkingly, had called

him *Iron Monthermer*. He was still strong and powerful, however--though gaunt and meagre; a brown tint of health was upon his face, and the light of clear and strong intelligence was in his eye. His features were aquiline, and somewhat harsh, his chin prominent, his brow strongly marked, and his forehead high and capacious, with his white hair lying lightly upon it, like snow upon a mountain. Notwithstanding several defects in point of beauty, and a sternness of outline in almost every feature, there was something uncommonly pleasing, as well as striking, in the whole expression of his countenance, and one read there kindness of heart, as well as firmness and decision of character. He was habited richly enough, but not gorgeously so; and, though not what was considered armed in those days, he carried more weapons, but of a different sort, about his person than is required for any modern trooper.

The fourth person, of whose appearance we shall now give some account, was the young man who had ridden forward to speak with Ralph Harland, Hugh de Monthermer by name, but commonly called by all who knew him, "The Lord Hugh." He was the only nephew of the Earl, and presumptive heir to his title and estates. At the same time, however, he was altogether independent of his uncle, being the son of that James de Monthermer, who was summoned to parliament in the first year of the reign of Henry the Third, as Baron Amesbury, having married the heiress of that ancient house. His father had long been dead; and as he had received his military education under his uncle, he still attached himself to that nobleman--respecting him as a parent, and treated by him as a son. He was some four or five years younger than Alured de Ashby, but had nevertheless gained considerable renown in arms, both under his uncle, and in service, which he had taken for a time with the King of Castile, in order to win his knightly spurs with honour. In person, he somewhat resembled the Earl, though he was taller, and his features were both softened by youth, and were smaller in themselves. His complexion was of a dark, warm brown, his hair short and curling, his hazel eyes full of light and fire, and a frank, but somewhat sarcastic smile, playing frequently about his well-cut lip. On

the whole, it is seldom that a handsomer face meets the eye, and his countenance well expressed the spirit within, which was gay and cheerful, but none the less thoughtful and imaginative. There might be a slight touch of satirical sharpness in his disposition, which often prompted a laugh or a jest at any of the many follies that an observing eye, in all ages, and all states of society, must meet at every turn. But a kind heart and a well regulated mind taught him to repress, rather than to encourage such a disposition, and it seldom broke forth unless the absurdity was very gross.

In those ages it was rare to find a man in his station who possessed even a very low degree of learning. To read and write was an accomplishment, and anything like elegance of composition, or a knowledge of classical lore, was hardly, if ever, dreamt of. In these respects, however, circumstances had given Hugh de Monthermer an advantage over many of his contemporaries. Various foreign languages he had acquired in following his uncle; and having been crushed and nearly killed, by his horse falling in one of the passes of the Taurus, he had been left for several months in a convent amongst the mountains, while broken bones were set, and health restored, by the skill of the monks. There, some of the friars, more learned than the rest, had taken a pleasure in solacing his weary hours, by communicating to him what was then considered a rich store of knowledge. With a quick and intelligent mind, he had thus gained, not only much information at the time, but a taste for reading, which in after years excited some envy, and called forth many a scoff from others, who had themselves no inclination for any exercises but those of the body.

Amongst these was Alured de Ashby, who affected to hold his military talents cheap, and called him a book-worm; but, nevertheless, Hugh de Monthermer quietly pursued his course, although, to say the truth, for reasons of his own, he was not a little anxious to gain the friendship of the house of Ashby, which during many years had been separated from his own by one of those fierce and bloody feuds that so

often existed in those days between the noble families of the land. The reconciliation of the two houses had been but lately effected, and could scarcely yet be called cordial, though the bond of party feeling brought them frequently into long and intimate communication with each other.

The dress of the young Lord was not so homely as that of his uncle; there might, indeed, be a little foppery in it; for though the colours were dark, yet the embroidery which appeared in every part was rich and costly, and the long and hanging sleeves of the loose coat he wore, was in itself one of the distinguishing marks of a petit maître of that day. Into the extreme, however, he did not go: there was no long and braided hair, there were no devils, and angels, and cupids, hanging over his head on a fanciful hood; but instead of that most ugly part of our ancient garments, he wore a cap or hat, a mode then common in Flanders and in Italy, with a long feather crossing from right to left, and nearly touching his shoulder. With the exception of the loose tunic, or gown, all the rest of his dress fitted as closely as possible, leaving nothing to embarrass the free action of his limbs, except, indeed, the long points of his shoes, which, though very moderate for that period, were certainly not less than twenty inches longer than necessary.

The rest of the party was composed of several noblemen, wealthy and powerful, but of less distinction than the two Earls we have mentioned, and evidently looking up to them as to their leaders; and besides these, was a distant cousin of the Earl of Monthermer, brought, as it were, to balance the presence of Richard de Ashby, though, to say the truth, if he more than outweighed that gentleman in wealth and respectability, he was very much his inferior in cunning and talents.

As a matter of course, the events which had just taken place upon the green formed the first subject of conversation with the personages assembled in the inn. The younger men only laughed over the occurrence. "You must get some fair lady to darn the hole in your hood, Richard," said the Lord Alured.

"I wonder," added another of the young noblemen, "that the arrow did not carry away one of those soft tresses."

"It might well have been called Scathelock, then," observed a third.

"It only disturbed a little of the perfume," rejoined Alured. The elder gentleman, however, treated the matter more seriously. The Earl of Ashby rated his kinsman with an angry brow for his licentiousness, and represented to him with great justice the evil of nobles bringing themselves into bad repute with the people.

"Do you not know," he said, "that at the present moment, between the king and his foreign minions on the one hand, and the people on the other, the English noblemen have to make their choice?--and, of course, it is by the people that we must stand. They are our support, and our strength, and we must avoid in all things giving them just cause of complaint. Scathelock?--Scathelock?--I have heard that name."

"You must have heard if often, my father," said Alured de Ashby. "It is the name of one of our good forest outlaws of Sherwood. I have seen the man twice in the neighbourhood of our own place, and though I did not mark this fellow with the arrow much, he has the same look and air."

"Seen him twice, and did not arrest him?" cried Richard de Ashby, with marked emphasis.

"Heaven forefend!" exclaimed Alured laughing. "What, arrest a good English yeoman, on account of a taste for the King's venison! If Harry would throw open his forests to us, and not give to proud Frenchmen and Spaniards rights that he denies to his English nobles, we might help him in such matters; but as it is, no free-forester shall ever be arrested by our people, or on our land."

The Earl of Monthermer and his nephew had both been silent, leaving the rebuke of Richard de Ashby to his own relations; for they well knew the jealousy of the nobles with whom they were leagued, and

were anxious to avoid every matter of offence. The poor kinsman, however, had established a right to sneer even at the proud Earl of Ashby and his no less haughty son, upon grounds which at first sight would seem to afford no basis for such a privilege. His poverty and partial dependence upon them had taught them to endure much at his hands which they would have borne from no other man on earth; and he, keen-sighted in taking advantage of the higher as well as the lower qualities of all those he had to do with, failed not to render their forbearance a matter of habit, by frequently trying it as far as he dared to venture.

"Forgive an old proverb, Alured," he replied, "but you know, it is said, that 'fowls of a feather flock together.' Perhaps, as you love forest thieves so well, you have no distaste for the King's venison yourself?"

"An unlucky proverb for you, Richard," said the young lord, while his father's cheek got somewhat red; "if what we have heard be true, the fowls you flock with are not quite those that suit our present purposes."

"What you have heard!" exclaimed Richard de Ashby, turning somewhat pale. "If you have heard aught against me," he added, after an instant's thought, turning at the same time towards Hugh de Monthermer, and bowing low, "I know to what noble hands I may trace it."

"You are mistaken, sir," said Hugh, sternly. "Respect for these two noble lords, your kinsmen, has made me eager that no charge should be brought against you by any of our people. Of this they are well aware."

"And they are aware also," added the Earl, "that both I and my nephew declared from the first that we believe you utterly innocent of all knowledge of the fact, even if it should prove to be true."

"What fact?" demanded Richard, in a low tone, and with a wandering eye, which did not produce a very favourable impression on the minds Of those who observed his countenance. "What fact, my lord?--but any

charge brought by a Monthermer, or one of a Monthermer's followers, against an Ashby; should be viewed with some slight caution, methinks."

"Certainly!" said Alured de Ashby, in a marked tone.

But to the surprise of both, the Earl of Monthermer added likewise, "Certainly!--Old feuds, even after they are happily laid at rest," he continued, calmly, "will leave rankling suspicions, especially in the minds of the low and the uneducated, and such I doubt not may be, in some degree at least, the origin of a charge to which I would not have listened for a moment, if it had not been that my good lord and friend here, who was present when it was made this morning, insisted that it should be inquired into.--The charge is this, sir, that you have with you, disguised as one of your servants, a spy of the King's. This accusation was brought by my good yeoman, Blawket, who vows he saw that man with you when I sent him to meet you and others here but a few days ago.--Sir, you seem agitated, and I know that such a charge must necessarily affect any gentleman deeply; but my Lord of Ashby here present is well aware that, from the first, I declared my conviction of your innocence of all share in the transaction."

"I assure you, my lord,--on my honour, gentlemen believe me," cried Richard de Ashby, hesitating, "it is not true--the man is a liar!"

"No, Sir Richard, no," said Hugh de Monthermer at once, "the man is no liar, but as honest a yeoman as ever lived. You may have been deceived, Sir Richard," he added, with a slight smile curling his lip; "we are all of us subject to be deceived, occasionally. Blawket may have been deceived, too; but that I should say may soon be proved, for he declares that the leopards of Henry of Winchester will be found upon the breast of your servant, Richard Keen."

"Fool!" muttered Richard de Ashby to himself, but at the same moment his kinsman, the Earl, exclaimed, "Let him be sent for--let him be sent for!"

"I will call him immediately," said Richard de Ashby, turning towards the door; "but I declare, so help me Heaven! if this man have ever been in the King's service, it is more than I know."

"Stay, stay, Richard!" exclaimed the Lord Alured. "Let some one else go and call him, and let no word be said to him of the matter in hand."

"Do you doubt me, my lord?" demanded his kinsman, turning upon him with a frowning brow. "If I am to have no support from my own relations----"

"An honest man needs no support, sir, but his own honesty," said Lord Alured, interrupting him. "Not that I doubt thee, Richard," he continued; "but I would fain have thee tell me how that fellow came into thy service, while some one else calls him hither. Sir Charles Le Moore, I pr'ythee bid them send hither this Richard Keen. Now, good cousin, tell us how this man came to thee, for he is not one of our own people born, that is evident. Richard Keen! I never heard the name."

"How he came to me, matters not much to the question," replied Richard de Ashby. "I hired him in London. I was told he was a serviceable knave, had been in France and Almaine, and--but here comes Sir Charles Le Moore. Have you not found him?"--and as he spoke he fixed his eyes eagerly, but with a dark smile, upon the face of the gentleman who entered, as if some anticipations of triumph had crossed his mind.

"The people have gone to seek him," said Sir Charles; "he is somewhere about the green, and it is growing dark; so I let them go, as I know not the place."

A moment or two elapsed, but before the conversation could be generally renewed, one of the attendants of the Earl of Ashby appeared at the door, bringing intelligence that Richard Keen was nowhere to be found, and that his horse and saddle-bags had disappeared also.

The kinsman of the Earl of Ashby affected to be furious at the news--"The villain has robbed me of the horse," he said, "and, doubtless, of other things also. My lord," he continued, tuning to the Earl of Monthermer, "I beg your pardon; doubtless your servant was right, and this man has fled, having obtained same intimation of the charge against him. Did any of you see him go?" he added, addressing the servant who had appeared.

"No, sir," replied the yeoman. "We were all upon the green, for it must have been, while these noble lords were talking with you, before they came in, that he went away. The host saw him go toward the stable, just before the arrow was shot that stuck in your hood."

Richard de Ashby frowned, for the man's tone was certainly not the most respectful. But before any observation could be made, a noise and bustle was heard without, which suspended the reply upon the lips of the Earl's kinsman; and the next moment, the landlord himself, with his full round face on fire with anger and grief, pushed his way into the room, exclaiming--"Noble lords and gentlemen, I claim justice and help. They have taken away my daughter from me--they have corrupted and carried off my poor Kate.--You, sir, you are at the bottom of this!" he continued, turning furiously to Richard de Ashby. "I have seen your whisperings and your talkings!--My good lords and gentlemen, I claim justice and assistance."

"How now!" cried Richard de Ashby, in as fierce a tone as his own, but not quite so natural a one. "Dare you say that I have anything to do with this? Your light-o'-love daughter has made mischief enough to-night already. Let us hear no more of her. Doubtless you will find her in some cottage, if not in the woods, with her lover, trying to make up by courtesies for her fickle conduct of this morning."

"No, sir--no, no, no!" replied the host, vehemently; "she is in neither of those places! She was seen, some half an hour ago, going out at the end of the village with your servant beside her; and a boy says that he

found a black mare tied to a tree not a quarter of a mile along the road. Gentlemen, I pray you do me right, and suffer not my child to be taken from me in this way by any one, be he gentle or simple."

"Was your daughter going willingly!" demanded the Earl of Ashby.

"I know not, sir--I know not!" cried the host, wringing his hands; "all I know is, they have taken her, and I am sure this is the man who has caused it to be done."

"I know nothing of her, fellow!" replied Richard de Ashby. "You must hold your daughter's beauty very high to suppose that I would take the trouble of having her carried off."

"Why, Richard, you are not scrupulous," said his cousin.

"London and Winchester," cried another gentleman, with a laugh, "are indebted to him for many a fair importation, I believe."

"His taste lies amongst country wenches," added a third. And notwithstanding the misery of the injured father, a great deal of merriment and jesting was the first effect produced by the complaint of the host.

"If this tale be true," said Hugh de Monthermer, who had been looking down with a frowning brow, "I would strongly advise Sir Richard de Ashby to mount his horse, put his spurs to the flanks, and not draw a rein till he is safe in Nottingham. There be people about this neighbourhood who are likely to render such a course expedient."

"I shall do no such thing, sir," replied Richard de Ashby; "this good man's suspicions are false as far as they regard me, though it is not at all improbable that the knave, Keen, who has, it seems, deceived me--and is a good-looking varlet, moreover has played the fool with a buxom light-headed country wench, whose cheek I may once or twice have pinched for lack of something better to do."

"Such being the case, my Lord of Ashby," said the Earl, drily, "as your kinsman has nought to do with the affair, and as this servant of his has cheated and robbed him, injured this good man, and is suspected of being a spy--by your leave, I will send some of my people after him without farther delay. Without there! Is Blawket to be found?"

"Here, my lord," replied the man, standing forward as upright as a lance and as stiff as a collar of brawn, from amidst a group of six or seven servants, who were all discussing as vehemently on the one side of the door the events which had just taken place as their masters were on the other.

"Mount in a minute," said the Earl of Monthermer. "Take with you three of your fellows whose horses are the freshest; follow this Richard Keen, from the best information you call get, and bring him hither with all speed, together with the girl he has carried off."

"Shall I beat him, my lord?" asked the yeoman.

"Not unless he resists," replied the Earl; "but bring him dead or alive, and use all means to get information of his road."

"I will bring him, my lord," replied Blawket, and retired, followed by the host, who ceased not, till the man was in the saddle, to give him hints as to finding his daughter, mingled with lamentations over fate and praises of the house of Monthermer.

"Now," said the Earl, when they were alone, "let us speak of more important things;" but it being announced that supper was well-nigh ready, the Earl of Ashby, who had an affection for the good things of this life, proposed that any farther conversation should be put off till after that meal. The other Earl, knowing that his placability depended much upon the condition of his stomach, agreed to the suggestion; and after the ceremony of washing hands had been performed, the supper was served and passed over as such proceedings usually did in those days, with huge feeding on the part of several present, and much jesting on the

part of the younger men. A good deal of wine was also drank, notwithstanding a caution from the Earl of Monthermer to be moderate. But moderation was little known at that time. Malvoisie was added to Bordeaux, and the spiced wine, then called claret, succeeded the Malvoisie; a cup of hippocras was handed round to sweeten the claret, and the Earl of Ashby fell asleep at the very moment the conference should have begun.

CHAPTER VI.

I cannot help grieving that amongst all the changes which have taken place,--amongst all the worlds, if I may so call them, which have come and gone in the lapse of time, the forest world should have altogether departed, leaving scarcely greater or more numerous vestiges of its existence than those that remain of the earth before the Flood. The green and bowery glades of the old forest, their pleasant places of sport and exercise, the haunts of the wild deer, the wolf, and the boar, the fairy-like dingles and dells, the woodcraft that they witnessed, the sciences, and the characters that were peculiar to themselves, have now, alas! passed away from most of the countries of Europe, and have left scarcely a glen where the wild stag can find shelter, or where the contemplative man can pause under the shade of old primeval trees, to reflect upon the past or speculate upon the future. The antlered monarch of the wood is now reduced to a domestic beast, in a walled park; and the man of thought, however much he may love nature's unadorned face, however much he may feel himself cribbed and confined amongst the works of human hands, must shut his prisoner fancies within the bounds of his own

solitary chamber, unless he is fond to indulge them by the side of the grand but monotonous ocean. The infinite variety of the forest is no longer his: it belongs to another age, and to another class of beings.

In the times I write of, it was not so, and the greater part of every country in Europe was covered with rich and ancient wood; but, perhaps, no forest contained more to interest or to excite than that of merry Sherwood--comprising within itself, as the reader knows, a vast extent of very varied country, sweeping round villages, and even cities, and containing, in its involutions, many a hamlet, the inhabitants of which derived their sustenance from the produce of the forest ground.

The aspect of the wood itself was as different in different places as it is possible to conceive. In some spots the trees were far apart, with a wide expanse of open ground, covered by low brushwood, or the shall shrub bearing the bilberry; in others, you came to a wide extent, covered with nothing but high fern and old scrubbed hawthorn trees; but throughout a great part of the forest the sun seldom if ever penetrated, during the summer months, to the paths beneath, so thick was the canopy of green leaves above, while those paths themselves were generally so narrow that in many of them two men could not walk abreast.

There were other and wider ways, indeed, through the wood, some of them cart roads, for the accommodation of woodmen and carriers, some of them highways from one neighbouring town to another: but the latter were not very numerous or very much frequented--many a tale being told of travellers lightened of their baggage, in passing through Sherwood; and, to speak the truth, no one could very well say, at that time, who and what were the dwellers in the forest, or their profession; so that those who loved not strange company, kept to the more open country if they could.

Nevertheless, it was a beautiful ride across almost any part of the woodland, offering magnificent changes of scene at every step, and the people of those times were not so incapable of enjoying it as has been generally supposed; but still, with all the tales of outlaws and robbers which were then afloat, it required a stout determination, or a case of great necessity, to impel any of the citizens of the neighbouring towns to make a trip across the forest in the spring or autumn of the year. Those who did so, usually came back with some story to tell, and some, indeed, brought home stripes upon their shoulders and empty bags. The latter, however, were almost always of particular classes. Rich monks and jovial friars occasionally fared ill; the petty tyrants of the neighbouring shire ran a great risk, if they trusted themselves far under the green leaf; the wealthy and ostentatious merchant might sometimes return rather lighter than he went; but the peasant, the honest franklin, the village curate, the young, and women of all degrees, had generally very little to relate, except that they had seen a forester here, or a forester there, who gave them a civil word, and bade God speed them, or who aided them, in any case of need, with skilful hands and a right good will.

Thus there was evidently a strong degree of favouritism shown in the dealings of the habitual dwellers in the greenwood with the various classes of travellers who passed through on business or on pleasure. But, nevertheless, it was the few who complained, and the many who lauded, so that the reputation of the merry men of Sherwood was high amongst all the inferior orders of society at the time when this tale begins.

So much was necessary to be said, to give the reader any idea of the scene into the midst of which we must now plunge, leaving Barnsdale behind us, and quitting Yorkshire for Nottingham.

It was about two o'clock, on the second of May, then, that a party of horsemen reached a spot in the midst of Sherwood, where the road--after having passed for nearly two miles through a dense part of the wood, which the eye could not penetrate above fifteen or twenty yards on either side--ran down a slight sandy descent, and entered upon a more

open scene, where the trees had been cleared away not many years before, and where some two hundred acres of ground appeared covered with scattered brushwood and bilberry bushes, sloping down the side of a wide hill, at the bottom of which the thick wood began again, extending in undulating lines for many a mile beneath the eye of the traveller.

The number of the journeyers was five; and they pulled in the rein to let their horses drink at a clear stream which crossed the road, and bubbling onward, was soon lost amongst the bushes beyond. Four of them were dressed as yeomen attached to some noble house; for although liveries, according to the modern acceptation of the word, were then unknown, and the term itself applied to quite a different thing, yet the habit was already coming in, of fixing a particular badge or cognizance upon all the followers or retainers of great noblemen, as well as of kings, whereby they might know each other in any of the frequent affrays which took place in those times. Sometimes it was fixed upon the breast, sometimes upon the back, sometimes upon the arm, where it appeared in the present instance. Each of the yeomen had a sword and buckler, a dagger on the right side, and a bow and a sheaf of arrows on the shoulders; and all were strong men and tall, with the Anglo-Saxon blood shining out in the complexion.

The fourth personage was no other than Ralph Harland, the stout young franklin, of whom we have already spoken. He, too, was well armed with sword and buckler, though he bore no bow. Besides the usual dagger, however, he wore, hanging by a green cord from his neck, a long, crooked, sharp-pointed knife, called in those days an anelace, which was, I believe, peculiar to the commons of England and Flanders, and which was often fatally employed in the field of battle in stabbing the heavy horses of the knights and men-at-arms.

The horses of this party were evidently tired with a long, hot ride, and the horsemen stopped, as I have said, to let their beasts drink in the stream before they proceeded onward. As they pulled up, a fat doe

started from the brushwood about thirty yards distant, and bounded away towards the thicker parts of the forest, and at the same moment a loud, clear, mellow voice, exclaimed--"So, ho, madam! nobody will hurt you in the month of May! Give you good day, sirs!--whither are ye going?"

The eyes of all but young Harland had been following the deer, and his had been bent, with a look of sad and stern abstraction, upon the stream, but every one turned immediately as the words were uttered; and there before them on the road, stood the speaker. How he came there, however, no one could tell, for the moment before, the highway was clear for a quarter of a mile, and there seemed no bush or tree in the immediate neighbourhood sufficiently large to conceal a full grown man.

The personage who accosted them was certainly full-grown, and very well grown, too. He was in height about five feet eleven, but not what could be called large in the bone; at least, the proportion of the full and swelling muscle that clothed his limbs made the bone seem small. His foot, too, was less than might have been expected from his height; and though his hand was strong and sinewy, the shape was good, and the fingers were long. His breadth over the chest was very great; but he was thin in the flank, and small in the waist; and when his arm hung loosely by his side, the tip of his middle finger reached nearly to his knee. His countenance was a very fine one; the forehead high and broad, but with the brow somewhat prominent above the eyes, giving a keen and eagle-like look to a face in every other respect frank and gentle. His well rounded chin, covered with a short curling beard, of a light brown hue, was rather prominent than otherwise, but all the features were small and in good proportion; and the clear blue eye, with its dark-black eyelashes, and the arching turn of the lip and mouth, gave a merry expression to the whole, rather reckless, perhaps, but open and free, and pleasant to the beholder.

In dress he was very much like the foresters whom we have before described; he wore upon his head a little velvet cap, with a gold button in the front, and a bunch of woodcock's feathers therein. He had also an image, either in gold or silver gilt, of St. Hubert on horseback, on the front of the cross-belt in which his sword was hung. The close-fitting coat of Lincoln green, the tight hose of the same, the boots of untanned leather, disfigured by no long points, the sheaf of arrows, the bow, the sword, and bracer, were all there; and, moreover, by his side hung a pouch of crimson cloth called the gipciere, and, resting upon it, a hunting horn, tipped with silver. As the fashion of those days went, his apparel was certainly not rich, but still it was becoming, and had an air of distinction which would have marked him out amongst men more splendidly habited than himself.

Such was the person who stood before the travellers when they looked round, but taken by surprise, none of the party spoke in answer to his question.

"What!" he said, again, with a smile, "as silent as if I had caught you loosing your bow against the king's deer in the month of May? I beseech you, fair gentlemen, tell me who you are that ride merry Sherwood at noon, for I cannot suffer you to go on till I know."

"Cannot suffer us to go on?" cried Blawket. "You are a bold man to say so to five."

"I am a bold man," replied the forester, "as bold as Robin Rood; and I tell you again, good yeomen, that I must know."

What might have been Blawket's reply, who shall say? for--as we have before told the reader--he had some idea of his own consequence, and no slight reliance on his own vigour; but Ralph Harland interposed, exclaiming, "Stay, stay, Blawket, this must be the man we look for to give us aid. I have seen his face before, I am well-nigh sure. Let me speak with him."

"Ay, ay, they show themselves in all sorts of forms," answered his companion, while Harland dismounted and approached the stranger. "One of them took me in as a ploughman, and now we have them in another shape."

In the meanwhile, Harland had approached the forester, and had put into his hand a small strip of parchment, in shape and appearance very much like the ticket of a trunk in modern days. It was covered on one side with writing in a large, good hand, but yet it would have puzzled the wit of the best decipherer of those or of our own times to make out what it meant, without a key. It ran as follows:--

"Scathelock, number one, five, seven, to the man of Sherwood." Then came the figure of an arrow, and then the words, "A friend, as by word of mouth. Help, help, help!"

This was all, but it seemed perfectly satisfactory to the eye that rested upon it, for he instantly crushed the parchment in his hand, saying, "I thought so!--Go on for half a mile," he continued; "follow the man that you will find at the corner of the first path. Say nothing to him, but stop where he stops, and take the bits out of your horses' mouths, for they must feed ere they go on. Away!" he added; "away! and lose no time."

Ralph Harland sprang upon his horse's back again, and rode on with the rest, while the forester took a narrow path across the brushwood, which led to the thicker wood above. They soon lost sight of him, however, as they themselves rode on; but when they had gone nearly half a mile, they heard the sound of a horn in the direction which he had taken.

A moment or two after, they came to a path leading to the right, and looking down it, saw a personage, dressed in the habit of a miller's man, leaning upon a stout staff in the midst of the narrow road. The instant he beheld them he turned away, and walked slowly onward, without

turning to see whether they noticed or not. Harland led the way after him, however, for the path would not admit two abreast, and the rest followed at a walk.

They thus proceeded for somewhat more than a mile, taking several turns, and passing the end of more than one path, each so like the other, that the eye must have been well practised in woodcraft which could retrace the way back to the high road again. At length they came to a little square cut in the wood, about the eighth part of an acre in extent, at the further corner of which was a hut built in the simplest manner, with posts driven into the ground, and thatched over, while the interstices were filled with flat layers of earth, a square hole being left open for a window, and one somewhat longer appearing for the door.

Here their guide paused, and turning round, looked them over from head to foot without saying a word.

"Ha! miller, is this your mill?" said Blawket, as they rode up.

"Yes," answered the stranger, in a rough tone, shaking his staff at the yeoman; "and this is my mill-wheel, which shall grind the bran out of any one who asks me saucy questions."

"On my life, I should like to try!" cried Blawket, jumping down from his horse.

"Hush--hush!" cried Harland; "you know we were told not to speak to him."

"And a good warning, too," said the other. "You will soon have somebody to speak to, and then pray speak to the purpose."

"Ah! Madge she was a merry maid,
A merry maid, with a round black eye;
And everything Jobson to her said,
The saucy jade she ask'd him, 'Why?'

"'I'll deck thee out in kirtles fine,
If you'll be mine,' he said, one day;
'I'll give you gold, if you'll be mine.'
But 'Why?' was all the maid would say.

"'I love you well, indeed I do,'
The youth he answered, with a sigh;
'To you I ever will be true.'
The saucy girl still ask'd him, 'Why!'

"But one day, near the church, he said,
'The ring is here--the priest is nigh,
Come, let us in, Madge, and be wed;'
But then she no more ask'd him, 'Why?'"

So sung the miller, with an easy, careless, saucy air, leaning his back against the turf wall of the hut, and twirling his staff round between his finger and thumb, as if prepared to tell the clock upon the head of any one who approached too near.

There was no time for any farther questions, however: for he had scarcely finished the last stave, when the forester whom they had first met appeared from behind the hut, with a brow that looked not quite so free and gay as when the travellers had last seen him. "Come--come, master miller," he said, "you should have to do with corn. Get some oats for these good men's horses, for they must speed back again as fast as they came."

"They will find oats enough in the hut, Robin," replied the other; "but I will do your bidding however, though I be a refractory cur."

Almost at the same moment that the above reply was made, the young franklin was speaking likewise.

"Go back again faster than we came?" he said. "I shall not feel disposed to do that, unless----"

"Unless I show you good cause," interrupted the forester. "But I am not going to do that. You shall stay with me for a while: these men may go back again, for we do not want them. Let them return by Mansfield; that is their only chance of finding those they seek. The Southwell and the Winborn side I will answer for. You know me, Harland, I think; and if you do, you know that my word is not in vain."

"I believe I do know you," replied Ralph Harland; "and I will trust you, at all events. But why should I stay, and not go with them, if there is a chance of finding the people that we want on the Mansfield road?"

"Because the chance is but a small one," replied the forester, "and because there is something for you to do here, which, I fear me, is better for you now than anything that can be done for you elsewhere.--Quick! slit open the bag with your knife, careless miller, and let the horses feed out of it on the ground. I want the men to get back quick. Hark ye, yeoman! Is your name Blawket?"

"The same, Master Forester," replied the yeoman. "What of me?"

"Why, this," answered the other. "I have heard of you from Scathelock, and know you are a faithful fellow. You must return to my good lord, your master, for me. Tell him that I will meet him between Bloodworth and Nurstead, the day after to-morrow, by three in the afternoon. Let him bring his whole company with him, for I have tidings to give which it imports them much to hear."

"Find some other messenger, good forester," replied the yeoman. "My lord sent me to seek for Richard Keen and Kate Greenly, and bade me not come back without having found them."

"Pshaw!" said the forester, "did I not tell you you would find them on the road to Mansfield, if at all? If they be not there, they have given you the slip, and are in Nottingham by this time. Away with you, Master Blawket, without more words! Give the man a cup of wine, miller; his stomach is sour with long fasting."

"I know not," murmured Blawket, hesitating still, but feeling an authority in the forester's speech, under which his own self-confidence quailed. "But who shall I say to my lord sent me back with this message? I must give him some name, good forester."

"Well, tell him," replied the person he addressed, with a smile upon his countenance, "that it is Robert of the Lees by Ely, sent you."

"Tell him Robin Hood!" cried the miller, with a loud laugh.

"Do as I bid you," rejoined the forester. "Say Robert of the Lees: by that name will he know me, from passages in other days; and hark!" he continued--"be sure the Earl of Ashby comes with him, and utter not one word of what that foolish miller just now said."

"I understand--I understand!" cried Blawket, with a much altered manner--"I will do your bidding, Master Robin of the Lees; but this horse eats so wondrous slow."

"He will soon be done," said the forester. "Give him the wine, miller. We have no cups here; take it from the stoup good Blawket, and hand it to your comrades."

A large tankard of wine which had been brought from the hut went round, and then a minute or two passed in silence while the horses finished their corn. When it was done, the four yeomen mounted, and at a word from the forester, the miller led the way before them at a quicker pace, leaving his leader behind with the young franklin.

When they were gone, the forester took a turn backwards and forwards before the hut, without speaking; then pausing, he grasped Harland's. hand, saying, in a tone of stern feeling--"Come, Harland, be a man!"

"You have bad tidings?" asked the young franklin, gazing with painful earnestness in his face. "Tell me, quickly!--the worst blow is past. They are not on the road to Mansfield?"

"There is scarcely a chance!" said Robert of the Lees; "I believe they passed some two hours since, and----"

"And what?" demanded Ralph, in a low, but eager tone. "And Richard of Ashby is at Nottingham, waiting for them."

Ralph Harland cast himself down upon the ground, and hid his eyes upon his hands; while the stout forester stood by, gazing upon him with a look of deep sadness and commiseration, and repeating three times the words, "Poor fellow!"

"Oh, you cannot tell--you cannot tell!" cried Ralph Harland, starting up, and wringing his hand hard; "you cannot tell what it is to have loved as I have loved--to have trusted as I have trusted, and to find that she in whom my whole hopes rested, she whom I believed to be as pure as the first fallen snow, is but a wanton harlot after all. To quit her father's house, voluntarily--to fly with a base stranger--the promised bride of an honest man--to make herself the leman of a knave like that! Oh, it is bitter--bitter--bitter! Worse than the blackest misfortune with which fate can plague me that I can never think of her again but as the paramour of Richard de Ashby! Would I had died first--died, believing that she was good and true!"

"It is a hard case," said the forester, "and I grieve for you deeply; but there is a harder case still than it,--that of her father, I mean. To you, she can be nothing more--she has severed the tie that bound you together; but she is still his daughter, and nothing can cut that bond asunder,

though fallen and dishonoured.--It were well if we could separate her from her seducer, Ralph, and give her back to her father's care. This is all, I fear, that now remains for us to do.--Had I known this two hours earlier," he continued, "the nose and ears of Richard de Ashby would by this time have been nailed to the post where the four roads meet; but the runner Scathelock sent me last night, fell lame on the other side of the abbey, and I did not get the news till about an hour before you came. The scoundrel, in the meanwhile, skirted the forest by Southwell at ten o'clock this morning, so that it is all too late. The time of punishment for his crimes, however, will come: we need not doubt that; but the time for preventing this one, I fear, is past."

"But how--but how can we punish him?" cried Ralph Harland, eagerly; "if he be in Nottingham town, how can we reach him there? How can we even make him give up the wretched girl, and send her back to her father!"

"We cannot do it ourselves," replied the forester, "but we can make others do it. Did you not hear the message I sent to the good old Lord of Monthermer?"

Ralph Harland bent down his eyes with a look of bitter disappointment. "If that be your only hope, it is all in vain," he said; "the Monthermer is linked to the Earl of Ashby by a common cause; and in the great movements of people such as these, the feelings, and even the rights of us lesser men are never heeded. The old Earl, good as he is, will not quarrel with Richard de Ashby for John Greenly's daughter, lest it breed a feud between him and the other Lord. There is but cold hope to be found there."

His companion heard him to an end, but with a faint smile upon his countenance. "I asked the Earl of Ashby, too," he said; "perhaps we may do something more with him."

Ralph Harland shook his head. "Not till you have got his neck under your baldrick," he said.

"Perhaps I may have by that time," replied the forester; "I mean," he continued, in a serious tone, "that I may by that time have a hold upon him which will make him use his power to send back this light-o'-love girl to her father's house. I know old John Greenly well, and grieve for him. Once I found shelter with him when I was under the ban of a tyrant, and no one else would give me refuge.--I never forget such things. He is somewhat worldly, it is true; but what host is not? It is a part of their trade; they draw their ale and affection for every guest that comes, the one as readily as another, so that he pay his score. But still the man has not a bad heart, and it will be well-nigh broken by his daughter's shame."

"She has broken mine," said Ralph Harland.

"Nay--nay!" replied his companion; "you must think better of all this. You loved her--she has proved false. Forget her--seek another. You will find many as fair."

"Ay," replied Harland, "I shall find many as fair, perhaps fairer; but I shall find none that had my first love--none with whom all the thoughts of my early years were in common--none with whom I have wandered about the fields in boyhood, and gathered spring flowers for our May-day games--none with whom I have listened to the singing of the birds when my own heart was as light and tuneful as theirs--none for whom I have felt all those things which I cannot describe, which are like the dawning of love's morning, and which I am sure can never be felt twice over. No--no! those times are past; and I must think of such things no more!"

"It is all true," said Robert of the Lees, "but the same, good youth, is the case with every earthly joy; each day has its pleasure, each year of our life has things of its own. As the spring brings the fruit, and the autumn brings the corn, so every period of man's existence has its

apportioned good and evil. I have ever found it so, from infancy till this day, now eight-and-thirty years, and you will find it likewise. You will love another--differently, but as well; with less tenderness, but more trust; with less passion, but with more esteem; and you will be happier with her than you would have been with this idle one; for passion dies soon, killing itself with its own food; esteem lives, and strengthens by its own power. Shake not thy head, Ralph. I know it is vain to talk to thee as yet, for sorrow and disappointment blind a man's eyes to the future, and he will look at nothing but the past."

"But of the Earl of Ashby," said young Harland, little cheered, to say the truth, by his companion's reasoning; "how can you get such a hold of him as will make him constrain his own kinsman to give up his paramour?--Alas! that I should call her so!"

"Take your bridle over your arm," replied the forester; "come with me, and I will tell you more. You want rest, and food, and reflection; but nothing can be done before to-morrow, so we shall have plenty of time to discuss the means, and to arrange the plan."

CHAPTER VII.

Upon the edge of the merry forest-land, on the side nearest to Derbyshire, not far from the little river Lind, and surrounded at that time by woods which joined the district on to Sherwood itself, there rose, in the days I speak of, a Norman castle of considerable extent. It had been built in the time of William Rufus--had been twice attacked in the turbulent reign of Stephen--had been partly dismantled by order of

Henry II.--and had been restored under the dominion of the weak tyrant John. Being not far from Nottingham, it was frequently visited by noble and royal personages, and was often the scene of the splendid and ostentatious hospitality of the old baronage of England.

It has now crumbled down, indeed, and departed; the ploughshare has passed over most of its walls, and the voice of song and merriment is heard in it no more. The lower part of one of the square flanking-towers in the outer wall is all that remains of the once magnificent castle of Lindwell; and a dingly copse, where many a whirring pheasant rises before the sportsman, now covers the hall and the lady's bower.

In the days of which I speak, however, it was in its greatest splendour, having come into the possession of the Earl of Ashby by his father's marriage, and being the favourite dwelling of the race. It was situated upon a gentle eminence, and the great gate commanded a view over some sixty or seventy acres of meadow land, lying between the castle and the nearest point of the wood; and for the distance of nearly three miles on the Sherwood side, though there was no cultivated land--except, indeed, a few detached fields here and there--the ground assumed more the aspect of a wild chase than a forest, with the thick trees grouping together to the extent of an acre or two, and then leaving wide spaces between, as pasture for the deer and other wild animals, only broken by bushes and hawthorns.

This district was properly within the limits of Sherwood; but, as all persons know, who are acquainted with the forest laws, certain individuals frequently possessed private woods in the royal forest, which was the case of the Earl of Ashby in his manor of Lindwell; and, whether or not he had originally any legal right of chase therein, such a privilege had been secured to the manor in the reign of John, by the king's special grant and permission. His rights of vert and venison, then, as they were called, extended over a wide distance around, and it was reported that

some disputes had arisen between himself and his sovereign, whether he had not extended the exercise of those rights somewhat beyond their legitimate bounds.

In the same merry month of May, however, of which we have just been writing, and but one day after the occurrences took place which have just occupied our attention, a gay party issued forth from the gates of the castle, and took its way in the direction of Nottingham. We have called it gay, and it was so altogether: gay in colouring, gay in movement, gay in feeling. At the head of it appeared three light-hearted young women, a lady and her two maids, all about the same age, and none of them having as yet numbered twenty years. Their clothing, was rich and glittering; and they were followed by a page, possessing all the requisite qualities for his office in saucy boldness and light self-confidence. Three or four yeomen came next, who, having been left behind while their lord went with numerous attendants upon a distant progress, had necessarily had all the love and the merriment of the lower hall to themselves. The horses which bore the whole party were fresh, proud, and spirited; and never, perhaps, was more brightness of appearance and heart embodied in one group than in that which took its way down from the castle gate and through the meadows below; but we must pause, for a moment upon the fair leader of the cavalcade, for she is worth a short description.

The Earl's daughter, Lucy de Ashby, wanted yet a few months of that period when girlhood may be said to end and womanhood begin; where the teens--which are so longingly looked for by the child--come to their end, and the third ten of the allotted seven begins. Oh, how long do the five tens that are to follow appear, when viewed from the brow of the hill of youth! And yet the two that are gone contain the brightest and the sweetest part of our apportioned time.

Lucy looked not older than her years, for she was small and delicately formed; but yet there was the fulness of womanhood in every line. Her face had not much colour, and yet it was not pale, but the whole hue was warm and healthy, and fairer than that of the southern nations

of Europe, though still evidently the complexion of what is now called a brunette. The brow, the nose, the lips, the chin, were all beautifully cut; though the model was not Greek, for the forehead was wider and higher, and there was a slight, a very slight wave in the line between the brow and the nose. The eyebrows were dark, small, and long, slightly depressed in the middle over the eye, but by no means either arched or strongly defined, according to the eastern notions of beauty, but, on the contrary, shaded softly off, so as only to show a definite line to beholders when at a little distance. The eyes beneath them were large and long, but with the deep black eyelashes, which she had derived from her mother, shading them so completely, that the sparkling of the dark iris was only clearly seen when she looked up.

That, however, was often the case; for in her gay liveliness, when she had said some little thing to tease or to surprise, she would still raise the "fringed curtain" of her eye to mark the effect it produced, and to have her smile at anything like astonishment that appeared upon the countenance of those who heard her.

The lip, too, was full of playfulness; for, indeed, sorrow had but sat there once, and tears were very unfrequent in those dark, bright eyes. There had been people seen, perhaps, more beautiful in mere feature, but few more beautiful in expression, and certainly none ever more captivating in grace of movement and in variety of countenance. Her dress was full of gay and shining colours, but yet so well assorted, so harmonious in their contrast, that the effect could not be called gaudy.

The same was not the case with her two women, who, with the pleasant familiarity of those times, were chattering lightly to their mistress as they rode along, upon the ordinary subject of women's thoughts in all ages--alas! I mean dress. There was, on the contrary, a good deal of gaudiness about their apparel, and their taste did not appear to be of the most refined kind.

"Nay, dear lady," said one of them, "I would have put on the robe of arms when I was going to Nottingham to wait for my father. It does look so magnificent, with the escutcheon of pretence for Minorca just on your breast, the silver field on one side, and the azure field on the other, and the beautiful wyverns all in gold."

"I cannot bear it, silly girl," replied the lady; "to hear you talk about wearing the fields, one would suppose that I was a piece of arable land; and as to coats of arms, Judith, I like not this new custom; women have nothing to do with coats of arms. I put it on once to please my brother, but I will never wear it again, so he may cut the skirt off and use it himself next time he goes to a tournament."

"Dear, now, lady, how you jest," replied the girl; "he could never get it on; why, Lord Alured's thigh is thicker than your waist; and I do declare I think it much handsomer than that azure and gold you are so fond of. I would not wear that, at all events."

"And pray, why not?" demanded Lucy de Ashby, with some surprise; "they are the two colours that divide the universe, girl--azure the colour for heaven, gold the only colour for this earth; so between the two I should have all mankind on my side. Why would you not wear them?"

"Because they are the colours of the Monthermers," replied the girl; "and they are old enemies of your house."

"But they are friends now," rejoined Lucy, into whose cheek, to say truth, the blood had come up somewhat warmly. She ventured to say nothing more for a minute or two, and when she did speak again, changed the subject.

The conversation soon resumed its liveliness, however; and thus they rode on, talking of many things, and laughing gaily as they talked, while the yeomen who were behind amused themselves in the same manner.

After about half a mile's ride, they approached nearer to the banks of the little stream, which being every here and there decorated with bushes and tall trees that hung over the water, was sometimes seen glancing through a meadow, and then again lost amongst the thick foliage.

Just as they were entering a closer part of the woodland, and leaving the stream on their right, one of the yeomen exclaimed, "By----!" using an oath of too blasphemous a kind to be even written down in the present age, but which in those days would have been uttered in the court of the king, "By----there is somebody netting the stream. Quick, Jacob, quick! come after them. You, Bill, go round the wood, and catch them on the other side. See, they're running that way--they're running that way!" and setting spurs to their horses, the whole of Lucy's male attendants, with the exception of the page, galloped off as fast as ever they could, shouting and whooping as if they had been in pursuit of some beast of the chase.

Lucy de Ashby paused for a moment, and called to the page, who was the last to leave her, not to go; but the spur had been already given to his horse, and the boy became seized with a sudden deafness which prevented him from hearing a word that the lady uttered. Lucy gazed after them with a thoughtful look for an instant, then laughed, and said--"'Tis a droll fancy that men have to run after everything that flies them."

"Ay, and dogs as well as men," added one of the girls.

"And women as well as both," answered Lucy. "I have more than three quarters of a mind to go myself; but I will not, girls; and so, to be out of the way of temptation, we will ride slowly on."

Thus saying, she shook her rein, and keeping her horse to a walk, followed the road before her into the thicker part of the wood, leaving her truant attendants to come after as they might.

In about a quarter of an hour the first of the men appeared at the spot where they had left her, but he was by no means in the same plight as when he last stood there. His clothes were dripping as well as his hair; there were the marks of severe blows on his face; his smart apparel was soiled and torn, and he was both disarmed and on foot. In short, he looked very much like a man who had been heartily beaten and dragged through a horse-pond. A loud hallo, which reached his ear from the direction of the stream, seemed to visit him with no very pleasant sensations, for he darted in at once amongst the bushes, and hid himself as well as he could for a few minutes. At length, however, two of his comrades appeared; but they seemed to have fared not much better than himself, for though they had preserved their horses, both were in terrible disarray, and had returned from the fray evidently with broken heads.

"Where is Bill?" said one to the other as they came up; "I saw him running this way."

"Poor devil, he got it!" replied his comrade.

"And you got it, too, I think," cried the one who had first appeared, now coming out from amongst the bushes. "Why, I never saw or heard anything like that blow of the staff across your shoulders, Jacob. You echoed like an empty cask under a cooper's hammer."

"Ay, Bill," said the man to whom he spoke, "and when the man bestowed upon you the buffet in the eye, and knocked you down, what a squelch was there! Why, it was for all the world as when the scullion, bringing in the kitchen dinner, let the apple pudding fall, and it burst itself upon the pavement."

"I will be even with him," said the man called Bill; "but where's the page and Walter?"

"They galloped off to the castle as they could," answered the third, "and your horse along with them, so you must go back too, and we must ride after the lady as fast as we can go."

"Pretty figures you are to follow her into Nottingham," rejoined Bill; "and what will my lord say when he finds that we four and the page were beaten by five men on foot?"

"There were more than five," replied the other, "I am sure."

"I thought I saw some in the bushes," added the third.

"Come, come," exclaimed Bill, "there were only five, I was disabled by being knocked into the river, otherwise I would have shewn them a different affair."

"I dare say you'd have done wonders," answered the other, with a sneer; "but we must get on, so you go back to the castle as fast as you can."

"Pr'ythee see me beyond those trees," said the yeoman on foot; "if those fellows are hiding there, they may murder me!"

"We have no time--we have no time!" replied one of the horsemen--"Go along with you! If you hadn't been in the stream, you would have thrashed them all; so thrash them now, good Bill;" and thus saying, the two rode on, for certainly there is no human infirmity, though it is a very contagious one, which meets with such little sympathy as fear.

Onward, then, they went at a quick pace, hoping to catch up their young mistress before she reached Nottingham, but feeling a little ashamed for having left her at all, and not a little ashamed at the result of their expedition.

When they had gone about a couple of miles, however, without seeing anything of Lucy de Ashby, the one looked round to his comrade, and said, "It is odd we haven't come up with her--she must have ridden fast."

"Oh, it is just like her," replied the other, "she has galloped on just to tease us, and punish us a little for having left her in the wood. I would wager a besant that she does not draw a rein till she gets to Nottingham."

"Ay, but the best of it is," rejoined his companion, "that we shall hear no more of it than just, 'Jacob, you should not have quitted me; you should have let the stream take care of itself,' instead of twenty great blustering oaths, such as Lord Alured would have given us. Then it will be all fair weather again in a minute."

"Ay, she is very kind!" said the other yeoman, "and when anything does go wrong, she knows that one did not do it on purpose."

With such conversation, and with praises of their sweet lady, which one may be sure were well deserved, as no ear was there to hear, no tongue to report them, the yeomen rode on; but the one called Jacob did so, it must be confessed, uneasily. His eyes, as he went, were bent down upon the ground, which in that part was soft, searching for the traces of horses' feet, but though he gazed eagerly, he could perceive none, till, at length, they reached the gates of Nottingham, and entering the city, proceeded at once to what was called the lodging of the Lord Ashby. It was, in fact, a large, though low-built house, shut from the street by a court-yard and a high embattled wall. The gates were open, and all the bustle and activity were apparent about the doors, which attended in those days the arrival of a large retinue. There were servants hurrying hither and thither, horse-boys and grooms slackening girths, and taking off saddles, servers and pantlers unpacking baskets and bags, and boys and beggars looking on.

"What, is my lord arrived?" cried one of the men who had followed Lucy, springing from his horse; "we did not expect him till to-night, or to-morrow morning."

"He will be here in half an hour," replied the horse-boy, to whom he addressed himself; "we rode on before."

"What tidings of my young lady?" said a server, walking up; "we thought we should find her here to meet the Earl."

"Is she not arrived?" cried the yeoman who had remained on horseback, in a tone of dismay; "she came on before us--we fancied she was here!"

The one who had dismounted sprang into the saddle again, exclaiming--"This is some infernal plot!"

The story was soon told, and the whole household of the Lord of Ashby, or at least such a part of it as was then in Nottingham, was thrown into a state of confusion indescribable. In the midst of this, some ten or twelve men mounted their horses, though every beast was tired with a long day's journey, and set out to seek for the fair lady who was missing, beating the forest paths in every direction. But not the slightest trace of her could they find; and, after a two hours' search, were coming home again, when, having made a round on the Southwell side, they met the party of the Earl himself, riding slowly on towards Nottingham.

He was accompanied by only four or five attendants, but had with him his son Alured and Hugh de Monthermer, the other Earl having remained behind at Pontefract to settle some business of importance there. It may be easily conceived what indignation and surprise the tidings, brought by the servants, spread amongst the party they thus met. Lord Alured chafed like an angry tiger, and the old lord vowed every kind of vengeance. Hugh de Monthermer's lip quivered, but all he said was, "This is horrible indeed, my lord, that your lordship's daughter cannot ride from Lindwell to Nottingham in safety! What can we do?"

"We!" cried Alured de Ashby. "Hugh of Monthermer, you have little enough to do with it, methinks! What I shall do, will be to cut off the ears of the scoundrels that left their lady on any account, when they were following her to Nottingham."

"My lord of Ashby," said Hugh de Monthermer, addressing the Earl, "I merely used the word *we*, because, as a gentleman, and your friend, I take as deep an interest in the affair as any one. I and my men are at your command to seek for this lady instantly; and we will strive to do you as good service in the search as the best of your own people, if you will permit us."

"Certainly--certainly, my good lord!" replied the Earl--"Alured, you are rash and intemperate.--Three hours ago, they say, this happened. Should they have taken to the forest, they cannot have gone very far, if they have followed the horse-paths; and were one of us to go back to the second road to the left, where there stands a meer[1], he must, by beating up those lanes, either come upon the party themselves or find the horses, if they have turned them loose, and taken to the footways."

"They have not gone into the forest," cried Alured de Ashby; "depend upon it, these are some of the king's people, or the bishop's. Better far let us scour the more open country along the banks of Trent. You will soon hear at the bridges whether such persons have passed that way."

"Stand out, Jacob," said the Earl; "you were one of the fools that were misled. What like were these men who lured you from your lady?"

"I think they were men at arms disguised," answered the servant, in a sorrowful and timid tone; "for so well practised were they at their weapons, that they beat us all in the twinkling of an eye; besides, when I struck one of them, I heard something clatter underneath, like armour. The net, too, did not look like a real net."

"It is very clear, the whole was a trick," said the Earl. "I doubt not you are right, Alured, but still we had better spread out, and scour the whole country across. You, with part of the men, take the banks of the Trent--I, with others, will skirt the borders of the forest from Nottingham to Lindwell--and our young friend here, with his own two servants and two of ours, will, perhaps, examine the forest itself from the

second turning on the road to Southwell, as far as he may judge it likely, from the time which has elapsed, that these gentry could have advanced. I will send people to meet him when I reach Lindwell, who will tell him what success we have had, and give him aid and assistance."

Alured de Ashby seemed not over well pleased at the arrangement, for his brows still continued heavy, his cheek flushed, and his proud lip quivering; but he made no objection, and after a few words more, the party separated upon the different tracks they proposed to follow, having still three or four hours of daylight before them.

Alured rode on, with his fiery temper chafing at the insult which had been offered to his family, and but the more irritable and impatient because he had no one on whom to vent his anger.

His father pursued his course more slowly, and with very different thoughts. Wrath in the bosom of the son swallowed up every sensation; but the loss of a child, which he had treated but lightly in the case of the innkeeper, now filled the Earl's breast with deep anxiety and apprehension, though certainly poor Greenly had more cause for agonizing fear and sorrow than the proud noble.

It is a curious fact, however, and one which gives a strange indication of the lawless state of the times, that no one imagined the absence of Lucy de Ashby could proceed from any ordinary accident.

CHAPTER VIII.

The sun had declined about two hours and a half from the meridian, but the day was still warm and bright. The month of May, in the olden time, indeed, was a warmer friend than at present, if we may believe the ancient tales and chronicles; and, in good sooth, the seasons of the year seem to have changed altogether, and the weather to have become chilly, whimsical, and crotchetty, as the world has grown older. There are no vineyards to be found now in Northumberland, and yet many a place in the northern counties retains the name to the present day, evidently showing to what purposes they were formerly applied. It is rarely now in England, too, that we have any title to call it the merry, merry month of May, for, very often, cold and piercing are the winds, sad the sleet and rain; and, for one of the bright and glorious days of summer, we have a multitude of the dark and shadowy ones of winter. Perhaps one cause of this change may be that which has brought about many another evil in the land,--namely, the cutting down of those magnificent old forests which sheltered the breast of England like a garment, and stopped the fierce winds in their career over the island, Indeed we know that the destruction of the woods in other countries has produced such effects; and there is every reason to believe that here also the climate has greatly suffered, though other benefits may have been obtained.

However that may be, the month of May at that time in England was indeed a merry month, replete with sunshine, bountiful in flowers, with every bird in song, and every tree in leaf, and the whole world full of the warmth and the tenderness of youth. It is true, indeed, that in the early part of the month, April would still look in with a tear in her eye to bid the earth good bye; and such had been the case on the morning of the fourth of May, in the year of which we have lately been speaking. About nine o'clock, two or three showers had swept past, though the blue eye of heaven had seldom been altogether withdrawn, but looked through the rain as through a veil, and every now and then the sun peeped out, even while the drops were coming down, and flung a rainbow over the bosom

of the forest. The clouds, however, cleared off entirely before noon, and left the world but the fresher for the sprinkling, the woods looking more green, and the flowers more bright and full of perfume.

The road from Sheffield--not the high road--running through Bloodsworth, and leaving Nurstead a little to the right, at the distance of about a mile past the former place, entered the extensive woody ground, which had ceased for a space in the neighbourhood of Mansfield; but which at that time covered the whole of the rest of the country. A little farther on again, the scene changed to one of those small, open greens, common in the forest, where two or three acres of grassy turf appeared free from trees, but surrounded on all sides by the wood. Fine old oaks and beeches stood forward here and there, stretching out their long and rugged arms, covered with the soft hue of spring, and leaving the line of the little savannah wild and irregular, While a break amongst the trees on the right showed the sunshine streaming into another opening of the same kind, and gave the imagination room to sport through other groves and dells beyond.

In the midst of this green, with his arms crossed upon his chest, his eyes bent on the ground, and his brow somewhat gloomy, walked Robert of the Lees by Ely, as he had called himself, while not far off, under the shadow of a wide-spreading oak, stood a boy, holding a white horse and a bow, Robin seemed to be whiling away a time of waiting, in communing with himself of many things, with that sort of desultory meditation which woodlands gender more than any other scenes; and, ever and anon, his lips proved faithless guardians to his thoughts, muttering a word of two of what was passing in his mind, without his knowing that they did so.

"Ha! Left Nottingham so soon with her paramour!" he said, "That was hasty!" and again he was silent for a space. "They must have heard that I had taken the chase in hand, or else the Earl has followed them closer than they expected.--How this poor youth suffers! One would think that he had lost the most precious thing on earth, instead of a

light-o'-love May-day flirt!--And after, all, perhaps, he has lost the most precious thing on earth, for he has lost trust--confidence. That can never come again when once it is gone.--Besides, a woman is to us what we esteem her more than what she is. He held her to be all that is good, and so in losing her he loses all that is good,--They are idle things, these women; and yet there is good as well as bad in them. So goes the old song--

"To whom does woman's love belong?
And who shall hold that fickle thing?
No iron chain was e'er so strong,
As long to bind its fluttering wing.

"Caught by the ear--caught by the eye--
The handsome face, the flattering tongue,
The pleasant smile, the well-told lie,
May win it, but not hold it long.

"The king has no command o'er love,
The peasant's sweetheart jilts the swain;
And those who stay, and these who rove,
Seek bands for woman's heart in vain.

"Rank, wealth, prosperity, and power,
Have all been tried, without avail;
Yet ne'er in dark misfortune's hour,
Has woman's love been known to fail."

So sung, or rather hummed, the bold forester, as he walked to and fro along the sandy path; and, as is very often the case, the song seemed the most convincing argument he could use, for it concluded the discussion with himself concerning young Harland, and he turned his thoughts to other things again.

"They will take him by surprise," he muttered to himself in the same low tone as before; and then having uttered this vaticination, he relapsed into silence, took another turn, and said--"The King at Cambridge?--That cannot be for nothing: he has misled De Montfort--Gloucester fortifying his castles too--that looks ill! He is not to be trusted, Gloucester. He never was--he never will be.--Hark! a horse's feet! Here come the Earls!"

Another moment, however, showed him that he was mistaken, for the horse whose tramp he heard came from the side of Nottingham, and not from that of Yorkshire. The animal itself was a good brown gelding, with a short tail, which, in those days, was a rarity, for many of the barbarous customs of the present time were then unknown. Indeed, though it may seem a contradiction in terms, civilization in general has not a little barbarism in it, and luxury is always sure to introduce practices of which savages would be ashamed. The horse, however, as I have said, was a good brown gelding with a short tail; the man that bestrode it, a jolly, large-stomached personage, in the garb of a tradesman; and the moment the forester saw him, he exclaimed, "Ha! our good friend the sutler of Southwell! What makes you ride the forest, Barnaby? You do not trouble Sherwood for nothing."

"Seeking you, Robin--seeking you," replied the sutler. "One that you know of gave me this for you. It was to pass through no hands but mine and yours. But look ye! Here comes a goodly train. Now will there be rough work anon between the silken hoods and the men in Lincoln green. I'll away, Robin--I'll away, for I love no blows but those of the rolling pin!"

The man to whom he spoke took no notice either of his words or his departure, so intent was he upon the contents of the letter which had just been put into his hand. He read it over twice after the messenger was gone, and seemed scarcely to remark the approach of a large party on horseback, comprising, as the reader may have divined by this time, the very personages for whom he was waiting. When he raised his eyes,

however, he beheld advancing towards him, at a slow pace, some twenty mounted men, well armed, and headed by the old Earl of Monthermer. That nobleman, however, was unaccompanied by one of those whom our friend in the Lincoln green was the most anxious to see, the Earl of Ashby being, as the reader is well aware, on the other side of Nottingham.

The party of old Monthermer, as he was called, consisted of himself and his servants alone, having sent away all the other noblemen and gentlemen who had met him in Yorkshire, to find their way, in separate bodies to join their friends in London. His nephew, too, for reasons that the old lord saw and well approved, had gone on with the Earl of Ashby; and the only addition to his train since we last saw him, was a stout old priest, his chaplain, who had been previously dispatched on a mission to Northumberland.

At a distance of about twenty yards from the spot where the bold forester stood, the Earl pulled up his horse and dismounted slowly, giving the word to halt. He then advanced directly towards, him, holding out his hand, which the other took with an air of respect and deference, but without the least approach to fawning.

"Welcome to Sherwood, my good lord," said Robert of the Lees. "But why come you alone? Would not the noble Earl of Ashby trust himself amidst these shades?"

"He had left me, Robin," replied the Earl, "before I got your message, with his son Alured and my nephew Hugh. He set out for Nottingham yesterday, just after morning song."

"Ha!" exclaimed the forester, his brow growing dark. "'Tis strange I heard not of it. Gone to Nottingham, just after morning song? He might have been there by noon; and yet he was not."

"No, no," answered the Earl, "he could not arrive by noon. He had matters of some moment to see to by the way. But were you so anxious to have some speech with him?"

"I was," answered the forester, abruptly. "I was.--But it matters not--I will send him a message; and now, my lord, will you mount your horse again; and come with me? I have much to say to you, and many things to tell, some of which you know, perhaps, already, but some of which you have never heard."

"I can but stay an hour," replied the Earl; "for I must forward to Nottingham to supper, and that will be a late one, even now."

"We have supper ready for you, my good lord," answered the forester; "and you, at least, need not fear to ride through Sherwood in the eventide."

"No feasting on the King's venison, Robin!" cried the Earl, with a laugh; "but still our meal must be short, for I have business to do to-night of more importance than my supper. Shall I bid the men come on with me, or to stay here till I return?"

"Let them follow--let them follow," said the forester; "but keep them out of earshot--the priest especially. Ho, boy! bring up my horse."

More at a sign by which he accompanied the call than at the words themselves, the boy, whom we have mentioned as holding a white horse under one of the trees, ran up with the animal in hand, while the Earl gave directions to his men to follow him slowly, keeping at the distance of some fifty yards. He then remounted, with his forest friend, who led him on still upon the open road, saying--"You shall have as little of the woodland as possible, and every step you take is so much on your way to Nottingham."

"That is well," replied the Earl; "but now tell me, Robin, how many of your old friends have you gathered round you here, in case of need?"

"Not more than a hundred," answered his companion, "With some forty in Barnsdale."

"Sadly few!" said the Earl, musing.

"Many a stout soldier and many a true friend," replied the forester, "love not to live the life and share the perils of an outlaw."

"There is a reproach in that," said the Earl; "but I pledge you my knightly word, Robin, that I did my best to have the outlawry reversed whenever we got the power into our own hands, but it was Gloucester opposed it, and the Earl of Leicester judged it dangerous to thwart him."

"You mistake, my lord," rejoined the forester, "and would have done me but little service had you succeeded, though I thank you for the wish. The enmity of my lord of Gloucester stood me in good stead. These are riddles, my good lord, but they are easily read. Hark to another, not much more difficult. My hundred men are not few, but many; for each man, besides a sheaf of arrows, has a sheaf of friends, and about the same number of each. We shall not count much less than two thousand, noble sir, in the day of need, and that day is coming faster than you imagine."

"There are clouds in the sky, certainly," replied the Earl,

"They overshadow the sun," rejoined the outlaw, abruptly. "The news I had to tell you, but an hour ago, was merely that the King had contrived to lead my lord of Leicester away from his resources, and that Gloucester is fortifying himself in the marches of Wales--that he has refused to be present at the tournament of Northampton, and that people flock to him who are known to be favourers of the foreigners."

"I have heard something of this," said the Earl, "but knew not that it had gone so far."

"Farther--farther, my lord," replied the other--"farther a great deal! I have more tidings for you now. Gloucester is proclaimed a traitor, Leicester has fallen back upon the Severn, and I fear me that means have been taken to amuse the good Earl's son in that business of Pevensey. Look at that letter, my lord."

"Ay this bears the likeness of war, indeed," replied the Earl, after reading a paper which his companion, gave to him--"this bears the likeness of war, indeed; and I am glad it has come to this. Gloucester is a loss to the good cause, it is true, though he is cold and cautious----"

"And selfish, and treacherous, and cunning," added the outlaw.

"But still there is little to fear," continued the Earl, "he is no more competent to cope with Simon de Montfort, than an usher's white rod with a soldier's battle-axe."

"He wants the energy of a strong will," said the outlaw, "and therefore can never be a great man; but still his influence makes him dangerous, my lord, and you must look to it."

"We will not despise him," replied the Earl; "but still I fear him not. So long as the Prince is in the hands of De Montfort, the freedom of England is secure. He is the power of the royal party, but we have taken care that he shall have no means of acting--nominally free, but watched, day and night--his servants, his keepers--his companions, his gaolers. I could grieve for the noble Prince, I must confess, were it not that the safety of the whole realm, the freedom of every man within it, and the happiness of every English hearth, demand that he should be prevented by any means from giving strength to his father's weakness by his own powerful mind."

"I grieve for him, too," replied the outlaw. "I once, at York, saw an eagle in a cage, my lord; and though it looked at me fiercely, as if it would have torn me for my pains, I broke the bars, and let the noble bird go free."

"We must not do that here," replied the Earl.

"I fear not," answered his companion. "Nevertheless, I grieve for the Prince with all my heart; and would he but swear and keep his oath, which princes seldom do, I would be the first to give him his liberty, upon a promise to respect ours."

"We have tried that, good Robin," replied the Earl, "and we must do so no more. The wisest man that ever lived, said, 'Put not your faith in princes;' and this young leopard must, I fear, be kept in a chain, however sad it be to fetter noble energies like his."

"Make the chain strong enough, then, my lord," said the outlaw; "for if he breaks it, he will be more fierce than ever."

"Forged by Simon de Montfort, it will be strong enough," answered the Earl; "but let us think of farther proceedings. So, Gloucester is proclaimed a traitor?"

"Ay, and Mortimer, too," replied the forester, "and a number of others. Many of the lords marchers have joined him, you see, and his power is daily increasing."

"Then it is time," said the Earl, "for the friends of England to gather round De Montfort. A battle cannot be far distant. Doubtless there will be letters for me at Nottingham, and I will soon let you know where you can meet us with your brave archers. Gloucester's day is over, and--"

"I know what you would add, my lord," replied the forester, "but I say, No. This outlawry sits more easily on my shoulders than you can think. Heaven forbid that you should ever have to try our life; but, were such the case, you would soon grow fond of it. There is a charm in these wild woods, and in our free existence amongst them, which leaves the parade of the city or the castle sadly tasteless in the comparison. No, my lord, I am well as I am, for the present. No man can call me traitor; for kings and princes have cast off my allegiance, and I have cast off their

rule. Perhaps when happier days come back--when England's wounds are healed--when justice and honour hold the sway, and peace and liberty go hand in hand, I may reclaim my rights, my lord, and ask your voice to testify that the Outlaw of Sherwood was as just in his dealings, as true to his country, and as fearless in her defence as any judge in his court, or statesman in the hall, or knight in the saddle. But till then--good faith," he added, in a gayer tone, "I live a merry life of it here, and am troubled with no remorse for the deeds I do under the green leaf of the wood. However, enough of myself, and as for your letters, you will find none at Nottingham. The sheriff is no friend of Simon de Montfort, and that the Earl of Leicester knows by this time. I would wager, my lord, a pipe of Malvoisie to a flitch of bacon, that if you go on to Nottingham, you will be a tarrier in the castle for longer than you reckon."

"If so," replied Monthermer, "the Earl of Ashby is a prisoner there by this time."

"Not so, my lord," said the outlaw, drily "the Earl of Ashby has had other things to do."

"Why, I thought that but now," exclaimed the Earl, "you did not know where our good friend was?"

"True," answered his companion, "but I know what waited him at Nottingham, if he arrived there yesterday.--Besides, my good lord, he has a friend at court. Richard de Ashby passed through Nottingham before him, was with the sheriff in close consultation for an hour, and doubtless set forth duly, 'how good a subject the Earl is to the King, and how humble a servant to the Earl of Gloucester.'--Take care, my lord, that you are not betrayed, as well as deceived.--There is a viper under your hand; and it may sting you."

"No--no--no!" said the old nobleman, shaking his head. "The Ashbys are incapable of treachery: proud and irascible they both are, father and son; but even in their pride there is no dishonour, though----"

"Though pride be the most dishonest of all our knave passions;" interrupted the outlaw, "ay, and the meanest, too! But I believe you, my good lord, they will not betray you, either father or son, but they will betray themselves; and their roguish kinsman will betray you and them every one. You judge, perhaps, that he came down but upon the lewd errand of carrying off a peasant girl, but his business in Barnsdale was of a darker character than that. Prisoner as the King now is, and watched as the Prince now seems, they have agents over all the land."

"But can you be sure," said the Earl--"can you prove that this Richard de Ashby is one of them? Base, I have always believed him to be; and I recollect that while the feud existed between our two families, he did all in his power to keep it alive, and prevent the breach from ever being healed--pandering, like all mean sycophants, to the fiercer passions of their lords; but I ever judged him a petty scoundrel, fit only to cheat at cross and pile, or accomplish the ruin of a milkmaid. I think not, Robin, that he has courage to deal with much greater things. Have you any proof of his treachery in this business?"

"Something I know, my lord," replied the outlaw, "and much more do I suspect--let them take my counsel who like it. What will you have? He was first with Mortimer, and then with Gloucester; and then, making a circuit round, to seem as if he came from the side of Norfolk, he visited Leicester at Northampton, and spent two days there, seeing the King thrice, and the Prince as often. Thence he went back to London, was purveyed with a spy, one Richard Keen, a servant of the King's who fled from Lewes; and thus accompanied, he followed you to Pontefract."

"I will tax him with it in his kinsman's presence," said Monthermer. "The good Lord of Ashby wants not sense and discrimination. He was eager for the business to be inquired into before, but the man's flight

with the light-o'-love girl of the inn broke off the investigation. Think you his master has really any share in that bad business? I left the poor man, her father, nearly broken-hearted."

"Share!" exclaimed the forester; "somewhat more than a share. She is now his leman at Huntingdon. I had tidings this morning, and they are now tasting together the fiery drop of joy which floats upon the deep draughts of bitterness in the cup of vice. A few weeks will cloy him, and then her sorrows will begin; but if I lay my hands upon him, so help me the Blessed Virgin! as I will nail his ears to the door-posts of good John Greenly's house, and scourge him with bowstrings from Wakefield to Pontefract. But, to speak of what is more important, my lord--do you think the rogue filched any of your secrets?"

"No," replied the Earl--"no, many of the people did not come; Hugh Bigod, too, was away; and, as is often the case with long-concerted meetings, to settle matters of great moment, we waited for each other, and, in the end, the whole thing went to empty air. I could not but think, however, that he strove hard to renew the breach between the house of Ashby and ourselves. With the father he did not succeed, but with the son he seemed to make some progress; so much so, indeed, that I was well pleased when this Sir Richard told us his purpose of going on before to London. After he was gone, Alured grew somewhat placable; and when we parted company, Hugh went with the two lords, trying to soothe and gain the younger one.--But here, Robin, what have we here? Why you have made the forest as gay as a May-day bride!"

CHAPTER IX.

The words of the old Earl gave a good idea of the picture which was presented to his eyes. It was indeed like a May-day pageant, or like one of those scenes which we now-a-days see upon the stage, but which are but feeble representations of those that in former times were constantly acted in reality. Though, it is true, we form exaggerated images of many things that we do not behold, imagination presents but a very faint idea of the splendour and decoration of those ages when sumptuary laws were enacted in various countries to prevent peasants from displaying gold and silver embroidery in their garments. What may be called representation was a part of that epoch. It was in every palace, and in every castle, at the table of the grave citizen, with his gold chain, in the arm-chair of the justice, in the ball of the franklin. It sat upon the forked beard of Chaucer's merchant, it appeared in the party-coloured garments of the gallant of the court. In short, a great part of everything in that day was effect: it was one of the great objects of the age, and all classes of people had an eye for it. Perhaps in all things, as in their great buildings, their taste was better than our own--in very few points it could be worse; and in consulting what is bright and pleasing to the eye, what is exciting and dazzling to the imagination, they followed where nature led--nature who delights in striking contrasts, as much as in gentle harmonies.

If, indeed, we can form a very faint idea of the splendour of the court and the castle, our conception is still more inadequate of the picturesque decoration of humbler scenes in those days. We are apt to conceive that it was all rude, or gross; and we scarcely believe in the charms of the merry morrice dance, in the graces and attractions that sported round the May-pole, in the moonlight meetings which Old Fitzstephen records, or in any of the sweeter and more gentle pleasures and pastimes of the peasantry of Old England; and yet all these things were true, all were enacted by living beings like ourselves upon every village green throughout the land, long before a feeble mockery of them crept into a close and stifling playhouse.

Stronger passions--or perhaps the same passions but less under control than in the present day--took their part therein, from time to time, and prompted to all those wild energies which spring from deep and highly-excited feelings. Graces free and uncultivated were there likewise, and the honest outpourings of the heart, subjected to no dull sneer from the lips of false refinement, burst forth with the touching force of simplicity and truth. The universal weaknesses of our nature mingled with all the rest, and varied the drama through a thousand parts. Vanity, and self-love, and pride, and envy, had their share in the gathering of spring flowers, in the weaving of the garland, in the decoration of the tent, in the choice of the May queen, and in the dance upon the sward; but to say sooth, they gave a pungency and a brightness, and a human interest to the whole.

I beseech thee, then, dear reader, carry thy mind back to the times of which I write, and recollect that such scenes as that which met the eye of the old Lord Monthermer, were every-day realities, and not any part of a cold fable.

Whether planted by accident or design I know not, but at the side of one of the little savannahs I have described, where the grass was short and dry, six old oaks came forward from the rest of the wood, three on either hand, at the distance of about forty feet apart, forming a sort of natural avenue. Their long branches stretched across and nearly met each other, and under this natural canopy was spread out the long table, prepared for the good Earl's repast; while, from bough to bough above, crossing each other in various graceful sweeps, were innumerable garlands, forming a sort of net-work of forest flowers, The board, too--let not the reader suppose that it was rude and bare, for it was covered with as fine linen as ever came from the looms of Ireland or Saxony.[2] The board had a nosegay laid where every man was expected to sit, and the ground beneath was strewed with rushes and green leaves to make a soft resting-place for the feet. Under the trees were gathered together various groups of stout archers in their peculiar garb, with many a country girl

from the neighbouring villages, all in holiday apparel. A number of young countrymen, too, were present, showing that the rovers of the forest were at no great pains to conceal their place of meeting; for their lawless trade found favour in the sight of the many; and their security depended as much upon the confidence and goodwill of the lower orders, as upon the dissensions and disunion of the higher classes.

The first sight of the Earl and the outlaw caused not a little bustle amongst the companions of the latter. There was running here and there, and putting things in array; and it was very evident that, although expected and prepared for, everything was not quite ready when the Earl arrived.

"Give him good morrow--give the noble Earl good morrow!" cried the forester, putting his horn to his lips and waving his hand for a signal.

Every man followed his example, and in a moment the whole glades of the forest rang with the sounds of the merry horn. Not a note was out of tune, no two were inharmonious, and, as with a long swell and fall, the mellow tones rose and died away, the effect in that wild yet beautiful scene was not a little striking and pleasant to the ear.

"Yeomanly! yeomanly! right yeomanly done!" cried Robin Hood. "This is the way, my lord, that we receive a true friend to the English Commons and the good old Saxon blood. Will you please to dismount, and taste our cheer? If yonder cooks have not done their duty, and got all ready, I will fry them in their own grease, though I guess from yon blazing log that they are somewhat behindhand."

As he spoke, he fixed his eyes upon a spot, to which those of the Earl followed them, where a scene not quite harmonious with the poetry of the rest of the arrangement was going on, but one very satisfactory to the hungry stomachs of the Earl's retainers. An immense pile of blazing wood, fit to have roasted Hercules himself, was crackling and hissing and roaring so close to a distant angle of the wood, that the flames

scorched the green leaves on the farther side. Beside it were some five men, in clean white jackets, running hastily about, and basting sundry things of a very savoury odour, which by the contrivance of small chains and twisted strings, were made to revolve before the fire. Each man was glad enough to keep to windward of the blaze; and, even then, full many a time were they forced to run to a distance for cool air and free breath, for the heat was too intense for any one to endure it long without suffering the fate of the immense masses of meat which were turning before it.

About fifty yards from this burning mountain was a lesser volcano, from which, upon the primitive tripod of three long poles; hung sundry pots of vast dimensions, emitting steams very grateful to the nose; while, in a cool spot under the trees, appeared the no less pleasant sight of two large barrels, one twined round with a garland of young vine-leaves, and the other with a wreath of oak. A host of drinking cups, fit to serve an army, lay near them, and a man with a mallet was busily engaged in driving a spigot and faucet to give discreet vent to the liquor within.

"Ho! where is Little John?" cried Robin Hood--"a small friend of mine, my lord, whom you must know. What! Naylor! the master of our revels--where is he? By my life, he is basting the capons! Hallo! friend John!--You will easily see, my lord, how he deserves his title."

As he spoke, a yeoman, some six feet four in height, with shoulders that seemed as fit to carry the bull as the calf, a round head covered with nut-brown hair, and a face running over with fun and jest, came near and shook the Earl's proffered hand.

"We have met before, I believe, Little John," said the Earl, "and I think in as warm a feast-day as this!"

"Warmer, my lord, by a bucket full," replied Naylor. "One of those feasts where one is as likely to be carved as carve."

"I recollect, your face well," said the Earl.

"John of Andelys would recollect it better, my lord, if he could recollect anything, poor fellow," answered the yeoman. "When last he and I and you met together, he had got you by the throat, with his dagger through your avantaille. I just tapped him on the head, to remind him not to do such things; and whether he went away or not I don't know, but if he did, he certainly did not carry his brains with him."

"Ay, you did me good service there," replied the Earl--"I should have lost an eye, at least. There's a jewel, my good friend," he continued, taking a ring from his finger--"I won it with hard strokes myself, near Tripoli, and I give it to you for as good a blow as ever was struck by an English yeoman."

"I'll set it in my cap, my lord," replied Little John, "and, perhaps, some day----"

"Nay, now, no boasting, John!" cried Robin Hood; "but let the Earl sit down to meat. It is the season, my good lord, when one strikes neither hart nor hare, when the partridge is free for her brood, and even the wild bustard runs unscathed. Thus, my good lord, I cannot give you forest cheer; otherwise, so help me Heaven! as you should dine at the King's expense, while his majesty be revelling with my Lord of Leicester. However, not being able to treat you as a yeoman, I will feast you as a baron; and if those good cooks do but their duty, no castle hall in all merry England shall show a better supper than yours this day."

"I doubt it not, good Robin--I doubt it not!" replied the Earl, with a good-humoured laugh; "you are Lord of Sherwood, and may hold your court of free-baron when you like. On my life! you have a peacock," he continued, as a long train or men began to approach, bearing large wooden trenchers loaded with viands--"and the noble baron of beef too!"

"True, my lord.--true!" replied Robin, "I could not feast an earl, you know, without giving him a young peacock with his tail spread, nor receive your merry men honourably without a double sirloin from the

best ox in the country. The beef's my own," he continued, "for I bought it with gold out of my purse; and the peacock's my own, for Little John gave it to me."

"And how he came by it--you did not ask," said the Earl, smiling.

"Nay, why should I?" demanded Robin Hood, in the same jesting tune; "you would not have me doubt my man's honesty?"

"Heaven forbid!" replied the Earl; "and I will claim a slice of the fair bird, by the same title."

"Come, my lord, come," cried Robin; "let us sit down.--We have no salt-cellar here, to make a distinction between highest and lowest," he continued aloud; "so let every man place himself where he can find room.--Peaceably there,--peaceably! Give seats to the women, and show yourselves courteous as knights. If there be not stools for all, there are platters for all, with meat to spare, and God made the green ground, you know, long before man made a settle. Here my lord, sit by me, and I will help you; and, as my chaplain is not here, I will give you a forest grace to your meat--Reverence, my men--reverence!"

Each man stood up, took off his hat, and crossed himself, and Robin Hood, bowing his head, and running the two parts of his sentence somewhat close together, though there was a slight pause between them, said, "God give us his blessing--and let no man disturb us!"

We have given the words of the forester, as affording the best account of the arrangement of his party; and it is only necessary to add that about a third of the number of those present found seats upon the ground, while the rest placed themselves on stools round the table; and it is to be remarked that many of the village girls, who had come as guests, preferred the green sward, with a stout young bowman beside them, eating, as was then customary with lovers, out of the same dish.

As Robin had said, indeed, there was plenty of food for all; for, besides two gigantic barons of beef, there was many a roasted pig of tender age, capons, and fowls, and pigeons, a heron here and there, together with that most excellent of all ancient dishes, a bittern made into soup, while, in the centre of the table, was seen the peacock with his magnificent tail spread out.

Close by the herons wherever they appeared, had been placed, by direction of Little John, who would have his jest at the long-legged fowl, large dishes of magnificent trout. "There," said the master of Robin Hood's revels, "the ancient enemies sit side by side peaceably, to show that man's maw made friends of all things!"

There was no serving at the table of Robin Hood. The Earl's good yeomen fell as readily into the customs of Sherwood as their lord, and, sitting down pell-mell with the green-coated rangers, attacked the meat as soon as grace was said. The cooks, themselves, when their function was done, and the dinner was dished up, took such places as they could find, and every man drawing forth anelace, or dagger, as the case might be, assailed the dish that was before him, and helped his neighbours and himself. For some time a deep silence fell over the whole party, and less noise attended the proceeding than ever occurs now-a-days, for dishes ages platters were all of wood, and the knives were encountered by no forks in those times, so that little clatter accompanied the operation either of carving or eating.

At the end of about ten minutes, some five or six of the younger men rose from various parts of the table, and made an excursion towards the barrels we have mentioned. They returned loaded with large flagons, and the only act of ceremony which took place was, that Little John himself, with a large black jack full of strong ale in one hand, and a stoup of wine in the other, approached the Earl, while another brought a large silver cup, and offered him to drink. Thus refreshed, another attack upon the unresisting viands succeeded, after which more tankards of wine were set around for every line to help himself as he liked. The juice of the

grape soon had its effect so far as to quicken the movements of the tongue; and the jests and laughter, and, it must said, noise also, became considerable.

From time to time the Earl and Robin Hood exchanged a word in a lower and more serious tone; but, in general, the old nobleman joined in gaily with the rest, with few words, indeed, and calm withal, but with a well-pleased smile, and a frequent glance down either side of the table at the row of merry faces which surrounded him.

"Come, Pigmy, come!" cried Robin Hood, at length, addressing Little John, "cheer us with a song, if thy portion of the baron have left thee any voice; but mind, no ribaldry, and as little impudence as may be."

"Heaven deliver us!" cried Little John, "I shall never be able to sing! I am like a city lady, who has just been called *madam* for the first time in her life, and somewhat faint with the smell of fat viands. Come, Billy of Southwell, fill me a cup of wine; for I must do our captain's bidding."

And having taken a deep draught, he went on, in a voice of a fine tone, indeed, but loud enough, according to the whimsical thought of the poet, to

"Sweep the sear leaves off the trees,
As if a storm pass'd by."

SONG.

Robin Hood and the Grinder.

"Lythe and listen, my merry-men all,
Lythe and listen to me,
Of a wonderful matter that once did befal

Under the greenwood tree.

"Those who go out to catch are caught,
As you shall presently hear;
For bold Robin Hood once a lesson was taught
Which well-nigh had cost him dear.

"'I'm going alone,' said Robin, one day--
'I'm going alone, to see
What sport I can make on the king's highway,
For I am as good as three.

"'Take any three men from Nottingham town,
And set them all of a row,
If they bide my buffet and do not go down,
They shall set me up for a show.'

"Bold Robin went out, and he met with a man--
A grinder he was by trade;
And 'Hillo! stand fast!' good Robin began,
'Bide here, till the toll be paid.'

"'Get out of my way, toll-taker,' said he;
'I'm a grinder, and one of hot blood,
And I have a strap that should well leather thee,
Wert thou even our bold Robin Hood!'

"Then Robin he took his stout staff in his hand,
And struck at the grinder a blow,
But he jump'd aside, and his running wheel-band
O'er Robin's two shoulders did throw.

"With a tug at the end, and a twitch at the buckle,
He pull'd it down over his wrists--
I know not if Robin's forgotten his knuckle,
But he left him the sign of his fists.

"Good luck for bold Robin!--the grinder took fright
At three yeomen, who came from the wood,
Or right sure he'd have pummell'd him on until night,
And made jelly of bold Robin Hood!"

Robin laughed heartily at the song; and turning to the Earl, he said--"If men should ever talk of me after I am dead, they'll take my character from yon knave's songs. But come, my lord, I'll give you one myself, to another tune."

SONG.

Merry England.

"Ho, merry England! merry England, ho!
The crimson grape grows ruddy in fair France;
There the rich juices from the wine-cup flow,
There beat the timely feet in graceful dance.
But give me back the bower
Where pass'd youth's jocund hour--
Ho, merry England! merry England, ho!

"Ho, merry England merry England, ho!
Light fills the skies, and gilds the fields of Spain;
Orange and olive, thyme and myrtle, grow
O'er purple hill and perfume-breathing plain;
But give to me the glade,
And twinkling forest shade,
Of merry England, merry England, ho!

"Ho, merry England! merry England, ho!
Bright shines the sun on the Italian shore,
And art and nature gain a brighter glow

From memories of greatness gone before;
But my dear island home
Veils not the crest to Rome,
Ho, merry England, merry England, ho!

"Ho, merry England, merry England, ho!
Thy hills, and dells, and groves,
Are full of brighter things than other lands:
Glorious remembrances, and happy loves,
And hearts sincere, and true and honest hands.
There let my life go by,
And my grave, when I die,
Be merry England, merry England, ho!"

It seemed to be a favourite song with the outlaw, and also with his companions, for at the close of each stanza they took up the refrain of--

"Ho, merry England, merry England, ho!"

and singing it to a wild though very simple minor airs produced a powerful effect upon their hearers and upon each other. When they had done, their leader poured out some wine, saying, "Pledge us a cup, my lord the Earl, in wine--better than which Gascony never produced,--to that dear mother-land for which we have bled, or are willing to bleed. Here's to Merry England!"

The Earl willingly drunk the toast; and after a few words more, he said, in a low voices to his companion, "I fear I must mar your merriment, Robin, by departure. I am anxious for tidings, and have perhaps delayed somewhat too long already. I know that letters must be waiting for me, and they may need an instant answer."

"Seek them not at Nottingham, my lord, at all events," replied the forester; "aware of the trap they hid laid for you there, I have already sent out people to stay all messengers De Montfort may have dispatched to you, and bid them turn aside to the little village of Stapleford. There you will find them, if at all. Yet I would fain have you remain here an hour or two longer; for, in the course of this night, I myself expect tidings by a sure hand and a nearer way."

"I will leave either the priest or my good yeoman, Blawket, with you," said the Earl, in a low tone. "Both are to be trusted."

"The priest!" exclaimed Robin Hood, "God bless his reverence, I forgot, and took his trade out of his hand just now. I must add a paternoster to-night, when he is at the table; but, in good truth, I quite forgot him.--Blawket must do, I fear, my lord; but yet I could have wished to have some one with me whom I could consult in case of need; for I, too, may have to act at a moment's warning, and may require to arrange some plan for joining you speedily, which I could not do with either the yeoman or the priest. Still I suppose you are right, and had better proceed."

"Hark!" cried the Earl, and, after a momentary pause, he added, "I thought I heard the blast of a horn at a great distance; perhaps it is your messenger."

"No," replied the outlaw; "I heard it too, but it came from the east. I have scouts out that way. Some one must be riding Sherwood worthy of notice. We shall soon know more. Silence, my men, silence! There is a horn, I think, from the ash-tree covert!"

All was instantly still, and for rather more than a minute no one spoke. But patience began to grow weary, and one or two at the lower end of the table were beginning to say an occasional word to their next

neighbour in a low tone, when the horn again sounded, much nearer than before, and Little John started up, exclaiming, "That's Kneller's blast at the hollow oak on Mostyn's Edge!"

"Look to your bows, my merry men," cried Robin Hood; "whoever it is, he comes this way fast. We may have to show the Earl some of our habits of life."

Every man now rose from the table at once, the implements Of archery (which were hung upon, or leaning against, several of the trees around) were hastily resumed, the bows were strung, and an arrow or two fitted to the string.

In about five minutes more, another horn sounded, not many hundred yards from the spot where the tables were laid. The country girls ran to the other side of the green, although they were told not to be afraid; and the old Earl separating his followers from the rest bade each man have his hand upon his bridle, ready to mount and take whatever part might seem needful; when gradually the sound of horses' feet coming at a quick pace became distinct, and, after a short pause of expectation, Hugh of Monthermer, with four or five servants, somewhat heated and travel-stained, rode into the little open space, and suddenly halted, as if in wonder at the scene which met their sight.

CHAPTER X.

NOT a little was the surprise of uncle and nephew at thus meeting in the midst of Sherwood, but it was greater on the part of the old Earl than of Hugh. The scene, indeed, in which he found his venerable relative,

might astonish the young gentleman a little; for the free rangers of the forest, the profusely covered table, the wine barrel, and the drinking cups, were certainly accessories which he had not expected to see around his noble kinsman. With the deference, however, which, at that period, existed for age and renown, he expressed no astonishment, and asked no questions, but dismounting from his horse, proceeded, in answer to his uncle, to inform him why and how he had returned, instead of accompanying the Earl of Ashby on his way either to Lindwell or to London.

But as the reader is well aware of the circumstances connected with the sudden disappearance of Lucy de Ashby, and of the part in seeking her which Hugh de Monthermer had taken upon himself, we shall not recapitulate this part of the young knight's account, but content ourselves with stating what success he had met with in the pursuit.

"Last night I swept the whole roads through the forest," he said, "in a breadth of about two miles, without discovering the slightest trace of any one who could have had a share in this outrageous act. I met a swineherd at one time, and then a ploughman with two potters bringing along clay in a cart, but no other persons whatsoever.--Why do you smile, good forester?" he continued, turning to Robin Hood.

"Because, noble sir," replied the outlaw, "men in the forest of Sherwood are not always exactly what they look. It is difficult there to know a carrion crow from an ousel."

"I may have been deceived, indeed," said Hugh de Monthermer; "but in one thing I must be right; whether they be ousels or carrion crows, they had no lady with them. However, I arrived at Oxton, in the wood, an hour after sunset, and as there was no possibility of pursuing my search, any farther then, I remained at the house of the reve, making inquiries amongst the people of the village, several of whom were coming in from their work in the forest. Last night I discovered nothing, but this morning at dawn a man was brought to me who reported that, in

crossing from Southwell about noon yesterday, he had seen two ladies on horseback, accompanied by a number of men on foot. The lady, he said, was gaily dressed, and very beautiful"--the Earl smiled,--"and certainly a lady of high degree. They were bringing her down towards Mansfield, the fellow thought, so I set off at once, beating up every road in the neighbourhood, and often losing my way. From time to time, however, the sound of a horn led me on, though I never could discover who it was that winded it."

"Did the man imply," asked the Earl, "that the people who accompanied this lady were using force?"

"No," replied Hugh de Monthermer; "he vowed that she appeared to go very willingly; but still I thought it could not but be the lady I was seeking, from her great beauty and her dress."

"As if there were no beautiful woman in the world but Lucy de Ashby?" cried the Earl. "What say you to this story, Robin? You should know if she have passed this way."

"No lady higher than a franklin's daughter has gone on the road to Mansfield," replied Robin Hood, "except the Prioress of Wakefield, who came by yesterday with about a dozen men on foot, and a nun with her. She is a goodly dame to look upon, too, with lips like a pair of cherries, and as to her dress, she had a pulled liripipy might have suited a court harlot, a dagger at her girdle with a silver chain, a peaked hat, and a gold medal round her neck. Yes, she was a goodly dame to look upon, and weighed some fourteen stone or more. I have seen fatter women, but not many."

"Psha!" said Hugh de Monthermer; "you are jesting."

"Not I, in faith and truth," cried Robin Hood; "she is the only woman of rank who has passed this way for a week, and assuredly I ought to know. Here is a bevy of as pretty country maidens as ever came out to see foresters shoot at the butts; but I will answer for it that no lady of

higher degree than themselves has gone along the road to Mansfield--except, indeed, the Prioress of Wakefield, and the nun who went with her. But did the good man tell you no more?--His information must have been somewhat scanty."

"He told me," replied Hugh de Monthermer, with a momentary smile crossing the anxiety which his countenance displayed--"he told me to take care how I went, for I might meet with Robin Hood and his merry men, and come home with a loss."

"Ay!" said Robin; "Ay! and, doubtless, you answered, my young lord, that you were not afraid, but would bring Robin Hood to Nottingham if you met him."

"No," answered Hugh de Monthermer, "No, I said no such thing. I told him, on the contrary, that I should be very glad to see bold Robin Hood; and that I was sure, if I did, we should meet and part good friends, as he and my uncle had fought side by side in the good cause of Old England."

Robin Hood held out his hand to him, replying--"You said right, young lord: though, let me tell you, it is not every gay gallant who may come through the forest that would go out of it again, without having his smart skin taken off his back as if he were a brown hare or a spotted deer. But you have come just at the nick of time: Let your uncle go on, and tell the Earl of Ashby, when he finds him, that Robin Hood says, the loss of his daughter is the judgment of the Blessed Virgin upon his head, for winking at Richard de Ashby's carrying off the child of as honest a man as himself, and making a leman of her.--It would be no marvel to hear that she has gone away with some wild young Frenchman of King Henry's bringing over.--Nay, look not so fierce, my noble lord, nor colour up so red! I mean no insult to the lady.--How should I know aught about her or her character? But if I had her in my hands, she should never return to her own home till the old Earl had pledged himself to send back idle Kate Greenly. However, it's no affair of mine,

you'll say; and we have weightier matters to think of. Both your uncle and myself were mightily puzzled just now, as he must go on at all speed, and yet it is needful that I should have some one here, to consult with in regard to the news I expect to-night. You have come, then, just in time to remain with me, and to settle whatever plan may seem expedient according to the tidings that I receive."

Hugh de Monthermer looked doubtfully from the face of the Outlaw to that of his uncle, and then demanded, "Have I your word that she has not passed this way?"

"I pawn my soul that she has not," replied the forester.

The young man cast his eyes down towards the ground, and thought for an instant or two, a suspicion having taken possession of his mind, he knew not well why, that Robin was better informed of Lucy de Ashby's fate than he chose to avow.

Before he had brought his meditations to an end, however, the old Earl interrupted them, saying, "It is very needful, Hugh, that, if possible, you should remain here, as he asks you. From your account, you have sought this fair lady much farther than you undertook to do. You have likewise been misled a little from the track, I fancy; and it seems to me more than probable that some emissary of the king's, or of the Earl of Gloucester's--who has been lately proclaimed by De Montfort, a traitor,--may have got possession of the fair Lucy, as a hostage for her father's neutrality."

"Gloucester proclaimed a traitor!" said Hugh de Monthermer. "Then are active times coming, my dear uncle!--I will not refuse to stay if it be needful, but still----"

"You could do no good bye any farther search," interrupted the Earl; "she must either have been found by her father or her brother, or must be far away ere now.--I look upon it as a duty, Hugh, that one of us should remain here this night; and assuredly I ought to go on."

"Enough, enough!" replied Hugh de Monthermer. "Your wish, my lord, is sufficient for me. But what can I do with the men? Two of them belong to my Lord of Ashby,--and where can I stable my horses?"

"Send them all away but your own charger," said the Outlaw. "You are not afraid to stay alone with Robin Hood--or Robert of the Lees, if you like the name better?"

"Not in the least," answered the young gentleman. "I know I am as safe with you, bold Robin, as in my own castle. Take them then with you, fair uncle; and you, sir," he continued, turning to one of the Earl of Ashby's servants, "bear witness to your lord that I have sought this young lady far and near, with all zeal and due devotion. Tell him, moreover, that I have ascertained beyond all doubt--as you yourself have heard--that she has not passed in this direction. Should he himself find her, I trust he will send me a messenger to ease my mind--that is to say, to save me the trouble of farther pursuit."

"Well, then, I will away," said the old Earl, "for the sun is getting far down already. I sleep to-night at Stapleford, and to-morrow go on for Derby. Follow me quickly, Hugh. So long as you are in Sherwood with our good friends here, you are safe, but I will leave you half a score of archers at Stapleford, and, should I find the roads dangerous, will send you some spears from Derby. If you learn by to-night's tidings that war has already begun, arrange with bold Robin for a levy of as many yeomen as possible, and let them march to join me wherever I am making head."

Thus saying, the Earl, putting his foot in the stirrup, flung himself lightly into the saddle, gave a brief order for the attendants who had followed his nephew to fall in with the rest of his train; and, once more grasping the hand of the Outlaw, without forgetting his companion, Little John, he rode away, taking, as his parting benison, a loud cheer from the band of yeomen.

"Now, my young lord," said Robin, when he had gazed for a moment or two after the gallant old Earl, "you seem fatigued and exhausted after your day's ride. I will warrant you, you have not broken bread since----"

"Since five o'clock this morning," replied Hugh de Monthermer; "but that matters not, I am more anxious than tired, and care little for food."

"Nonsense, nonsense, young gentleman," cried Robin, taking him by the arm, and drawing him towards the table. "Here, some one hold the horse. A slice of yon baron, though it be, like a timid counsellor, neither hot nor cold, together with a cup of Bordeaux wine, will do you good, young sir."

"Nay," replied Hugh, "give me one of those barley cakes and the wine you speak of. That is all I want. Where do we rest to-night?"

"Some three miles hence, on the way to Nottingham," answered the forester, "and if you will not sup now, you must have a rere supper there."

While Hugh de Monthermer broke the barley cake and drank the wine, Robin spoke a few words, in an undertone, to Little John, who replied, laughing, "No fear, no fear; there is plenty of light, dear little souls."

"Nay, but I will have it so," answered his leader, aloud. "Now, my merry men and pretty maids, disperse, and God's blessing be with you. But let it be remembered that if there be a damsel away from her home at sunset, I will reckon with the man that keeps her. They are all under the safeguard of our honour; and we shall lose their sweet faces at our feasts if any evil happens to them.--Those who have sturdy shoulders, clear away all that is left, and let it be given to the poor in the villages round. So do the monks at their gates, and Robin Hood will be as good as a monk, though his gates be the meres of Sherwood. Here, cooks, here is your reward, and let the tapster take the tuns for his pains."

Very rapidly after these words were spoken the numbers on the green began to disperse. Some sauntered down the road, some disappeared amongst the trees, and those that remained made themselves busy in carrying off the platters and trenchers from the table, and piling the whole of the simple dinner-service, stools and all, into some large country carts which stood near. No horses, indeed, were upon the ground, but that of Hugh de Monthermer, and the white charger which had borne the bold forester, and which was still seen under a tree, finishing slowly a trough of oats that had been put down for its consumption.

The boy who had held the beast while Robin was waiting for the Earl of Monthermer, now stood close to his master's side looking up in his face; and, at a sign of the finger, he darted away and led up the steed at a quick pace.

Robin laid his hand upon the urchin's head, saying, "Good boy!" and that word, if one might judge by the smile of the young countenance, was reward enough.

"Now I am ready," said Hugh de Monthermer; and, mounting their horses, they rode away into the wood.

"You will sup better to-night," said Robin, as they went.

"I do not know," replied the young lord; "I am anxious about this young lady, Robin, that is the truth; and anxiety makes but bad sauce to the most savoury food."

"Nay--nay, take heart of grace," said Robin; "I doubt not she is well enough wherever she may be, and it becomes not a gay gentleman to pine for any lady till he knows that she fares hardly."

"Nay, I do not pine," replied Hugh, not liking the term; "methinks I do not look much like a sick crow or a magpie in the moulting season; but still I must feel somewhat anxious, as you would if you had ever seen

her."

"Is she so very beautiful, then?" said Robin Hood, with an arch smile.

"Faith is she!" answered Hugh de Monthermer, "and more than beautiful, though you may think my description savours of extravagance. But it is not so. I have seen others perhaps as beautiful--perhaps more so--but there is that sort of charm about her--that sort of sparkling grace, which is like nothing but the bright morning sunshine, giving fresh loveliness to everything it lights upon."

"Are you sure that the charm is not love?" asked Robin Hood. "But let us talk of other matters. Here we must turn off from the road, and I take you through paths in Sherwood unknown to any justice, either north or south of Trent. Although I could well trust to your knightly honour, and to your regard for the laws of hospitality, yet I must here exact from you a promise, which every one makes who is led where I lead you. It is, that, upon your honour as true man and good knight, everything you see or hear from this spot till I lead you back to the high road again, shall be forgotten as soon as you quit me, and revealed to no one--no, not to your confessor."

The notions which then existed of knightly honour caused Hugh de Monthermer to give the promise exacted from him without the slightest hesitation; and, that having been done, the bold forester led him on through one of those narrow lanes which we have before mentioned, where only one horse could advance at a time. This path continued for about half a mile, and opened out into one of the wildest parts of the forest, through which there seemed to be no track of any kind.

It was not one of those spots properly called coverts--which name was only applied to woods so thick that the branches of the trees touched each other,--but, on the contrary, it was a sort of wild chase, scattered with fine old oaks, and encumbered with an immense quantity of brushwood. There were patches of green grass to be seen here and there,

indeed, and once or twice a sandy bank peeped out amongst the bushes, while two or three large ponds, and a small silver stream appeared glistening at about half a mile's distance from the spot where the horsemen issued forth from the lane.

It was as lovely a forest scene as ever the eye rested upon, for the ground was broken, and a thousand beautiful accidents diversified the landscape. Every here and there a tall mound of earth, sometimes covered with turf, sometimes rounded with brushwood, would rise up, bearing aloft a graceful clump of trees, while the setting sun, pouring its long horizontal rays across the wild track, cast lengthened shadows over the ground below, and brightened all the higher points with gleams of purple light.

Beyond, again, at the distance of not less than two miles and a half, and considerably lower than the spot where the two journeyers stood, reappeared the thicker coverts of the forest, rolling like the waves of a deep green sea in the calm and mellow rays of the departing day, while a slight mist here and there marked out its separate lines, growing fainter and more faint, till some distant objects, like towers and pinnacles--they might be clouds--they might be parts of a far city--closed the scene, and united the earth with the sky.

Here all trace of a road ended, but without the slightest hesitation, bold Robin Hood led the way onward, threading with unerring steps the different green lines which separated one mass of brushwood from another, guiding his companion under one tall bank, and round another high mound, between the bolls of old oaks and across the dancing stream, without even once meeting a check, or having to pause in his whole course through the woody labyrinth.

At length, however, the sun went down, and the twilight just sufficed to show Hugh de Monthermer his way, as they had reached the lowest spot of the chase, and approached a clump of several acres of thick covert. There was a path at one angle by which Robin and his companion

entered, and winding on in darkness for some way--for the trees excluded the whole of the remaining rays--they at length emerged into an open space in the centre, where they could again see, though faintly, the objects around them.

Opposite to the mouth of the road by which they came, was the first building that they had seen upon their ride. It was of a very peculiar architecture, consisting of round stones piled upon one another, and cemented together, being what, I believe, is called rubble, while the windows and doors alone, presented hewn stone lintels and transoms, with short small columns supporting each. A quantity of ivy had grown over the greater part of the building; but there were lights within, and for a moment Robin Hood drew up his horse as if to listen.

"Here," he said, at length, "lived and reigned a Saxon Thane when the trees of Sherwood were yet young. His bones lie in the little chapel behind. The memory of the place has passed away as well as the people that inhabited it, and it has come to be the abode of a child of the same race, when outlawed for the love of his country."

CHAPTER XI.

Two notes, or, as they were then called, mots, upon his horn, formed the only signal that Robin Hood gave of his return; but in an instant those sounds brought forth a head from one of the windows, at the height of about twelve or thirteen feet from the ground. That it was apparently a human head, Hugh could distinguish, and also that it was a very large one, somewhat strangely shaped; but he was not a little

surprised when the body began to follow after, with an extraordinary serpent-like suppleness, till the knees were brought upon the window sill; and then, the feet being swung over, the body was suddenly dropped, and hung against the side of the house, while one hand retained its hold of the stone work, and the other waved, what seemed to be, an odd-looking cap, round and round in the air. The next instant the being who had thought fit to employ this unusual method of descent, let go the grasp of its left hand, and came down upon its feet, bounding up again from the earth like a ball, and cutting a curious caper in the air.

Although well accustomed to all the monsters which were then much sought for in courts and castles, Hugh de Monthermer at first imagined that the creature before him was an enormous ape, so extraordinary was its agility, and such the pliancy of all its limbs. The arms, too, like those of the Simia tribe, were of an extraordinary length, and the one which attached it to the window as it hung from above, seemed to be longer than the whole body. The moment after it descended, however, the young knight was undeceived, for a human voice proceeded from the supposed ape, of remarkable sweetness.

"Ho! Robin, Ho!" it said in English.[3] "So you have come home at length, wicked wanderer. You have been feasting in the forest, I know, and carried off little Harry with you to pamper him on wine and comfits, and left Tangel behind with the women."

"Did I not take thee at Christmas," asked Robin, "and leave Harry behind? It was but fair, Tangel!"

"Ay, but he's the favourite," said the dwarf, "though he can't do half that I can. Pretty looks, Robin, pretty looks! You're like all the world, beauty's fool. Pretty looks are everything! But I'll comb him into worsted when he comes back again."

"Nay; thou wilt not hurt him," replied Robin; "thou lovest him as well as we do, Tangel."

"I love him!" exclaimed the dwarf. "Scurvy little monster of whiteness! I love him not--out upon him! I'll carve his pink cheeks for him, and bore a hole in each of his eyes. Take care what you do with him, Robin, and look well to your meat; for if I find you kinder to him than to me, I'll roast him before a slow fire, baste him in his own fat, and serve him up to you as a barbecued pig. Ha! ha! ha!--that will be fine sport!--Come, give me the horses.--Who have you got here in the purfled jerkin?--Give you good day, sir," and with his cap in his hand, he made a low and grotesque bow to the young lord.

"He will take your horse, my lord," said Robin. "Now let us in," and approaching the door, he shook it with his hand. It was locked, however, and the stout forester was obliged to have recourse to an instrument, in use during many centuries in England, which served the purpose of a knocker. It consisted merely of a large ring with sundry notches in it; and, a small iron bar, hanging beside it by a chain, being rapidly run over the indented surface, produced a sharp and unpleasant sound, which soon called the attention of those within, who enquired who was there.

The door was speedily thrown open at Robin's well-known voice, and Hugh de Monthermer followed his guide through a long dark passage into a room at the back of the house. There were lights in it, though it was vacant; and it was hung with tapestry, which was stained in some places as if with damp, though in general the colours were as fresh as when first the texture was wrought.

"Here, Cicely," said Robin Hood, pausing at the door after his guest had entered, and speaking to a pretty young woman who had given them admission--"Bid them prepare a chamber for this young lord; and hark! tell old Martha--"

The rest of the sentence was lost to the ears of the young gentleman, and after the girl had tripped away, the Outlaw remained upon the ground, apparently in a meditative mood, till at length the sound of

some one singing seemed to rouse him from his reverie. It was a remarkably sweet voice, and the air was one but little known in England at the time, coming from those Southern lands where music had made greater progress than with us.

Robin listened for a moment or two, and then said aloud, though evidently speaking to himself--"It is scarcely just, after all, to punish the innocent for the guilty; and it must be a punishment, though she bears it lightly. I must speak with him first, however."

"Remember, you are not alone, good Robin," said Hugh of Monthermer, unwilling to be a partaker in the Outlaw's counsels.

Robin Hood laughed--"It was ever a fault of mine," he replied, "that my tongue was a false gaoler to my thoughts. One would sometimes fancy I was an old doating woman, to mumble to myself the fragments of half-digested purposes. But come, my lord, you have not supped, I have; and as there is much business to do, I must leave you for a time. I go to see a young friend of yours and mine, in order to hold with him some counsel of importance; and I beseech you, quit not this house till I return, which will be in about two hours' time."

"I will not," answered Hugh, "and in the meantime, rather than sup, I will lie me down and take some rest, having first, with your good leave, seen to the accommodation of my horse."

"Trust him to my people, trust him to my people," replied Robin Hood--"and follow my advice. Take some supper: you may have to ride far to-night, for aught you know; and meat and drink in moderation, is strength, if not courage. Hunger is a sad tamer of stout limbs."

As he spoke, he lighted a small silver lamp at one of the candles, which hung in a large polished brass sconce against the wall, and bidding the young lord follow, he led the way through another of those long narrow passages which occupied so much space in all ancient houses. No doors appeared on either side till a sudden turn to the right

brought them to the foot of a heavy wooden staircase, the steps of which seemed to be composed of solid blocks of wood, piled round a common centre. There was a rope on either hand fastened by stanchions of iron let into the stonework of the wall.

"There," said Robin Hood, giving the young lord the lamp, "if you go up and open the door just before you, at the top, you will find some supper ready. When you are tired, and wish to go to bed, call for Cicely or Tangel, and they will show you the way. I must hasten away, or I may miss my time."

Hugh de Monthermer took the lamp and bidding God speed him for the present, ascended the stairs with a slow step. At the top he found himself in a large sort of vestibule, lighted from one end, and containing three doors; one immediately opposite to him, as Robin had said; another a little farther down, and another upon his left hand; but although the directions of the Outlaw had been very distinct, Hugh de Monthermer paused and hesitated, for he heard the sound of voices speaking within, and the tongues seemed those of women.

Although he was by no means averse to the society of the fair, the young knight imagined that there must be some mistake, as the Outlaw had given him no cause to suppose that any one was waiting for him. After a moment of suspense, however, he approached and knocked; and a voice answered, "Come in, for we have no means of keeping any one out."

The sight that presented itself to Hugh de Monthermer made him pause suddenly in surprise not unmingled with pleasure. The room was a small low-roofed chamber, covered with dark-coloured painted cloth instead of arras, but well lighted, and with a blazing log on the hearth, which might be needed in that old dwelling, notwithstanding the month being May. Although the furniture was ancient even in those times, yet everything was most comfortable according to the usages of the day. The

floor was thickly strewed with dry rushes, and a table was in the midst, on which pretty Cicely was arranging, in haste, a number of dishes, and plates, and drinking-cups.

But it was neither on the maid nor on the table that the eyes of Hugh rested, for in a chair, at some distance from the fire, sat a fair lady, amusing herself with an old embroidery frame, while on two seats somewhat lower, engaged in winding and unwinding silks, sat two girls of about the same age as their mistress, one of whom was evidently the person who had spoken, as her eyes were fixed upon the door, and her pretty little lips still apart.

If the surprise of Hugh de Monthermer was great, that of the party within seemed not less so. The lady at once dropped the embroidery frame, started up and ran towards him with her hands extended, as if she would have cast herself into his arms, exclaiming, with a glowing cheek and sparkling eye--"Hugh!" Then, suddenly stopping herself, she turned her eyes to the ground, and the colour became still brighter in her face than before. She recovered herself in a moment; but neither of the maids of Lucy de Ashby ever jested with their mistress afterwards upon her wearing the colours of the House of Monthermer.

Hugh, however, did not hesitate, but advancing, with a quick step, took the hand that was held out to him, and pressed his lips upon it. "Lucy!" he cried, "have I then found you at last?"

"Have you been seeking me, my lord?" asked Lucy de Ashby, glancing her eyes timidly towards the two maids; "I trust you are come to deliver us--though, to say sooth," she added, with a gay look, "we have been so well treated in the forest, and so thoroughly despaired of gaining our freedom, that we had well-nigh chosen ourselves husbands from the bold rangers."

"You might do worse, Lady," said Cicely, scarcely liking the subject to be jested with; "there are honest hearts in the forest!"

"Doubtless, my good girl," replied Lucy; "but you forget, we have not tried them yet. Now, my good Lord Hugh, let us know, in a word, whether you are come to deliver us or not.--On my life, one would think that he was the man who goes about preaching patience: to keep a lady one whole minute without an answer!"

"Nay," replied Hugh, "I am so surprised to find you here, that my wonder must have time to cool. But, in reply to your question, fairest lady, I must own, though I certainly came into Sherwood to seek you, I came not here to deliver you."

"Why, how is that, Sir Knight?" demanded Lucy, a shade of disappointment coming over her bright countenance, at the thought of being detained longer in the forest; for, however gaily we may bear it, the loss of liberty is always painful, and the exercise of that gift which has brought so much misery to every man--our own free will--is not the less dear under any circumstances--"Why, how is that? Surely, if you came to seek me, you came to deliver me! You speak in riddles but to tease me a little longer."

"Nay, Heaven forbid!" replied Hugh de Monthermer, "that I should tease you at all! But, to explain what I mean, I must tell you the whole story."

"Oh, tell it, tell it then!" cried the lady; "that is quite according to every ballad in the land! The knight always finds the lady in the wood, and then narrates his lamentable history."

"Mine shall be a short one, at all events," said Hugh, and he proceeded, as briefly as possible, to relate all that had occurred to him during the last six-and-thirty hours.

Every one, of course, in this world tells his story in his own way, and his manner of telling it is not alone modified by his own peculiar character, but by the circumstances in which he is placed, and the passions that are within him at the moment. This truism may be trite

enough, but it was applicable to the case of Hugh de Monthermer, for his own sensations at the time affected the method of telling his tale even more than any of the peculiarities of his own nature. The feelings that he entertained towards Lucy de Ashby--the difficulty of restraining those feelings, and yet the fear of suffering them to appear too openly, circumstanced as he then was, all modified his history, and made it very different from what it would have been had he been indifferent to the person whom he addressed. Love, however, has ever been considered a skilful teacher of oratory, and without any actual intention of doing so, every word that Hugh de Monthermer uttered showed the fair girl beside him something more of the passion which she already knew was in his heart.

He paused but little upon the anxiety of her father, or the indignation of her brother, but he detailed at length the whole of his own course while seeking her, the grief he had felt, the apprehensions he had entertained, and the disappointment he had experienced when frustrated in his endeavours; and, although there appeared from time to time flashes of his own gay and sparkling disposition--though he told his tale jestingly, with many a light figure and playful illustration, there was an undertone of deep tenderness running through the whole, which showed Lucy that the sportive tone was but as a light veil cast over the true feelings of his heart.

The reader need hardly be told, after the traits that we have given--which, though they be few, were significant enough--that Lucy was not by any means displeased with the discoveries which she made in Hugh de Monthermer's bosom. That she loved him we have not attempted to conceal, but the history of her love is somewhat curious, and worth inquiring into, as it displays some of the little secrets of the human heart.

Lucy de Ashby was by no means a coquette; her nature was too tender--too sensitive, her mind too imaginative for cold arts. She knew that she was beautiful, it is true; indeed she could not doubt it, for she

saw it in every mirror, and heard it from every tongue; but she was far less anxious for admiration than for love. Indeed, to persons not naturally vain, who aim at higher objects than merely to please the eye, personal admiration, although they may know that they deserve it, may sometimes become even burdensome. Lucy, for one, was tired of hearing that she was beautiful, and to tell her that she was so, in whatever courtly forms the intimation might be conveyed, was no way of winning her favour. It was the general mode, however adopted by the young nobles who frequented the Court of England, and were admitted to her father's house. They thought they could never too much praise her loveliness or extol her grace. It was the custom of the day, the only mode of winning lady's love then known; and the world were much surprised to find that for one or two years she remained very cold and insensible to all who strove by such means to raise a warmer feeling in her bosom.

During the greater part of that time the House of Monthermer had been at open enmity with that of Ashby, and Hugh himself was the object of many a bitter and an angry speech on the part both of her father and her brother. Now it may seem that the fair lady was a little animated by the spirit of contradiction, when we acknowledge that the hatred which her family entertained towards the young Lord Hugh was one of the first causes that created in Lucy's bosom a feeling in his favour. But the reader must not forget, Lucy had no reason to suppose that the animosity of her family was well-founded, or their harsh censure just. On the contrary, from every indifferent person whom she was inclined to respect and esteem, she heard the highest praises of him whom her father and brother delighted to decry. She saw, also, that they themselves had no slight difficulty in finding matter for blame in the conduct of the rival house; and when occasionally the two families met, either at the Court or at any of the chivalrous pageants of the day, it seemed to her that in demeanour, at least, Hugh de Monthermer was very different from that which the voice of angry passion represented him. All these things sunk into her mind; and although she said nothing upon the subject, but remained equally silent when he was condemned

or praised, the conviction forced itself upon her that he was the object of injustice; and where is the woman's heart without that latent chivalry which instantly takes arms in favour of the oppressed?

Thus went on the history of Lucy's love till that reconciliation was brought about between the families, of which we have already spoken. Circumstances then led them into frequent communication, and a great change took place in her father's opinion of the young lord. He made no longer any difficulty of acknowledging that Hugh was one of the most distinguished gentlemen of the day; and though her brother Alured did not forget his enmity so easily--for in his case there was a touch of envious jealousy in it--yet he suffered the motives too plainly to appear; and Lucy, seeing, esteeming, and admiring, had always ready a champion in her own breast to defend the cause of Hugh de Monthermer. Had anything been wanting to lead her onward to that state in which the whole heart is given--where there is no retreat, and where all other sensations are swallowed up in love--some of the events of the first few months succeeding the reconciliation of the two families would have speedily furnished it.

For some time Hugh de Monthermer paid only such attention to Lucy de Ashby as the courtesy of the day required. She was certainly surprised--perhaps a little disappointed, that the only man for whose admiration she had ever wished, should not at once be captivated by her beauty, as others had been. Many a woman, under such circumstances, would have thrown out every lure, would have used every art to win his attention; but Lucy did not so: she retired to her own chamber, and fell into deep meditation. "He may love some one else," she said to herself, and as she said so, she felt inclined to weep; but she repressed her tears, and determined never to let her thoughts rest for a moment upon him again. She chid herself for unwomanly rashness, even for the preference she felt; but with poor Lucy the time for good resolutions or self-chiding to be of any avail, was past. She loved already--loved truly, and those who have so loved, well know that, like the garment imbued with the

blood of Nessus, true affection, when once it clothes the human heart, can never be torn off, and that even in the effort to do so the very veins and flesh are rent away along with it.

She was not destined long to suffer any doubt, however: a single day brought her relief, and changed sorrow into joy. The Earl of Monthermer and his nephew were then at her father's castle of Lindwell, enjoying the sports of the brown autumn, and cementing the newly-revived friendship between the two houses in the intimate communication of domestic life. The day after she had indulged in the melancholy thoughts, and made all the vain resolutions, and addressed to her own heart the idle reproaches we have mentioned, Hugh and Lucy were seated next each other at the table, and at first their conversation was cold and commonplace. At length, however, as so often happens, something was said--some accidental word--some mere casual observation--some sentence, apparently as light as air, but accompanied by smile, or glance, or tone, indicative of feelings deeper than the words implied, and the heart of each seemed to open to the other as if by magic.

I recollect once visiting a house where the scenery around appeared tame and monotonous enough. The rooms were stately, fine pictures hung upon the walls, and many objects of art and interest lay scattered round, but still when one looked forth there was nothing beautiful before the eye, till suddenly, in a dark, dull chamber, in a remote part of the mansion, a servant drew back a blind from a small window, and one of the most magnificent scenes in nature burst instantly upon the view.

What it was that Lucy de Ashby said to Hugh de Monthermer I know not, but it drew back the veil from her heart and showed him a new world, such as he had never dreamt was near at hand. He had certainly not been without warm admiration of her beauty: he had felt its power, and somewhat dreaded its effects; but the master spell was now added, and the harmony between her person and her mind left him no power to resist. His whole manner towards her changed at once; admiration and

regard were thenceforward in every look and in bright interchange of thoughts and feelings; and when Lucy laid her head down upon her pillow, her brain reeled with the memory of a thousand sweet sensations crowded into the short space of a few hours.

Her brother was absent--there is reason to believe purposely--and on the following day her father's horse fell in the chase and injured him, though not dangerously. It was Hugh who brought her the tidings, who soothed her apprehensions, who calmed and consoled her, and every hour added something to the intimacy that grew up between them. They rode forth in the woods together, they walked side by side upon the battlements; and, though the words of love that might be spoken, were all vague and shadowy, yet each understood the feelings of the other; and Hugh only waited till the friendship of their houses should be more confirmed, to demand the hand of Lucy as a new bond of union between their families.

The man who delays even for an hour in love is a fool, or has no experience. The latter was the case of Hugh de Monthermer. Had he asked for Lucy de Ashby then, the old Earl would have granted her to him at once; but in a few days Alured de Ashby returned, bringing his cousin Richard with him; and it soon became evident to the lover that the favourable moment was past for the time.

Such is the history of the affection which had grown up between Hugh and Lucy to the time when last they parted. Some months had intervened, and it may well be supposed that it was not a little soothing to the sweet girl's heart to mark that strain of tenderness which, as we have said, ran through the whole of Hugh de Monthermer's story. So pleasant was it, indeed, that for a short time the disappointment of her hopes of deliverance was forgotten in the gratification of other feelings. She paused and mused; but at length her mind reverted to the more painful consideration. She at once saw, when she reflected on all he had just told her, that Hugh was bound by his promise to the Outlaw to take no step whatever to set her free. He had sworn that all he beheld and

heard there should be to him as if it were not; and Lucy herself had too much of the chivalrous spirit in her nature to wish that one she loved should ever evade, even were it possible, the sincere execution of an engagement he had formed. She looked in his face for a moment or two in silence, and in the end asked him simply, "What then do you intend to do?"

"Good faith, dear lady," he replied, "I see but one thing to be done, which is, as I cannot take you away with me, to stay here with you; and, if this terrible enchanter of Sherwood will not set you free, why we must spend our days here under the green leaves, chasing the wild deer, and singing the hours away."

Lucy smiled gaily, for the images were not unpleasant ones that Hugh de Monthermer's reply called up. She thought it would be a very happy life; and if those sad bonds of circumstances which continually tie down the noblest energies of the mind and the best, and strongest feelings of the heart had permitted it, she would willingly have cast off high rank and station, and all the gawds and gewgaws of society, to remain with Hugh de Monthermer in the forest of Sherwood and pass the rest of her days in low estate.

His reply threw her into a new fit of musing, however, and their farther conversation was interrupted, for the moment, by the pretty maid, Cicely, calling their attention to the supper, which was spread upon the table. The two lovers sat down side by side; Lucy's maidens took their seats opposite, and the meal passed over partly in gay, partly in serious conversation; but, between Lucy and Hugh, there was of course a degree of restraint from the presence of others, which was sufficiently evident to those who caused it.

There is a general sympathy in every woman's heart for love, but, of course, that sympathy is more active in the young, who feel, than in the old, who only remember the passion. With unchilled hearts ready to thrill at the first touch, Lucy de Ashby's two maids having so lately been

enlightened fully in regard to their mistress's feelings for Hugh de Monthermer, were only anxious for an excuse to leave the lady and her lover alone; and not finding any ready to their hand, they dispensed with all pretexts whatever, first the one and then the other quitting the room, and betaking themselves to the sleeping-chamber which had been assigned to them and their lady.

There can be but little doubt that Lucy was well satisfied with their departure; but yet a sort of timid panic took possession of her, and she had well-nigh called them back. The next moment she smiled at her own fears, and would have given a great deal to renew the conversation, which had come to a sudden halt, upon some indifferent topic; but words were wanting, and Lucy sat with the colour a little heightened in her cheek, and the silky fringes of her soft dark eyes drooping so as to veil half their light.

Hugh de Monthermer gazed at her with admiration and love, and although he felt very certain that she was not without her share of tenderness towards him, he determined to make "assurance double sure," and not lose the opportunity which fortune had presented.

"Well, Lucy," he said, breaking the long pause at length, "as I cannot deliver you, shall I remain with you to protect you?"

"Assuredly!" she answered, covering a certain degree of agitation with a gay look, "you are a faithless knight, even to dream of quitting a lady in this enchanted castle! Did you not say that you were to stay here; and that we were to live a woodland life--chasing the wild deer, and making the groves and dells echo with our horns? I declare it is quite delightful to think of!"

"And you are to be my lady, and I am to be your knight?" asked the lover. "Is it not so, Lucy?"

"To be sure!" replied his fair companion. "I will have you my most devoted servant, as in duty bound. You shall train my hawks for me, and teach my dogs, and ride by my side, and be ever ready to couch your lance in my defence. In short, as I have said, you shall be my very humble servant on all occasions."

"And nothing more?" inquired Hugh de Monthermer. "May I not sometimes have a dearer title?" Lucy blushed deeply and was silent, and Hugh de Monthermer went on; "May I not be called your lover, Lucy?--may I not some time, perhaps, be called your husband? Dear girl," he continued, taking her hand, which trembled a little in his,--"Dear girl, if we are to remain here, depend upon it, we shall soon have to look for a priest in the forest. What say you, Lucy, shall it be so?"

Lucy crushed a bright drop through her eyelashes, and giving her pretty brow a wild fawnlike shake, she turned her glowing face towards him with a look of gay daring, saying, "I dare say we could find one, Hugh, if it were needful."

Her lover drew her somewhat nearer to him, whispering a few low words in her ear.

"Hush, hush!" she said, "be satisfied, I will tell you no more!"

"But listen, dearest Lucy," said Hugh de Monthermer, "we have here a few moments to ourselves: it may be long ere we have the same again. It is right that we should clearly understand how we are placed. I love you, dearest Lucy, as well as woman was ever loved! Do you believe me?"

"I dare say you do," replied Lucy, laughing, "I think it is quite natural you should--How could you help yourself, poor youth!"

"And you love me as much, Lucy," added the young knight; "Is it not so?"

"No!" cried Lucy, "I hate you! You know it quite well, and I shall hate you still more if you tease me about it!"

"Hate me in the same way ever," replied Hugh de Monthermer, kissing her cheek, "and I will forgive you, my sweet mistress.--But the case is this, Lucy," he added, in graver tone; "there are difficulties and dangers before us. Why they have brought you here, I do not know. How long they may keep you, I cannot tell; but the moment that I dare to leave you, I must march with all speed towards Wales. Battle and peril are in my way--perhaps I may never see you more. A thousand evils may occur, a thousand dark mischances may separate us for long, if not for ever, and I would fain----"

"Say no more, Hugh, say no more," cried Lucy, at once rendered serious by his words; "I do love you, if it will make you happy to hear it. I have never loved any but you--There, I can say no more, can I?"

Hugh rewarded the confession as such an acknowledgment may best be rewarded; but still he went on, after a few minutes, in the same tone.

"No one can tell dear girl," he proceeded, "what events the future may have in store; but I see clouds gathering in the sky, portending storms which may well dash down the blossom of our hopes, if we put it not under shelter. What I mean is, that we must not fancy our affection will meet with no opposition."

"But my father loves you, Hugh," exclaimed Lucy; "he loves, esteems, and praises you."

"But your brother does not," replied her lover. "It is in vain, Lucy, that I have sought his regard, by every honest means that a true heart could take. Still he loves me not; and I am apprehensive lest in the coming events some cause of dissension should arise, which might induce him, and perhaps your father also, to endeavour to separate us for ever."

Lucy bent down her eyes thoughtfully, and remained for several moments without answering. "One cannot resist the will of a father," she said, at length, "but I am not bound to obey the will of a brother. What is it you would have me to do, Hugh?--I am in a foolish mood for complying," she added, with a smile. "I know not what you men would do, if we women did not sometimes become as soft as wax when the sun shines on it."

Hugh de Monthermer paused, for there was a strong temptation at his heart, and, to say the truth, he could scarcely resist it. He saw that Lucy was in a yielding mood--he saw that, taking advantage of the opportunity, he might, perhaps, win her even to give him her hand at once. There were excuses for such a step, which, probably, no other moment would furnish. In a situation of danger and captivity, where she required the protection of one invested with some sacred right--far from her own relatives, and having every reason to believe that her father would approve her choice, a thousand motives for yielding to such a request might easily be urged; and when pleaded by the voice of love would doubtless prevail.

These were strong temptations to Hugh de Monthermer, whose heart was not of the most icy nature; but, on the other hand, there were those chivalrous feelings of honour in which he had been educated, which but too few, indeed, of the nobles of his own day entertained, but which were rooted in his mind as principles that even passion could not overthrow. He demanded of himself, Would it be honourable? would it be just?--Treated with kindness and trust as he had lately been by the Earl of Ashby, ought he not to return confidence for confidence, and boldly ask her father for Lucy's hand without taking advantage of her unprotected situation to induce her to grant what might otherwise be refused?

"It is like stealing a treasure," said Hugh to himself, "which we have found by chance, but which we know belongs to another man."

Lucy looked up, wondering that he did not reply; and her lover, believing that he risked nothing to show her both the passion which was in his heart, and the principles which restrained that passion, answered, at length, "Dear girl, I am sorely tempted--tempted to ask you to be mine at once--tempted to ask you to send for that same priest we talked of but now, and to give me this fair hand before we quit these greenwood shades."

"Nay, nay, Hugh," cried Lucy, colouring brightly.

"Hear me, Lucy," said her lover; "I only said I was sorely tempted; but I know I must not yield. Yet one thing, Lucy, I may seek, and that fairly, for it is what I would ask were we now in the midst of the gayest hall,--ay! or in that sweet oriel window of your father's castle, where we have whiled away so many an hour with idle words that covered deeper thoughts within. Will you promise to be mine?--Will you promise to be mine whatever betide!"

Lucy gazed somewhat sadly in his face--"Sooner or later, Hugh," she said; "sooner or later, I will. I must not resist my father's will. If he oppose, I must obey so far, as to deny you for the time; but never--believe me, Hugh, for I promise by all I hold most sacred--never shall this hand rest as a bride in that of another man. They can but send me to a convent; and that my father will not do, for I know that often, when my brother's rash mood frets him and brings a cloud over the calm evening sunshine of his days, he finds a comfort in my presence, which he would not willingly be without."

"But, dear Lucy," said Hugh, "were your father dead, might not your brother doom you to the dark cold shade of the cloister?"

"He cannot, Hugh--he dare not!" replied Lucy. "He has no power. The lands I hold are not from him, nor from the King of England. However, they might strip me of them, Hugh, it is true, and Lucy de Ashby might be a dowerless bride, but----"

"But the more welcome, dearest Lucy!" replied Hugh. "Would that your father even now would give me this fair hand, with nothing on it but the ring that makes you mine! and should the time ever come when, after his death, your brother opposes our union, but bring me that sweet smile, and the kind word, 'Yes,' at the altar, and I shall think my Lucy dowered well enough."

"It is sad, Hugh," said Lucy, "even to look forward to future joys when one of those we love shall be no longer here; and, therefore, I will still trust that my father's eyes may see our wedding, and his voice give us a blessing. But my proud brother, Alured, shall never stand between you and me.--Hark! there are steps upon the stairs!" she exclaimed; "before they come, let me bind myself by bonds that cannot be broken.--I promise you that, sooner or later, I will be yours, Hugh; and that I will never be the bride of another; so help me Heaven at my need!"

CHAPTER XII.

All the principal streets of the old town of Hereford were thronged with personages of various conditions and degrees, towards the evening of one of those soft, but cloudy summer days, when the sun makes his full warmth felt, but without the glare which dazzles the eye when he shines unveiled upon the world. That street, however, to which we shall conduct the reader, was narrow, so that not more than three or four horsemen could ride abreast, and yet it was one of the best in the town. But, in reality, the space for passengers was much wider than it seemed; for, as was then very common, especially upon the frontiers of Wales, one half of the ground-floor of the houses was taken up by a long, open

arcade, which sheltered the pedestrians from the rain at some periods of the year, and from the heat at others. From the first floors of these houses--just high enough to allow a tall horse, mounted by a tall man with a lance in his hand to pass, without striking the head of the cavalier or the weapon he carried--projected long poles, usually gilt; and suspended therefrom appeared many of the various signs which are now restricted to inns and taverns, but were then common to every mansion of any importance.

Down this street, and underneath innumerable symbols of swans, and horses, and eagles, and mermaids, and falcons, and doves, and of all those heterogeneous mixtures of birds, beasts, and fishes, which the fertile fancy of man ever confounded, were riding, at the time I speak of, various groups of horsemen, while ever and anon the progress of one party or another would be stopped by some man, woman, or child, darting out from the arcade at the side, and holding a conversation, short or long, as the circumstances might be, with one of the equestrians.

Amongst other groups in the gay and animated scene, was one which remained ungreeted by any of the good people of the town, but which was suffered to pass along uninterrupted till it reached a second-rate inn, called the Maypole. It consisted of four human beings and three beasts--namely, three men and a woman, two horses, and a sleek, vicious-looking mule. On one of the horses was mounted a tall sturdy man in the guise of a servant; on the other was evidently a fellow-labourer in the same vineyard; but he was not alone, for on a pillion behind him appeared a female from, covered with a thick veil which shrouded the face, so that it was impossible to see whether there was beauty beneath or not, although the figure gave indications of youth and grace which were not to be mistaken.

Jogging along upon the mule, with his legs hanging down easily by the side of the animal, and his fat stomach resting peacefully upon the saddle, was a jolly friar clothed in grey, with his capuche thrown back,

the sun not being troublesome, and a bald head--the glistening smoothness of which had descended by tradition even to Shakspeare's days, and was recorded by him in his Two Gentlemen of Verona--peeping out from a narrow ring of jet black hair, scarcely streaked with grey.

His face was large and jovial, which, in good sooth, was no distinction in those times between one friar and another; but there was withal a look of roguish fun about the corners of his small grey eyes; and a jeering smile, full of arch satire, quivered upon his upper lip, completely neutralizing the somewhat sensual and food-loving expression of the under one, which moved up and down every time he spoke, like a valve, to let out the words that could never come in again. Indeed, he seemed to be one of those easy-living friars who, knowing neither sorrow nor privation in their own persons, appeared to look upon grief and care with a ready laugh and a light joke, as if no such things in reality exist. His rosy gills, his double chin, and his large round ear, all spoke of marrow and fatness; and, indeed, at the very first sight, the spectator saw that he was not only a well-contented being, but one who had good reason to be so.

Just as they reached the entrance of the tavern which we have mentioned, the friar, by some mismanagement, contrived to get his mule's hind quarters towards the servant, who was riding singly on horseback, and by a touch of the heel, given, apparently, to make the beast put itself into a more convenient position for all parties, he produced a violent fit of kicking, in the course of which the horseman received a blow upon the fleshy part of his thigh, which made him roar with pain. The seat upon the vicious beast's back was no easy one, but yet the fat monk kept his position, laughing heartily, and calling his mule a petulant rogue, while he held him by his left ear, or patted his pampered neck. As soon as the fit was done, he rolled quietly off at the side, and looking up to his companion, saw, or appeared to see, for the first time, the wry faces which the servant man was making.

"Bless my heart!" he cried, "has he touched thee, the good-for-nothing rogue? I will chastise him for it soundly."

"If he have not broke my leg it is not his fault," replied the man, dismounting, and limping round his horse; "and you have as great a share in it, mad priest, for bringing his heels round where they had no business to be."

"Nay," rejoined the friar, "I brought not his heels round, he brought them himself, and me along with them. It was all intended to cast me off; so the offence is towards myself, and I shall punish him severely. He shall have five barley-corns of food less for his misbehaviour."

"Psha!" said the serving-man, looking up at the inn. "You are jesting foully, friar; I am sorry I let you join us. Is this the hostel you boasted had such good wine? It seems but a poor place for such commendation."

"Thou shalt find the liquor better than in any house in Hereford," replied he of the grey gown; "whether you choose mead, or metheglin, or excellent warm Burgundy, or cool Bordeaux. Taste and try--taste and try; and if you find that I have deceived you, you shall cut me into pieces not an inch square, and sow me along the high road! There is good lodging, too.--Canst thou not trust a friar?"

The man grumbled forth some reply not very laudatory of the order to which his fat friend belonged; and in a few minutes after, the whole party were seated in a hall, which, for the time being, lacked other tenants. The usual hour of supper was over, and in many a hostelry of those days the wayfarers would have found no food in such a case, unless they brought it with them. But the host was a compassionate man, and, moreover, knew right well the twinkle of the jolly friar's eye, so that, for old friendship's sake, many a savoury mess was speedily set before them, together with a large flagon of wine, which fully bore out the character that had been given to it by the friar as they rode along.

Under the influence of such consolations, the serving-man forgot his bruise; and the lady, laying aside her veil, shewed a pretty face, with which the reader is in some part acquainted, being none other than that which, once happy and bright, graced the door of the little village inn under the name of Kate Greenly. There was some sadness upon that fair countenance--the cheerful smile was gone, although there was a smile of a different character still left. The freshness, the ease, the lightness, were all wanting; though there was greater depth of thought and feeling in the expression than during the pleasant days of village sport and girlish coquetry. The rough touch of passion had brushed the bloom from the fruit, and Kate Greenly, in look at least, was three or four years older than a few weeks before.

As she put aside her veil to take part in the meal, the eye of the friar fixed upon her, till she reddened under his gaze, looking half angry, half abashed; but the moment after, the colour became deeper still, when he said, "Methinks, fair lady, I have seen that sweet face before."

"Perhaps so," she replied--"I cannot tell. There's many a wandering friar comes to my father's door; but I heed them not, good sooth."

The friar laughed, answering gaily--

"Beauty, fair girl, is like the sun--
  Is marked by all, but marketh none."

"Try some of these stewed eels, pretty one; they are worthy of the Wye, whose waters have no mud to give them a foul flavour. Try them--try them--they are good for the complexion: and now, Master Serving-man, what think you of the wine? Did you ever taste better out of the spare tankard which the butler hideth behind the cellar door?"

The serving-man was forced to admit that he had seldom drunk such good liquor, and gradually getting over the ill humour which had been sharpened by a lurking suspicion that the heels of the mule had been turned towards him by human agency rather than the brute's own obstinacy, enjoyed his supper, and laughed and talked with the friar till the wine seemed to mount somewhat into the brain of both.

In the meanwhile, the light-o'-love, Kate Greenly, sat by for some three quarters of an hour, melancholy in the midst of mirth. The thoughts of home had been called up in her heart by the monk's words--the thoughts of home and happy innocence! and she now found that in giving up every treasure with which Heaven had gifted her lot, for one trinket that, she could not always wear upon her hand, she had made a mighty sacrifice for an uncertain reward. The only object that could console her was away; and after enduring for the space of time we have mentioned the pangs of others' mirth, she rose, and said she would seek her chamber, as they had to proceed early.

The two serving-men sat idly at the table, leaving her to find her way alone, for they reverenced but little their master's leman; but the jovial fat friar started up from his seat with an activity which he seemed little capable of, saying, "Stay, stay, pretty one--I will call my host or hostess to you. They are worthy, kind people, as ever lived," and he walked side by side with her towards the door.

Had the eyes of her two companions been upon her, they would have seen her start as she was quitting the room with the friar; but their looks were directed to the tankard which was passing between them, and in a moment after, the rich full voice of the grey gown was heard calling for the host and hostess. In another instant he rolled back into the room, and resuming his place at the table, did as much justice as any one to the good wine of the Maypole.

"Here's to thy lord, whosoever he may be!" cried the friar, addressing the serving-man whom his mule had kicked. "God prosper his good deeds, and frustrate his bad ones, if he commits any!"

"I'll not drink that," replied the worthy who had carried Kate Greenly behind him. "I say, God prosper my master, and all his works--good, bad, and indifferent. I have no business to take exceptions."

"Tut, man, drink the toast, and sing us a song!" cried he of the grey gown.

"Sing first, thyself, fat friar," answered the serving-man.

The friar rejoined, "That I will!" and after taking another deep draught, he poured forth, in full mellow strains, the well-known old song,

"In a tavern let me die,
And a bottle near me lye,
That the angelic choir may cry,
God's blessing on the toper!" etc.

The song was much applauded, and as both the friar's companions were now sufficiently imbued with drink to be ready for any species of jollity, the same musical propensity seized upon them both in turn, and they poured forth a couple of strains, which, if they could be found written down in the exact terms in which they were sung, might well be considered as invaluable specimens of the English poetry of that early age. As they had no great tendency to edification, however, and contained more ribaldry than wit, the gentle render will probably excuse their omission in this place.

While thus with mirth and revelry three out of the personages whom we saw arrive at the inn passed more than one hour of the night, the fourth was ushered to a chamber hung with dark-painted cloth, while a

lamp placed in the window shewed a deep recess projecting over the street, and making, as it were, a room within the room. The hostess accompanied Kate Greenly to her apartment, and for some time bustled about, seeing that all was in order, much to the poor girl's discomfort. In vain she assured the good landlady that she had all she wanted; in vain she expressed weariness and a desire to retire to bed: still the hostess found something to set to rights, some table to place, some stool to dust, while ever and anon she declared that her girls were slatterns, and her chamberlain a lazy knave. At length she turned towards the door, and Kate Greenly thought that she was going to be freed from her presence; but it was only to call for her husband, and to tell him, at the top of her voice, that he was "wonderful slow."

The poor girl could bear it no longer, but approaching the deep recess, where the lamp stood in the window, she mounted the two little steps, which separated it from the rest of the room, and standing close to the light, unfolded a paper which she held in her hand. At first she could scarcely see the words which were written therein, but shading her eyes with her hand, she gazed intently on the lines, and read,--

"Return to your father; leave him not broken-hearted with shame and sorrow! If you are willing to go back, I will soon find means; for I have more help at hand than you wot of. Say but one word to the hostess, and ere daylight to-morrow you shall be on the way to Barnesdale. As I know the whole, so I tell you that the last hope is before you. If you go back you may have peace and ease, though you have cast away happiness; if you go forward, you may have a few hours of joy, but a long life of misery, neglect, destitution, and despair, without the hope of this world or the hope of the next.

"THE FRIAR."

Kate trembled very much, and her whole thoughts seemed to refuse all direction or control; but at that moment the host of the Maypole himself appeared, bearing a small silver chalice of warm wine, and a plate filled with many-coloured comfits.

"I pray you, taste the sleeping-cup," he said, approaching his fair guest; and as she mechanically followed the common custom of the day in taking the cup, putting a few comfits in, and raising it for an instant to her lips, she saw the eyes of both her companions fix upon her countenance with a look of interest and inquiry, and perceived at a glance that they also had, in some way, been made acquainted with her history.

The burning glow of shame--the first time that she had felt it fully--came into Kate Greenly's cheek, but it only roused her pride; and instead of trampling that viper of the human heart under her feet, after a moment's pause to recover herself, she said, with the look and air of a queen--

"I want nothing more. You may go! If I want aught else, I will call."

The host and hostess retired, wishing her good night; but she thought she saw upon the man's lip one of those maddening smiles which say more than words, but do not admit of reply.

The moment they were gone she clasped her hands together, and burst into tears--tears, not calm and soothing; tears, not bitter and purifying; but tears of fierce and passionate anger at meeting, perhaps, kinder treatment than she deserved. Seating herself upon the step to the window, she sobbed for a few minutes with uncontrollable vehemence; and then, starting up, she approached the lamp, and once more read the lines she had received.

They seemed to change the current of her thoughts again, for her eye fixed upon vacancy, the paper dropped from her hand, and once or twice she uttered, in a low, solemn voice, the word "Return!"

"Oh no!" she cried at length, "no; I cannot return. What! return to my father's house, with every object that my eyes could light upon crying out upon me, and telling me what I was once, and what I am now,--to have the jeers and smiles and nods of my companions, and be pointed at as the light-o'-love and the wanton!--to be marked in the walk, and in the church, to be shunned like a leper, to be pitied by those who hate me most, and looked cold upon by those who loved me! No, no, no! I can never return. There is no return in life from any course that we have once taken.--I feel it, I know it now. We may strive hard, we may look back, we may stretch forth our arms towards the place from which we set out; but we can never reach it again, struggle however we may. No, no; I must forward! I have chosen my path, I have sealed my own fate, and by it I must abide!"

She paused and thought for several minutes, and as she did so, it would seem, the fears and apprehensions, the doubts and anxieties, that dog the steps of sin, the hell-hounds that are ever ready to fall upon their prey the moment that lassitude overtakes it on its onward course, seized upon the heart of poor Kate Greenly with their envenomed teeth.

Yes, you may struggle on, poor thing; you may burst away, for an instant, from the fangs that hold, you may get a fresh start and run on, thinking that you have distanced them, but those fell pursuers, Fear and Apprehension, Doubt and Anxiety, are still behind you, and shall hunt you unto death!

They were now, for the first time, tearing the sides of their victim; and the shapes they assumed may be discovered by the words that broke from her in her mental agony--"He will never surely abandon me!--he will never surely ill-treat me! after all that he has promised, after all that he has told me, after all that he has sworn! He will never surely be so base, so utterly base!--and yet why has he not come on with me? Why, after two poor days' companionship, send me on with serving-men? If he needs must to London, why not take me with him?--But no," she continued, soothing herself with fond hopes, "no, it cannot be; he has

some weighty business on hand requiring instant dispatch. Doubtless his journey was too swift and fatiguing for a woman.--Oh, yes, he will come back to me soon.--Perhaps he is already at his castle--perhaps I may see him to-morrow:" and she clapped her pretty hands with joy at the happiness which imagination had called up.

At that moment, however, by one of those strange turns of thought which the mind sometimes suddenly takes, whether we will or not--like a bird struggling away from the hand that would hold it--the image of poor Ralph Harland rose up before her, and the satisfaction she felt at the idea of again seeing her seducer, seemed to contrast itself painfully in imagination with the anguish which he must endure at never beholding more the object of his earliest love, and knowing that she was in the arms of another.

"What," she asked herself, "what would be my own feelings under such circumstances?" and the answer which naturally sprang to her lips from the eager and passionate heart that beat within her bosom, was, "I should kill some one and die!"

The contemplation, however, was too painful; she would think of it no more. Sorrow and repentance had not yet sufficiently taken hold of her, to render it difficult for Kate Greenly to cast away thought with the usual lightness of her nature, and she answered the reproaches of conscience, as usually happens, with a falsehood.

"Oh, he will soon find some one to console him!" she said; and for fear of her own better judgment convicting her of an untruth, she hastened to employ herself on the trifles of the toilet, and to seek in sleep that repose of heart which her waking hours were never more to know. But there was a thorn in her pillow too, and her nights had lost no small portion of their peace.

The following morning dawned bright and clear, and Kate Greenly's state of mind was changed. Fears and apprehensions, self-reproach and regret, had vanished with the shades of night. The stillness, the darkness, the solitude--those powerful encouragers of sad thoughts--were gone; the busy, bustling, sunshiny day was present; she heard songs coming up from the streets, she heard voices talking and laughing below; all the sounds and sights of merry life were around her; and her heart took the top of the wave, and bounded onward in the light of hope. Her only care, as she dressed herself in the morning, was, how she should meet the keen grey eye of the Friar; but that was soon resolved. She would frown upon him, she thought; she would treat him with silent contempt, and doubtless he would not dare to say another word, for fear of calling upon himself chastisement from her two attendants.

She was spared all trouble upon the subject, however, for the friar had departed before daybreak. She had sent him no answer by the hostess, and her silence was answer enough.

After a hasty meal the light-o'-love and those who accompanied her once more set out upon their way, and rode on some fifteen miles down the Wye without stopping. Not that the two serving-men would not willingly have paused, at one of the little towns they passed, to let the fair companion of their journey take some repose; but Kate herself was eager to proceed. Hope and expectation were busy at her heart--hope, that like a moth, flies on to burn itself to death in the flame of disappointment.

At length, upon a high woody bank, showing a bold craggy face towards the river--the reader who has travelled that way may know it, for a little country church now crowns the trees--appeared a small castellated tower, with one or two cottages seeking protection beneath its walls. The serving-man who rode beside her pointed forward with his hand, as they passed over a slight slope in the ground, which first presented this object to their sight, saying, "There is the castle, Madam."

Kate looked forward, and her eyes sparkled; and in a few minutes more they were entering the archway under the building.

The castle was smaller than she expected to see it. It was, in fact, merely one of those strong towers which had been built about a century before, for the protection of the Norman encroachers upon that fair portion of the island, into which the earliest known possessors of the whole land had been driven by the sword of various invaders. Many of these towers, with a small territory round them, had fallen into the possession of the younger sons of noble families; upon the mere tenure of defending them against the attacks of the enemy; and although the incursions of the Welsh upon the English lands were now much less frequent than they had been some time before, the lords of these small castles had often to hold them out against the efforts of other still more formidable assailants.

It mattered not to Kate, however, whether the place was large or small: how furnished or decorated was the same to her. It was *his* castle--*his*, to whom all her thoughts and feelings were now given; and she looked upon it but as the home of love and joy, where all the hours of the future were to be passed.

Her disappointments began almost at the threshold. An old warder who let them in, not only said in a rough tone, that Sir Richard de Ashby had not yet arrived, but gazed over the form of the female visitor with a look of harsh and somewhat sullen displeasure. He murmured something to himself too, the greater part of which she did not hear, but words that sounded like--"This new leman," caught her ear, and made her start, while a thrill of agony indescribable passed through her bosom at the thought of a name which might but too justly be applied to her. The eyes of two or three archers, however, who were hanging about the gate, were upon her, as she knew; and, fancying that the same term might be in their hearts also, she hurried on after the old warder, who said he would show her the chamber which had been prepared for her by his master's orders.

She found it convenient, and fitted up with every comfort, some of the articles being evidently new; and she concluded, with love's eager credulity, that these objects had been sent down to decorate her apartment, and make every thing look gay and cheerful in her eyes. She was well used also; but still, amongst the men who surrounded her, there was a want of that respect, which, although she knew she had fairly forfeited all claim to it, she was angry and grieved not to obtain. She had fancied, in her idle vanity, that the concubine of a man of rank would approach, in a degree at least, to the station of his wife; and she now consoled herself with believing that she could easily induce Richard de Ashby, if not to punish such want of reverence, at least to put a stop to it. But day passed by, after day, without the appearance of him for whom she had sacrificed all; and melancholy memories and vain regrets kept pouring upon her mind more and more strongly, till she could hardly bear the weight of her own thoughts.

At length, one day, towards eventide, she saw, as she wandered round the battlements, which were left unguarded, a small party of horsemen coming up over the hill; and, with impatience which would brook no restraint, she ran down to meet him who, she was convinced, was now approaching. The old warder would have prevented her from passing the gate, but she bade him stand back in so stern and peremptory a tone that he gave way: for few are the minds upon which the assumption of authority does not produce some effect.

Kate Greenly was not mistaken. The party consisted of her seducer, and four or five soldiers, whom he had obtained at Hereford, for the purpose of strengthening his little garrison, war being by this time imminent, and the post that he held considered of some importance.

Richard de Ashby sprang down from his horse to meet her, and kissed her repeatedly, with many expressions of tenderness and affection. It is true, he spoke to her lightly; called her "Pretty one," and used those terms with which he might have fondled a child, but which he would never have thought of employing to a woman he much respected.

To other ears, this might have marked the difference between Kate Greenly's real situation, and that which fancy almost taught her to believe was hers; but poor Kate saw it not; for happiness swallowed up all other feeling. He was with her--he was kind--he was affectionate--she was no longer a solitary being, without love, or joy, or occupation, or self-respect, and that evening, and the next day, and the next, passed over in happiness, which obliterated every sensation of remorse for the past or apprehension for the future.

Gradually, however, a change came over Richard de Ashby; he lost some of his tenderness--he now and then spoke angrily--he would be out on horseback the whole day, and return at night, tired, imperious and irritable. Kate tried to soothe him, but tried in vain. He uttered harsh and unkind words--he laughed at her tears--he turned from her caresses.

It were painful to pursue and recapitulate the very well-known course of the events which, in nine cases out of ten, follow such conduct as she had adopted. The retribution was beginning. The pangs of ill-requited affection, of betrayed confidence, and of disappointed hope, rapidly took possession of the young, light, wilful heart, which had inflicted the same on others; and, in the gentler paroxysms of her grief, Kate would sit and think of young Ralph Harland, and his true love, of the father she had deceived and disgraced, of the happy scenes of her childhood and her youth, her village companions, her innocent sports, the flowers gathered in the early morning, and the Maypole on the green.

Of all these she would think, I say, in the gentler moments of her sorrow, and would sit and weep for many an hour together. But there were other times, when a fiercer and a haughtier mood would come upon her, when disappointed vanity and irritated pride would raise their voice, as well as injured love; and dark and passionate thoughts would pass through her mind, sometimes flashing forth fiery schemes of vengeance, like lightning from a cloud, soon swallowed up in the obscurity again. An angry word, also, would often break from her when

she saw herself trifled with, or neglected, or ill-treated, but it only excited a mocking laugh, or some insulting answer. It seemed, indeed, as if Richard de Ashby took a pleasure in seeing her fair face and beautiful figure wrought by strong passion; for, when he beheld her wrath kindled, he would urge her on, with mirth or taunts, till the fire would flash from her eyes, and then drown itself in tears.

There was still, however, so much of unsated passion yet left in his bosom, as to make him generally soothe her in the end; and, though sometimes Kate's heart would continue to burn for a whole day, after one of these scenes, they generally ended with her face hid on his bosom. The very quickness and fiery nature of her spirit, indeed, gave her charms in his cold, dissolute eyes, which none of the softer and the weaker victims who had preceded her had ever possessed. It kept his sensations alive, amused and excited him, and he treated her as a good cavalier will sometimes treat a fiery horse, which he now spurs into fury, now reins and governs with a strong hand, now soothes and caresses into tranquillity and gentleness.

His servants marked all this, and smiled, and one would turn to another and say, "This has lasted longer than it ever lasted before. She must have some spell upon him, to keep his love for a whole month!" But it was clear to see that, under such constant vehemence and irritation, affection, on her part, at least, could not long endure, or that, as will sometimes happen, love would change its own nature, and act the part of hate.

CHAPTER XIII.

As unpleasant a moment as any in the ordinary course of life is when a conversation with the being we love best--one of the few sweet entrancing resting-places of the heart which fate sometimes affords us in the midst of the ocean of cares, anxieties, sorrows, and trifles, that surrounds us on every side--is interrupted suddenly by some one to whom we are wholly indifferent.

The step upon the stairs, and the knock that followed it at the door, were amongst the most ungrateful sounds that could have struck the ear of Hugh de Monthermer and Lucy de Ashby; and there was no slight impatience in the tone of the former, as he said, "Come in!"

The door opened slowly; but, instead of either of Lucy's maids or pretty Cicely, who waited upon them, the ape-like face and figure of poor Tangel, the dwarf, appeared, beckoning Hugh out of the room with one of his strange gestures.

"What would you, boy?" said Hugh, without rising from his seat.

"I would have you get upon your walking-sticks," replied Tangel, "and come with me."

"I must first know why," answered Hugh de Monthermer. "Go away, good Tangel; I will come presently."

"Nay, you must come now," said the dwarf. "Robin stays for no man; and Robin and the t'other fellow sent me for him of the purfled jerkin. He has matter of counsel for thine ear, though well I wot that it is for all the world like sticking a flower in a cock's tail."

"I see not the likeness, good Tangel," answered Hugh, slowly rising.

"It will soon fall out again," said Tangel. "Counsel, I mean, Sir Man at Arms. What's the wit of giving counsel to a man in a purfled jerkin? But you must come and have it, whether you will or not."

"It must be so, I suppose," answered Hugh. But Lucy held him for a moment by the sleeve, saying, anxiously--

"You will come back, Hugh? You will come back?"

"Think you that I will leave you here now, Lucy?" he asked, with a smile. "No, no, dear Lucy; as I said before, if I take you not with me, I will remain and spend my life in the forest with you."

"Ho, ho!" cried the dwarf, as if he had made a discovery, "Ho, ho! I were better away, methinks."

"We did not wish for you, good Tangel," answered Hugh, laughing. "Lead on, however. Where is your master?"

The dwarf again made a sign, waving one of his long arms in the direction of the stairs, and Hugh de Monthermer, after a word or two more to Lucy de Ashby, in a lower tone, quitted the room, and followed the boy down to the same chamber into which the Outlaw had led him on his first arrival. It was now tenanted by two men--the bold forester, and another, who was standing with his back towards the door. At the step of the young lord, however, the latter turned round, displaying the face of the good franklin, Ralph Harland.

Hugh de Monthermer started; for in the short space which had passed since last he saw him on the village green, a change had taken place in his countenance such as nothing but intense grief can work. Indeed, mortal sickness itself but rarely produces so rapid an alteration; he looked like one of those, whom we read of, stricken with the plague of the fourteenth century, where the warning sign of the coming death was read by others in the face and eyes, before the person doomed was at all aware that the malady had even laid the lightest touch upon them. Of poor Ralph Harland, it might indeed be said, as then of those attacked by the pestilence, "the plague was at his heart."

Hugh de Monthermer instantly took him by the hand, exclaiming, "Good Heaven! Ralph, what ails thee? Thou art ill, my good friend--thou art very ill!"

"Sick in mind, my lord, and ill in spirit," replied Ralph Harland, gloomily, "but nothing more."

"Nay, nay, Ralph," exclaimed Hugh de Monthermer, "you must not speak to me so coldly. We have wrestled on the turf in our boyhood, we have galloped together through the woodland in our youth; I have eaten your good father's bread and drank his wine, and rested my head upon the same pillow with yourself--and Hugh de Monthermer must have a brother's answer from Ralph Harland. What is it ails thee, man? On my honour and my knighthood, if my sword, or my voice, or my power can do you service--But I know, I know what it is," he continued, suddenly recollecting the events of the May-day; and though he was not fully aware of the whole, divining more than he actually knew, by combining one fact with another--"I remember now, Ralph; and I know what is the serpent that has stung thee. Alas, Ralph, that is a wound I have no balm to cure!

"There is none for it on earth," replied Ralph Harland.

"Ay," said Robin Hood, "but though there be none to cure, there may be balm to allay, my lord; and yours must be the hand to give it. I will tell you the truth; we hold here a certain fair young lady, whom, as you see, we treat with all respect. You may ask, why we hold her--why we have taken her from her friends? My lord, one of her noble house has taken from a father's care, a child beloved as she can be; has broken bonds asunder which united many a heart together--parent and child, lover and beloved--has made a home desolate, crushed the hopes of an honest spirit, and made a harlot of a once innocent country girl. This is all bad enough, my lord; but still we seek not for revenge. All that we require is, the only slight reparation that can be made by man. Let her be sent back to her home--let her be given up to her father--let her not be kept awhile

in gaiety and evil, and then turned an outcast upon the bitter, biting world. You, my lord, must require this at the hands of the Earl of Ashby; he only can do that which is right, and to you we look to induce that noble lord to do justice even to us poor peasants."

Hugh de Monthermer paused for a moment or two in thought ere he replied, but he then answered--"I can bear no compulsory message to the Earl, my good friend. What you have done here is but wild justice; this lady never injured you--her father never injured you. You take her unwilling from her home as a hostage for the return of one who went willingly where she did go--who stays willingly where she now is. If she chooses to stay there, who can send her back again? I can do nothing in this, so long as you keep this lady here. Indeed, I tell you fairly, as you have bound me by my honour not to mention what I have seen, I must e'en remain here, too; for my first act as a knight and a gentleman, when I am at liberty, must be to do my endeavour to set her free."

"And as a lover, also," added Robin Hood; "but, my lord, we will spare you a useless trouble; for, let me tell you, that not all the men of Monthermer, and Ashby to boot, would liberate that lady if I chose to hold her. But there is some truth in what you say; and that truth struck me before you uttered it. It was on that account I left you an hour or two ago, and went to seek this much injured young man, to confess to him what I am never ashamed to confess, when it is so, that I have been rash--that I had no right to punish a fair and innocent lady for the fault of a false traitor. To-morrow morning she shall return under your good charge and guidance; but still, my lord, to you I look to demand of the Earl of Ashby that he compel his kinsman both to send back that light-o'-love, Kate Greenly, to her father's house, and to make such poor reparation, in the way of her dowry to a convent, as may at least punish the beggarly knave for the wrong he has committed. I charge you; my lord, as a knight and gentleman, to do this."

"And I will do it," answered Hugh de Monthermer, "since you so willingly set the lady free, whatever be the consequences; and to me they may be bitterer than you think. I will do what you require because my heart tells me it is right, and my oath of chivalry binds me to perform it."

"Ah, my lord!" said Robin Hood, "would the nobles of England but consult the dictates of the heart, and keep that heart unhardened--would they remember the oath of their chivalry, and act as that oath requires, there would be less mourning in the land--there would be more happiness in the cottage, and some reverence for men in high station."

"You are wrong," said Hugh de Monthermer, laying his hand upon the bold forester's arm--"you are wrong, and give more way to common prejudice than I had hoped or expected. There are amongst us, Robin, men who disgrace the name of noble, whose foul deeds, like those of this Richard de Ashby, carry misery into other orders, and disgrace into their own. But vices and follies find ready chroniclers--virtues and good actions are rarely written but in the book of Heaven. One bad man's faults are remembered and talked of, and every one adds, 'He was a noble;' but how many good deeds and kindly actions, how many honourable feelings and fine thoughts remain without a witness and without a record? Who is there that says, This good old lord visited my cottage and soothed me in sickness or in sorrow? Who is there that says, I love this baron, or that, because he defended me against wrong, protected me against trouble, supported me in want, cheered me in adversity? And yet there are many such. I mean not to assert that there are not many corrupt and vicious, cruel and hard-hearted. I mean not to contend that there are any without faults, for every man has some, be be rich or poor. But if the merits and demerits could be fairly weighed, I do believe that the errors of my own class would not be found greater than those of any other, only that our rank serves to raise us, as it were, on a pedestal, that malice may see all flaws, and that envy may shoot at them."

Robin Hood paused, with his eyes bent down upon the ground, making no reply; and Hugh de Monthermer went on a moment after, saying, "At least, do us justice in one point. In this age, and in others gone before, the nobles of England have stood forward against tyranny wherever they found it. Have they ever failed to shed their blood in defence of the rights of the people? Is it not their doing, that such a thing as human bondage is disappearing from the island? We may have vassals, followers, retainers, men who are bound, for the land they hold, to do us service in time of need, but we have no serfs, no theows, as in the olden time, and even villain tenure is passing away. Again, who is it, even at the very present time, that is calling deputies from the ranks of the people to the high parliament of the nation; to represent the rights and interests of those classes which had heretofore no voice in making the laws of the land? I say, it is the nobles of England; and I am much mistaken if, in all times to come, that body of men--though there may be, and ever will be, evildoers amongst them--will not stand between the people and oppression and wrong--will not prove the great bulwark of our institutions, preserving them from all the tempests that may assail them, let the point of attack be where it will."

"Perhaps it may be so," said Robin Hood; "but yet, my good lord, I could wish that persons in high station would remember that, with their advantages and privileges, with wealth, power, and dignity, greater than their fellow-men, they have greater duties and obligations likewise; and, as envy places them where all their faults may be observed, it would be as well if, as a body, they were to remember that each man who disgraces himself disgraces his whole order, and were to punish him for that crime by withdrawing from him the countenance of those upon whom he has brought discredit. When the virtuous associate with the vicious, they make the fault their own; and no wonder that men of high birth, though good men in themselves, are classed together with the wicked of their own order when they tolerate the evildoer, and leave him unpunished even by a frown."

"I cannot but agree with you," said Hugh de Monthermer; "but----"

"Ay, my lord, there is many a but," replied the bold outlaw, after having waited for a moment to hear the conclusion of the young lord's sentence; "and there ever will be a but, so long as men are men, and have human passions and human follies. There was but one in whose life there was no *but*, and Him they nailed upon a tree;" and the outlaw raised his hand, and touched his bonnet, reverently, for he felt deep reverence, however much his words might seem to want it.

Hugh de Monthermer was not inclined to pursue the conversation any farther, and, turning to the young franklin, he said, "I fear, Ralph, that after all the wrong you have suffered from one of my class, you will not be inclined to allow us much merit in any respect; but, believe me, we are not all like him."

"I know it, my lord--I know it," replied Ralph. "If I were ignorant that, as well as the blackest vices which can degrade man, there are to be found in your order the brightest virtues, I should not merit to have known you.--But in good sooth, my lord, my thoughts are not of general subjects just now. One private grief presses on me so hard that I can think of nothing else."

"I would fain have you wean yourself from those remembrances," said his friend. "Nay, shake not your head, I know that it can only be done by banishing all those sights and sounds that are the watchwords of memory, and by seeking other matter for thought. Ay, even matter that will force your mind away from the subject that it clings to, and occupy you whether you will or not. There are stirring times before us, Ralph,--times when the great interests of the state,--when dangers to our liberties and rights may well divide men's attention with private griefs. What say you; will you come with me to the west, and take a part in the struggle that I see approaching?"

"I will follow you right willingly, my lord," replied Ralph Harland, "though I cannot well go with you. I must not forget, in my selfish sorrow, that I have a father who loves me; and whose life and happiness rests upon mine, as I have seen an old wall held up by the ivy which it first raised from the ground. I must speak with him before I go--must bid him adieu, and do what I can to comfort and console him. He will not seek to make me stay, and I will soon follow you; but it shall not be alone, for I can bring you many a heart right willing to fight under the same banner with yourself. Where shall I find you, my good lord?"

"As soon as I have taken this fair lady's orders," said Hugh de Monthermer, "and conducted her whither she is pleased to go, I shall turn my steps direct to Hereford by the way of Gloucester, hoping to overtake my uncle and the good Earl of Ashby, and should I find with him his cousin Richard, he shall render to me no light account of more than one base act."

"Nay, my lord, nay," replied the young franklin, "I do beseech you, quarrel not for me. I know, or at least guess, what dear interests you may peril. But, moreover, though I be neither knight nor noble, there are some wrongs that set aside all vain distinctions, and I do not despair of the time coming when I shall find that base traitor alone to give me an answer. When that moment arrives, it will be a solemn one; but I would not part with the hope thereof for a king's crown. But now, my lord, let me not keep you from the lady of your love. Go to her; let her know she is free to come and go, as far as I at least am concerned; but tell her, my lord, I charge you, why she was brought here, that she may be aware of what a serpent her father and her brother cherish."

"Ay, tell her--tell her," said Robin Hood--"tell her, for her own sake; for there is something that makes me fear--I know not why--that the day will come when that knowledge may be to her a safeguard and a shield against one who now seems powerless. Scoff not at it, my lord, as if he were too pitiful to give cause for alarm. The scorpion is a small, petty-looking insect, but yet there is death in his sting. And now, good night;

when you have spent another hour in the sweet dreams that lovers like, betake you to repose, and early to-morrow you shall have some one to guide you on your way."

CHAPTER XIV.

There are some days of life when everything appears to combine to heighten the hues of happiness, when not only the sensations in our own bosoms, and the circumstances of our fate are all bright and cheerful, but when every external object, every feature in Nature's face seems to smile, and every sound to be in harmony with our feelings. But such hours are too precious to be many; blessed is that life which can count two or three of them; and it has been often remarked, that as at some seasons of the year, a peculiarly fine day generally announces the approach of storm and tempest, so do one of these bright intervals in our cloudy existence precede a period of sorrow, trouble, and disaster.

An hour after daybreak, on as sweet a morning as ever dawned, in the midst of the magnificent scenery of the forest, Hugh de Monthermer and Lucy de Ashby stood by the side of their horses, ready to mount and depart. Love gave its sunshine to each heart. Lucy's bosom beat high at her deliverance by her lover. The assurance of her affection--the delight of her presence--the increased hope of obtaining her, rendered his sensations not less joyful. The yellow morning light spread sweetly overhead; the old grey Saxon building rested calm in its ivy robe behind them: every blade of grass was sparkling with a thousand diamonds; every air wafted the breath of the sweet forest flowers; every tree was tuneful with the song of the birds. It was like some happy dream, when

imagination, stripping life of its stern realities, revels supreme, and decks the brief moments of sleep with all the boundless treasures of her airy kingdom.

A step nearer to the lodge stood the bold forester; his fine, muscular limbs clear and defined in his tight-fitting garb, and his nut brown hair curling round his thoughtful forehead. A faint smile hung upon his lip as he watched the two lovers, leaving them to proceed as they would, without interrupting them with courtesies. It seemed as if he was reading a pleasant book, of the truth of which he might have some doubt, but which yet interested and amused him; for Robin knew the world too well to suppose that such happiness could last long, but yet his mind was of that firm and hardy nature which clouds not the present with cares and fears of the future, but extracts from every hour its honey, and leaves the rest to fate.

When Hugh de Monthermer had placed Lucy on her horse, he turned to bid their host good bye, frankly holding out his hand.

"Farewell, my lord!" said Robin, taking it. "We shall soon meet again in busier scenes, if I judge right. But where is the guide I promised you? Why, Tangel, Tangel! where are you?" and he raised his voice loud and somewhat sternly. At his last call the dwarf crept forth from behind the house, with a bent head and crouching posture, like an unwilling dog, approaching his master slowly, and eyeing him askance.

"What now--what now?" said Robin Hood. "Did I not give you orders? Where is the horse?"

"I would fain not go," cried the dwarf. "Let me stay with thee, Robin, let me stay with thee. Send Smooth Face, send White Skin, send Harry the page.--If the fool can't take care of himself, and must have a boy to lead him about the world, like a blind beggar, send young Porkflesh with him.--Why should he take me?"

"Nay, my good friend," said Hugh de Monthermer, seeing the bold forester about to speak somewhat angrily, "Let the lad stay with thee! I shall find my way well enough; his only fault is loving thee well."

"Those that love me obey me," replied Robin Hood; "and, my good lord, he must do so, or never see me more. It is not alone to guide you through the forest I send him with you; you must take him to Hereford, and keep him till we meet again. You will find him faithful and true, crafty and active, though he shews himself so unruly at present; and in these dangerous times it may be of great service both to you and me that you should have some one with you who knows every man in my band. I may have to convey intelligence to you and to the good lord, your uncle; for I gain a knowledge of all that takes place throughout the land, which my Lord of Leicester, with all his power, cannot attain. It is needful that you should have some means of knowing which messengers are really mine, and which are not, for these are times full of deceit, and human cunning is more busily at work than the world ever saw, I believe. If anybody comes to you in my name, call for this boy, and make him tell you whether he be one of my people or not. Go, Tangel; and let me hear that you have done your duty."

"Come, my boy--come!" said Hugh de Monthermer, speaking to him kindly; "I will try to make thee as happy as may be; and thou shalt love me, whether thou wilt or not."

"Goodsooth, I love thee well enough," replied the dwarf, "though I have no weakness for men in purfled jerkins. I love thee well enough, though not so well as him; but what must be, must be. Poor Tangel has always been Fate's foot-ball. Well, I will get the horse."

So saying, he stretched out his long arms, put his hands suddenly upon the shoulders of Lucy's two maids, who were standing close together, and vaulting over them with a leap that made them both

scream, he bounded round the angle of the building, and soon reappeared, leading a small brown forest horse, furnished with saddle-bags for his journey.

As soon as the whole party were mounted, the Outlaw approached the side of Hugh de Monthermer's horse, and, looking up in his face, said a few words to him in a low tone which seemed to excite some surprise.

"Indeed!" exclaimed the young knight; "but are you certain?"

"As certain," replied Robin Hood, "as of that being a magpie in the tree."

"Then you must have taken some means to delude them," said Hugh de Monthermer.

"Not I," answered Robin Hood, "I always leave fools to delude themselves; they are sure to do it more cleverly than I could. However, it was necessary that you should know the fact, so I tell you. Now, God speed you, sir--we shall meet again soon."

In a moment or two after, the little cavalcade was moving along through the glades of the forest, Tangel riding on before, in somewhat sullen mood, followed at the distance of about twenty yards by Lucy and her lover, with a discreet space between them and the maids who followed. The pace at which they proceeded was not quick, for those were hours which two at least of the party would willingly have spun out slowly--a fine golden thread, which they feared would end only too soon.

But why should I pause upon their happiness? Why should I relate what each said to the other? The stream of human pleasure, except when it falls in the fierce cataract of passion, is so calm and smooth that there is little to describe. Let each one bring such a moment home to his own breast; let him fancy himself riding by the side of her whom he loves best through scenes as fair, with hopes as bright, and his own heart will

present him a better picture than any which my hand could draw. They soon emerged from the deeper part of the wood, and wound slowly on through the mingled savannahs and copses which occupied a considerable part of the forest ground, till they came upon a high road running from Nottingham to some of the Yorkshire towns, with a finger-post--which is a much older invention than is generally supposed--marking the various paths towards Mansfield, Southwell, and other small places within the meres of the forest.

To say the truth, Hugh de Monthermer, with a true lover's forgetfulness, had never remembered to give their dwarfish guide any orders as to the direction he should take, and the first thing that called the necessity to his mind was the question which that finger-post mutely put to the traveller.

"I fear, dear Lucy," he said, "that Lindwell is not far off, and thither I suppose I must conduct you direct, although it is sad to bring such happy moments as these to an end."

"I fear it must be so," answered Lucy, with a sigh; "my father will be anxious, you know, till he sees me again, and I must think of him before myself, Hugh."

"But if it be on his account you would go to Lindwell," replied her lover, "you will be disappointed, dear Lucy, for he is not there. Judging hastily that you must have been carried off by some emissary of the King's party, in order to detach him from the English cause, he and your brother have, I find, gone on in the direction of Gloucester likewise."

"Oh, then I will not stay at Lindwell all alone," cried Lucy, gaily--"I should be as melancholy as one of the rooks that haunt the old trees round it; and besides," she added, perhaps not ill-pleased at having a good excuse to go on under her lover's protection--"and besides, who can tell what might happen. The foreign party are strong in Nottingham and all the neighbouring places, and I might have to put on armour and

defend Lindwell against an army. No, no, Hugh, if you are a good knight and true, you will guide me on to seek my father till we have found him. By my sooth, I would rather have remained with the blithe foresters than be confined to Lindwell, with all the chances of these evil times."

The reader may easily suppose that Hugh de Monthermer was not at all dissatisfied with Lucy's decision, and as he was one whose heart was no way faint, he doubted not that he should be able to guide her safely and well to her father's side, although he could not conceal from himself, and would not conceal from her, that there were difficulties and dangers in the way.

"You put a hard task upon me, Lucy," he said, laughing.

"What mean you, uncourteous knight!" she asked, in the same tone;--"This is the first time that I ever met a gentleman unwilling to guide and protect me whithersoever I went.--A mighty hard task, truly!"

"No, by those bright eyes," replied Hugh, "that is not the task I speak of; but it is to persuade you not to do that which I most wish you would. I mean, dear Lucy, that I must dissuade you from going on, though to ride beside you thus, for two or three days more, were worth a whole year of any other part of life. But I cannot let you choose without telling you that there is many a peril to be encountered between this and Gloucester. Gilbert de Clare, whose faith has long been doubtful it is now ascertained, is ready to take arms against De Montfort. Indeed, he may already have done so; and one thing is certain, that in the forest of Dean, armed men are gathering thick, without any known object, so that the way is dangerous."

"I have no fear, Hugh," replied Lucy, "so that you be beside me; and moreover we can get some men from Lindwell. I would not stay there alone to be Queen of Cyprus, so that my only choice is to go with you, or to put myself at the head of the best troop I can gather, and then, like an errant lady, seek my way without you."

"Nay, then, if such be your will," answered her lover, "there is no choice for either of us, though perhaps your brother may frown, and even your father look cold. There is still, however, a chance that we may overtake my uncle at Torwel, and if we do so, his grave company and stout men at arms will save us from all danger, and all reproaches. At all events, he will leave some four or five archers behind him, trusty soldiers at one's need; and if we can get as many from Lindwell, I would undertake, with care and forethought and good precautions, to guard you uninjured hence to Palestine."

"Oh, how pleasant!" cried Lucy--"Let us go, Hugh--why should we not go? I think every woman should make a pilgrimage to Palestine before she marries."

Hugh de Monthermer, however, thought it would be better to reverse the proceeding, and, marrying first, make the pilgrimage afterwards--if they liked it. So he told Lucy; nor did she say no; and putting their horses into a quicker pace, he directed their dwarfish guide to lead on towards Torwel. Passing by Arnold, and skirting the edges of Thorney Wood, they crossed the Lind not far from Basfort, at which little village they paused for a moment or two, to water their horses, towards nine in the morning. At Torwel, however, they found that the Earl had gone on, leaving six archers behind him to await his nephew's coming. Here a longer repose was necessary, for though Lucy, trained to hardier habits than ladies affect in the present day, was capable of enduring much more fatigue; she was still a woman, and might well feel somewhat weary with a four-hours' ride.

The time they passed at Torwel flew quick away, and they were speedily retreading, in some degree, their steps towards her father's castle. Great were the rejoicings at Lindwell to see her safe returned, and every man would have gladly accompanied her to guard her by the way. The defence of the place itself, however, was not to be neglected, and as Lucy was resolved to proceed that night, six stout men-at-arms were

chosen from the rest, and being quickly mounted and accoutred, the party once more set out with four hours clear daylight before them, taking their way towards the frontiers of Derbyshire.

Onward they rode with light, gay hearts; the spirit of adventure and enterprise itself adding something to all the manifold enjoyments which had crowded into that day.

The boy Tangel had by this time dropped into the rear, being no longer necessary as a guide, and to say truth, although Hugh had spoken to him once or twice as they proceeded, absorbed in his own feelings towards Lucy, he had taken but little notice of his absence from the front. When they had left Lindwell, however, some seven miles behind them, the boy urged his horse up at a quick pace, saying, "On your guard--on your guard! there are men coming up fast behind;" and turning round, Hugh de Monthermer perceived some six or seven persons galloping down from a hill at the distance of about half a mile.

Lucy paused to gaze likewise, and as the pursuers came nearer, she exclaimed, with a look, it must be owned, of no great pleasure--"It is my brother, Hugh; I am sure that is Alured on the black horse."

"I think so too," replied Hugh de Monthermer, drawing in his rein; "but even if it be not, we have nothing to fear."

The little party of horsemen who were following, came on at full speed, and certainly not with the most peaceful appearance; but every stretch of the horses showed more and more clearly the form of Alured de Ashby, and at length, after slackening his pace a good deal, as if to examine the group which was now waiting his approach, he rode up, with a countenance expressive of less pleasure than might have been expected at seeing his sister in safety.

"How now!" he exclaimed--"What is all this? Why have you turned your back upon Lindwell, my good lord? and whither are you having the great kindness to conduct my sister?"

"To overtake Lord Ashby, my lord," replied Hugh, "who has gone on towards Gloucester, we find."

"Methinks, sir," answered Alured de Ashby, "that Lindwell castle were the properest place for you to conduct her to, after having so dexterously found her when no one else knew where she was."

"But suppose, Alured," said Lucy, ere Hugh de Monthermer could utter the somewhat sharp rejoinder which was springing to his lips--"suppose, Alured, that your sister did not choose to be so conducted. Suppose, after visiting Lindwell, she thought fit to ask this noble gentleman to guard and protect her by the way, till she overtook her father?"

"Doubtless he was very willing," answered Lord Alured, with a sneer.

"Beyond all question," replied Hugh de Monthermer, in as cool a tone as he could command; "and not more willing to do so than justified in doing it. But you were pleased just now to make use of a word which must be explained. You said, sir, that I had found your sister when no one else knew where she was. Do you mean to imply that I did know?"

"Good faith," replied the hot young nobleman, "it is not for me to say whether you did or not. It is mighty strange, however, that you could discover her in the twinkling of an eye, as soon as her relations were gone."

"Not half so strange," said Lucy, interposing once more in terror for the result, "as that you should show yourself so ungrateful, Alured, for his having found me. Instead of giving him deep thanks, which are his due both from you and me, you seem as angry as if you had wished me to remain and perish in the forest."

"Well, well," said Alured de Ashby, a little ashamed perhaps of his irritable heat--"this is all waste of words!--Where were you? What was the cause of your being taken away? What has happened to you?"

"Three questions in a breath," exclaimed Lucy, "each of which would take an hour to answer fully, even if I could answer them all. As to the first, then, I have been in the forest; as to the last, I reply, a good deal has happened to me, of which I will tell you at leisure. As to the middle one, Why they took me away? my answer must be very short,--I do not know."

"Perhaps you do, sir?" said her brother, turning to Hugh. The young nobleman looked him straightforwardly and somewhat sternly in the face, answering, "I do."

"Then pray explain," said Alured.

"You will excuse me," replied Hugh, "I shall first explain the whole to your father, as he is the person who must act in the business, and as I bear a message to him of which he alone can judge."

"Mighty mysterious, my good lord," cried Alured--"But as I am now present here, and am going with all speed to overtake the Earl of Ashby, my sister will no longer need your kind protection."

"But as we take the same road," said Hugh de Monthermer, "it will be safer for all, if we travel it together."

"Fie! Alured; in common courtesy----" exclaimed Lucy.

But her brother interrupted her petulantly, saying--"These are times that abridge courtesy, Lucy.--I differ, my good lord," he continued--"I judge that it will be safer for us to travel apart. With our two troops united we form a body that cannot escape observation, and which is yet too small to make a good defence. I therefore think that it will be better for us to separate. Thanking you much for the assistance and protection you have given to this lady, and waiting with devout patience for the explanations which you have not thought fit to afford, I will take one way if you will take another."

Hugh de Monthermer bit his lip; but though quick and fiery in his own disposition, he was acting under a restraint which made him bear to the utmost, rather than quarrel with the brother of her whom he loved, resolved that it should be no act of his which placed a barrier between them. Without making any reply to Alured de Ashby then, he wheeled round his horse to Lucy's side, asking in a low voice--"Shall I go?"

"You had better," said Lucy, with a sigh--"you had better:" and then raising her voice, she added--"Farewell, Lord Hugh; I at least am grateful, and so you will find my father, I am sure. Farewell."

Thus speaking she held out her hand to him; and Hugh de Monthermer, pressing his lips upon it, turned his horse, and bade his men follow him, without offering any salutation to the ungracious young nobleman who had brought so happy a day to so unpleasant a close.

Taking a road which lay somewhat to the north of that which Lucy and her brother were pursuing, he advanced towards Gloucester, keeping nearly upon a line with the other party, and gaining from time to time some information of their movements. Towards the end of the fifth day's march, his little troop approached the city in which he expected to find his uncle; but at the small town of Charlton, he received intimation from his host that if he were going to join the army of the great Earl of Leicester, it would be well for him to take a large circuit, the road between that place and Gloucester being somewhat dangerous.

"Gilbert de Clare," he said, "our good Earl, keeps the forest of Dean with some five thousand men; and we just this morning heard that the young Lord of Ashby, who left last night, has been taken with all his company. His sister was with him, too, pretty lady; but some say the young lord was not unwilling to fall into the Earl's hands. At all events he was well forewarned, for we told him what would happen when he set out."

Hugh bit his lip, mused for a moment or two; and then murmuring--"It is not impossible," mounted his horse and rode away, taking the road which the host had pointed out as the most secure.

CHAPTER XV.

The greatest men that ever lived, if we were to examine accurately all the actions that they have performed at different periods of their existence, and could try them with impartial and perfectly discriminating judgment, would be found to have committed more than one great mistake which in many instances did not lead to the evil consequences that might have been anticipated. And, on the contrary, very often indeed, a trifling fault, a rash word, a thoughtless act, or even an angry look, has produced more important results than one of these capital errors. Sometimes it has been conduct which has retrieved the fault, but history shows us that the moment at which an act is committed more frequently decides whether the consequences shall be great or insignificant than the nature of the act itself. At the period of history of which we now speak, the famous Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester--justly celebrated both as a soldier and a politician, one of the few men, with a prophetical spirit, to foresee the path in which society will march, and forestall their age in choosing it--had committed that grand mistake which led to his overthrow and death.

Often, before this period, he had proceeded with inferior forces from one end of the land to the other, and, supported by the strong popular feeling in his favour, had overthrown all his enemies, holding his weak and tyrannical sovereign a mere prisoner in his hands, and keeping even

Prince Edward himself, one of the wisest men and best soldiers of the age, in a state of honourable captivity. No evil results had ensued--no great danger even had been incurred. But the times had changed. Many of those who had attached themselves to De Montfort, upon the less virtuous and honourable motives which affect the course of human actions, had been treated by him with cold and most impolitic neglect. Others feared the consequences of his growing power, either for themselves or their country, not taking in the vast range to which his own political vision extended; and others were indignant at his treatment of their king, who, however weak, vicious, and tyrannical, they still looked upon with feudal respect. Many of the lords of the marches of Wales were actually in arms against his power; and the famous Earl of Gloucester, a factious kinsman of the throne, had been for some time assuming loyalty, and displaying a thinly veiled enmity to the party of De Montfort.

At this inauspicious moment, the Earl of Leicester had determined to march from the neighbourhood of London, by whose citizens he had always been vigorously supported, and where his chief strength lay, and to advance to the frontiers of Wales, with the purpose of punishing the malcontents who refused to submit to his authority. By thus removing from the proximity of his best resources, he rendered the power of his adversaries and his own so nearly equal, that it wanted but one of those slight accidents which so frequently overthrow the best laid schemes, to turn the balance against him; and that accident was soon destined to occur.

With the exception of this great mistake, not the slightest error has been pointed out in his conduct, at least in a military point of view. His march was conducted with the circumspection; and, with a force by no means large--keeping the King and the Prince, eager for deliverance and assisted by many friends, at his side, while he advanced in the midst of enemies, equal, if not superior in numbers to himself,--he proceeded, with slow and careful steps, to Gloucester, and there entered into

negotiations with Gilbert de Clare, his most formidable opponent, in order to induce him once more to join the party which had so frequently asserted the rights of the people against the encroaching spirit of Henry III.

Deceived; in some degree, by pretended advances on the part of the Earl of Gloucester, he agreed to refer their differences to arbitration, and recommenced his march for Hereford; but still, with the most scrupulous precaution, guarded his royal companions, and frustrated every effort made by the Earl to take him at a disadvantage, and to set them free.

At the same time, perceiving that, in order to attain the great objects he had in view, he must strengthen himself to the utmost of his power, he notified to all his friends the absolute necessity of their combining to give him support and marching to his assistance with all the troops that they could levy. The effect of his messages and exhortations we have seen in the meetings held in Yorkshire, and gradually perceiving that there was no chance of recovering the friendship of Gloucester, he prepared to compel that submission which he could not obtain, by gentler means.

Men were gathering from all parts--arms were being manufactured in every town--the land was agitated from end to end, and every one looked forward to a great and decisive struggle--though there were few, it must be confessed, who did not believe that De Montfort would triumph--for the prestige of victory hung around his banner, and the whole air and tone of the great leader were those of a man marked out by the hand of God for success.

Such was the state of affairs, when Hugh de Monthermer, with his small troop, after having visited the town of Gloucester, and learned that his uncle had proceeded at once to Hereford, arrived in that fair city. It was now filled with soldiers and with noblemen from different parts of the country, so that a lodging would have been difficult to obtain, had

not the old Earl of Monthermer secured a portion of the inn called the May which we have once led the reader--for the dwelling of himself and his nephew.

Hugh found but small space, however, allotted to him and to those who accompanied him. A party of his own servants who had gone on with the Earl were already in possession, two having taken up their abode in the small ante-room leading to the chamber which had been assigned to himself; and an adjoining room, not very large, with one somewhat less, at the side, was all that remained for the rest of his retinue, and the five archers who had been left behind by his uncle. The other parts of the inn were completely filled; and for the poor boy, Tangel, no place had, of course, been reserved, as every one had been ignorant of his coming.

The dwarf, who had seemed to grow more sad at each day's journey from Sherwood, stood in the doorway of the ante-room, as the young lord entered, listening to the arrangements which had been made.

"Where to put the maggot that you have brought, my lord," said the old servant, who was explaining to Hugh the fullness of the rooms and the disposition they had been obliged to adopt, and who did not appear at all well pleased at poor Tangel's addition to the party--"Where to put the maggot you have brought, I cannot tell. The ante-room is scarce big enough for the two yeomen, and----"

"He shall sleep in my chamber," said Hugh, noting the poor dwarf's desolate look; "come hither, Tangel, thou shalt sleep on a bed at my feet. Know him, and take care of him, Walsh; for he is a good and faithful boy, true and affectionate to his master; and if any one does him wrong, he shall answer to me for it."

The boy darted forward, and kissed his hand; and Hugh de Monthermer, after giving some farther directions, to ensure that he was protected against insult as well as injury, proceeded at once, followed by

two servants, armed with sword and buckler, to the magnificent castle of Hereford, whither he found that his uncle had gone about an hour before.

It was a gay and bustling scene that the court-yard presented, for as every detail of military life was then complicated in the extreme, and the taste for splendour and expense was at its height, the crowd of followers, in gaudy dresses, who accompanied even the inferior officers of an army hither, caused the head-quarters of the general to appear in a constant state of flutter and pageantry. Forcing his way through the crowd, and, from the scanty number of his attendants, attracting but little attention, Hugh de Monthermer ascended the steps into the great hall of the keep, which he found nearly filled with people, pacing up and down; and as he was not acquainted with the building, he asked a gentleman, who seemed at his ease in the place, to tell him where he could find the Earl of Leicester.

The personage to whom he addressed himself pointed to a flight of steps leading from the farther end of the hall, and replied, "At the top of the stairs you will meet with some one who will tell you where the Earl is: but you will not get speech of him, I think."

"I think I shall!" replied Hugh, "but, at all events, I thank you;" and ascending the stairs, he was stopped by an officer with a partisan, who asked him his business, and in the same breath told him he could not pass that way.

Hugh gave his name, and demanded to see the Earl; upon which a page was sent to knock at the council chamber, and ask if the Earl would see the young Lord of Monthermer. In about three minutes the boy returned, bidding him follow, and Hugh was led along the dark and gloomy corridor, until his guide paused, and again tapped at a low narrow door on the left hand side of the passage.

After a moment's interval, a deep voice replied, "Come in!" and the next instant Hugh entered the room, and found himself standing within a step or two of the chair in which De Montfort was seated.

He was a tall, powerful, square-browed man, with a countenance full of thought, but likewise full of confidence. There was great calmness also in his aspect, and an eye, not stern but grave, not so much shrewd as searching. There were but two other persons in the room, although he was said to be holding council. One of those was the old Earl of Monthermer, and the other a man considerably younger, but yet grey-headed, and well known in the history of the times as the Lord Ralph Basset.

De Montfort looked up, as Hugh de Monthermer entered, with a bland and pleasant smile, holding out his hand at the same time, and saying, "How are you, Hugh? Right glad are we to see such friends as you arrive. Do you bring us any farther tidings from Nottingham?"

"None, my lord," replied Hugh, "except that levies of the yeomen and foresters are going on rapidly."

"They had need be speedy," said De Montfort, "or we shall strike some great blow before they come. Heard you aught else by the way?"

"In truth, my lord, I did, and no good news either!" replied Hugh. "The Earl of Gloucester is daily gathering strength, and he renders the road round his fair city somewhat dangerous to travel. Indeed, the reason why I intruded on you now, was but to tell you that Alured de Ashby, his sister, and some twelve or fourteen archers, had been captured by De Clare, between Gloucester and Charlton. I judge, my lord, that if you took speedy means to set him free, it might fix the house of Ashby somewhat more firmly in the good cause."

Both De Montfort and the Earl of Monthermer heard him with a smile, and Ralph Basset muttered between his teeth--"Fix the sands of the sea!"

"You have been forestalled, my young friend," said De Montfort; "some one else has already liberated Alured de Ashby, together with his sister and his archers."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Hugh de Monthermer; "may I ask who?"

"Gilbert de Clare, Earl of Gloucester," replied De Montfort.

"Ay, and not without cause, be sure of that;" said Ralph Basset; "he is coming hither now, will arrive to-morrow, with a smooth air and a high-carried head, and my Lord of Leicester here will receive him as kindly and frankly as the truest of his friends."

"I want not to multiply my enemies, Ralph," replied De Montfort; "and perhaps we may find some better way of attaching him to what is right, than by treating him as a foe, before we are well sure that he has done aught to deserve the name. What say you, Hugh, will you be the link to bind him to our cause?"

"Right willingly, my lord," answered Hugh de Monthermer; "but I rather fear that I am more likely to separate him from it. He loves me not, that is clear; and though the good Earl, his uncle, is not so hot and fiery in his nature, yet I have those things to say about their near relation, Richard, which may breed ill blood before I have done."

De Montfort mused for a minute or two. "Why, Richard," he said, at length, "is apparently the most zealous in our cause of all the race!"

"But did my uncle----" demanded Hugh.

"Ay, he did,". said De Montfort, interrupting him; "and I spoke with Richard about it; but he assures me that the thing was done in ignorance, and that the man himself has since been discharged.--However----"

"He is a foul knave!" replied Hugh de Monthermer; "and at all events I have promised to demand, at the hands of the Earl, some reparation for a gross wrong which he has committed."

"Well, well," said the Earl of Leicester, apparently desirous of changing the subject for the time; "if you must do so, Hugh, let it be done before some friends as witnesses--before myself, perhaps, were better; and do whatever you do gently, for your uncle here has told me of hopes and wishes which you may go far to mar, if you act rashly in the business."

"I will be as calm and gentle as the south-west wind," replied Hugh, "for I would fain give neither Alured nor his father any matter for offence; and if you will send and let me know when they are with you, I will come and speak to them in your presence. And now, my lord," he continued, "if such a thing be permitted, as I suppose it is, I would fain spend a short time with Prince Edward. You know we were sworn friends in youth."

"I know you were," replied De Montfort; "but good sooth, Hugh, to have been his sworn friend is no good motive, in my eyes, for letting you confer with him."

The brow of Hugh de Monthermer grew somewhat dark, but the Earl of Leicester added immediately--"I will tell you what is a motive, however, my young friend--your own honour and high name. We treat the Prince with every courtesy and due respect; we do not look upon him as a prisoner; but it is highly needful for the safety of the state, ay, and for our own lives and fortunes, that he should remain in close attendance upon his father, the King. Now, my good friend, there are men who would fain persuade him it were better for him to be away, consulting, doubtless, with this good Earl of Gloucester, and heading armies to tear the kingdom with fresh strife, while others again would willingly give him the means of carrying such designs into execution. None that we even suspect, therefore, do we permit to visit him; and this

very Richard de Ashby, whom we spoke of but now, though he gave good reasons, as I have said, to make us believe him innocent, we have, on your uncle's information, forbidden to hold any farther communication with the Prince, and, moreover, warned him to quit Hereford without delay. It is different, however, with a Monthermer," continued the Earl, with a gracious but stately inclination of the head--"you can be trusted."

"Of this, at least, my lord, you may rest assured," replied Hugh; "that, although I own I wish to see the Prince at liberty, and only bound by solemn vows to take no part against the cause of freedom and right----"

"No wise man trusts to fetters of wind," interrupted the Earl, who had taken up a pen, and was writing at the table.

"At all events," continued Hugh de Monthermer, "I would never basely use a permission you yourself had granted to thwart your dearest wishes."

"I know it," said the Earl; "there is a pass. You will find the Prince in the other court; but make what speed you may, for it is growing dusk, and the castle gates must soon be closed."

"Haste away, Hugh," said his uncle; "in an hour I shall be at the inn."

CHAPTER XVI.

In the old castle of Hereford, which, according to the account of Leland, was one of the largest and finest specimens of the military architecture of feudal times, were numerous courts and various detached buildings, so that the number of persons which it could contain was immense; and even when several hundred men were within the walls, many of the open spaces and passages would be found silent and solitary. Thus, on the evening of Hugh de Monthermer's visit, the chief court, the halls, and the corridors around it, were crowded with not less than seven or eight hundred persons; but as one turned one's steps to other parts of the building, the throng decreased, the passers to and fro became fewer and more few, and at length nothing presented itself but untenanted courts and empty arcades.

In a dark corner of a long passage--which, traversing one side of the keep under open cloisters, passed through a large mass of buildings, receiving no light but that which poured in at either end, and, after being joined by two other arched corridors, led out into the court in which Prince Edward's lodging was situated--in a dark corner of this long passage stood two men engaged in earnest conversation, just about the time that Hugh de Monthermer quitted the Earl of Leicester. They were both covered with large cloaks, and both had their hoods drawn far over their heads, so that it would have been very difficult for any one to recognise them, unless well acquainted with their air and figure. Nevertheless, they did not seem to feel themselves secure; for, the instant that they heard a step coming from the direction of the principal court, they walked on a few paces, and then turned into one of the lateral passages, near the mouth of which they again paused, and resumed their conversation in a low tone.

A moment after, the tall, graceful figure of Hugh de Monthermer passed across, without appearing to excite their attention, so earnest were they in the matter they were discussing. He, however, turned his head, and looked at them steadily, but still walked on without slackening his pace.

"Some means must be found," said one--the shorter and the slighter of the two--"some means must be found, and that right speedily, or our last chance is lost."

"You must have been playing some of your accursed tricks, Richard," replied the other, "or De Montfort never would have taken such a step. The house of Ashby is of too much importance to any cause that its members espouse, for even the lowest branch to be treated with indignity, without some strong occasion."

"Nonsense, Alured, I did nothing!" replied the other. "I tell you, it was solely and simply upon this old Monthermer's charge against me."

"On your life and honour?" demanded his companion.

"On my life, honour, soul, and salvation!" replied the other. "Well, then, I am glad of it," said the taller speaker. "I am glad that it has happened; for, first, I will take care it shall rouse my father's anger against De Montfort, and, secondly, it shall stir him up against these Monthermers, and, I trust, induce him to break with them both. At all events, it will make him forgive my joining Gloucester. So, I repeat, I am glad that it has happened."

"I cannot say as much," rejoined the first speaker. "I never care, for my part, Alured, about an excuse for anything I am about to do. Oh, there is many a convenient point in having a bad reputation! Men do not expect too much of you--you may do what you please, without anybody wondering; and then, when you are in the humour, and perform two or three good actions, Lord! how you are praised! But, to the point--what can be done now? How can we give *him* intimation of the scheme?"

"On my life! I know not," said the other.

"Could you not bribe some woman?" demanded the taller and more powerful of the speakers; "They would not stop a woman, I suppose."

"Right, right!" cried his companion. "You have put me on the track, and I will not miss my game."

"But can you engage any woman you can trust?" asked the other. "It must not be some common hireling, some minstrel's wench, some follower of city fairs."

"Leave it to me, leave it to me!" cried the shorter man; "if I cannot *engage*, I can make her, and that ere another hour be over. There is no time to be lost. Farewell, for the present, for I must away from Hereford to-night; and, if you intend, good Alured, to hatch a quarrel with my noble Lord Hugh, let it be speedy; for I do not think that twenty-four hours will be over ere I have repaid him some trifles that I owe him. I have some plans in my head, as well as you. So fare you well, once more." And thus they parted.

In the meanwhile, Hugh de Monthermer sped upon his way, traversed the other court, and approached a door at which stood two or three of De Montfort's officers, guarding closely, though with an appearance of profound respect, the only entrance to the apartments of Prince Edward.

While he showed the pass which he had received, and mounted the long, narrow staircase, we shall take leave to precede him, for a few minutes, to the apartment of the Prince. It consisted of a suite of several rooms, all reached by the same ascent, and was in itself as convenient and comfortable as any abode can be from which free egress is denied us. The principal chamber was a large and lofty one, with two wide windows, situated in deep bays, looking over the fair scene around.

The casement was open; and, seated in a large chair, with his feet resting on a stool, sat the captive Prince, gazing down upon a part of the town of Hereford and the meadows and orchards beyond. The apple-trees were all in blossom, and every shrub in the manifold gardens had put on the blush of vegetable youth, promising rich fruit in the maturity

of the year. Beyond the meadows and the orchards came slopes and rising ground, and lines of deep wood, sheltering the intervening space, and then high hills were seen, fading off into the sky. On the left hand the scene was all open, but on the right, an angle of the cathedral, as it then appeared, bounded the view, while the tower of another church, of inferior dimensions, rose up under the eye, and cut the long, straight lines of the houses and other buildings.

Edward leaned his head upon his hand and gazed, while at a little distance from him sat a gentleman, somewhat younger than himself, looking upon him, from time to time, with a glance of deep interest, but keeping silence out of respect for the Prince's musing mood.

The soft air of summer wafted to the window the scent of the blossoms from the fields beyond; and Edward thought it spoke of liberty. Up rose from the streets and houses of Hereford the manifold sounds of busy life, the buzz of talking multitudes, the call, the shout, the merry laugh of idle boyhood; and still, to the captive's ears, they spoke of liberty. The bells from the cathedral joined in, and rang complines; and turning his eyes thither, he thought how often he had heard those sweet tones, at even-close, in the happy days of early youth, returning from the chase or any other or the free sports of the time. His sight wandered on, over tower and spire, round which the crows were winging their airy flight, to the deep woods and blue hills, flooded with glory from the declining sun. Still, still, it all spoke of liberty; and Edward's heart felt oppressed, his very breathing laboured, as he remembered the mighty blessing he had lost.

It was like the sight of a river to a man dying with thirst in the sands of Africa, without the strength to reach it.

He gazed, and perhaps for a moment might forget himself and his hard fate, in a dream of enjoyment; but if he did, it lasted not long--the dark reality soon came between him and the light of fancy, and letting

his head droop, he turned away with a deep sigh, and gave up a brief space to bitter meditation.

Then rising from his seat, taller by many an inch than the ordinary race of men, he threw back his magnificent head and his wide shoulders with a sorrowful smile, saying, "I will walk up and down my chamber, De Clare, and fancy I am free!"

"I hope you feel better, my lord, to-night," said young Thomas de Clare, the Earl of Gloucester's brother.

"Yes, good faith," replied the Prince, "I am better. The fever has left me, but nothing will make me truly well but open air and strong exercise. However, I am better, and I thank you much; for I believe you love me, De Clare, although you make yourself a sort of willing gaoler to me."

The young gentleman bent his head without reply, though there was a faint smile upon his lip, which might have puzzled Edward had he seen it; and after a moment or two De Clare said, somewhat abruptly, "Now I could wager your Grace is strong enough to ride some twenty or thirty miles, if you were at liberty to do so."

"A hundred!" answered Edward, quickly; and then added, more slowly--"were I at liberty."

At that moment some one knocked at the door, and on being told to come in, Hugh de Monthermer entered.

The face of the Prince instantly brightened--"Ah, Monthermer!" he cried, "right glad am I to see you, my friend!--yes, my friend--for these factious times shall never make us enemies, though we draw our swords on different sides. This is my state apartment, Hugh, and that staircase by which you came hither the extreme limit of my principality. I wonder that De Montfort suffered you to see me."

"I almost wondered myself, my lord," said Hugh de Monthermer; "for my request was coupled with a remonstrance against your imprisonment."

"And yet," added the Prince, "you will remonstrate, but not aid to free me."

"My lord, I cannot, without treason," replied Hugh de Monthermer.

"Treason to whom?" demanded Edward, somewhat sharply. "Treason to the land, my lord," answered Hugh de Monthermer, "and to those rights which I know, when you are king, you will yourself willingly respect. I do beseech you, my dear lord, press me not harshly on a matter where I can make but one reply. You are here by the will of four-and-twenty noble gentlemen, appointed lawfully----"

"And by the *mise* of Lewes," added the Prince, bitterly--"but say no more, Monthermer; I do believe that if your voice might prevail, I should soon be at liberty."

"Upon my life, you would," replied the young nobleman; "indeed, you never should have been otherwise, for I would have taken your word--your plighted word--to maintain the rights of Englishmen, and to aid in no act against them, and would have set you free at once."

"Well, it matters not," answered the Prince; "perhaps it is better as it is. I know not what I might have promised to buy my liberty, if men had asked me; but now, though fettered in body, I am at large in mind, and events may yet come to open stronger doors than that.--How fares it with your good uncle?" he continued. "He has been somewhat harsh and sudden with his king, but still he is a noble gentleman, and one of whom England may well be proud."

Hugh de Monthermer answered in general terms; and the conversation, having then taken a turn away from painful subjects of discussion, reverted pleasantly to brighter themes. Their boyish hours

rose up before their eyes--the sports, the pastimes--the gay thoughts and heedless jests of youth were recollected--Edward's countenance unbent, his eyes sparkled, his lips smiled, the prison and its cares were forgotten; and for the time he seemed to live once more in the sweet early days of which they spoke.

The conversation proceeded almost entirely between the Prince and Hugh de Monthermer, for though Thomas de Clare added a word or two now and then, they were but few, and only served to break through one of those momentary pauses which would have given thought time to return from the pleasant past to the sad present.

The sun was, as I have said, going down when Hugh de Monthermer entered the Prince's chamber, and ere he had been there half an hour, the bright orb had sunk beneath the horizon; but in these northern climes, Heaven has vouchsafed to us a blessing which brighter lands do not possess--the long, soft twilight of the summer evening--and the sky was still full of light, so that one might have read with ease in the high chamber of the Prince, nearly half an hour after the star of day had disappeared. It was just at that moment that Hugh, who was sitting with his face towards the door, saw it open slowly, and a beautiful girl, dressed in somewhat gay and sparkling attire, even for those gaudy times, entered with a noiseless step, bearing a small basket in her hands.

An expression of some surprise on the young lord's countenance made Edward himself turn round, and the sight suddenly produced signs of greater amazement in his face than even in Hugh de Monthermer's. He rose instantly, however, saying--"What would you, my fair lady?"

"Nothing, royal sir," replied the girl, "but to bring your Grace this small basket of early strawberries. You will find the flavour good," she added, "*especially at the bottom*, where they have not been heated by the sun."

As she spoke she put down the basket on the table, and was retreating quickly, but Edward exclaimed--"Stay--stay; pretty one! tell me who you are, that I may remember in my prayers one who has thought upon her captive Prince, and striven to solace him in his imprisonment."

"It matters not," replied the girl, courtesying low and speaking evidently with a country accent--"it matters not. I promised not to stay a moment, but to give the strawberries and to come away. God send your Grace a happy even, and a happy morning to boot!" and thus saying, she retired, closing the door carefully behind her.

"This is strange," said the Prince, taking up the basket, and turning towards Hugh de Monthermer.

But the young lord was buried in deep meditation.

"You seem surprised, Monthermer," said the Prince, "and, faith, so am I, too. I never saw the girl in all my days. Did you, De Clare?"

"Never!" replied the young noble.

"Methinks, I have," observed Hugh de Monthermer, gravely, "and that, many a mile hence. But I will now leave you, my lord; the gates will soon be shut."

"Nay, stay, and take some of this sweet food," said Edward, "which has been brought me, not by ravens but by doves."

"Not so, sir," replied Hugh, staying the Prince's hand, as he was about to empty the basket on the table. "May the fruit prove propitious to your Grace and to England!--Adieu, my lord!" and thus saying, he quitted the room abruptly.

"He is right, he is right!" cried Thomas de Clare; "there is more than fruit in that basket, or I am much mistaken."

Edward laid his hand upon it firmly, and fixed a keen and searching glance upon the young nobleman, saying, "Whatever there be in it, is mine, and for my eye alone, Thomas de Clare."

But his companion passed round the table, bent one knee before him, and, kissing his hand respectfully, said, "My noble lord and future King, you have mistaken me; but it is now time to tell you that I am no gaoler. If I be not very wrong, there are in that basket tidings which shall soon set you free as the wind. I have already gained from stern De Montfort permission for you to ride forth, accompanied by six gentlemen of his choosing, and followed by a train of spears. I said, that it was the only means of restoring you to health.--I might have added had I pleased, and to liberty. Now, my lord, see what that basket does contain; and believe me, if it cost me my head to keep your secret, I would not reveal it."

"Thanks, De Clare, thanks," replied Edward. "We often suspect the honest of being guilty; but, this time, suspicion has taken a different course, and I have long suspected thee of being honest.--Now suppose all your hopes are false?" and he overturned the basket on the table.

Nothing fell from it except the fruit; but, fastened to the bottom by a piece of wax, appeared, on closer inspection, a small billet, folded so as to take the form of the basket.

It was speedily drawn forth and opened, as the reader may suppose; but the first words which met the eye of the Prince puzzled him not a little. The note was to the following effect:--

"My Lord,"

"One of your horses has been stolen from your stable, namely, the bright bay Norman charger; but, as some compensation, in its place has been put a large-boned, long-legged grey. He is not beautiful to look

upon, though a skilful eye will see fine points in him; but he is strong and enduring, and no horse in Europe can match him for speed. Your lordship may try him against what horse you will, you will be sure to win the race; and should you be disposed to try to-morrow, you will find spectators in Monington Wood who will receive you at the winning post. Mark this, for it is from

"A Friend."

"Would that I knew his name," cried Edward, as he concluded the letter.

"I can tell you, my lord," replied Thomas de Clare. "It is Richard de Ashby."

"Ha!" said Edward, as if not well pleased--"Ha! Richard de Ashby. He is a faithful subject of my father's, I believe, but that is all the good I know of him. However, I must not be ungrateful--Hark! There is a step upon the stairs. Get the fruit into the basket--quick!" and concealing the note, Edward cast himself into the chair which he had previously occupied.

De Clare had scarcely replaced the strawberries and set down the basket, when a heavy, stern-looking man, one of the chief officers whom the Earl of Leicester had placed in attendance, as he called it, upon the Prince, entered the room, with a silver dish in his hand.

"Seeing that a fair lady has carried you some strawberries, my lord," he said, "I have brought you a dish to put them in;" and taking the basket, he emptied it slowly into the silver plate.

"Thanks, Ingelby, thanks," replied the Prince with a look of total indifference as to what he did with the fruit. "Methinks, if you had brought me some cream also it would have been as well."

"Your lordship shall have it immediately," answered the officer. "They are fine berries, so early in the season."

"They will refresh me, after the fever," said Edward; "for still my mouth feels dry."

"You shall have the cream directly, my good lord," rejoined the officer, and left the room.

Edward and De Clare looked at each other with a smile, and the note was soon re-read and totally destroyed.

CHAPTER XVII.

About the hour of ten, on the morning following the day of which we have just been speaking, Simon de Montfort sat alone at a small table in a room adjoining that which he used as a council chamber. Manifold papers and parchments were before him, and a rude map of England, such as the geographical skill of that day enabled men to produce, lay underneath his large powerful hand, with the forefinger resting upon the word, Gloucester. His brow was heavy and his teeth were set; and he fixed his eyes--we cannot call it vacantly, for they were full of expression, though without sight--upon the opposite wall of the room, while his right hand ran slowly up and down the hilt of his heavy sword.

"Care," he said--"continual care! thought, and anxiety, and strife!--Oh, life, life! the gilded bubble--how is it that man clings to thee so fondly!--Who would not gladly be waked from an unpleasant dream? and yet how troublous is this sad dream of human existence, which we

are so loath to lose? Some five or six years in early youth, when fancy, passion, and inexperience forbid us to think, and teach us only to enjoy, may have a portion of chequered brightness; but the rest, alas! has its care for every day, and its anxiety for every hour. It is a weary place, this world to dwell in, and life but a grim and discontented tenant of the house!"

He paused, and looked at the papers again, but it seemed difficult for him to fix his mind upon them. "It is strange," he continued--"I am not often thus; but I feel as if all things were passing away from me. Can it be, that sometimes the spirit has an indication of coming fate, from beings that we see not?--It may be so--but it is weak to give way to such thoughts. It is with human actions and endeavours that we have now to do. Ho! without there!--Does any one wait?" he continued, addressing a servant who appeared at his call.

"The constable of the guard of the west court, my lord," replied the attendant; "he has something to report."

"Send him, in," said the Earl of Leicester; "and dispatch a messenger to the Earl of Ashby, with many courteous greetings, to say that I am ready to receive him when it suits his pleasure: the same to the Earl of Monthermer and the lord Hugh.--Now, constable, what have you to tell me?"

The servant had beckoned in from the door where he stood, a sturdy soldier, clad in full armour, except the casque; and the latter now replied to Leicester's question--

"You told me, my lord, that the pass was withdrawn from Sir Richard de Ashby, and that he was no more to have access either to the King or the Prince."

"I said, moreover," answered Leicester, "that he was to quit Hereford. Is he not gone?"

"He may be now, my lord," replied the soldier, "but last night I found him several times lingering about the castle."

"If you find him any more, arrest him on the spot," cried De Montfort, hastily. "Methinks the man is a traitor. I sent him hence for his good; if he come back, evil shall overtake him."

He spoke evidently with considerable irritation, which the Great Earl of Leicester, as he was generally called, was seldom, if ever, known to display. Impetuous he certainly had been in his early youth; and pride and sternness had been faults of his years; but excitement upon trifling occasions was so foreign to his character, that the constable of the guard, as he retired from his presence, muttered--"Something must have gone very wrong with the Great Earl; I never saw him so before."

When the officer had departed, Simon de Montfort rose, and took two or three turns up and down the room, murmuring to himself--"Each petty knave dares to disobey me; but I doubt these Ashbys; they are none of them stern and steadfast in the cause of right. This conference with Gloucester, on pretence of being stopped by his troops--'tis rank,--'tis evident. But we shall soon hear more. Here they come, I suppose:" and opening the door into the council-room, he walked slowly to the head of the table, while the old Earl of Monthermer advanced to meet him, and Hugh lingered for a moment at the opposite side reading a note which seemed to have been just put into his hands.

"Public or private?" asked De Montfort, looking upon his young friend with a smile.

"Private, my lord," answered Hugh--"at least it is marked so; and though I have some doubt of the honesty of the writer, I will keep it private--at least for the present."

The Earl was about to reply; but at that moment the jingling step of Alured de Ashby was heard in the stone corridor at the top of the stairs; and after a brief pause he followed, his father into the council chamber.

"Welcome, my Lord of Ashby," said De Montfort, advancing, and taking the Earl's hand. "I am right glad to see you here; and welcome, too, Lord Alured. I fear that you have passed through some perils, and met with somewhat rough treatment on your road hither?"

"Perils, my lord, I may have passed through," answered Alured, "but rough treatment I have none to complain of. The noble Earl of Gloucester treated me with more courtesy than I had a right to expect; and, as you see, suffered me to proceed, to join your lordship."

De Montfort strove in vain to prevent his brow from gathering into a heavy frown; and he replied, with a bitter smile--"Doubtless the Earl is wise."

In the meanwhile the Earl of Ashby had been greeting cordially the Monthermer and his nephew; and the sight of their mutual courtesies, which was in no way pleasant to Alured de Ashby, prevented him, in all probability, from making a rash reply to the Earl of Leicester.

"Well, sir," he said, not noticing the words of De Montfort, but turning sharply to Hugh, "you informed me, some time ago, that the cause of my sister's being carried off and detained by some rude country people, or forest outlaws, would be explained to my good father here. Pray let us hear it in this noble presence! I am as curious as a woman."

"Tush, Alured!" cried his father; "you are an impatient, irritable boy. First let me render thanks to our young friend, for his gallant, well-conducted search after our dear Lucy, and for restoring her to us so soon."

"Whatever thanks he has merited, my lord," replied Alured, "I am right willing to pay; but first I wish to hear the full extent of his great deservings, lest my gratitude should overwhelm me. Luckily, however, there is a small deduction to be made, for having even at this early hour, brought an unjust charge against our kinsman Richard, and roused dark suspicions of him in the breast of this noble Earl."

"I fear, my young friend," said the old Lord of Monthermer, in a calm and kindly tone, "that the gratitude which seems to sit so heavy upon you--if there prove any cause for gratitude at all, which I doubt--can suffer no diminution on the account you would place against it. The charge against your kinsman was made by me, not Hugh. I neither concealed any part of the suspicion, nor aggravated it in the least; but merely told noble De Montfort that which we all know, and which behoved him to be acquainted with, when he was trusting daily near Prince Edward a person of whom even your father must entertain grave doubts."

"No--no! not so, my lord!" cried the Earl of Ashby, "my doubts have been dispelled."

Some farther conversation, of a menacing character, took place, the old Lord of Monthermer showing himself desirous of soothing the two Lords of Ashby, but Alured evidently striving to drive the matter to a personal quarrel.

It is no easy task, with a companion so disposed, to avoid administering some occasion of offence; and although Hugh de Monthermer, in his love for Lucy, found every motive for avoiding a breach with her brother, yet there was a point of endurance beyond which even that inducement could not carry him.

"Well--well, Lord Alured," he said, at length, "it is clear to me, and must be clear to all, what is your object now. You have never forgotten ancient feuds, though we all agreed to cast them aside for ever. I would do all that is honourable and just, to maintain and strengthen every kindly feeling between our two houses, but even the desire of so doing shall not induce me to swerve from what I consider right. I believe Richard de Ashby to be a false traitor, unworthy of the name he bears; for your noble race, whatever side it has taken, has never produced such a one before."

"And I maintain him honest and true," replied Alured, "and will uphold it at----"

He was going to add, the spear's point; but his father stopped him, exclaiming--"Hush--hush! no violence! Hear what Lord Hugh would say."

"At all events," said De Montfort, "have some respect, sir, for those in whose presence you speak."

Alured de Ashby bit his lip, but made no reply, and Hugh de Monthermer turned with a glowing cheek to the Earl of Ashby, inquiring--"My lord, have you heard from your daughter, in whose hands I found her?"

"I have not seen her," replied the Earl--"I have not yet seen her. This city is so full of troops and armed men, that Alured judged it better to leave her at a place a short distance hence, between this and Gloucester. But Alured has told me what she told him."

"Well then, my lord," continued Hugh, "I have but to add, that the men in whose hands she was, and against whom I could bring no force sufficient to set her free, agreed to liberate her on condition that I requested you, by your honour and high name, to compel your kinsman, Richard de Ashby, to restore the unhappy girl he carried off, when we all met in Barnesdale, to the house of her father, John Greenly, and to make him pay such dowry, on her entering a convent, as may punish him and ensure her reception. It was as a hostage for her return that they seized your daughter; and it was only upon this condition that they set her free."

"May I know," demanded Alured de Ashby, assuming a sweet and ceremonious tone, which contrasted strangely with the workings of anger and pride in his face--"may I know, fair sir, whether this demand is made of my father by these courteous outlaws of Sherwood, or by the noble Lord Hugh de Monthermer?"

"Hush! Alured, I will have none of this!" exclaimed his father again. "You are too violent! Surely I have maintained the dignity of my house all my days, and can do it without your help. Now, my Lord Hugh, from whom comes this demand?"

"It comes, my lord," replied Hugh, "from all those persons who held your daughter in their power. To you, my lord, for whom I entertain so much respect, I bear it unwillingly, and bear it only in the name of others; but it is my purpose, I acknowledge, whenever and wheresoever I meet Richard de Ashby, to demand that and more at his hands."

"Sir!" cried Alured, "there is one here present right willing and ready to put himself in the place of his cousin, and render you every account of his conduct you can desire."

Hugh turned from him with a look from which he could not altogether banish some contempt. "When I find, my lord," he replied, "that Richard de Ashby is lame or impotent, a woman or a monk, I will consent to his appointing a champion, but not till then. I have no quarrel with you, my lord, and do not intend to have one."

"Methinks, my Lord of Ashby," said De Montfort, who had been speaking for a moment apart with the old Earl of Monthermer--"methinks the demand made upon you is but just, let it come from whom it may. These men held your daughter in their power, and they fixed certain conditions, taking it for granted you would execute which, they set the lady free. Those conditions in themselves are fair, if I understand the matter rightly; and it were better far to yield to them, than now to dispute the matter, when your daughter has thus attained her liberty.--It would be more honourable, I say."

The colour came up in the old Earl de Ashby's cheek.

"The house of Ashby, my lord," he replied, "permits no one to dictate to it, what is for its honour to do."

"Far less," cried Alured, "will it allow an ancient enemy, presuming on the forbearance which has already given pardon and forgiveness for many offences, to bring false charges against one of its members, and then dictate how its chief is to act!"

"Pardon and forgiveness!" exclaimed Hugh de Monthermer--"false charges! These are strange terms. As to the truth of the accusation, if your base kinsman, sir, dares to put forth still the lying pretext that he made use of when last I saw him, and to lay, upon the same scapegoat, the blame of corresponding with the enemies of the state and of carrying off this poor girl, his falsehood now can soon be proved, for she has been seen with him in this very city."

Alured looked down and bit his lip; and the old Lord of Monthermer, anxious to prevent the house of Ashby from abandoning that cause which he conceived to be just and right, interposed in the calm, grave manner which was usual with him, saying--"Do not suppose, my noble friend, that my Lord of Leicester wishes to dictate to you in any degree. It is fair that he should submit for your consideration whether it will not be more honourable to your family to clear it of the stain which this man's conduct leaves upon it."

"I can meddle, my lord, with no man's pastimes," said the Earl de Ashby, carried away by the example of his son. "Richard de Ashby is not my page, for me to chastise him, if he plays the fool with a peasant's daughter. I cannot meddle in the matter."

"Would your lordship not have meddled," asked De Montfort, sternly, "if your daughter's freedom had still depended on it. Methinks you would then have found right soon motives sufficient to interfere, and that somewhat vigorously."

"Well, my lord," cried the Earl, in an angry tone,--for where weakness goes hand in hand with wrong, wrath is never far behind; "at all events, it is no affair of yours! This is no public matter, but a private

business, put upon me by Lord Hugh of Monthermer."

"Nay, my good lord--nay!" exclaimed Hugh, "most unwillingly did I undertake it; but surely you would not have had me risk your daughter's liberation, by hesitating to convey to you a mere demand, which, without obtaining her deliverance at all, might have been sent by any other person."

"And carried by any other, with much more grace than by a pretended friend," rejoined Alured de Ashby.

"Young gentleman," said the old Earl of Monthermer, "you have done mischief enough this morning, whether you intended it or not. Do no more mischief, I beseech you; nor make those part enemies who would fain be friends. Your father's answer is given--he will not meddle in the affair; so let it rest. Hugh has done his duty, and he has had, moreover, the pleasure and the honour of serving and protecting a lady. Whatever more is to be done rests with yourselves."

"Not entirely," replied De Montfort, with a frown; "I have some say in this business."

"How so, my lord?" demanded the Earl of Ashby, sharply. "I will allow no one--, not the highest in all the laud, to judge for me, as to my private conduct."

"You are somewhat hasty, my good lord," said De Montfort, coldly.

"Hasty or not," interrupted Alured de Ashby, eager to widen the breach as far as possible, "my father is right in what he says: and I say yea to him."

"So bold!" said De Montfort, contemptuously; "so very bold for so young a bird! Methinks its wings want clipping, lest it should flee away!"

Alured de Ashby saw that he had gone somewhat too far, and might, perhaps, if he said more, endanger his own liberty. At least, conscious of his own purposes, he so construed the words of the Earl of Leicester. His haughty spirit, however, would not bow to qualify even in a degree the rash language he had used, and he remained sullenly silent, looking down upon the ground, while the great Earl continued with his keen grey eyes fixed sternly upon him.

"To end all this," De Montfort went on, "and to conclude a conversation which has continued too long, there are other charges against your kinsman, Earl of Ashby, which cannot exactly be trusted to your lordship's lenity. They are somewhat more serious than debauching a country girl; and as it has been proved that he has been seen with this light-o'-love damsel, who, by his own confession, went off with one undoubtedly a traitor to these realms, it is strong presumptive proof that he still has that traitor in his service, or knows more of him than is befitting. Under these circumstances, I have already ordered his arrest, should he enter Hereford; and now, moreover, I will have him sought for, and if he be a traitor, deal with him as such--which I will likewise do with all who prove so;" he added, in a marked tone.

"Your lordship is right," said Alured de Ashby; and he muttered between his teeth so low that it could not be heard--"If you can catch them!"

"Now, good morning to you, my lords," continued De Montfort; "at three this evening we will hold a council, to consider of proclaiming Mortimer and others, traitors. We shall expect you all to be present. Come with me, Monthermer--come with me, Lord Hugh! We will have no high words upon the stairs."

Lord Ashby and his son turned away, with frowning brows; and, as they descended to the court-yard, two short sentences were spoken, which decided the fate of both. "I know not what may be your purpose,

my father," said Alured, "but my course is determined. I will neither be the jest of the Monthermers nor the slave of Simon de Montfort!"

"Nor I either, Alured," answered the Earl, in a low tone; and without more comment they mounted their horses, and rode back to the inn.

They had scarcely quitted the court when Hugh de Monthermer appeared in it, with a hasty step. One of the small party of armed retainers who had accompanied him instantly led forwards his horse, and he sprang into the saddle. "Which way did the Earl of Ashby take?" he demanded.

"Through that gate, my lord," replied the man; and, bidding the servants follow him, the young knight was turning towards the other archway, when he felt something pull his stirrup, and looking down, beheld the boy Tangel, holding up his long bony hand with many a curious grimace.

"I will speak with thee by and by, Tangel," said Hugh; "I will be back in an hour."

"Ay, by and by is the cat that lapped up all the cream!" cried the dwarf. "By and by wont do, I must speak with you now! I have much to say!"

"Then you must get a horse, and follow me, Tangel," replied the young lord--"it is already near the hour named. I go up the hill--be quick!" and he put spurs to his horse. The dwarf gazed after him for a minute, murmuring--"He'll be an hour too soon, if he do not mind!" and turned away.

CHAPTER XVIII.

About half an hour after the events had taken place, of which we have spoken in the last chapter, Prince Edward stood in the midst of the chamber already described, habited in a light riding suit, but armed only with his sword. He was gazing, with a look of expectation, at the door, when it opened, and his young companion, Thomas de Clare, entered in haste. "Oh yes, my lord," he said, with a well pleased smile, "he fully confirms the permission; and, indeed, William of Cantelupe, Ingelby, and Thomas de Blundel, with three or four, are already waiting in the court-yard for your coming."

"Is my horse prepared, then?" demanded the Prince.

"Why, the foolish grooms, my lord," replied the young nobleman, "had brought out the roan, alleging that grey was lean, and not like a Prince's horse, but I bade them saddle him, notwithstanding, saying that I had given him to your Grace, and checking them for not obeying the order they had received. He is, doubtless, caparisoned by this time--but you are pale, my lord; the fever has weakened you! Were it not as well to take a cup of wine before you ride forth?"

Edward shook his head. "Not so!" he said; "when I strike my spur into that horse's side, the very thought of freedom shall give me better strength and courage than the best wine that ever France produced. However, let me have your arm; it may be well to seem a little weaker than I am. Do you go with me, De Clare?"

"No, my lord," answered his companion, "I am not one of those named; and, to say the truth, I did not seek the honour, for I might but embarrass you, and I must provide for my own safety here."

"Are you sure you can?" demanded the Prince. "You must not risk your life for me, De Clare!"

"Oh, fear not--fear not!" replied the young nobleman; "give me but one hour, and I will be beyond the reach of harm."

After a few more words, Prince Edward took his arm, and slowly descended the stairs, at the foot of which they found a number of gentlemen assembled, with several servants holding the horses which had been prepared for their excursion. The spearmen whom De Clare had talked of the preceding night did not make their appearance, De Montfort judging that seven or eight of his stanchest followers would be quite sufficient to secure him against the escape of the captive Prince. Edward bowed familiarly to the various gentlemen present, and was received with every appearance of deference and respect.

"Good morning, Ingelby," he said; "good morning, Sir William de Cantelupe. Blundel, I am glad you are here--you are a judge of horses; and De Clare has given me one, which he declares will make an excellent charger--God speed the mark! When shall I need a charger again?--But there he comes; at least, I suppose so. What think you of him?"

"Nay, no jesting, gentlemen!" cried De Clare, remarking a smile upon the lips of the rest; "that is a horse which, when well fed and pampered highly, will do more service than a thousand sleek-coated beauties."

"To the latter appellation, at least, he has no title," replied Blundel, looking at the horse as it was led forward; "but he has good points about him, nevertheless."

"He seems quiet enough," observed the Prince; "and, to say sooth, that is no slight matter with me to-day. I am not strong enough to ride a rough-paced fiery charger. But let us mount, gentlemen, and go. Farewell, De Clare! I will not break your horse's wind."

"I defy your Grace," answered Thomas de Clare, holding Edward's stirrup, as he mounted slowly. "I wish you a pleasant ride."

At the gate of the castle stood the Earl of Leicester himself, ready to do honour to Prince Edward, as he passed; and after a few words of cold courtesy, the train proceeded on its way, and wound out of the town of Hereford.

"This free air cheers me," said Edward, turning to one of his companions, after they had passed the gates about half a mile. "How true it is, that blessings, manifold blessings, are only known to be such when we have lost them! To me this free summer wind is in itself the richest of enjoyments."

"I am glad to hear it, my lord," replied the gentleman he addressed; "I hope it may do you much good."

"If I can obtain many such rides," continued Edward; "I shall soon be quite well. See, how proud Blundel is of his horse! and yet I would bet a silver tankard against a pewter can, that Cantelupe's would beat it for the distance of half a mile, or Ingelby's either."

Ingelby, who was near, smiled, well pleased; and the other, to whom Edward had spoken, exclaimed--"Do you hear what the Prince says, Blundel?--that Cantelupe's horse would beat yours for half a mile!"

"Cantelupe would not try," answered Blundel, "I should think."

"Oh, I will try!" cried Cantelupe; "to please the Prince, I will try with all my heart. Let us set off!"

"Nay, nay," rejoined Edward, "let us wait till we get upon the turf, on the higher ground. If I remember right, there is as fair a course there as any in England. We will make matches there for you, and I will give a golden drinking cup as a prize for the horse that beats all the rest. You shall run two at a time, and the gentlemen who remain with me will be the judges of each course."

"Agreed, agreed!" cried the whole party.

"I shall win the cup!" said Blundel.

"Not you!" shouted Ingelby, in his loud, hoarse voice. "It is scarcely fair for me, however, for I am so much heavier."

"But you have a stronger horse," replied Edward; and thus passing the time in light conversation, they mounted slowly the first gentle slopes in the neighbourhood of Hereford, and came upon some fine dry turf at the top.

As soon as they found an open space where there was grass enough, Blundel and Cantelupe put their horses into a quick pace and galloped on, taking for the winning-post a tree that stood detached at the distance of about half a mile. Cantelupe was the lighter man of the two, and he rode well; but Blundel's horse was decidedly superior, and, he had already passed the tree when his competitor was two or three lengths behind. The Prince seemed greatly to enjoy the sport, and cheered on the men and horses with his voice and hand. Two more competitors speedily succeeded the first, and still the whole party kept, advancing over the wild, turfy sort of down, ever and anon choosing an open spot for their gay pastime.

"Now, Ingelby," said the Prince, at length, "you must try with Blundel. As you are the heavier man, you have some advantage in his horse being rather tired. We will give you a mile's course, too, so that your beast's strength will tell. There, up to that gate, with the little village church beyond, and if you beat him, I will fill the cup with silver pieces. He is so proud of his beast, it makes me mad to see him."

Blundel patted the arching neck of, his proud charger with a self-satisfied smile, and, at the given sign, gave him his head. Away the two best horses in the party went, and ran the longer course before them with very equal speed, Blundel taking the lead at first, but Ingelby's stronger beast gaining upon him afterwards. Blundel, however, was the first to reach the gate; but Ingelby dared him to try his chance back

again, and away they came once more at headlong speed. This time, Ingelby was first, till, at the distance of about three hundred yards from the Prince, his horse stumbled, and came down with a heavy fall. The rider and the charger were both upon their feet again in a moment, but the beast had struck his knee, although not severely, and went lame as he finished the rest of his course.

"I know not how we must award the prize here," said the Prince; "for had it not been for that accident----"

"Oh, it is mine--it is mine, fairly!" cried Blundel.

"Oh, yes, my lord, I think he has won it!" said several voices round.

"Oh, I have won it!" reiterated Blundel; but added, laughing, "unless his Grace himself will ride a course with me upon his grey charger."

"It must be but a short one, Blundel," answered Edward; "but I do not mind if I try for some hundred yards or two the mettle of the beast. What say you to that little tree?"

"With all my heart!" replied Blundel.

"On, then!" cried the Prince; and at the same moment he loosed the rein--at which his horse had been tugging for the last half hour--and struck his spurs into the animal's sides. Like an arrow shot from a bow, the lean and bony charger darted forth, covering an immense space of ground at every stretch, and speedily leaving Blundel and his vaunted steed behind. Spurring with all his might, the disappointed cavalier followed on Edward's track; but though the distance to the tree was certainly not more than five hundred yards, the Prince was full fifty in front when he passed it.

Seeing that it was vain to make any further effort, Blundel slackened his speed, but to his astonishment the Prince spurred on, gaining upon him every minute; and, at the distance of about seventy or eighty yards,

feeling the immense speed and power of the horse that he bestrode, Edward turned gaily round in the saddle, and, waving his hand, exclaimed, in a loud voice, "All courteous things to my cousin De Montfort! Tell him he shall hear from me soon."

By this time the party, who had been slowly following, had caught sight of what was passing, and putting their chargers into a gallop, were soon up to the spot where Blundel had halted in bewilderment and wonder.

"He is gone!" cried Blundel. "By St. John the Evangelist, he is gone!"

"What shall we do?" exclaimed another.

"Follow him, follow him, at all events," said Ingelby; "it must not be said that we did not follow him," and accordingly they spurred on at their best speed; but it was all in vain. The poor-looking grey, that every one had contemned, now showed his real powers, each moment seemed to increase his speed, each stride seemed wider than the last, and every instant Edward gained upon his pursuers.

For some way he never turned his head to look, feeling sure that they were left far behind; but at length, after rising another gentle slope, he paused for an instant to let his horse breathe, and gazed back over the grassy land, which he could now see extending all the way down to the river. At the distance of about a mile, he beheld a knot of eight horsemen, in whom he instantly recognised the persons who had been sent to guard him. But they were no longer following upon his track, their horses' heads were turned towards Hereford, and thither they now pursued their way, having soon given up all hope of overtaking the fugitive.

"Where is my Lord of Leicester?" demanded Ingelby, the moment they arrived in the court of the castle.

"He is holding private council, and cannot be spoken with," replied the officer to whom he addressed himself.

"I must speak with him, however," rejoined Ingelby.

"You cannot!" said the officer, sternly; "he is in close conference with the Earl of Oxford and Lord Ralph."

"If the devil were with him, I must see him!" exclaimed Ingelby. "Out of my way, man! I will bear the blame." And, pushing past him, he approached the door of the council-chamber, and knocked hard with his hand. A page, who was within, opened the door; and walking straight up to De Montfort, who sat at the head of the table, Ingelby whispered, "The Prince is gone, my lord!"

De Montfort turned fiercely round upon him, and struck the table with his clenched hand, exclaiming "Gone!"

"Ay, my lord, gone!" replied the officer; "and yet none of us could help it;" and he proceeded to explain how Edward had effected his escape.

De Montfort showed no further agitation or surprise than that which the sudden communication of such intelligence elicited at first. It overpowered his usual calmness for a moment; but then it was past. After hearing Ingelby's account, he muttered to himself--"The shadow that fell upon me this morning was from this cloud. Go, boy," he continued, addressing the page who stood at the door, "bid the constable of the guard seek for Thomas de Clare; and if he find him, attach him for high treason. Let some one, too, summon the Lords of Ashby hither instantly, on business of much importance. Quick boy, away!--My Lord of Oxford, I will beseech you to speed across the country to Pevensey at once, and instead of aiding my son to take it, as we proposed just now, bid him raise the siege, and march to join me, with all the men whom he can raise, coming by Winchester and Oxford. We shall soon have business on our hands, and must be up and stirring. What were we

saying, Sir Adam de Newfort!--oh, about bringing the troops from Chester;" and he entered again upon the subject which they had before been discussing, seeming to dismiss from his mind the escape of the Prince, as if it had been a matter of no moment.

In about half an hour the messenger returned, whom he had sent to order the arrest of Thomas de Clare.

"My lord," said the page, "they are not to be found."

"They!" exclaimed the Earl.

"Lord Thomas left the castle an hour ago," replied the page, "and his servants are all gone likewise."

"So I thought, so I thought!" said De Montfort; "'Trust not soft seeming' is a good old saw. I might have been wiser than to put faith in one of the brood of Gloucester."

"But of the Ashbys, boy--speak of the Ashbys!" cried Lord Ralph Basset. "My heart is no true prophet if they play us not false likewise."

"They went out upon the Worcester road, the people of their inn declare," rejoined the boy, "within half an hour after they left the castle, and ere an hour was over all their people followed them, their steward paying the score."

"Let them go!" cried De Montfort, "we can afford to lose them. An unwilling hand is always well spared from a good cause. Besides, the greater loss puts out the less. One Edward is worth a whole shop full of Ashbys!" and with this contemptuous observation he turned to other matters again.

CHAPTER XIX.

The impediments of life, at which we fret and chafe in early years, and which we view with stern doubt and disappointment in that after period when the shortness of the space left to us renders each moment really as valuable as it only seems to be in the eagerness of youthful impatience--the impediments of life, I say--the things that check us in our impetuous course, and force us to pause and to delay--how often are they blessings instead of curses? How often is the object which they dash from our outstretched hands an evil rather than the good that we esteemed it!

Hugh de Monthermer, as we have shewn, rode away from the castle of Hereford about half an hour before Prince Edward. He chose the very road, and went on at great speed for about three miles; he then turned his horse into a path somewhat different from that which the Prince had chosen, but leading nearly in the same direction; and in that he proceeded at a rate which gave his five servants some trouble in keeping up with him. At length, however, his horse suddenly went lame, and on dismounting to see what was the matter, he found that a nail had run into the frog of the animal's foot; and although it was easily extracted, yet it was impossible to proceed at the same pace as before.

"Give me your horse, Peterkin," he said, "halting, and take mine slowly back to Hereford."

While the servant was changing the saddle, however, a countryman appeared on the road, driving some swine before him; and Hugh immediately walked up to him, asking, "Is this the way, my friend, to Monington Chapel?"

"No, no," replied the man; "you must go back. You should have taken the first turning on your left. Lord, now! only to think of your not knowing your way to Monington Chapel!"

"What's the hour?" asked Hugh.

"Just mid-day," answered the man. "Don't you see the sun?"

"Then there is time," said Hugh de Monthermer; and mounting the servant's horse, he retrod his steps for some distance.

Just as he was approaching the turning, however, which the man had directed him to take, he heard a loud whistling scream, which made him look up to the sky, thinking that some eagle--a bird then very common in the marches of Wales--had come close above his head. But nothing of the kind was to be seen; and a moment after the same cry was repeated, while one of the servants who were riding a little way behind, exclaimed, "It is the dwarf, my lord, it is Tangel. See where he comes at full speed, like a monkey on a race-horse!"

Hugh de Monthermer paused for a moment and turned his eyes down the road from Hereford, up which the dwarf was coming, not mounted on his forest pony, but perched upon the back of a tall charger with his head just seen between the ears of the animal, his long arms stretched out holding the bridle somewhat short, and his equally lengthy legs hanging down, affording no bad type for the old figure of Nobody.

The boy was speedily by Hugh de Monthermer's side, shaking his head reproachfully as he came, and saying, "Ay, you would not listen to Tangel, man-at-arms. Nobody listens to Tangel; and why? Because he has not got a skin like a sucking pig and a face such as boys cut out of a turnip. Now, if any of these bottle-nosed beer drinkers had told you to stay and listen, you would have waited by the hour."

"Not I," replied Hugh de Monthermer, "nor can I wait now, good Tangel; so come on, and make haste with your story by the way. What is it you want to tell me?"

"Ay, haste, haste!" cried Tangel, turning his horse and keeping by the side of the young lord; "always hasting to destruction, and slow to anything good. Now are you riding out here, without knowing where you are going or who it is that has sent for you."

"And pray, if you are wiser, Tangel," said Hugh, with a smile, "let me know where it is I am going to, and who it is that has sent for me."

"Going to a prison," cried Tangel, "and he who sent for you is a traitor."

"Are you serious?" demanded Hugh, turning gravely towards him.

"No, never was merrier in my life," answered Tangel, grinning till he shewed his fine white teeth running back almost to his ears. "Is it not enough to make me merry, to see a man who calls himself wise put his head into a noose like a woodcock?--Now I will catechise you, as the priest of the chapel did me one day when he was drunk. Did you not receive a letter to-day?"

"Yes, I did," replied Hugh.

"Who gave you that letter?" demanded Tangel.

"One of the servants of the noble Earl of Leicester," answered Hugh.

"Ha!" said the boy, "they are cunninger than I thought."

"And moreover," added the young nobleman, "I asked the servant from whom he had received it, and he told me, from one of the attendants of the Earl of Ashby."

"And who did the Earl Ashby's ton of flesh get it from?" demanded the dwarf.--"I will tell you, for you know nothing about it yourself. He got it from gallant, sweet, honest, pretty Richard de Ashby, before he ran away from Hereford, last night. I heard him when he thought there were no ears listening; for I watched him all over the place, as soon as I found

he was in Hereford, creeping after him like a shadow. He gave me a blow once in Nottingham, and called me ape and devil; but the ape was at his heels last night when he and his fair cousin Alured were plotting to go over to Gloucester; and I heard him say, that he would have you in a net before four-and-twenty hours were over."

"He might have found himself mistaken, Tangel," replied Hugh, "for I had my misgivings. Although I have not often seen the Lady Lucy's handwriting, I suspected that the note was not hers; and, though he told me to come alone, I brought five stout fellows with me, as you see, intending to leave them within call. I think we six might be quite enough to deal with any force they would dare to bring within seven miles of Hereford."

The dwarf laughed aloud, paused, and then laughed again; but in his wayward fashion he would not explain the cause of his merriment, let Hugh say what he would.

"Mighty cunning--mighty cunning!" he cried. "Now, if you have luck, you may catch the fowler in his trap; but yet, if you be wise, you will ride back to Hereford, and take a nuncheon at the Maypole."

"No," replied Hugh; pausing for an instant, and beckoning to his followers to come up; "no, I will not. I know Richard de Ashby's force right well, and we five are worth any ten he can bring against us. I would give a capful of gold pieces to take that traitor back with me, and nail his ears to the castle gates; but we must lay our plan securely. The place appointed is Monington Chapel, and there surely must be some place near it where I can conceal the men."

"Why, my lord," said one of his followers, "just on this side of it is Little Bilberry wood. I know it well; and then beyond, is the great wood of Monington. We can find cover in either, for a thousand spears if it were necessary."

"I forget the place, though I have seen it often," replied Hugh; and, musing over what the dwarf had told him, he rode on till the highway entered a little copse intersected by numerous paths.

The width of the whole wood might be about a hundred and fifty yards, though the length, to the right and left of the road which they followed was not less than a couple of miles; and as the young nobleman and his train issued forth again on the other side, they perceived at a short distance before them a small chapel, to which the name of a shrine would have been more appropriate, for the largest congregation that it could contain was certainly thirty persons at the utmost.

Hugh de Monthermer's arrangements were soon made. Drawing back as soon as possible, lest any one should observe his movements, he stationed his men under cover of the wood, and then advanced alone to the chapel, the door of which was open, as usual with all places of worship at that time. Before he entered, however, he paused to gaze over the scene on the other side of the little building, which presented, first an open green expanse covered with short grass dotted with tufts of fern, and then, with the interval of about a third of a mile, a deep, sombre wood, extending to a considerable distance on both sides. The ground all round was perfectly clear, and the copse, where he had left his men, so near at hand that it was impossible for him to be taken at a disadvantage by a larger force than his own, without having due warning of its approach.

Hugh looked up towards the sun, saying to himself, "I am half an hour before the time, I should imagine--We shall have a storm ere long:" and, fastening his horse to a hook fixed in the stone work, apparently for that purpose, he entered the chapel, which was quite vacant.

Above the altar appeared the figure of the Virgin, and kneeling for a moment, as usual with all persons of his faith, Hugh repeated a short prayer, and then rising, gazed out of a window which turned towards the larger wood at the back. The sky was becoming rapidly clouded, and

though the sun shone high in heaven, it only served to render the thick, thronged mass of vapours, that were rolling up from the south-west, more dark and lowering in appearance than would have been the case had they not been contrasted with the warm glow of the zenith. Soon, however, swelling up like the waves of an ocean of molten lead, the white edges of the thunder-cloud covered the disk of the sun, bringing with them an oppressive heat very different from the mild but fresh air which had prevailed during the morning.

Still Hugh de Monthermer kept his eye fixed upon the wood; and after watching for several minutes, he thought he could distinguish, through the bolls of the trees, a human form, moving slowly along at the very verge. It disappeared again, and for a few moments nothing more was perceived, so that Hugh, at length, begun to think he had been in error. He soon found that such was not the case, for after a short pause, a man on foot issued forth a step or two, and was seen to look carefully round him. He then gazed down the road towards Hereford, and put his hand over his eyes, as if to shade them from the light. Apparently satisfied, he retired into the wood again, after having continued his investigations for about three or four minutes.

It was evident he was watching for some one, and Hugh naturally concluded it was himself. The young nobleman paused, meditating how he should act--at one moment, thinking of shewing himself, in order to bring the affair to a speedy issue, but the next, judging it would be better to remain in the chapel till the hour appointed had arrived.

While he was still hesitating, a vivid flash of lightning, that almost blinded him, burst forth from the cloud, and appeared to sweep close past the chapel. Some large drops of rain fell at the same time, and after another and another flash--succeeding each other with extraordinary rapidity--the flood-gates of the heavens seemed to open, and the torrent poured down, mingling hail with the rain, and forming foaming yellow pools at every indentation of the road. Incessantly through the twilight of the storm the broad blue glare of the lightning was seen, with a thin,

bright, fiery line crossing the tissue of the flame, and marking its fierce and destructive character; while the rolling peal of the thunder seemed to shake the very earth, echoing and re-echoing from the woods around.

"Those poor fellows will be half drowned," thought Hugh de Monthermer; "I have a great mind to call them into the chapel, though it might lose me my opportunity. Yet, if I were sure of catching that villain, and carrying him into Hereford,--ay, or of meeting him with double my numbers, I would myself swim the Wye a dozen times.--Hark! surely that was the tramp of a horse's feet!"

Another clap of thunder, however, drowned all other sounds; but when it had passed away, the noise of a horse's hoofs beating the ground at a quick pace distinctly reached the young nobleman's ear. Hugh de Monthermer listened. "There is but one," he said; "I will take no odds against him;" and he loosened his sword in the scabbard, keeping behind the angle of the building, so as not to show himself too soon at the half-opened door.

The next instant the horse stopped opposite the Chapel, the rider was heard to spring to the ground; and after a moment's delay, in order, it seemed, to secure the beast from straying, the stranger's foot was heard ascending the steps.

Hugh de Monthermer advanced to confront him, but instantly drew back again, exclaiming, in a tone of strong astonishment--"Prince Edward!"

"Hugh de Monthermer," cried Edward, "this is strange meeting, old companion!"

"It is, indeed, my dear lord," replied Hugh. "It becomes me not to ask how or why you are here, but I will confess that it rejoices my very heart to see you at liberty, though I doubt not many men would say, if they knew of our meeting, that I ought to arrest and bring you back to Hereford."

"He would be a bold man!" answered the Prince, raising his towering form to its full height--"He would be a bold man who would attempt, single-handed, to stop Edward of England on his way!"

"Alas, my lord!" replied Hugh de Monthermer, "I have not even that excuse to give to those who may blame me. One shout from that door would bring fearful odds against you, for, to tell the truth, I am waiting here to catch that arch-traitor, Richard de Ashby, in his own net, and have left men in the little wood you have just passed. But once more, I say, I rejoice to see you free."

"Then, indeed, I thank you, Hugh," replied the Prince--"I thank you from my heart for your sincere love--though, if I judge rightly, I am not so unprotected as I seem."

The young nobleman took the hand that Edward held out to him, and kissed it respectfully, saying, "I would not betray you, my lord, for the world, were you here alone and I at the head of hundreds; but ere we part, I must ask you one boon."

"Nay, let us not part yet," rejoined Edward; "there is much to be said between us, Hugh. I have taken shelter here from the storm,--you are here also; and while the elements rage without, let us talk of giving peace to the land."

"That is the object of the boon I crave, my lord," answered Hugh, "but I can stay no longer with you than to name that boon. No, not even to hear you concede or refuse it--else I shall be held a traitor to that cause which I believed to be sacred. The boon is this: when you have joined the Earl of Gloucester--when you see yourself at the head of armies--and when you feel your royal mind at liberty to act with power and success, publish a proclamation pledging yourself to uphold all those laws and ordinances which have been enacted for the safety of the land, for the rights and liberties of the people, and for our protection from foreign minions and base favourites--laws and ordinances to which

you have once already given your consent. If you do this, I myself will never draw the sword against you, nor do I believe will Simon de Montfort."

Edward shook his head, with a look of doubt. "De Montfort is ambitious, Hugh," he said; "perhaps he was not always so, for many a man begins a patriot and ends a tyrant."

At that moment the sound of a horn was heard from the little neighbouring copse, and Hugh de Monthermer advanced to the door of the chapel, knowing that it was a signal of danger. The scene that presented itself was curious: the rain was still pouring down heavy and grey; the air was dim and loaded; the flashes of the lightning were blazing through the sky, and seemed to the eyes of the young nobleman to be actually running along the ground. At the same time, rushing towards him with rapidity almost superhuman, was the poor dwarf, Tangel, throwing about his long, lean arms, in the most grotesque manner, and pointing ever and anon to the opposite wood, issuing forth from which appeared a body of at least three hundred horse, well armed and mounted, and coming down at full speed towards the chapel.

Hugh turned one look more into the building and waved his hand, exclaiming--"Adieu, my lord, adieu! Here is danger near;" and, gaining his horse's side, he unhooked the bridle, and leapt into the saddle.

"Up, Tangel! Up behind me!" he cried, as the dwarf came nigh--"up, quick, or they will be upon us!"

The dwarf sprang up behind him in a moment, with one single bound from the ground; and Hugh, turning the bridle towards the little copse, dashed on at full speed. The servant's horse, however, which he was riding, was not a very fast one; the troop from the wood was coming forward with great rapidity, and seemed determined to chase him: his own force was too small to offer any resistance; and Hugh de Monthermer saw with bitterness of spirit that if the adversaries still

pursued, he must soon be a prisoner. To be so deceived and foiled, added anger to the grief he felt at the prospect of captivity, and he muttered to himself--"They shall pay dearly for it, at all events," while he still spurred on towards the copse from which his own men were now approaching, leading the horse on which the dwarf had joined them.

"Mount your beast quickly!" cried Hugh, turning his head to Tangel.

"Go on--go on, fast, good master!" cried the boy. "Do not halt for me: I will mount without your stopping, only carry me close enough to the beast;" and in a moment after, as Hugh rode swiftly up towards his followers, the boy put his hands upon the young nobleman's shoulders, sprang up with his feet on the charger's haunches, and then with a leap and a shrill cry, he lighted on his own horse, whirled himself round, and dropped into the saddle.

No time, indeed, was to be lost; for Hugh and his attendants met midway between the building and the wood, when one end of the enemy's line already reached the chapel.

And at that moment, Edward himself darted out upon the steps, and shouted aloud, "Halt! I command you, halt!--Lord Lovell, Sir Thomas Grey, I charge you, halt! Chase him not. I say!--Sir Richard de Ashby," he continued, raising his voice till it seemed to vie with the thunder, as he saw that his orders were unheeded, "Halt! on your life! Will you disobey my first command?"

But Richard de Ashby was deaf, and dashed on with five or six others, while the rest of their party drew the rein, some sooner, some later, pausing in a broken line. Hugh de Monthermer and his men spurred forward at the full gallop; but the slippery ground, now thoroughly soaked by the pelting rain, defeated his effort to escape an attack. The horse of one of his followers floundered, and fell some forty yards before they reached the copse; and though both man and beast staggered up again, the pursuers were too near to be evaded.

Some ten yards in advance of the rest, mounted upon a fleet black horse, was Richard de Ashby himself. He was fully armed with hauberk and shield and spear, but his aventaille was open, and a glow of savage satisfaction might be seen upon his countenance. Hugh de Monthermer turned in the saddle, to measure the distance between them with his eye, saw in a moment that escape was not possible, but that vengeance was; and, snatching from the man next to him a spear and small round buckler, he wheeled his horse, struck the sharp spur furiously into its flanks, and met his pursuer in full career.

The young knight himself was clothed in nothing but a hauqueton of purple cendal, which, though stiffly stuffed with cotton, as was then customary, afforded poor protection against the point of a lance. But the tournament and the battlefield had been the young nobleman's ball-room and his school, his place of amusement and his place of practice; and his eye was always ready to discover, his hand prepared to take advantage of the slightest movement of an enemy. He perceived in an instant that Richard de Ashby's lance was aimed at his throat, but he showed by no sign that he knew that such was the case, till he was within a yard of his enemy. Then suddenly raising his buckler, he turned the point aside; and at the same instant he somewhat lifted his own spear, which, as he had no rest, was charged upon his thigh, intending to strike his adversary full in the face. But Richard de Ashby bent his head, and the lance touching him high upon the forehead, glanced off from the skull, and catching in the hood of mail, hurled him headlong from his charger to the ground.

Hugh drew up his horse suddenly by the side of the fallen man, and shortening the spear, held it to his throat, shouting aloud to those who followed--"If any one comes near; he dies!"

By this time his own attendants had rejoined him; and two or three gentlemen came riding down at a quick pace from the chapel, calling upon their companions, who had gone before, to halt and come back.

"Did you not hear the Prince's voice?" exclaimed an elderly knight, angrily, as he approached: "it is his express commands, that you come back. Depart, Lord Hugh--depart in peace; it is the Prince's will, and we obey."

"Had I but one half your numbers, Lord Lovel," answered Hugh, "I would not go without taking this traitor with me."

"Or being taken yourself," replied Lord Lovell, with a laugh. "I can assure you, my good lord, we had every intention of carrying you with us into Worcestershire; but as the Prince will let the bird out of the trap which poor Richard baited so nicely for him, he must e'en use his wings--there is no help for it. You seem to have pecked the fowler pretty handsomely, however. I believe you have cleft his skull. There--let his people come up and help him! You have my word against treachery."

"I fear he is not punished as much as he deserves," replied Hugh de Monthermer. "Bear my dutiful thanks to the Prince for his courtesy; and now, fare you well, my Lord Lovell. I trust we shall soon meet again."

Thus saying, he turned his horse, and rode quickly but thoughtfully back to Hereford.

CHAPTER XX.

A few pages more of dry details, dear reader, and then for nothing but brief scenes and rapid action. This, if you please, is a chapter of pure history; and therefore those who are well read in the annals of the times

may pass it over without any particular attention. To all who are not, however, it will be found absolutely necessary to the right understanding of that which is to follow.

On Hugh de Monthermer's arrival at Hereford, he found the news of Edward's escape common to all the town; but, nevertheless, he thought it necessary to communicate first to his uncle, and then to the Earl of Leicester, all that had taken place after he had left them in the morning.

"Some three hundred horses!" said De Montfort, as he listened to the young nobleman's account of his meeting with Richard de Ashby. "They are bold, upon my life! but they teach us that we have been somewhat negligent. And so you unhorsed the traitor, but could neither kill nor take him? It is a pity--you are sure that he is not dead?"

"Not sure, my lord," replied Hugh; "but I rather think not, for I felt the spear strike, and then glance off. I would fain have brought him into Hereford."

"Have you heard," continued De Montfort, "that our good friends the Earl of Ashby and his son have left us?--so that I fear some hopes and expectations, which your uncle mentioned regarding a fair lady's hand, may suffer disappointment."

"I have heard it, my lord," answered Hugh, "and am, I confess, not a little grieved. Nevertheless----"

"Well, what of nevertheless?" asked De Montfort, seeing that be. paused.

"Why, nevertheless, my lord," replied Hugh, "I cannot but hope that I shall succeed at last. I have never yet seen a matter of love which was destined to end happily begin smoothly at the first."

"Ay, hope!" said De Montfort. "Hope is like a hungry boy, who I once saw burn his mouth with his porridge; for he still consoled himself, poor urchin, by saying that it would be cool enough by and by. May it be as you wish, my young friend:--and so good night; for neither you nor I can mend what is gone amiss this day."

As Hugh was leaving the room, De Montfort called to him again, saying, "Pray ask your uncle to spend an hour with me to-night. I want his warlike counsels in our present strait; I know no one more fitted to advise me."

"And none more willing, my lord," replied Hugh, quitting the room.

Bustle, activity, preparation, the movement of troops, rumours Of strange events, some false, some true, portents, even miracles--for those were times in which every man were the magnifying-glasses of superstition--doubts, expectations, suppositions in regard to the motions of every following day, filled up the next fortnight busily. Every part of the country, from one end to the other, was stirred up to fight for one party or the other; and bands of soldiers moving across to join their several banners often encountered in the same village, and by their contests "frighted the isle from its propriety."

According to the best accounts that could be obtained, the number of troops which gathered round Prince Edward and the Earl of Gloucester was considerably larger than that which joined De Montfort in Hereford, and being principally composed of cavalry, these levies dropped much more rapidly in; the foot soldiers, who were enrolling themselves for the party of the Lords Commissioners, as De Montfort's faction was called, though infinitely more numerous, being very much longer in their march, and more easily intercepted and driven back by the enemy.

To counterbalance the depression, however, which the increasing strength of Edward and Gloucester might have spread through Hereford, rumours came daily of a great rising of the citizens of the capital, in

favour of De Montfort; and there was also on his side that great moral support which is given by the assurance of being at the head of a great popular movement--for, that the cause of De Montfort was the popular one, no one can doubt who reads the ballads, the legends, or the histories of the day. The people, beyond all question, looked upon that renowned leader, not only as the champion of their rights and liberties, but as a hero, which he really was, and as a saint, which he probably was not.

Still the camp of De Montfort suffered many severe defections. In political contests, the love of novelty and of change affects many more men than one would at first sight suppose, causing them to seize any pretext for abandoning a party to which they have been for some time attached, and for going over to the other, which they have constantly opposed. Dissensions with their leaders or their fellow partisans, disgusts at trifling acts of neglect--even weariness of habitual associations, will produce in others the same effect; and thus a great number of the nobles, who before the famous battle of Lewes supported the Earl of Leicester, now framed or discovered an excuse for following the example of the Earl of Ashby and his son, and joining the forces of Gloucester and Prince Edward. A few, too, really doubtful of De Montfort's real intentions, and fearful of his growing power, either retired from his party without espousing that of the Prince, or abandoned him entirely, and prepared to oppose him in arms.

Many of his weaker partisans, though adhering still to his cause, were alarmed at this defection, and looked grave and sorrowful at the intelligence received of the enemy's movements; but the Earl, though as serious in his demeanour as his age and character might require, was still firm and cheerful, as were all his principal councillors and companions.

None seemed less depressed than the old Earl of Monthermer, who had always a hopeful and courteous answer to give to every one. "We shall beat them yet, my good friend," he said, in answer to a somewhat

timid and news-seeking gentleman, who stopped him while riding down from the castle to his inn. "We shall beat them yet, do not fear. Unless some great and extraordinary error is committed on our side, or some inconceivable piece of good fortune occurs upon theirs, they must be defeated, as they were at Lewes."

"But I see," said his companion, "that the Earl has proclaimed----"

"Not the Earl, but the King," interrupted the old lord--"it is the King who has proclaimed Gloucester and all his adherents traitors; but that makes very little difference. In contentions like these, every man is called a traitor in his turn, whatever side he takes; and as for those who have gone over to the enemy, do not let their defection alarm you. It is better always to have an open enemy than a false friend; and a wise general gives all cowards and waverers a prompt order to quit the ranks of his army, not only as a useless, but an injurious incumbrance."

Such cheerful words, and a few gallant acts performed in a casual skirmish here and there, kept up the spirits of the soldiery in Hereford and the neighbouring towns, till at length such a number of men were collected, as seemed to justify De Montfort in taking the field, although the army of the Prince might be, perhaps, by one-half more numerous than his own.

The movements of the great Earl after marching out of Hereford, became of a strange and incongruous character, which greatly puzzled and embarrassed many of his best supporters, and which have not been clearly understood even in our own time; but De Montfort's countenance remained calm and tranquil, even in the midst of what seemed, to ordinary observers, checks and reverses; and it was remarked, that the two or three noblemen who were in his most intimate councils, maintained the same serene aspect, whatever circumstances occurred.

At the head of a large force, Edward interposed between the army of the Lords Commissioners and London, moving as it moved, and practising with consummate art, the science of strategy, as it was known in those days, with the evident purpose of keeping his adversary at a distance from his resources, without giving him battle, exactly at his own time and place. De Montfort, in the meantime, affected to man[oe]uvre skilfully for the purpose of passing Edward's superior force without fighting, and making his way direct to London. But in all these operations, the Prince seemed to have the advantage, turning his opponent at every passage, as the greyhound does the hare.

Many facts have since been discovered, which have induced modern historians to suppose that De Montfort sought merely to amuse his adversary; but, at the time, two circumstances only, led the closer observers in the Earl of Leicester's camp to believe that that great man had a covert object in view, and that he was not actually so completely frustrated by his opponent as appeared upon the surface. The first was, that perfect equanimity to which we have alluded, and which he maintained under every apparent reverse. The second, was a degree of anxious impatience, which manifested itself upon the arrival of many of the messengers who were constantly coming and going between his camp and the south-eastern parts of the country. These facts, in those who remarked them, created a suspicion that the Earl was waiting for reinforcements, not choosing to risk a battle till they had joined him; and at length a circumstance occurred which confirmed this opinion, and quieted the anxiety of many who had begun to fear that ill success was hanging over the very commencement of their career.

Towards the middle of July, the army approached the small town of Newport, after having attacked and taken Uske, which was feebly defended by some of the Earl of Gloucester's adherents. It seemed evidently the intention of De Montfort and his councillors to cross the Severn, a few miles above Newport, and take possession of Bristol; and orders to that effect had been actually given. Few vessels, however,

capable of transporting the forces of the Earl, were found at the spot where De Montfort had ordered them to be collected, and Edward himself was known to be in the neighbourhood. But several ships and galleys of a considerable size were to be seen moored at the opposite side; and Hugh de Monthermer, who commanded an advance party, threw himself into a passage boat with a small force, and crossed the estuary towards a point where he believed he could make good his defence, while he dispatched the vessels to the opposite shore, to bring over the main army of the Earl.

His proceedings, as far as they were suffered to go, proved entirely successful. He effected his landing, repulsed a body of the enemy who attempted to dislodge him, and secured a place of disembarkation for the rest of the forces; when, to his surprise, while he was endeavouring to induce the seamen in the other vessels to cross to the Welsh shore, a messenger reached him, in a small row-boat, commanding his immediate return.

Hugh obeyed at once; and, proceeding to the head-quarters of De Montfort, he found his uncle and Lord Ralph Basset in conference with the Earl of Leicester. The young nobleman was about to explain the motives of his conduct, but De Montfort stopped him, saying--"You did quite right, my young friend; but Prince Edward and I, you must know, are as two chess-players, where the game is life and power, and neither he nor I must hazard one rash move, if we would avoid destruction. I know my own game--he is not aware of it; and it is necessary that he should not be so till the last moment."

These words were heard by many of the gentlemen round, and rumour soon carried them through the whole host--one person repeating them in one manner, and another in another, but all implying the same thing--that De Montfort had some dark secret purpose in view; and such was the confidence of the soldiery in their leader, that they never doubted success would attend him, whatever that purpose was.

An immediate change of movements then took place. Suddenly turning into South Wales, the army ravaged a district belonging to some of the adherents of Gloucester; and in his progress, De Montfort entered into a treaty with several of the Native Welsh princes, by which he obtained the assistance of a considerable body of their light armed troops. A short pause of total inactivity next succeeded, and the Earl remained encamped for two or three days on the banks of the river Lug, apparently with the purpose of giving some repose to his forces, in the midst of the heats of July. Messengers, however, were continually coming and going; the Earl was constantly employed, either in writing or in training the troops to various military evolutions; and, after all the camp except the sentinels were sound asleep, a light was seen burning in his tent till two or three in the morning. "He used his nights," says a historian of those times, "more for thought and labour, than for sleep."

During the greater part of each day, and often during these nocturnal vigils, the old Earl of Monthermer and the Lord le Despenser remained with De Montfort, sometimes consulting with him, sometimes writing in the same tent, sometimes examining the rude maps of that period, measuring distances and tracing out lines, but not one word did either of them utter, even to their nearest and dearest relations, in regard to the plans and purposes of the general.

At length, one night towards eleven o'clock, while the army was what was both technically and literally, "in the field," Hugh de Monthermer received a summons, written in the hand of De Montfort himself, desiring his immediate presence, The last words were, "Bring your dwarf page with you."

Tangel was accordingly roused from the corner in which he slept, and followed Hugh to the quarters of the Earl, whom they found sitting in the outer tent in company with two or three noblemen. The flap of the canvas was drawn back on either side, in order to admit what fresh air

could be found in a sultry night of summer, and at one end of a table, round which the assembled nobles were seated, appeared a man, dusty with travelling and dressed in the garb of a Yorkshire forester.

"Here is a letter for you, my Lord Hugh," said De Montfort, "enclosed in one to myself;" and he handed a small packet to Hugh de Monthermer, tied, as was then customary, and fastened with yellow wax.

Hugh took it, but before he broke the seal or cut the silk, he advanced to the table and examined the outside of the letter carefully by the light of one of the lamps.

"Something seems to strike you as extraordinary," said De Montfort. "What is the matter?"

"I will tell your lordship presently," replied Hugh; and severing the silk with his dagger, he read the contents.

"This is good news as far as it goes," he said at length in a low tone; "I find that my good friend Ralph Harland is on his road to join us, together with a certain forest friend of ours," he added, turning towards his uncle, "with some seven hundred bold yeomen and foresters of York and Nottingham, and more will follow. They are already far advanced on their way in Staffordshire.--But I cannot help thinking, my good lord," he added, raising his voice, "that this letter has been opened and read before it reached my hands."

As the young nobleman spoke he fixed his eyes on the messenger, who was somewhat pale before, but became paler still when he heard the last words.

"I will swear upon the blessed rood!" he cried, "that I have never opened the packet, but brought it safely hither, as I was told."

"Who told you to bring it?" asked De Montfort, fixing his stern eyes upon him.

The man hesitated a moment, and then replied, "Robin of Barnesdale."

"What makes you think it has been opened, Hugh?" demanded the Earl of Monthermer.

"Why, my dear uncle," answered the young nobleman, "this wax is yellow, but at the side of it is a stain of green, as if at first it had been sealed with another colour."

"Can our friend Robin write?" inquired De Montfort.

"Yea!" cried a shrill voice from behind Hugh de Monthermer, "as well as a Florentine reed or a turkey's quill in the hand of an Oxford clerk."

"We shall soon know more, my lord," said Hugh de Monthermer; "but this letter is not Robin's writing, this is from Ralph Harland the franklin."

"But this," replied the Earl, laying his hand upon another letter--"this purports to be from the bold forester, praying me to send you with some men-at-arms to reinforce them as they come, seeing that Gloucester threatens them, and they are afraid to proceed."

"That shows it to be a forgery at once," said Hugh, in a low voice to Leicester; "Robin never seeks aid of any man. There is treachery somewhere, my lord; but we have means at hand of convicting this fellow.--Now, sir," he continued, "tell me, and tell me true, who sent you hither; and, beware! for if you deceive me, it may cost your life."

"I have told you already," answered the man, doggedly.

"Well then, stand forward, my little magician," cried Hugh, laying his hand upon Tangel's head. "We hear of Eastern talismans, my lord, whereby truth and falsehood are discovered, as gold and alloy by the

touchstone; and in this boy I have such a human talisman, who will soon tell us how much verity there is in the fellow's tale. Now, Tangel, look at him well, and say if he came from Robin Hood?"

"No," answered the dwarf, well pleased with the importance of his functions, and entering fully into the spirit of his master's figure of speech--"Hark! I hear Robin deny him, and say he never yet set eyes upon him." Then tugging the young nobleman's sleeve he whispered the words, "Go on!--ask me more!"

"And now, Tangel," continued Hugh, "can you tell me whose man he is?"

"Right well," replied the dwarf, fixing his keen gaze upon the pale face of the messenger; and then speaking slowly, he added, "He is Prince Edward's."

A slight smile came upon the man's countenance for a moment; but Tangel went on almost without a pause, watching him keenly as he spoke. "He is Prince Edward's by the Earl of Gloucester, and the Earl of Gloucester's by Richard de Ashby. Ha! ha! ha! I hear them laughing, when they think how they will take in De Montfort, and lead the Lord Hugh into a trap--and he hears them, too! Look at his face--look at his face!"

Certainly that face was now as bloodless as the visage of the dead.

"Take him away!" said De Montfort, in a stern tone--"take him away, and hang him on the first tree!"

"I will confess--I will confess," cried the man, falling upon his knees. "Spare my life, and I will confess!"

"It is your only hope of safety," replied the Earl; "tell the whole truth, and you shall be spared--out with it at once, and without hesitation!"

"Well, then," said the detected impostor, in a whining tone, "I confess I am Sir Richard de Ashby's man!" and he went on to tell how a jolly monk, passing through a village in the neighbourhood of Worcester, and making merry with some soldiers, had been recognised by one of the servants of Richard de Ashby, and instantly arrested. On searching him strictly, the letter from Ralph Harland to Hugh de Monthermer had been found, wrapped in leather, between his sandal and the sole of his foot, and a plan was instantly formed, both for cutting off the party of the young franklin and Robin Hood, and also for leading Hugh de Monthermer into an ambuscade. "The Earl of Gloucester and Roger Mortimer," he said, "had been made acquainted with the plot, but not the Prince."

"Take him away!" said De Montfort, after the story was told--"Take him away, and guard him strictly! We may have occasion to account with these gentlemen at some future time.--Now here is an opportunity," he continued, as soon as the pretended yeoman was removed, "which some men would seize, for cutting off whatever troops the rebels may detach in execution of their pitiful schemes, but I think, my good lords, we must not waste our strength upon skirmishes. At any moment, we may have to act suddenly with our whole force, and therefore we must cast away the occasion that now presents itself of lopping off a limb from our enemy. Nevertheless, we must not forget the safety of our friends; some faithful messenger must be sent at once to meet the reinforcement from Nottingham and Yorkshire, and give them notice to take a circuit through Shropshire. Shrewsbury is ours, and all the country round; so, on that road, they will be safe. Have you any one you can send?"

Hugh looked at the dwarf, and the boy clapped his hands gladly, exclaiming, "Let me go--let me go!"

"So be it, then!" said Hugh, "I will provide him with the means at once, my lord. He had better have no letter but a purse well-filled, and a swift horse. He will not fail a word of the message----

"Hark!" cried De Montfort, "there is a sound of galloping from the other side of the river! The messengers, at length, I trust.--Do you know your errand, boy?"

"Right well, great man," answered the dwarf, "and I will not fail either in speed or truth."

"What, ho!--stand!--who goes there?" demanded the sentinels, who were placed about fifty yards from De Montfort's tent.

"A friend!" was the reply.

"Stand, friend, and dismount!" cried the sentinel.

"Letters," answered the other voice--"letters from the Lord Simon de Montfort, to his father, the most noble Earl of Leicester."

"Ha!" exclaimed Leicester, starting up, with his whole face beaming with satisfaction, "At length!--Let him advance!" he shouted--"Let him advance!" and a moment after, coming forward to the opening of the tent, a man, pale, haggard, and worn, presented himself, bearing a small packet in his hand.

"This is to your lordship, from your son," he said; "I left him well, at Oxford, not many hours ago, with thirty thousand men in arms, all ready to defy the world, on behalf of De Montfort."

Too eager to make any reply, the Earl of Leicester took the packet, tore it open, and read--"All is right!" he cried at length, rising with a well pleased smile, and turning to the gentlemen on his right. "Now, my good lords--now, the moment for action has come. To you, Monthermer--to you, Le Despenser, thanks--many thanks, for those wise and prudent counsels which have cast cool patience upon my own somewhat too impetuous nature, and enabled me to resist my own inclination to advance. Here have we amused these rebel lords, and the infatuated Prince, in needless marches and counter-marches, while my son has

raised the country behind them, and is already at Oxford with an overwhelming force. He, on the one side,--and I on the other, we have them in a net; or, even if they escape from the toils that are around them, our forces united will be irresistible, and we will drive them to fight, to surrender, or to flee the land. Let every noble lord give instant orders in his own quarter of the camp, to make ready for our advance an hour before daylight; and you, my Lord Hugh, must now direct your messenger to lead our friends from Nottingham, by Clebury and Wire Forest, on towards Worcester, keeping a keen look-out for the enemy; but, doubtless, ere they arrive we shall have cleared the country.--You have brought me good tidings," he continued, addressing the messenger, "go to my steward, let him provide for you, and to-morrow a hundred marks shall be your reward.---Now, for a few hours, my lords, good night--good night!"

By daybreak the next morning, every tent was struck, and the main body of the army had passed the Lug. De Montfort still advanced with great care and caution, throwing out scouts in all directions, and never making a movement which exposed any part of his force to sudden attack. But not an enemy Wad now to be met with. The whole country, as he advanced towards Worcester, was clear, and it seemed evident to all that Edward had become aware of his danger, and was endeavouring to escape from it.

On the evening of St. Peter's day, in the year 1265, De Montfort reached a magnificent country palace of the Bishop of Worcester, called, in the language of the time, "Kemestoia, or Kematow," from which, in all probability, the name Kemsey is derived. It was surrounded by an extensive park, reserved for the chase; and therein, or in a small neighbouring village, the army lodged during the night, while the head-quarters of the general and his royal prisoner were in the manor, or palace of the bishop. The distance from Worcester was only three miles, but still no tidings reached the army of Prince Edward's movements.

About seven o'clock, however, a letter was received by De Montfort from his eldest son, who was at the head of the large body of men, marching from Oxford to reinforce him; but when he opened it and read the date, his brow became clouded, and he muttered to himself, "Kenilworth--Kenilworth! That is a great mistake! What does he in Kenilworth?"

On reading on, he found that the letter had been written just after a long night's watching in the fields to intercept the army of Prince Edward, which was said to be flying from Worcester, and that the young nobleman proposed to march on to join him on the Friday following, concluding that the Prince had made his escape.

De Montfort mused, after he had perused the letter twice, and then murmured, "There is no help for it--there is no help for it! We must onward to Evesham, with all speed--Edward flying, with a large force at his command, Worcester in his power, Gloucester garrisoned by his troops--Dean Forest near! No, no, no! That is not likely! Edward was not made to fly.--We must guard against surprise--there is something under this!" and ringing a small hand-bell which stood upon his table, he continued aloud; as soon as one of his officers appeared, "Double the guards at every avenue of the park--throw out some fifty horse archers on the road to Worcester, and barricade the farther end of the village,--give those orders quickly, and then come back for a letter, after directing a horse and mail to make ready for Kenilworth.--Kenilworth!" he added, musing, "What had he to do at Kenilworth? Hark ye!" he proceeded, once more addressing the man--"Get some diligent fellows, who do not fear for their necks, to make their way into Worcester as soon as the gates are open, and bring me tidings of what is going on--promise them high wages--we must have news."

The officer departed, and De Montfort put his hand upon his brow, repeating, to himself, "What had he to do at Kenilworth?--My heed aches," he continued; "ere long, perchance, it may cease to ache for ever!"

Day had dawned about an hour when, by his permission, and of the spies who, as we have seen, had been sent into Worchester, was admitted to the chamber of the Earl of Leicester, whom he found just putting on his steel hauberk, proposing soon to set forth upon his march.

"I have had a narrow escape, my lord!" cried the scout; "all the rest are taken."

"But the news--the news!" exclaimed De Montfort, with a degree of heedlessness for human life which most veteran warriors acquire--"the news! What did you learn?"

"Little or nothing, my lord," answered the man, somewhat sullenly. "I heard my companions ordered to be hanged, and saw Prince Edward's troops arriving in haste and disarray, after a long night march. But I could only save myself by speed, and therefore could learn nothing more."

"It is enough--it is enough!" cried De Montfort. "There, fellow, is your reward!--Edward arriving in disarray at Worcester!--That is enough! Now, on to Evesham with all speed--join my boy's forces, and then return to crush this nest of hornets with my foot!"

He spoke proud and exultingly. Ah, little did he know that at that moment his son's forces were defeated and dispersed, thirteen of his gallant barons killed, and a whole host of noble prisoners following the army of Edward into Worcester!

CHAPTER XXI.

The march of a feudal army of that day was a beautiful thing to see. Although a part of the splendour which it afterwards assumed, when the surcoats of the knights were embroidered with their arms, was not yet displayed, still those arms were emblazoned upon the banners and on the shields, still the richest colours that the looms of France, Italy, and England could supply, were to be found in the housings of the horses, and in the pourpoints and coats of the knights, and in the beautiful scarfs, called cointises, then lately introduced, which, passing over the right shoulder and under the left arm, fluttered like many tinted streamers in the air, with every breath of wind.

Yes, it was a beautiful sight to see; and wisely does the rugged front of war deck itself with every brilliant accessory, to hide the dark and murderous look which would otherwise scare the hearts of men.

It was a beautiful sight; and as Hugh de Monthermer detached with a body of horse-archers and men-at-arms from the main army to reconnoitre the neighbouring country--stood for a moment on a little hill, looking down the lovely vale of Evesham, and watched the host of De Montfort winding on its way from Kemestow, probably a more magnificent scene never met the eyes of man.

Sunshine, the bright sunshine of a summer's day, was over the whole, mingling the ingredient of its own loveliness with every fair thing in the landscape. Still, now and then, over the brilliant blue sky floated a light cloud, like a flying island, casting here and there a deep shadow, which hurried speedily onward, leaving all shining behind it--like those fits of gentle pensiveness which come at times even upon the happiest spirit, scarcely to be called melancholy, but seeming as if a shade from something above us flitted over our minds for a moment, and then left them to the sunshine and the light.

On one hand, rising tall and blue, was the beautiful range of Malvern, with many a lesser hill springing out from the base, wooded to the top, and often crowned with an embattled tower. On the other side

were the high grounds running down in the direction of Sudleigh, covered with magnificent trees, and bearing up innumerable castles, while here and there the spire of a church peeped out, or the pinnacles of an abbey. In the wide expanse between the two were seen the rich slopes, the green meadows, the corn-bearing fields, the long lines of forest that still distinguish the lovely vale of Evesham, with tower, town, and hamlet, brook and river, offering a confusion of beautiful forms and splendid colouring; and, in the midst of this, marched on the army of De Montfort, with banners displayed and pennons fluttering in the wind.

First came the slingers with their staves and leathern bands, and then the light foot pikemen, armed with the shorter spears and oucins. The former were totally without defensive armour, and the latter were only protected by a pectoral, or breastplate of steel scales hanging from the neck, and a round steel buckler on the arm. All was confusion amongst them, as they ran on, preceding the rest of the army, somewhat in the manner of modern skirmishers, only with less discipline and skill. But immediately following these appeared the first regular troops, consisting of various bands of heavy armed spearmen, with much longer lances than the former, and defended by the steel cap, or *chapel de fer*, the long oval shields, and thickly-stuffed hauqueton, so stiff and hard as to resist the blow of sword or dagger.

Some of these bands, according to the taste or the means of their leader, were furnished with the same pectorals of scales that were borne by the lighter spearmen; while some had short hauberks of steel rings, set edgewise--and some were unprovided with any other armour for the body than the hauqueton of which we have already spoken. Marching, however, in regular order, with their spears leaning on their shoulders, and their steel caps glistening in the sun, they presented a fine martial appearance, and were, in fact, a very formidable body to attack.

After the pikemen came the bands of archers, the pride of the English army. In general they were covered with the hauberk and the steel cap of the times, but--upon what account it is difficult to be

discovered--each wore above his armour a sort of leathern cuirass, ornamented with four round plates of iron. Their arrows were in a belt at their waist, their bows unbent in their hands, while each man had his anelace, or short dagger, hanging from his neck by a cord, and many of the bands were also, furnished with a strong broad sword of about two feet in length.

Little difference existed in the equipment of the crossbowmen, who in the army of De Montfort were not very numerous, as the arbalist was a foreign arm; for his being more especially the English party, care was taken to avoid everything that had not some touch of the national character about it.

Bodies of horse-archers followed, and then came the long line of men-at-arms, marching four abreast, with their polished harness reflecting every ray, but presenting a very different appearance from that of the cavalry at an after period, when plate armour had been introduced. At this time each ring of their mail caught the light, and sent the rays glancing to the eyes of the beholder, at a different angle from the one next to it, so that a more sparkling object could scarcely be seen than the new hauberk of a knight in the middle of the thirteenth century. Great pride, too, was taken by each soldier in keeping his arms bright and highly polished; and though many of the leaders wore a rich surcoat without sleeves, yet others took a pride in displaying their full panoply. Certainly a more splendid sight has rarely been witnessed than the long line of De Montfort's cavalry winding onward through the beautiful vale of Evesham.

Ever and anon, too, the light summer wind brought to the ears of Hugh de Monthermer the stirring blast of the trumpet, and the loud shouted word of command; and as he gaged and listened, his high chivalrous soul seemed to swell within him, and he longed to break a lance or wield a sword against the most renowned champion that Europe could produce.

Riding onward at the head of his men, through the by-ways by which he had been directed to advance upon Evesham, visions of glory, and of honour, and of knightly fame, swam before his eyes, chasing away, for the first time, a dark train of melancholy images which had possessed him ever since the father of her he loved had gone over to the enemy. It was not, indeed, that the hope of winning renown could banish the memory of Lucy de Ashby, but in those days the passion for glory was so intimately mingled with the thoughts of love, that they never could be separated from each other. To know that she would hear of his deeds of arms--to know that her bosom would thrill at the tidings--to know that her heart would go with him to the battlefield, and that she would watch and listen for every tale and every history concerning the scenes in which he was now mingling, was a solace and a comfort to him. Glorious actions were one of the ways of wooing in chivalrous times, and but too often the only way to which the true-hearted lover could have recourse. Such indeed was now the situation of Hugh de Monthermer himself, and such, he knew, would, in all probability, be his state for many years, unless some of the great accidents of war brought to a speedy extinction the flame which was just kindled in the country.

Thus the desire of military glory was the twin sister of his love for Lucy de Ashby, and at that moment, when the splendid pageantry of the marching army passed before his eyes, and the inspiring blast of the trumpet reached his ear, he would gladly have defied the most renowned champion in all Europe for honour and the lady that he loved.

The host moved on, however, and, after gazing for a minute or two, Hugh once more pursued his course, eagerly examining from every little eminence in the plain the whole country around him, to see if friend or foe was near, in arms, to the forces of De Montfort. But nothing appeared--all was calm and tranquil. There was the village girl tripping away through the fields, the long ears of corn almost reaching to her head; there was the labourer reaping the barley of a rich and early season; there was the wagoner guiding his team along the road; there

was the herd driving his cattle into the shade; but the only martial thing that struck the eye was the glancing of De Montfort's spears, as they wound onward at the distance of about a mile.

It was towards evening, and the host of the Earl was entering the little town of Evesham, about two miles from the spot at which Hugh de Monthermer had by this time arrived, when an object attracted his attention in a small wood at some short distance. The declining sun shone upon something glistening under the trees. It might be a ploughshare, the young knight thought; but a moment after, another gleam came from a different part of the copse, and he instantly turned his horse's head thither, advancing cautiously along a narrow lane, with some archers thrown out in the fields on either side.

After having gone on for about ten minutes, a living creature, creeping along under the hedge, was observed both by the young lord and the persons immediately behind him, but in the dimness of the shade they could not discover what it was.

"'Tis a dog," said Tom Blawket, who was in the first rank behind his leader.

"Or a wolf," remarked another man near.

"'Tis more like a bear," observed a third, "and it goes like a bear."

"Pooh! you are always thinking of the Holy Land," rejoined Blawket; "we have no bears here but bears upon two legs."

At that moment Hugh spurred on his horse, and raising his voice, shouted aloud, "Tangel, Tangel, is that you?"

The dwarf started upon his feet, for he was creeping along with wonderful swiftness upon his hands and knees; and, turning round at the well known sound of the young lord's call, he darted towards him with various wild and extravagant gestures.

"They are here," he cried--"they are here; Robin and Ralph and all, and right glad will they be to see you, for we have had a sore time of it these last four days. They thought it was the Prince's army again, and sent me out of the wood to discover."

"Right glad shall we be to meet them, too," replied Hugh; "for though we are strong enough, I trust, and shall soon be stronger, yet a reinforcement of seven or eight hundred gallant men can never come amiss."

"Not so many as that, good knight--not so many as that!" cried the dwarf. "Some of the Yorkshire churls were afraid to come by the road we took, and went round by Stafford--the rascals that Leighton raised, and Shergold of the bower. Thus there are but Robin and Ralph Harland, and two hundred and fifty barely counted; but they are good men and true, who will send you an arrow through the key-hole of Mumbury church-door, or beat the sheriff's constable into the shape of a horseshoe."

"They shall be welcome--they shall be welcome!" said Hugh; "and as for the others, the man who has ever felt a doubt or fear in a good cause, had better not bring his faint heart to spread the mildew through a gallant army."

When the young knight, however, met his yeoman friends, under the first trees of the little wood, he found the bearing of bold Robin Hood somewhat more serious than it was wont to be.

"What is the matter, Robin?" he asked, after they had greeted each other kindly.

"I know not, my lord," replied the forester; "but wild rumours have reached us in the course of the day, of a battle fought and De Montfort routed."

Hugh de Monthermer laughed. "Nay, Robin," he said, "from that little hill you may see even now the last troops of the great Earl's gallant force marching into Evesham without a plume shorn from a crest, without banner torn, or a surcoat rent."

"That is good news, my lord," answered Robin Hood, "that is good news." But still he looked grave, and added, "the tidings came from the Warwick side, and I love not such rumours, whether they show what men fear, or what men hope."

"From the Warwick side!" said Hugh, musing in turn. "My Lord of Leicester must hear this. Come, Robin--come, Ralph, let us quickly on to Evesham. My uncle's men keep good quarters for me and mine, and I will share them with you for to-night. Have you no horses?"

"No, my lord," replied Ralph; "we have marched with our people afoot. I have here a hundred good spears, and Robin some seven score archers. If you go on with your mounted men, we will soon follow, now that we know there are friends before us. For the last four days we have slept in the fields and woods; for the marchings and countermarchings of Prince Edward have more than once brought us nearly into a net. Go on--go on, my lord, and we will follow you."

Hugh de Monthermer did not hesitate to do so; for he was well aware that at such a critical moment the least intelligence might be of importance to De Montfort. The moment he reached Evesham he left his men under the command of one of the principal followers of his house, and proceeded through the thronged confusion of the streets to seek the head-quarters of the Earl of Leicester. He found him at the abbey surrounded by a number of officers, and leading the King, with every appearance of deference and profound respect, to the apartment which had been prepared for him. This being done, and the usual measures having been taken to guard against the monarch's escape, the Earl turned to go back to the refectory.

The moment his eye fell upon Hugh, De Montfort beckoned him to follow; and, in the large dining hall of the monks, called him into one of the deep windows, saying, "You have some news for me, I see. What is it?"

Hugh related to him his meeting with their friends, and mentioned the rumours they had heard, which brought a sudden gloom on De Montfort's brow.

"Ah!" he exclaimed; "from Warwick did he say the news had come?"

"From the side of Warwick, my lord," replied Hugh.

"By St. James, that were bad tidings, if true!" continued the Earl; "but it cannot be! I had letters from my son, last night. No, no; all is well. He had watched for Edward," he said, "but the Prince had not come.--Thanks, thanks, my young friend!--these good yeomen arrive most seasonably. See that they be well lodged and fed. Take care of your own people too; for, although the King told your uncle just now that he looked upon him as the worst enemy he had, I regard him as one of the best subjects in the land. So good night for the present, we must be early in the saddle to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXII.

It was about one o'clock on the 4th of August, 1265, when Simon de Montfort--having the King upon his right hand, with Lord le Despenser, the high justiciary, on the monarch's right, the Earl of Monthermer and Lord Ralph Basset, on his own left, and some four or five and twenty

knights and gentlemen following close upon his steps--rode out from the highway leading from Evesham to Alcester, upon that ever renowned plain, where the truncheon of power was to be wrested from his grasp for ever.

The country was for the most part open, but there was a little wood and some rising ground to the right, a rivulet running along across the patch of common land which the road now traversed, and a cultivated field with its hedgerow on the left. About a quarter of a mile from the point at which the highway issued from between the banks, was a stone post, marking the spot where three roads, coming down from some slight hills in front, met and united in the one along which De Montfort had marched from Evesham. For nearly the same distance beyond, these roads might be seen crossing the common, and then, plunging amongst woods and hedges, they ascended the gentle slope opposite.

The day was not so fine as the preceding one; clouds were gathering in the sky; the air was heavy and oppressive; the horses either languid or impatient, and everything announced that the sun would go down in storms. A small advanced guard had been sent forward to reconnoitre the country in front, and, the head of the column of the army was about a hundred yards behind the general and his companions; but no detachment had been on this, as on the preceding day, thrown out to examine the fields to the left of the line of march.

De Montfort's brow was calm and serene; he hoped, ere many hours were over, to unite his forces to those of his eldest son, and then, turning upon his enemy, to terminate the contest at a blow. Ere he had reached the stone at the crossing of the roads, however, three or four horsemen, at headlong speed, came down from the rising ground in front, and in a moment after the whole advance-guard were seen in full retreat.

"What is this?" asked De Montfort, spurring on his horse to meet the first of the men-at-arms who was approaching. "What news bring you in such haste?"

"My lord, there is a mighty power coming down upon you," cried the man; "we saw them from the edge of the slope beyond--full twenty thousand men."

"Did you see their banners?" demanded De Montfort.

"No," answered the Messenger; "there were banners in plenty, but I marked not what they were."

"You are speedily alarmed," said the Earl, in a cold tone. "Hugh de Monthermer," he proceeded, speaking to the young Lord, who was close behind, "gallop up that hill there to the right, and bring us word what your keen eyes can see. I will ride on to the other slope, and judge for myself."

Hugh was away in a moment, and De Montfort continued, turning in the saddle--"My kind friend, Monthermer--my good Lord Ralph--I beseech you, array the men as they issue forth from between the banks. These that are coming must be the forces of my son from Kenilworth, but it is as well to be prepared. My Lord le Despenser, I leave you to entertain his Majesty--I will be back directly. Some of you gentlemen follow me;" and spurring on at full speed, he crossed the little rivulet, and ascended the first slope of the ground beyond.

He there paused, for some minutes, watching attentively the country before him, through which, upon the left-hand road, was advancing a large body of men, under numerous banners. At length, he seemed satisfied, turned his horse, and rode back at an easy canter to the spot where the old Earl of Monthermer and Lord Ralph Basset were arraying the spearmen, archers, and crossbowmen, who had by this time come forth upon the common, while the men-at-arms were only beginning to appear, taking up a position behind the infantry.

"It is as well," said De Montfort, speaking, as they returned, to one of the gentlemen who had followed him--"it is as well to put them in array, for we shall halt here for an hour, while the men refresh themselves. You

saw those banners?"

"Yes, my lord," replied the knight; "I marked that of your son, and that of the Earl of Oxford."

"We will give them a cheer when they come up," continued De Montfort; and he rode on to the Earl of Monthermer, saying--"It is my son, Monthermer; I see his banner, and Oxford's likewise. But here comes your nephew. Who is this he is driving down before him, at the point of the lance? A crossbowman, it seems."

"My lord--my lord!" cried Hugh de Monthermer, as he came up--"prepare for instant battle. Prince Edward's army is within a mile, and Mortimer is coming up on the right-hand road!"

"What! to the right?" exclaimed De Montfort. "How came he there?--Well, let them come! they will meet more than they expected. My son is on the left. Advance our wing, my good Lord of Monthermer, that we may join with him more easily."

"My lord, you are deceived," said Hugh, eagerly; "the banners you have seen are not your son's."

"But----" cried De Montfort.

"Speak, sirrah!" exclaimed Hugh, turning sternly to the crossbowman, whom he had driven down before him; "speak, and let the Earl hear the truth. Such bitter tidings should only come from the lips of an enemy. Speak, I say. My lord, this is one of Gloucester's archers; he will tell you more."

"Let him, then," said the Earl. "Who are these, marching against me, sirrah?"

"Prince Edward, Roger Mortimer, and Gilbert de Clare," replied the man. "Your son, my lord--kill me if you will, but it is the truth--your son was surprised in his bed, at Kenilworth, his army routed and dispersed,

thirteen barons displaying their own banners were taken, and as many more were slain. The banners you have seen were captured by the Prince, and are hung out but to deceive you."

"And my son?" asked De Montfort, gazing earnestly in the man's face. "What of my son?"

"He escaped, my lord," replied the archer, "he escaped, and threw himself into the castle."

"Take him to the rear," said De Montfort. "Lo! where they come! A mighty power, indeed!! How orderly--how firm!--The boy learnt that from me. Now, God have mercy on our souls--for our bodies are Prince Edward's!"

He added the latter words in a lower voice, but so as to be distinctly heard by the gentlemen around him. A moment after, he raised his head proudly, saying, "However, he must be met boldly, and we must do our duty as knights and gentlemen. Every one who is willing to do so may this day conquer high renown, if he wins no other prize; but should there be any one who fears to fight and fall with De Montfort, he has full leave to go; for I would not have it said, when men shall talk of this glorious, though perhaps disastrous day, that there was one coward amongst all those who did battle at Evesham. Let us make the best of our array, my Lord of Monthermer. Yonder wood is a point that must be maintained. Hugh, line the hedges of that little field with archers--place me there our stout foresters from Sherwood: it is a point of much importance. Take up your post beyond them there with your men-at-arms--have some archers and slingers in your front, and keep the ground between the further hedge and those scrubby bushes and hawthorn trees, amongst which their horsemen cannot act. I put you in a post of difficulty and danger, young gentleman, but I know that you will acquit you well; and now for the rest of our array. The enemy are halting for their own arrangements, but still we must lose no time."

Thus saying, he rode slowly along towards the wood, giving his orders as he went, and ranging his men for battle; while Hugh de Monthermer proceeded to execute the commands he had received. Every post was soon filled up, and before two o'clock the adverse armies were completely arrayed facing each other; but, alas, that of Prince Edward outnumbering the force opposed to him in the proportion of two to one!

Nearly in the centre of De Montfort's line was the Earl of Leicester, and at a little distance the weak and false King Henry, cased in complete armour, and riding a strong black charger; for on both sides the royal standard was displayed, and in a brief consultation amongst the principal nobles, it had been judged necessary, as the King's name was used in all public acts by the Lords Commissioners, to let the soldiers see him actually in arms on their behalf. Neither had Henry himself appeared in the least unwilling to play this part, for although surrounded by a number of guards, he still entertained the hope of escaping in the hurry and confusion of battle.

In the right of the same army was placed the gallant young Henry de Montfort, a godson of the King, and, like Hugh de Monthermer, a playfellow of Prince Edward; for in those dire civil wars, as is ever the case, all the sweet relationships of life were torn asunder, and the hearts that loved each other the best were frequently armed for each other's destruction.

In the left wing was the banner of Monthermer, and under it fought, not only the regular retainers of the house, but the yeomen and foresters of Yorkshire and Nottingham. The slingers, as usual, were thrown forward about a hundred and fifty yards before the rest of the army, closely supported by the lighter pikemen, and taking advantage of every bush and brake which might give them shelter, while they discharged their missiles at the enemy. Behind them were some thousands of Welsh foot, who had been engaged as auxiliaries by De Montfort, and then came the lines of sturdy English archers and regular spear-men, supported by the men-at-arms.

It was a fine array to look upon, and stern and firm seemed the front of De Montfort's battle; but the vast superiority of the enemy's numbers cast a shadow, as it were, upon the spirits of the soldiery, while in the hearts of the leaders was nothing but the certainty of defeat and death. Had it been any other body, perhaps, that opposed them but an English force, had any other generals commanded the adverse party but Edward and Gloucester, their confidence in their own courage and in their great leader might have taught them to look with hope even to the unequal struggle before them. The troops, however, by whom they were outnumbered were English soldiers, the chiefs who led the enemy were famous for their warlike skill and courage, and all were fresh from victory, and elated with recent success.

Upon the field of battle the banners which had been assumed to mislead De Montfort were cast by, and those of the different leaders themselves displayed. The troops of Mortimer and the Lords Marchers were on the right, the division of Gloucester on the left, and the command of Edward himself in the centre. In the army of the Prince, hope and exultation were in every bosom, confidence was strong, and, amongst the foreign favourites of Henry III. who were ranged in that force, the burning thirst for revenge upon him who had overthrown their fortunes, and well-nigh driven them from the land, added fierceness to their courage, and a savage joy at the thought of the coming vengeance.

After the array was complete, a stern and gloomy silence pervaded the whole line of De Montfort. Each man thought of to-morrow, of the home that he might never see again, the children left fatherless, the widowed wife, the promised bride, the sweet, warm relations of domestic life, soon to be torn by the bloody hand of war.

Yet none but the auxiliaries thought of flying: not one dreamt of avoiding the fate before him, for each man there arrayed came with a firm conviction of right and justice on his side; Each believed that he was fighting for the deliverance of his country from foreign domination; each came ready to die for the liberty and the freedom of the people of

England. They were determined, resolute, unshaken, but they were without hope, and therefore in stern silence they awaited the onset of the foe.

On the other side, for some time, nothing was heard but cheerful sounds, the leaders' shouts, the repeated blasts of the clarion and the trumpet, till at length, amongst them also, a momentary solemn pause succeeded, giving notice that the battle was about to begin. They hung like a thunder-cloud upon the edge of the slope, and that temporary calm but preceded the breaking forth of the tempest.

The heavy masses then, for a moment, seemed to tremble; and then a few men ran forward from the ranks, slinging, even from a distance at which no effect could be produced, large balls of stone or lead at the front of De Montfort's line. Others followed quick, in irregular masses; and then, moved on, somewhat more slowly, but in fine and soldierly order, the whole of Edward's overpowering force.

A pin might have been heard to drop in the host of De Montfort, so still was the expectant silence with which they awaited the attack of the immense army which seemed not only about to assail them at once in front, but lapping over at both extremities, to crush either flank under the charge of its numerous cavalry.

The skilful dispositions of the great Earl, however, had secured them against that danger; and the wood on the right hand, which he had filled with archers and foot spearmen, defended one wing, while the hedges and low hawthorn trees, near which he had planted Hugh de Monthermer and the bowmen of Sherwood, were a protection to the left.

Nevertheless, the latter point was one of considerable danger, and Edward marked it as the weakest part of De Montfort's line. Scarcely had the first movement in the prince's army taken place, when a strong body of horse, following close upon a band of crossbowmen, was observed by Hugh de Monthermer marching straight against his post, headed by the

banner of Bigod Earl of Norfolk; and leaving his men-at-arms for a moment, he galloped to the spot where his friend Robin stood, saying in a low voice, "Here will they make their first attack, Robin, in order to turn our flank."

"Let them come!" replied Robin Hood, "we will give a good account of them. We have planted stakes for their horses, my lord, so if you have to charge, mark well the gaps."

"I see--I see!" cried Hugh de Monthermer, "but as it is a great object to put them in disarray, send them a flight from your bowstrings as soon as the arrows will tell."

"Ours will tell now!" said Robin, and at the same time he raised his bow above his head as a signal to his men.

At that instant a few balls dropping from the enemy's stingers, fell impotent along De Montfort's line; but the next moment a hundred and fifty arrows shot into the air, scattered the crossbowmen in face of Hugh de Monthermer's band, and even caused considerable disarray amongst the men-at-arms, from Norfolk.

A whole flight from Edward's army then darkened the air, but reached not the opposite host; and the Earl of Monthermer, distrusting his nephew's impetuosity, rode down to beg him on no account to charge till the battle had really begun.

It was not long ere such was the case, however. Onward, with increasing rapidity, came the force of the Prince; the arrows and the quarrels on both sides began to work fearful havoc in the ranks; and the men-at-arms might be seen closing the barred aventaille, preparing to enter with each other into deadly strife. The arrows from the Nottingham bows--unmatched throughout all England--did execution of a fearful kind amongst the crossbowmen opposed to them. One went down after another as they hurried forward; their ranks became thinner and more thin; and at length, the men-at-arms behind them, finding

that the living as well as the dead and wounded encumbered without serving, called to them loudly to retire, that they themselves might advance to charge. Before the retreat of the infantry could well be accomplished, the Earl of Norfolk gave the word; and with levelled lances the horsemen sushed on, though repeated arrows from an unerring hand struck every part of the Earl's own armour as he approached.

"At the horses!" cried the voice of Robin Hood, as the men-at-arms drew near; and in an instant another flight, point blank, rattled like hail amongst the advancing cavalry. Five or six chargers instantly went down, and others, furious with pain, reeled and plunged, spreading disarray around.

Hugh de Monthermer was now about to give the order to advance, in order to support the archers, and complete what they had done, but at that instant a cry of, "They fly--they fly!" came from the right; and, looking up the line, he perceived the whole body of Welsh auxiliaries running from the field in rout and disarray. The panic of any large body of an army, we are told, generally communicates itself more or less, to the whole; but such was not the case upon the present occasion. A shout of indignant anger burst from the other troops as the Welsh went by, for it was forgotten that they were not fighting for their country's safety or deliverance, like the rest of that host; but every one made way for them to pass, and, filling up the open space as fast as possible, presented a still sterner face than before to the advancing enemy.

One of the chief defences of the centre, however, was now gone: it was like an outwork forced; and a charge of men at-arms taking place on both sides, the whole line was speedily engaged.

From the firm front of the Nottingham archers, and the terrible, unceasing shower of arrows they kept up, the bands of the Earl of Norfolk turned off in disorder, at the very moment he had led them up almost to the stakes. Hugh de Monthermer, charging while they were

still in confusion, drove them back in complete rout; but the troops of Mortimer sweeping up; changed the fortune of the parties, and Hugh knowing the absolute necessity of keeping firm the post he occupied, retreated unwillingly to his first position.

It was now that the Yorkshire spearmen, with the young franklin at their head, did gallant service to the cause which they espoused. Advancing with their long lances, they kept the enemy at bay, and, in spite of charge after charge, made by Mortimer and others, maintained their ground against the whole force of the Prince's right wing.

In other parts of the field, however, numbers were gradually prevailing against all that courage and resolution, could do. The *mêlée* had begun in all its fierceness, knight fought with knight, man opposed man, hurry and confusion were seen in all parts of the field, while the clang of arms, the blasts of the trumpet, the shouts of the combatants, the loud voice of the commanders, the galloping of horse, the groans of the dying, and the screams of men receiving agonizing wounds, offered to the ear of heaven a sound only fit for the darkest depth of hell.

Charge after charge was poured upon the left wing of De Montfort's army; but Mortimer, Bigod, and the Earl of Pembroke, in vain led down their horse against the gallant band of spearmen and archers. Each time they approached, they were driven back, either by the fierce flights of arrows, the long spears of Pontefract, or the encounter of the men-at-arms.

Once only was the line, between the hedged field we have mentioned and the hawthorn trees, shaken for an instant by overpowering numbers; and then the old Earl of Monthermer, seeing his nephew's peril, galloped down, at the head of a strong band of men-at-arms, and aided to repel the enemy.

He paused one moment by his nephew's side ere he left him, saying; "It will be very glorious, Hugh, if we can maintain our ground till night. Farewell, my dear boy; do your devoir, and, if we never meet again on earth, God bless you!"

"I beseech you, sir," replied Hugh, "take care of your own invaluable life; remember, you are as much aimed at by the enmity of the foreigners as even De Montfort."

"I will never fall alive into their hands," replied the old Earl, "but I quit not this field, so long as there is light to wield the sword."

Thus saying, he rode away to a spot where the battle was thickening, round the banner of De Montfort itself; and his presence there apparently aided to restore the field; for, shortly after, the whole force of Prince Edward withdrew for a short space, like a tiger that has been disappointed of its spring, and hung wavering upon the edge of the slope, as if collecting vigour for a new charge.

At the same time, the sky overhead, which, as I have before said, had been threatening during the whole morning, grew darker and darker, so as to be more like that of a gloomy November evening; than the decline of a summer's day.

The pause which had taken place seemed a part of Edward's plan for breaking the firm line of his adversary, as it was more than once repeated during the battle; but it was never of long duration. The next instant his trumpets blew the charge, and down came the thundering cavalry, pouring at once upon every part of De Montfort's army. On the Earl's side, too, after a rapid flight of arrows from the archers, the men-at-arms advanced to meet the coming foe, and again the battle was urged hand to hand.

It were vain to attempt a picture of the various deeds that were done that day in different parts of the field, for seldom in the annals of warfare has a combat taken place in which such acts of prowess and stern

determination were displayed on either part. Edward himself, Mortimer, Gloucester, the Earl of Ashby and his son, Bigod, and Valence, and a thousand others of noble birth and high renown fought, both as generals and soldiers, with personal exertions and valour, which could only be displayed in a chivalrous system of warfare; while on the other, De Montfort, Monthermer, Le Despenser, Basset, St. John, Beauchamp, De Ros, put forth energies almost superhuman to counterbalance the disadvantage of numbers, and to wrest a victory from the hand of fate.

In one place, Humphrey de Bohun was struck down by one of Edward's men-at-arms; and a peasant with an oucin was preparing to dispatch him, ere he could rise, when William de York came to his rescue, and slew the foot soldier; but, even as De Bohun rose and regained his horse, his deliverer was killed by a quarrel from a crossbow.

In another part, the King himself was assailed, and wounded by one of his own son's followers, who had even shortened his lance to pin him to the earth, as he lay prostrate before him, when throwing back his aventaille, the monarch exclaimed, "Out upon thee, traitor.--I am Henry of Winchester, thy king: Where is my son?"

As he spoke, a knight, taller, by a head, than any man around, and clothed from the crown to the heel in linked mail, sprang to the ground beside him, and thrusting the soldier fiercely back, raised the monarch from the ground, exclaiming, "Mount, mount, my father, and away! Come to the rear, and let your wound be searched.--Give me your horse's rein.--You at least are free, and that is worth a victory."

The King sprang on his horse, and Edward led him by the bridle to the rear of his own army.

Almost at the same moment, on the left of De Montfort's line, Alured de Ashby and Hugh de Monthermer met in full career; the former charging the well-known shield of Monthermer with animosity only the more fierce, perhaps, because he knew that it was unjust; the latter

meeting him unwillingly, though compelled by circumstances to do his knightly devoir. His very reluctance, however, made him more calm and thoughtful than his fiery assailant; and, aiming his lance right at the crest of his adversary, in order to cast him from his horse and make him prisoner, rather than kill him, he galloped on with a wary eye. The young lord of Ashby's spear, charged well and steadily, struck full upon the shield of his opponent, pierced through the plate of steel and touched the hauberk; but stopped there, without even shaking him in the saddle, and broke off in splinters; while Monthermer's lance, catching the steel casque just above the aventaille, hurled his adversary to the ground, bruised, but unwounded.

Several of Monthermer's followers instantly ran up on foot to seize the discomfited knight, and make him prisoner; but a charge of fresh troops drove them back, and Alured de Ashby remounting his horse, rode away with no light addition to his former hatred for Hugh de Monthermer.

The momentary retirement of Edward from the field now caused another of those pauses in the battle, which have been already mentioned. His forces once more withdrew for a short space, slowly and sullenly, the archers on either side continuing to discharge their arrows, though with but little effect. About the same time, a flash somewhat faint, but blue and ghastly, came across the sky, and then the low muttering of distant thunder.

"Ha!" said Robin Hood, who was standing by the side of Hugh de Monthermer at the moment; "that trumpet will be but little attended to to-day. Heaven's voice too rarely is."

"Too rarely, indeed!" replied Hugh. "Have you lost many men, Robin?"

"Well-nigh two score, I fear," answered Robin Hood. "Poor Brown was rash, and ventured beyond the stakes with his little band of Mansfield-men. They are all gone; but we have filled up the gap."

"Can you still maintain your post?" demanded Hugh.

"With God's will and the help of the blessed Virgin, we shall do very well here," said Robin; "but I fear, my lord, for the centre and the right. Look up there, just in the second line, where there are so many gathering to one spot. Some great man is hurt there."

"My uncle was there a moment ago," exclaimed Hugh; "I fear it is he!"

"No, no, my lord!" replied an old knight of the house of Monthermer, who was on his horse close by; "my lord, your uncle is safe. I have seen him since the last charge, though he seems resolved to lose his life."

"I do beseech you, Sir John Hardy," said Hugh, "if we lose the day, look to my uncle, and force him from the battle, should it be needful."

"You stay on the field then, my lord, I suppose?" asked the old knight.

"I do," answered Hugh.

"Then, I stay too," replied Sir John Hardy.

"Nay, that is folly," cried Robin Hood. "Let each man fight so long as fighting may avail; but when the day is clearly lost, the brave man, who would spill his best blood to win it, then saves the life that God gave him to do God service at another time. But, see--all the leaders are gathering to that point! You had better go, my lord, and bring us tidings. We will ensure the ground till your return."

"Command the troop then till I come back, Sir John," said Hugh, and riding along the front of the line, under a shower of arrows from the enemy, he approached the spot--where, sheltered from the sight of the adversary's lines by a thick phalanx of foot spearsmen and men-at-arms,--was collected a group of noblemen of the first rank, seeming to hold a council round the royal standard, which was there erected.

When Hugh came near, however, he saw that the occasion was a sadder one. His uncle, the Lords of Mandeville, Basset, Crespigny, Beauchamp, and Le Despenser, were standing dismounted round the famous Earl of Leicester, who was stretched upon the ground, with his head and shoulders supported by the knee and arm of a monk. Deep in his breast, piercing through and through the steel hauberk, was buried the head of a broken lance, and in his right was a cloth-yard arrow. He had just concluded, what seemed his confession, in extremis; and the good man was murmuring over him in haste the hurried absolution of the field of battle. His countenance was pale; the dull shadow of death was upon it; the lips were colourless and the nostrils widely expanded, as if it caused an agonizing effort to draw his breath; but the eye was still bright and clear, and--while the man of God repeated the last words--it rolled thoughtfully over the faces of all around, resting with an anxious gaze upon those with whom he was most familiar.

"Draw out the lance," he said, speaking to the surgeon of his household, who stood near.

"If I do, my lord," replied the leech, "you cannot survive ten minutes."

"That is long, enough," said de Montfort. "My boy Henry is gone; I saw him fall, and I would not be much behind him. Draw it out, I say, I cannot breathe and I must needs speak to my friends. Le Despenser; make him draw it out; I shall have time enough for all I have to do."

Unwillingly, and not without a considerable effort, the surgeon tore the head of the lance out of the wound; but, contrary to his expectation; very little blood followed. The Earl bled inwardly.

He seemed to feel instant relief, however, saying--"Ah, that is comfort! keep that steel, my friend, as the instrument that sent De Montfort to heaven. Now mark me, lords and nobles," he continued, in a firm voice--"mark me and never forget, that at his last hour, going to meet his Saviour in judgment, De Montfort declares that those who accuse him of ambition do belie him. I say now, as I have said ever, that my every act and every thought have been for my country's good. I may have been mistaken--doubtless, have been so often; but that my intentions have been pure, I do most fervently call Heaven to witness. So much for that; and now, my friends, I am fast leaving you. My sun, like yonder orb, is setting rapidly: I for ever--he to rise again. He may yet shine brightly on the cause I can no longer support, but it must be upon another field, and upon another day. Preserve yourselves for that time, my friends, I exhort, I beseech you! Basset, Monthermer, Le Despeuser, this battle is lost; but you may yet, as night is coming, effect your retreat in safety. It is no dishonour to quit a well-fought but unequal field. Show, a firm face to the enemy; gather all our poor soldiers together; retire as orderly as may be till night covers you, then disperse, and each man make the best of his way to his own stronghold. Monthermer, you shake your head!"

"I have sworn, De Montfort," said his old friend, kneeling down and grasping his hand, "not to quit this field so long as there is light in yonder sky to strike a stroke, and I must keep my vow."

"You are going, my noble friend," said Lord Ralph Basset--"you are going on a journey where you must have companions. I am with you, Leicester, and that right soon."

"Good bye, De Montfort," said Lord le Despenser. "Go on; I will not make you wait. We shall meet again in half an hour."

A faint smile came upon the lip of the dying man. "Must it be so?" he asked. "Well, then, range your men! Upon them altogether! and let the traitors, who have betrayed their country, make such a field, that Evesham plain shall be sung and talked of so long as liberty is dear to the hearts of Englishmen.--Hark, they are coming!" he continued, in a faint voice, with his eye rolling languidly from side to side.

"No, my lord, that is thunder," said the surgeon.

"Ha!" replied De Montfort, vacantly, "thunder!--I am very thirsty."

Some one ran and brought him a little water from the stream. It seemed to refresh him; and, raising himself for an instant upon his arm, he gazed around with a countenance, full of stern enthusiasm, exclaiming aloud, "Do your devoir!" and with those words he fell back into the arms of the priest, a corpse.

A dozen voices, replied, "We will!" and each man springing on his horse, regained the head of his band. Just as Edward's troops were once more in movement to advance, the word was given along the whole of the confederate line, the trumpets blew to the charge, and the army, which had held its firm position up to that hour, rushed forward to meet the adversary like a thunder-cloud rolling down a hill.

The sun, at the same moment, touched the edge of the horizon, shining out beneath the edge of the stormy canopy that covered the greater part of the sky, and blending its red descending light with the thunder-drops which were now pattering large and thick upon the plain of Evesham. The whole air seemed flooded with gore, and the clouds on the eastern side of the heavens, black and heavy as they were, assumed a lurid glare, harmonizing with the whole scene, except where part of a rainbow crossed the expanse, hanging the banner of hope, light, and peace, in the midst of strife, destruction, and despair.

Such was the scene at the moment when the two armies met in the dire shock of battle; and fierce and terrible was the encounter, as, soon broken into separate parties, they fought hand to hand, dispersed over the plain. In one of these confused groups, leading on a small body of archers, with Robin Hood by his side, was the young Lord of Monthermer.

"My lord, my lord," said Sir John Hardy, riding up, "your uncle is down--wounded, but not dead!"

"Bear him from the field, Sir John," replied Hugh. "Robin, I beseech you, look to him. Bear him from the field--bear him from the field!"

"What, ho! Monthermer!" cried a loud voice, from a party Of spearmen coining at full speed. "Down with your lance; surrender to the Prince!"

"If the Prince can take me!" replied Hugh, charging his lance at Edward's shield, and driving his spurs deep into his horse's sides.

"Hold back--hold back!" shouted Edward to his own men. "Hold back, every one, upon your lives!" and meeting the young lord in full career, both their lances were shivered in a moment, as if in some mock combat of the tilt-yard.

Hugh de Monthermer's sword sprang from the sheath in a moment, while Edward cried--"Yield thee, Hugh--yield thee!" but a number of men on foot had ran up; and, suddenly, the young knight received a violent blow from a mallet on the side of his head, while, at the same instant, his horse, gashed deep in the belly by the broad sword of a crossbowman, staggered and and fell prone upon the plain. A dozen spears were at his throat in a moment; but Edward shouted once more, to stand back; and springing to the ground, he bent over the young knight, exclaiming, "Now, Hugh, rescue, or no rescue--do you surrender?"

"I have no choice, my lord," replied the other; "I am in your hand."

"Take him to the rear," said Edward; "but use him with all kindness, as your Prince's friend. Now, my lords," he continued, remounting his horse, "methinks the field is ours, and there is scarcely light to strike another blow. Well has the fight been fought, and it is but justice to our enemies to say, that never was greater valour, conduct, and chivalry, displayed in any land than by them this day. Some one said De Montfort is dead. Have the tidings been confirmed?"

"They are certain, my lord," replied one of his attendants. "The Lord de Vesci, who is taken sorely wounded, saw him die."

"He was a great man," said Edward. "Now spur on and clear the plain; but be merciful, my friends. Remember, they are brave men and fellow-countrymen."

Thus speaking the Prince advanced again, and having seen that no party remained in active contention with his forces, but that all were either dead, taken, or dispersed, he caused his standard to be pitched upon the banks of the little rivulet we mentioned, his trumpets to blow the recal--and thus ended the famous battle of Evesham.

CHAPTER XXIII.

How frequently in real life, as upon the mimic stage, the most opposite scenes that it is possible to conceive follow each other in quick succession. Often, indeed, are they placed side by side, or only veiled from the eye of the spectator by a thin partition, which falls with a touch,

and all is changed. While revelry haunts the saloons of life, anguish writhes in the garret, and misery tenants the cellar. Pomp, and pageantry, and splendour occupy the one day; sorrow, destitution, and despair the next; and, as in some of our old tragedies, the laughter and merriment of the buffoon, appear alternately with tears and agony.

If it be so with human life--if, in this fitful spring-day of our being, the storms and the sunshine tread upon the heels of each other, so must it be with everything that would truly represent existence--even with a tale like this.

We must change the scene, then, and convey the reader far away from the sad field of Evesham--without pausing to detail some of the barbarous horrors there committed on the bodies of the dead--at once to the splendid court of England, now triumphant over its enemies, and revelling in uncontrolled power.

We may, indeed, stay for an instant to remark, that while joy and satisfaction spread through the various partisans of the court, while the foreign favourites of Henry III. displayed their rejoicing with indecent ostentation, and even the calmer and wiser adherents of his high-minded son could not refrain from triumphant exultation, consternation, dismay, and mourning spread throughout the middle and lower classes of the people, through the clergy of the real Anglican church, and through the greater part of the barons who claimed a genuine English descent. The barrier was thrown down which had protected their rights and liberties; and most of those whose swords had been so long unsheathed in the popular cause, now lay weltering in their gore upon the field of Evesham, leaving none but outlaws, and fugitives to mourn for them in secrecy and concealment, and poets and minstrels to sing the deeds of the gone.

It was at the court of England,--not in the capital of the kingdom, but in the palace of Eltham, then one of the most beautiful, if not most splendid of the residences of our kings--in a small chamber in the left

wing of the building, rather more than a month after the scenes which we have lately commemorated, that there lay upon a couch, covered with a leopard's skin, a young knight, busily engaged in reading a manuscript written in a somewhat cramped and difficult hand. He was clad altogether in the garments of peace, but a deep gash upon his brow, a scarf bound tight round his arm, and a certain uneasy expression of countenance when he turned from side to side, showed that it was not long since he had been engaged in the fierce and bloody pursuits of war.

Hugh de Monthermer had not passed through the battle of Evesham unwounded; and though, as a point of chivalrous, courage, he had scorned to suffer the slightest sign of anguish to appear, yet the injuries he had received were long in being healed, and even for some days his life had been held in danger.

Asa prisoner taken by the Prince's own hand, he had been brought in the train of the Court to London, and then to Eltham; and although no one word had been spoken of his future fate--no proposal made in regard to terms of liberation at the period when many other nobles were allowed to submit and receive letters of remission, yet he had been treated with constant care and kindness. Scarcely a day had passed without his being visited by Edward himself; but the subject of his actual situation had been studiously avoided by the Prince; and Hugh, impatient of farther restraint, now lay in his chamber waiting his coming, and resolved to make such inquiries as must lead to some definite reply.

About half an hour later than his usual time, the firm step of Edward was heard in the ante-room, and his voice bidding the page who followed stop at the door. The next instant the Prince entered, bowing his lofty head as he passed through the low arched doorway. His countenance was somewhat grave; but his tone was full of kindness towards Hugh de Monthermer, and he took him by the hand inquiring after his health.

"I am nearly well, my dear lord," replied Hugh; "and, like your Grace, when I found you in the castle of Hereford, I only sigh for fresh air and liberty to use my cramped limbs."

"But why do you not take exercise?" demanded the Prince. "You should ride forth every day."

"I did not know I had permission," answered Hugh. "I fancied your Grace might think that the lesson you gave upon the banks of the Wye might not be lost upon your humble prisoner."

"Not after you had surrendered, rescue or no rescue, Monthermer," said the Prince. "I put no fetters upon you, my friend, but the fetters of your word. The great gates are as free to you as to myself; and, though I give you not your liberty, it is for your sake, not my own. My father's anger burns fierce against your house, Monthermer. It is the only spark which I have not been able to quench. You, he will pardon, after a time; but I fear towards your uncle we shall never soften him.--He says that it was by his advice De Montfort acted."

Edward put the last words in the tone of a question, or, perhaps, as an assertion which he wished to hear refuted; but Hugh replied, gravely--"His majesty says true, my lord; it was by my uncle's advice. But your Grace's words give relief to my mind. I have had no tidings of my uncle since that fatal field; and though I had hopes that he had escaped, yet those hopes were faint. I do beseech you, my good lord, tell me what you know for never son loved father more than I love him, under whose sword I have been brought up from youth."

"I know little more than yourself," answered the Prince; "all I can say, is, neither his body nor his arms were found amongst the dead; and so far is my father convinced of his having escaped, that he, with seven others, who have not yet made submission, have had sentence of outlawry proclaimed against them."

Hugh de Monthermer mused with feelings very much divided between pleasure and pain; but the Prince laid his hand kindly on his shoulder, saying--"Come, old playfellow, prepare yourself for a ride, and join me in a minute in the court below. There are guests coming to the palace to-day, and perchance we may meet them."

There was no slight delight to Hugh de Monthermer, as the reader may very well imagine, in the thought of using his limbs in wholesome exercise, and tasting again the free outward air; and dressing himself hastily for the expedition, he was soon by the Prince's side. It often happens, however, that when we have looked forward with bright anticipations towards enjoyments from which we have been long debarred, and have thought that nothing but pleasure and refreshment can await us therein, a degree of melancholy falls upon us even in the very fruition of our wishes--a memory, a regret, is poured out from the heart to dilute the inebriating cup of joy.

It was so with Hugh de Monthermer. The first breath of the free air felt to him like new life and the promises of hope; but, almost instantly, the thought of the many high and noble, good and wise companions, with whom not long before he had enjoyed the same gentle breeze, the same warm sunshine, and who could now taste them no more--the thought of his just and chivalrous uncle, wandering wounded and alone, an exile or an outlaw--the thought of the gallant and the brave who strewed the field of Evesham, came across his mind, and dimmed all the happiness of the hour.

He was gloomy, then, as he rode forth from the palace gates, and the merriment of many a young knight and gay esquire, who followed in Edward's train, sounded harsh and unpleasant to his ear. They were absent for some two hours; but, as they returned, the look of Hugh de Monthermer was brightened, and his smile as cheerful as the rest.

If the reader would know why, it is easy to tell. Riding beside Prince Edward, were the Earls of Gloucester and Ashby, and not far distant, a train of fair ladies and attendants, amongst whom was one whose soft dark eyes seemed ready to run over with bright drops whenever they turned towards the young knight, who, for his part, was by her side as often as the movements of the cavalcade would permit.

It is true, that more than one of the gentlemen around, proud of being of the court party, and vain of any share they had taken in the late struggle, deemed it almost an act of insolence on the part of a captive and a rebel, as they chose to term him, to claim the attention of one of the fair guests of their sovereign, Hugh de Monthermer's renown as a knight, however, kept their saucy anger within due bounds; and, though they so contrived that no private word could pass between Lucy de Ashby and her lover, they could not cut him off from the enjoyment of her society.

On arriving at the palace, more than one prepared himself to aid the lady in dismounting from her horse; but Hugh de Monthermer, feeling a title in her regard advanced as of right, and lifted the fair form of Lucy from the saddle. In so doing, the only opportunity occurred of uttering a word to each other, unheard by those around. But it was Lucy herself who took advantage of it.

"I have something to say to you, Hugh," she, whispered; "something that must be said."

Ere he could answer, however, the Earl of Ashby was by their side. He had hitherto taken no notice of his former friend and confederate, and perhaps might not have done so even now, had not his conversation with the Prince been of a kind to show him that, in Edward's eyes, Hugh de Monthermer was anything but a captive enemy. He held out his hand to him, then, with kindly greeting, and asked him after his health, adding--"Now that these contentions are happily at an end, my young friend, let us forget any disputes in the past."

Hugh, as may be supposed, was not backward to accept his proferred hand, and good care did he take, not even by a look, to shew that he knew himself to be rather the injured than the injurer, in the dissensions which had taken place. A few brief questions and replies followed, while Edward spoke in a low tone with the Earl of Gloucester, whose eyes, Hugh de Monthermer remarked, were fixed earnestly and somewhat sternly upon himself. At length the Prince turned, and bending gracefully to Lucy de Ashby, and another lady who was with the party, told them that, though the Queen was still absent in France, the Princess Eleanor waited for them in the hall.

"She is a cousin of yours, you know, fair lady," he added, addressing Lucy, and then turning to his prisoner, he said "We have a grand banquet to-night, Monthermer, at which you must find strength to be present.--I have my father's commands to invite you."

Hugh bowed low, and as the guests passed on, he retired thoughtfully to his own chamber.

It was still early in the day; the hour appointed for the banquet was late, and his first reveries were full of joy and love, but a discomfort of a trifling, yet annoying kind, crossed the young knight's thoughts from time to time. Separated from all his attendants, kept a close prisoner up to that period, both by his wounds, and by his situation--he was totally without the means of appearing at the table of the King with that splendour which the customs of the day required.--The only suit he had was that which he then wore, the pourpoint, namely, over which at Evesham he had borne his armour. Some other necessaries had been supplied to him, as a kindness, by one of Edward's attendants; but still--though resolved, at all events, not to be absent from the banquet--how could he appear in garments soiled and rent, where all the pomp and pageantry of England were sure to be displayed!

"I will send to the Prince," he thought, "and let him know the situation in which I am placed; but still, though doubtless, he will now give me means of sending to my own friends, both for money and apparel, the supply will come too late, for this day's necessities at least, and even if he himself furnishes me with gold for present need, where can I buy, in this lonely situation, any thing that I want?"

While he was thus thinking, the sound of steps in his ante-room showed him that some one was approaching; and in a moment after, two of the inferior attendants of the court entered, bringing in between them, one of the long heavy cases of leather stretched upon a frame of wood, which were then used for carrying arms and clothing in the train of an army.

"This was brought here last night, my lord, and left for you," said one of the servants. "The chief sewer opened it by mistake, and finding that it contained apparel, sent us with it."

Hugh smiled, thinking that it was a kindly stratagem of the Prince to furnish him with what he needed; but ere the two men had quitted the ante-room, Edward himself re-entered it, coming to offer the assistance of his purse or wardrobe, and taking blame to himself for not having thought before of his friend's need.

Hugh laughed, and pointing to the coffer, thanked him for what he had already sent; but the Prince denied all knowledge of it, and on opening the case, which Edward insisted on his doing before his eyes, he found that it was filled with apparel of his own, nearly new, which had been left behind him in Yorkshire, in the early part of the year.

"This must be the doings of the fairies, my lord," he said; "but as I cannot always count upon these nimble gentry thus attending to my wants, I will beseech your Grace to let me send a messenger to enquire after my own poor friends and attendants who were scattered at

Evesham, and to bring me such a number of men and horses as I may be permitted to maintain while a prisoner, as well as some small supply of money."

"If you will write," said Edward, in reply, "I will send immediately. But let us understand each other completely, Monthermer. I think on many accounts that it may be better for you to reside some few months at the Court of England, and I believe, at all events, that you yourself will not be eager to quit it, while a certain bright lady remains with the Princess. Your being my captive is the only excuse that can be given for your prolonging your stay, where it is very needful you should remain; and this is the reason why I do not publicly set you free. But as in this changeful world," he continued, in a marked and significant manner, "one never can tell what the next day may bring forth, and as it may be necessary, either for your happiness or your safety, under some circumstances, to fly at a moment's notice--for I can neither trust the fierce Mortimer, nor the cruel Pembroke--I promise to fix your ransom whenever you require it; and, should need be, you may act upon this promise as if I had already given you liberty--I will justify you whenever it takes place. In the meantime, however, you must play the part of captive demurely, and make the best of your opportunities, my young friend; for I have learned from one of your enemies the state of your affections, and I doubt not that your lady love will willingly listen to your tale if you choose a fair hour for telling it.--Nay, no thanks, Monthermer! Take what money you want from my purse till your own arrives; and now, adieu."

Hugh conducted the Prince to the door of his ante-room, and then returned, proposing to examine more fully the wardrobe which had been so unexpectedly sent to him, thinking that perhaps he might find something to indicate from what hand it came. But before he did so, he sat down thoughtfully, and gazed out of the small casement of his chamber, while, strange to say, his spirit seemed oppressed. In every point his situation was happier and better than it had been a few hours

previous; the storm cloud which had obscured his hopes was clearing away; his mind had been made more easy in regard to his uncle's safety; liberty appeared before him, and he was near to her he loved; but, nevertheless, he felt a sadness that he could not account for. As the first impression of the fresh air upon a person going out after a long sickness will give them a sensation of faintness, even while it revives them, so will the return to hope and happiness, after a long period of despair and sorrow, bring with it a touch of melancholy even on the wings of joy.

CHAPTER XXIV.

It was in the great hall at Eltham--that splendid hall which still remains, attesting, like many other monuments, the magnificent ideas of an age which we, perhaps justly, term barbarous, but which displayed, amongst many rude and uncivilized things, a grasp of conception and a power of execution in some of the arts, that we seldom if ever can attain even in these more generally cultivated times.

In the great hall at Eltham, about an hour after sunset, was laid out a banquet, which in profuse luxury and splendour as far exceeded any, even of our state repasts, in the present day as the hall that overhung it excelled the lumbering architecture of the eighteenth century. The table actually groaned under masses of quaint and curious plate,--many of the cups and dishes blazing with jewels, and an immense emerald, in the shape of a cross surrounded by wax tapers, surmounting and ornamenting the centre of the board. The dresses of the guests were of all those bright and glittering colours so universally affected by rich and

poor in those days; and gold and precious stones were seen sparkling all around, not alone ornamenting the persons of the fairer sex, but decorating also the garments of the men.

Though the guests themselves only amounted to seventy, and the broad table at which they sat looked small in the centre of the hall, yet the number of attendants, carvers, cup-bearers, butlers, and sewers, was not less than two hundred, without including the harps, the trumpets, the minstrels and the spectators, who were admitted within certain limits.

Various and curious were the dishes set upon the table; the wine was of the choicest vintages of France and Spain: and one may conceive how recklessly it was suffered to flow in those times, when we know that the consumption of a private nobleman's house was upon one occasion, three hundred and seventy pipes in the year, besides ale, metheglin, and hypocras.

The banquet was somewhat strangely ordered, according to our present notions, for there was but one large silver plate assigned to each two persons; but as, with scrupulous exactness, the male and female guests had been restricted to an equal number, this arrangement permitted a display of the courteous gallantry of the times, each gentleman carving for his fair companion, and taking care that she was supplied with all she wished for before himself.

Opportunity was also thus offered for all those little signs and tokens of chivalrous love which but too often, it must be confessed, deviated into vice and folly. But of all the hearts at that table--and there were some which fluttered with gaiety and excitement, some that beat with calm satisfaction, some that palpitated with eager and not over-holy joy,--none throbbed with higher and purer delight than those of Hugh de Monthermer and Lucy de Ashby, as, sitting by side, they bent together over the same board and drank from the same cup. Many a sweet-whispered word was there, while all was laughter and merriment

around, and many an avowal of unchanged attachment, many a promise of future affection was spoken by the eyes when any pause in the general conversation might have betrayed the secret had it been intrusted to the lips.

Happy indeed was the young lover, happy indeed was she whom he loved, thus to commune with each other after so long a separation. But if anything could have added to Lucy's joy in thus meeting Hugh again, and sitting by his side, it would have been the terms with which Edward had that night brought him forward to the king.

"Let me beseech you, sire," he had said, "for your favour towards the friend of my youth, who, though for some time separated from me by unhappy feuds, now at an end for ever, forgot not, in a time of need, our early regard."

"His house have shown no great love for our throne," replied the King, looking coldly upon him; "but we welcome him for your sake, Edward."

"Do so, my lord," answered the Prince, "for while I was in prison he ever advocated my release, and when I was escaping, and he might have stayed me, he bade God speed me on my way."

"Then we welcome him for his own," replied the King, more warmly, and holding out his hand.

Hugh bent his head over it in silence, and retired.

The merriment had somewhat waned, the lights had grown rather dim, the tapers were burning low, when, taking advantage of a momentary rise in the sounds around, Lucy said, in a low voice, "I have still much to tell, Hugh, of great importance."

"Can you not do so now?" demanded her lover, in the same tone.

"I dare not, I dare not," whispered Lucy, "and yet I would fain that it were soon."

Hugh looked around. "This revel cannot last long," he said, "at least you fair ladies will not stay much longer, Lucy; I can find an excuse too, in my late wounds, to quit the board earlier than the rest, if we could but meet."

Lucy looked down and blushed, for though those were days of liberty, nay, of licence, when every lady held it little less than a duty to hear each tale of passion that was addressed to her,--ay, and to afford full opportunity for its being told,--yet still there was an inherent modesty in her nature, which made the warm blood rise into her cheek at the thought of meeting in secret the man which she loved best.

"I would tell the Princess," she replied, "and ask her advice and assistance, for she is as kind and as wise as ever woman was. But what I have to say no one must hear but you."

"There is a row of cloisters," answered Hugh, "just under the Princess's apartments; I will go thither, Lucy, as soon as I can steal away, and wait till all hope of seeing you be gone. Come if you can, my beloved,--come if you can! You know you can trust to me."

"Oh, yes," replied Lucy, in the same low voice; "I will come, Hugh, I will, for it is better."

The evil custom of men prolonging the song, the wine cup, and the revel, after the table has been quitted by those whose presence softens and refines our coarser nature is of a very old date in this our land of England, and though certainly more honoured in the breach than the observance, has only been abandoned by fits and starts from the period of the Saxons till the present day.

At the early meal, which was called dinner in those times, such was not often the case, for every one started up quickly to pursue his business or his rude sports in the light; but after supper, when no occupation called them from the table, the baronage of England would frequently indulge in long revels, ending usually, especially under the monarchs of the pure Norman line, in scenes of the most frightful excess and disgusting licentiousness.

Henry I., though he did something to refine the people, and to soften the manners of his nobles, still tolerated every sort of vice in his court, and it was only with the sovereigns of The house of Plantagenet--though they themselves were often corrupt enough--that a certain degree of decency and courteous refinement was introduced which put a stop to the coarse debaucheries of the Norman race. Under Henry II., Richard, and John, amidst civil and foreign wars, a gradual improvement might be perceived, and even during the reign of the weak Henry III.--at least, by the time of which we speak--the high, pure character of his chivalrous son worked a vast change in the general tone of society.

Thus, though drinking and song, after the ladies of the court had withdrawn, generally succeeded to the evening banquet, yet the night never now terminated in those fearful orgies, to hide which altogether from the eyes of men, the second William had commanded that all lights should be suddenly extinguished in his palace at a certain hour.

On the evening in question, not long after the few words which we have mentioned had passed between Hugh and Lucy, the Princess Eleanor, with the rest of the ladies present, rose and left the hall, taking their way under the high gallery and through the small door which communicated with the royal apartments. As the Princess passed out she placed her hand gently upon Lucy's arm, saying--"Come with me, sweet cousin, I would fain speak with you;" and led the way towards her own chamber.

All her own attendants were dismissed one by one; and then, seating herself in a large chair, Eleanor beckoned her fair companion to take a place beside her. But Lucy quietly, and with that exquisite grace which is beauty's crowning charm, and she pre-eminently possessed, sunk slowly down upon the stool at the Princess's feet; and looked up in her face with a glance from which she strove hard to banish every trace of that impatience which was strong in her heart.

Eleanor gazed down upon her in return with a kindly and yet a thoughtful smile, keeping silence for nearly a minute, and then saying--"So you are very much in love, dear Lucy de Ashby?--Nay, do not blush and cast down your eyes, as if you thought I could doubt it, after your telling me and every body else that it is so, some five times during supper."

"Nay--nay," cried Lucy, turning round quickly with a look of alarm--"not so plainly as that!"

"Plainly enough for me to understand," replied the Princess, "and that is all that is necessary to talk of now. Edward told me something of this before, and I promised to ask if you knew what you were doing."

Lucy looked up again, but it was now with an arch smile; and she answered--"Right well, dear lady."

"I hope it is so," rejoined Eleanor; "for methinks I see difficulties before you--thorns in your path; which I fear may wound those tender feet more than you dream of. You love and are beloved, that is clear, and that were simple enough to deal with, as most loves in this world go, for very often the wild god's dart gives but a scratch as it passes, and wounds not one heart deeply in a thousand. But for those who love as you two seem to do, there is a world of anxieties and cares upon the way. In our state of life, Lucy, we cannot, like the happy country maid, give our hand at once where our heart is given, and seldom--seldom through ages, is it the lot of woman to find so happy a fate as mine, where the

first lot I drew was the chief prize of the whole world--he whom alone my heart could ever love, and he who was destined to return it well.--He loves you, Lucy, I think,--this young captive lord?"

"I am sure of it, lady," replied Lucy, earnestly.

"Indeed!" said the Princess. "Then doubtless you have spoken on this theme--are plighted and promised to each other!"

Lucy turned somewhat pale, but it was with indecision, and doubt, and the Princess, marking her changing colour, added--"Nay, let me not force your confidence from you. I would fain help you, if I could; but trust, like bounty, must be free, Lucy, not extorted; and though your secret were as safe with me as in your own breast, yet let not the bird take wing if you fear its flight."

Her fair companion, turning round, sunk somewhat farther at the Princess's feet, and hid her eyes upon her knee, saying--"My confidence shall be free!--We are plighted by every promise that can bind heart to heart but the last one at the altar; and now that I have told you so much, I will tell you all," she continued,--"even now, I fear he is waiting for my coming in the cloisters down below."

"Nay!" exclaimed Eleanor, with a look of some surprise and disapprobation.

Lucy read her thoughts by the tone in which she spoke, and raising her head somewhat proudly, she replied--"You mistake me, I fear, dear lady; and do not know the purpose for which I go."

"To fly with him, perhaps," said Eleanor.

"Oh no!" answered Lucy, "while my father lives I will never wed man without his blessing. No, lady--no! Neither must you think--although I hold there might be circumstances in which, but for the sake of cheering and soothing him I love in captivity and sorrow, I might well grant him a

poor hour of my company alone--neither must you think, I say, that I go to him now either to please my ear with hearing his dear voice, or to comfort him with aught I can say in return. I know I may trust you, lady--I know I may tell you why I go, and that you will neither repeat it, nor ask me any farther question. I have a message to him from one he loves and sorrows for. I have news from those he has wept as dead; and though there be no treason in it, lady," she added, with a smile, "I dare not give it to any other lips to deliver than my own."

Eleanor bent down her head and kissed her brow--"Go--go, sweet Lucy," she said, "I give you leave. Ay, and even when your message is given, if you do linger out the hour, or, perhaps, even see him again by another clear moon like that, I will forgive and trust you both. The man that could sully such a thing as thou art, by prompting one wish--one act--one thought for which the pure heart would burn with grief hereafter, were somewhat worse than a fiend; and methinks," she added, laughing, "your lover does not look like one."

"Oh, no--no!" cried Lucy, "like anything but that; but I fear he may be waiting for me."

"Some women would tell you to make him wait," replied the Princess, "but I will not say so. I have heard my husband quote some Latin words, which mean that he gives twice who quickly gives; and a frank favour to a kind heart must surely make more impression than a greater boon wrung from us by long soliciting. Go, then, Lucy--go! see if he be there; if not, come back to me, and go again. I would not let him know I waited for him, were I you; for the best child may be spoiled, Lucy; but neither would I make him wait for me, lest ever the time should come when he might think he had waited long enough."

Lucy kissed the princess's hand, and after enquiring somewhat timidly her way, quitted the room and descended the narrow staircase which Eleanor directed her to take. Winding round and round till her

head was almost giddy, and holding fast by the column, about which the small steps turned, Lucy at length reached the little archway that led out into the cloister, and which, as usual, was wide open.

The scene before her was the wide open park which surrounded the palace, and was then called Eltham Chase, and over it the moonlight was streaming peacefully, pouring in also under the cloister and paving it with silver, while across the glistening stones fell the dark shadows of the beautiful Norman arches. Lucy paused before she issued forth, seeing no one within the range of her eye at that moment; but there was the sound of a step, and the quick ear of love instantly recognised the well-known tread, which she had listened for, many a day in Lindwell Castle, ere the lover knew that he was loved in return.

She still kept back, however, under the shadow of the doorway, that she might be quite sure; but in a moment or two after, the step turned and came nearer and nearer, till at length the tall, graceful form of Hugh de Monthermer, with his arms folded on his chest, and his eyes bent upon the ground, as if he expected to play the sentinel some time, appeared in the moonlight, and approached the place where she was standing.

Lucy was soon by his side; and it was not easy for Hugh to find words to express his gratitude for her coming, and his joy at her presence. Although she had resolved to stay with him but a short time, to give him the message that she had received, at once, and then to return to the princess as speedily as possible, it must be owned, that the thoughts of both herself and her lover dwelt upon those dear subjects, which naturally presented themselves on being thus alone with each other for the first time after a long separation, and that half an hour passed in the sweet dalliance of two young hearts, full of warm and tender affection. Lucy felt almost grateful to Hugh for having forced her to confess her love, it was so delightful, now that it was confessed, to dwell upon it, and to give it voice unrestrained.

To Hugh it seemed almost a dream, to have her there beside him in the calm moonlight, to hold that fair soft hand in his, to see those dark eyes raise their fringed curtains and pour their living light upon his face. Who can wonder that they forgot the minutes in such joys as the human heart can know but once in life?

At length, however, some accidental circumstance woke them from their dream of love and happiness.

"I had forgot, Hugh," cried Lucy, disengaging her hand from his; "the princess expects me back again soon, and I had to tell you much that I have not told.--We have been at Nottingham since I saw you, for they sent me to Lindwell while the army lay at Worcester. After that fatal battle, which I thought would have killed your poor Lucy, too--for with a brother, and a father, and a lover there, ranked upon opposite sides, I had well-nigh died with fear and anxiety--after that battle of Evesham, I used to listen eagerly for tidings, converse with every countryman I met, and glean even the lightest rumours that might tell me of the fate of those I loved. I could hear nothing of you or your uncle, however, till one day, as I was walking near the castle, and alone, I sat down beneath the shadow of an oak.--You remember the old oak within sight of the hall window, where once----"

"Where first I fancied that Lucy might love me," answered Hugh.

Lucy paused for a moment, and then replied; "You might have fancied it before, Hugh; if your eyes had but been bright.--Well, I was sitting beneath the shadow of that oak, when, suddenly, I heard something rustle-overhead, and in a moment, down from the branches like a falling acorn, dropped the strange boy, that accompanied us from the forest, on that sweet ride, which I shall never forget. At first, I was alarmed, and was going to run to the castle; but when I saw who it was, I lost my fear, and asked him what he wanted. He then told me more than I had ever heard before: that the battle had gone against the English party; that Hugh de Monthermer was wounded and prisoner; and also,

that I was ere long to be called upon to join my father at Derby, and go with him to London. 'And now,' said the dwarf, 'I am to charge you with a message. Sooner, or later,' he continued, 'you will meet the young lord in the capital; tell him that his uncle lives, that he is nearly well of his wounds; but that, as he knows his life is forfeited, he dare not show himself. A report is rife, that he has escaped to France. Such, however, is not the case, he is even now under the boughs of merry Sherwood, and he would fain see his nephew there in secret. So, tell him, lady, when you find him; but tell him when he is quite alone, when there is no ear but yours and his to hear, for the lives of more than one good man and true, are trusted to your discretion.' Such, dear Hugh, was the message he bade me give you, and I willingly undertook to do so, though I knew not when I might have the means. But, I have a prayer to put, Hugh--I have a boon to ask, which you must not refuse to Lucy de Ashby, if you be a true knight and a true lover."

"Ask it, dear Lucy," he replied, "whatever it be, consistent with my honour, I will do it, were it to carry the cross from the top of the chapel into Palestine, and make the Sultan bow down and worship it."

"Nay--nay!" cried Lucy, with a smile, though such strange vows were not uncommon then; "it is not so hard as that, Hugh, it is but that you promise me, you will take no farther part in these secret conspiracies to levy war against the throne. The cause is lost, Hugh, whether it was a good or a bad one; and if Hugh de Monthermer mingles with it more, he will but bring destruction upon himself, and misery upon Lucy de Ashby. See your noble uncle, dear Hugh; but try and lead him to make submission. At all events, for my sake, promise to abstain yourself from any further efforts in an enterprise which is hopeless and past away."

"You must ask another boon, Lucy," said Hugh.

"What, will you not grant the first request I make?" cried Lucy, quickly.

"Nay, not so," answered her lover; "it is, that this is no request at all, my Lucy, for I have made the same promise to myself, beforehand. I can never bear arms more against Edward Plantagenet, let who will call me to the field. So wherever his banner floats, mine shall never be raised to oppose it. This makes me bid you ask another boon, dear Lucy."

"Well, I will," said Lucy; but ere she could, explain what it was, she was interrupted.

During their conversation they had wandered backwards and forwards under the cloister, and at this time were pausing at the end farthest from the door leading to the apartments of the Princess. It unfortunately happens but too often, that, not only love, but a lover is blind--blind to all external objects as well as to the faults of her he loves; and certainly such must have been the case with Hugh de Monthermer at that moment; otherwise he would have seen before, that while he turned hither and thither with Lucy de Ashby, the cloister did not remain untenanted, as he believed. More than once, two or three figures had come round the farther angle of the palace the moment his back was turned, and entering the cloister, had watched him and Lucy with laughing, and yet malicious looks.

At the very moment, however, that Hugh de Monthermer and the Lady paused at the end of the southern front, a voice, coming from the dark arcade which ran along the western side of the building and joined that where they now stood, at a right angle, said in a low but distinct tone, as if the speaker were close to them, "You are watched--you are watched! Go back, or you will be caught!"

Hugh's first impulse was to start forward to discover who it was that spoke; but Lucy, terrified at the bare idea of being found there by any of the licentious minions of Henry's court, sprang from him, crying, "Let me fly, Hugh--let me fly! Adieu adieu!" and, darting along the cloister with the speed of a startled deer, she ran towards the doorway leading to the stairs.

Hugh de Monthermer followed at a somewhat slower pace, thinking that on that side she was safe; but just when Lucy was within a few yards of the arch to which her steps were directed, some three or four men came out from under the pillars, and advanced towards her with a shout of ribald laughter. With a bound like that of a sword-player, Hugh de Monthermer sprang forward, and was by her side before they could reach her.

"Halloo, halloo!" cried one; "we have started the game."

"Run it down--run it down!" exclaimed another; and a third, evidently bearing more wine than wit, added something still more offensive.

Another step brought the lovers close to the doorway, but one of the revellers cast himself in the way, as if to stop the passage.

"Stand back, Sir Guy de Margan!" cried the young knight, sternly; "stand back, I say."

But, finding that instead of doing as he was directed, the other spread wide his arms to catch Lucy as he passed, Hugh struck him one blow with his clenched hand which laid him prostrate on the pavement.

Lucy sprang through the doorway and ran up the steps like lightning; and her lover, folding his arms upon his chest, walked slowly onward through the midst of those opposed to him. They regarded him with frowning brow, and muttering voices, but suffered him to pass; and as he reached the gate which led towards his own chamber, he heard a sound of loud laughter, succeeding apparently to the anger which the blow he had struck had produced.

CHAPTER XXV.

In one of the ante-rooms of the palace at Eltham, on the morning following, sat five gentlemen, dressed with extravagant gaudiness, their hair curled, and in some instances plaited like that of women, and their persons adorned with innumerable rings and trinkets.

"Out upon it!--bear a blow?" cried one of them. "I will have revenge!"

"How will you seek it, De Margan?" asked another. "With a bodkin?"

"Nay, nay, let him alone," said the third, "he is a man of spirit, and will dare this proud knight to the field."

"Who will crack him there," rejoined the second speaker, "as the King cracks a crawfish!"

"How is that?" inquired the first.

"Between his finger and thumb," replied the other.

"This is all nonsense," joined in one who had not yet spoken. "Monthermer is a prisoner and cannot underlie a defiance."

"De Margan will do better than defy him," said the fifth personage. "He knows that there are shrewder means of revenge in his power than that. Tell them, De Margan--tell them! and we will all go in with you and bear it out!"

"Ay!" cried Sir Guy de Margan, "those two fair lovers would, I rather fancy, give each a finger of their right hand rather than have the Earl of Ashby know their secret moonlight meeting in the cloister. Neither would the good Earl much like to have the tale told of his fair daughter showering such favours on this good Lord Hugh; and Alured de Ashby, I have heard, hates these Monthermers worse than a cat hates oil."

"A goodly mess of venom if you stir it properly!" observed one of his companions.

"That will I do most certainly," said the first. "I wait but the opening of the King's doors to tell the noble Earl before the whole court that his daughter was somewhat less niggardly of her presence last night to Hugh de Monthermer than he dreamt of. Then, you see, the old lord will chafe, the King will frown, and Alured de Ashby will be sent for----"

"To do what Guy de Margan does not dare himself," said one of the gentlemen.

What might have been the reply is difficult to say; for, although the personage he spoke to, had so much of the better part of valour as to refrain from measuring his strength against a man so much superior to himself as Hugh de Monthermer, yet he was by no means without courage where it was at all prudent to display it. But his answer, which seemed likely to be a fierce one, was stopped on his very lips; for the door of the King's chamber opened at that moment, and the well-known William de Valence, Earl of Pembroke, came forth, bearing two or three sealed letters in his hand.

"Sir Guy de Margan," he said, presenting him with a packet, "I am directed by the King to command you immediately to set out for Monmouth, where you will open these orders, execute them, and rejoin the court at Nottingham. You, Sir Thomas le Strange, will proceed on a similar mission to Chester; and you, Sir Roger de Leiburn, will go on before with these to Derby. Speed, gentlemen, speed!--there is no time to be lost. We have tidings of a threatened rising in the north, and the whole court sets out within two hours."

"Cannot I have audience of the King, my lord," said Guy de Margan; "if but for a moment, or with the Earl de Ashby?"

"Impossible!" replied William de Valence; "the King, with the Earls of Ashby, Mortimer, and Gloucester, and the noble Lord of Audley, is arranging with the Prince the measures which are to be pursued. It is impossible, Sir Guy! So quick away with you, gentlemen, and see whose spur is sharpest."

All was bustle, hurry, and confusion at the court of Eltham during the rest of the morning. The threatened rising in Northumberland was indeed, not of a very serious nature, and Edward was of opinion, that the few nobles who were about the court, with such troops as he could muster rapidly by the way, would be sufficient to overawe the malcontents, and nip the revolt in the bud. Henry, however, ever fond of excitement and display, seized the pretext for making a royal progress into the north, knowing well that every great noble as he passed, especially at that particular period, would vie with his neighbour in entertaining his Sovereign with luxury and splendour.

Edward looked grave, and evidently disapproved; but he did not venture to offer any opposition to his father's wishes; and towards two of the clock, in a fine day of the early autumn, preceded and followed by a strong band of soldiery, the whole court, comprising all who happened to be at Eltham at the time, set out on its way towards Nottingham.

Although there was indeed more than one horse-litter in the train, yet all the principal personages proceeded on their journey, as usual, upon horseback; and, even in their robes of travel, they formed a bright and glittering train, as ever was seen, comprising nearly two hundred persons. Laughing, talking, jesting, they rode along, keeping no very compact order, and each person choosing his companions as his inclination prompted, or circumstances admitted.

Hugh de Monthermer, as may well be supposed, sought the side of Lucy de Ashby; and it luckily so happened that an old knight of her father's household, so deaf that the blast of a trumpet was the only thing he could hear, took upon himself to act as esquire to the lady. In this

capacity he occupied the post upon her left hand, talking all the while, and, with the fruitful imagination, which many deaf people have, fancying the replies that were never spoken. Immediately behind, came the gay girls who waited upon their fair lady, with two or three pages and squires, all occupied with the usual subjects, which engrossed the attention of pages, squires, and handmaidens in those days.

The Earl of Ashby himself kept near the presence of the King; but he seemed to entertain no objection to the attentions which Hugh was evidently showing to his daughter; and throughout the whole of the progress, the princess Eleanor, with that sympathy which a kind-hearted woman always feels for woman's love, favoured the lovers with opportunity, not indeed with bustling eagerness, not indeed even apparently, but with the calm and quiet tact of a refined mind, as well as a gentle heart.

Edward, too, though more occupied with other things than Eleanor, showed every kindness to Hugh de Monthermer, and once or twice, in passing him while he was conversing with Lucy de Ashby, marked with a smile, the brightness of the lover's eye, and certainly gave no discouragement to his hopes.

At Huntingdon, the young knight was joined by a number of his own servants, and one or two of those who had been attached to his uncle. Amongst the latter, was the stout yeoman, Tom Blawket; and upon questioning him, Hugh discovered that all the tenants and retainers of the old Earl were ignorant that their lord had survived the battle. The good fellow was evidently so deeply grieved at the supposed death of his noble master, that Hugh felt a strong inclination to impart to him the fact of the Earl being safe, and very reluctantly refrained, in the belief that it might be contrary to his uncle's wishes, so to do. Money and horses reached him at the same time, and he was now enabled, in all things, to resume the appearance of his rank and station.

Health, too, and strength, were every day coming back more and more; and, though the Prince's surgeon at Eltham had shaken his head and prognosticated that the wound on his breast would never heal completely till he could obtain perfect repose, a certain balm that Hugh carried with him--the balm of happiness--had closed it before he reached Huntingdon, and had left nothing to be desired but the recovery of his former vigour.

Thus, as the reader may believe, the progress to Nottingham was a joyful one to Hugh de Monthermer. He bore his sunshine with him, and mingled willingly in all the sports and pleasures prepared for the royal entertainment.

It would be tedious to tell all the little incidents of the journey, to describe the pageant at this castle, the banquet at the other, the tournament that was prepared in one town, the grand procession that met the monarch at the gates of another city.

Suffice it, that all was feasting and revelry, merry-making, and rejoicing; and the populace, even in many of the places which had most strongly adhered to De Montfort, during his days of prosperity, now met the Monarch, whose oppression and exactions he had risen to curb, and the Prince, before whose sword he had fallen, with the loudest shouts, and most cheerful acclamations. Such is popularity!--he who counts upon it for an hour will find that he has trusted it too long, and he who relies upon it for support will learn that a bulrush is an oak to it.

Long before the royal party reached the North, the news of the King's march, and of the gathering together of considerable forces, ran on before, and, as Edward had supposed, the very rumour crushed the insurrection in the egg. But Henry still resolved to advance as far as Nottingham, and promised the Earl of Ashby to spend some time with him at his castle of Lindwell.

The Earl sent on messengers to prepare everything for the monarch's reception, and two days before the time named for entering Nottinghamshire, the party of the King halted in the fair little town of Mountsorrel. The castle was then in ruins; but in the priory below, the King, the Prince, and several of the chief nobles in attendance on them, found lodging for the night, while the rest of the court were scattered in the houses round about.

The good monks of Mountsorrel, who since the beginning of of the century, when the castle was destroyed, had managed matters their own way, were celebrated for the excellence of their cheer; and their refectory certainly displayed, for the Monarch's entertainment, a repast that night, which, in point of excellence of materials and skill in cookery, excelled all that he had met with on the road.

The hour was late when the King arrived; and Henry, who loved the pleasures of the table, sat long, tasting all the exquisite meats--partridges, which had been kept in a mew, and crammed with a spoon to make them fat--peacocks the flesh of which had been rendered as white as driven snow, by the method of feeding them--fish brought across the country from the sea, and others which had tenanted for years the tanks of the priory, nourished with especial care, and treated with a stream of running water conducted from the Soar river to the pond, to render them fresh and healthy, together with a thousand other dainties under which the table groaned. Nor did the King merely continue at the table himself, but he contrived to keep all his guests there likewise, conversing between the dishes with the prior, who knew well how to season meat with merriment, and had many a light and jesting tale for the Monarch's not very scrupulous ear.

While such things were proceeding at the Priory, however, the rest of the royal party, broken into bodies of five or six, occupied, as we have said, three or four neighbouring houses, besides the small hostelry,

making themselves as merry and as much at ease as men can do who care nothing for the comfort of their host, or the report he will make of them when their backs are turned.

It was about ten o'clock at night when, in the best room of the inn, three gentlemen were sitting with the relics of their supper still before them--a fat capon and a venison pasty remaining almost uninjured, the one only having lost a leg in the conflict, and the other having a breach in its wall of not more than a couple of inches in diameter. This fact, however, did not by any means evince that the party had wanted appetite, but merely that various dishes had gone before, leaving no room for anything but wine in the stomachs of the well-fed guests. The red juice of the Bordeaux grape was flowing profusely amongst them, and great was the merriment and uproar going on, when the sound of several horses' feet, coming rapidly down the street, and then stopping at the door, called their attention. Whoever were the riders, nothing more was known of their proceedings for several minutes, at the end of which time a step was heard descending the little flight of stairs that led from the road into the parlour which was somewhat sunk below the level, of the ground.

"We can have no more here," cried one of the gentlemen, starting up, resolved to defend the inviolability of their dining chamber--"whoever it is, must find a lodging elsewhere."

But just as he spoke, the door, which was fastened with the happy old contrivance of a pulley and weight, was pushed sharply open, and a man, dressed in a riding costume, and muffled in a large loose gabardine above his pourpoint, appeared before them. The one who had been speaking, prepared, in a somewhat sharp tone, to enforce his objections to the admission of a new guest; but suddenly he seemed to recognise the new comer, and holding out his hand to him, he exclaimed--"Richard de Ashby, as I live! Why who thought to see you here? We fancied that you were with your cousin, Alured, keeping down the men of

Westmoreland. At all events, you are welcome, though, by my life, you will find the supper we have left you but scanty, and the wine barrel not so full as when we began."

Richard de Ashby declared that there would be quite enough of both for him, and summoning the host to provide him with fresh wine, he proceeded with his meal, from time to time asking such questions as might best lead his companions to tell him all they knew of what was taking place at the English Court.

"Gay doings, I find," he said,--"gay doings, I find, between Eltham and Leicester. Why, the whole country rings with it!"

"Well may it ring," replied the other gentlemen; "well may it ring, and rejoice too, to see such sights. I have never beheld the like, since I followed the Court of England. But during all that time, it is true, we have had nothing but civil wars, or the rule of grim De Montfort; so it is no wonder things have gone sadly."

"They will be merrier now, I trust," said Richard de Ashby. "It is high time, however, that my own affairs should go a little more merrily; and surely I have every right to expect it, for to me the Prince owes his liberty. Ay! and to me, they owe the first seeds of dissension sown amongst De Montfort's people. It is but fair that my claim should be heard."

"On my life," cried the gentleman to whom he spoke, while Richard de Ashby filled himself a cup of wine and drained it off; "on my life, our good King and Prince seem fonder of their enemies than their friends. Here is this young Monthermer, one of the chief favourites of the Court."

A malevolent scowl passed over the dark face of Richard de Ashby, but as the host was coming in at that moment with more wine, he remained silent, hewing the meat before him with his knife, but without tasting it. When the landlord was gone, however, he composed his

countenance, and exclaimed, with an affected laugh--"A pretty favourite, indeed!--But tell me what bright ladies follow the Court? I hear there never was a fairer train."

"You have heard true, Sir Richard," said the same gentleman who had hitherto spoken to him, the others being busily engaged in a conversation of their own--"you have heard true; a bevy of lovelier dames has seldom been seen. There is the Countess of Pembroke, and Mortimer's wife; but she is ugly enough, Heaven knows! Then there is the young lady, De Veux, and Lord Audley's daughter; and chief of all, Hugh de Monthermer's lady-love, your fair cousin, Lucy de Ashby."

There was a certain touch of malice in his tone as he spoke, for it is wonderful how soon men discover any weak point in their fellow-men, and still more extraordinary how much pleasure they derive from saying things that may give pain to others, without producing the slightest benefit whatever to themselves. Perhaps the courtier, Sir Harry Grey, who now spoke with Richard de Ashby, had in view to provoke him to one of those outbursts of passion which to our corrupt hearts generally afford matter of merriment rather than commiseration; but if he did so, he was disappointed.

A momentary expression of intense wrath convulsed the features of Richard de Ashby, but he uttered not a word in reply. He paused thoughtfully, filled another cup of wine, but did not drink it, gazed down upon the edge of his knife, and then turning round to his companion, said, "How warm it is! How can you all sit here with the casement closed?"

"The boys of the village were staring in," answered Sir Harry Grey, "looking at us like wild beasts in a cage, so we were forced to close the casement and draw the curtain. They are gone now--you can open it.--But you do not tell me what you think of this coming alliance. He is very wealthy, handsome, renowned; we all think it will answer very well.

"Do you?" said Richard de Ashby, drily. "Why, I rather think, Sir Harry, it is no business either of yours or mine; although, to speak the truth, I believe you are mistaken, and that there is no such alliance toward."

"Oh, but it is the talk of the whole court!" cried the other. "He is ever with her, or with the Lord of Ashby, and besides, the Earl has been known to say--" and he went on to repeat some twenty rumours of the day concerning the marriage of Hugh de Monthermer and Lucy de Ashby, not one of which contained a word of truth.

Still, however, Richard de Ashby remained unmoved--at least, to all appearance; and after merely asking who else was at the court, and receiving a somewhat lengthened answer, giving him the names of fifteen or sixteen ladies in whom he had no interest whatsoever, he arose, saying, "I must to bed, for I depart at daybreak to-morrow."

"What! do you not visit the King?" demanded one of the other gentlemen, who had not yet spoken.

"No, no," replied he, "I go on to Nottingham to meet him. I have business of importance. Good night--good night;" and he left the room.

"You galled him, Grey," said Sir Andrew Geary--"You galled him hard about that marriage."

"I know I did," answered Sir Harry Grey; "once let me know a man's folly, and I will pink you him to the quick, if his skin be as thick and hard as a German gambesoon.--Not that he thinks of marrying fair Lucy himself; but it is his hatred to the Monthermers touches him."

"Faith, you're mistaken," rejoined Sir Andrew Geary, who was one of those keen-sighted men who seem intuitively to see into men's motives, under whatsoever specious disguises they may endeavour to conceal them--"faith, you are mistaken. This Richard de Ashby is one of more ambition than you believe. He knows right well, that in the many

accidents of the day the good Lord Alured may find his way to the kingdom of Heaven, and then--though he be now but the poor kinsman, treated not so well as many a worthy retainer of the house--he becomes heir presumptive to the title, though to none of the lands, except the small estate of Ashby. It would suit him but little to see Hugh of Monthermer, as the husband of the heiress, sweep up the whole wealth of the house. What he will try," added Sir Andrew, musing, "I do not know; but be sure he will do something to break the marriage--if there be any truth in the story at all."

"Then Monthermer will cut his throat," replied Sir Harry Grey, "and there will be an end of it. But now what say you to the dice, Geary? let us try a cast or two."

"Not I," answered Sir Andrew Geary; "I am not in the mood. I am not well to-night, and shall betake me to my rest."

"I will throw with you, Grey," cried a young man from the other side of the room. "Geary's wings are drooping like a sick hen's. Don't you see? So let him go and carry himself to the isle of pipkins, and seek some stewed prunes for his queasy stomach. I am with you till cock crow, if your purse be long enough, and the wine good."

CHAPTER XXVI.

Richard de Ashby mounted the stairs with a slow step, paused at the first landing-place and grasped his forehead with his extended hand, then turned upon his steps; and, descending to the kitchen, in which

were seated an immense number of various classes, he beckoned to one of his servants, who was near the fire-place.

The man started up, and came to him at the door, when his master said, in a low tone, "You must take your horse as soon as he is fed, and speed across the country as if for life and death, to bear a letter from me to the Lord Alured, in Cumberland.--Have every thing ready in an hour."

"What! to-night, sir?" demanded the servant.

"Ay, to-night, villain!" replied his master; "to-night, I say!--Do you grumble?" and without waiting for any further answer, he turned, and once more ascended the stairs.

The inn was a rude old building, having a square court in the centre. It consisted of two stories above the ground-floor; and two ranges of open galleries ran round the whole yard, the chambers having no screen between them and the free air of heaven but the single door by which one entered or went out of each.

It was to the highest of the galleries that Richard de Ashby now directed his steps, for arriving late, it had been with difficulty he had found lodging at all. He had no light with him; but finding his way by the dim glare of some lanterns in the court, he stopped at the last chamber on the right hand side: and, after another halt of more than a minute passed in stern meditation, he threw, open the door and went in.

The room was a large one, forming the corner of the building, and having windows either way. There was a wide chimney, in which was a blazing log of wood, lighted to dispel the damp which the chamber might have contracted by disuse; and gazing at the changing aspect of the flame, sat fair, but unhappy, Kate Greenly, with her head resting on her hand, and her eyes full of deep and sorrowful thought.

"Get thee to bed," cried Richard de Ashby, in a rude and angry tone, as soon as he saw her; "did I not bid thee get to bed before?"

"I have had many things to think of," answered the girl. "I wish thou hadst left me behind thee, Richard. I love not going so near what was once my home."

"It was my will," replied he; "that must be enough for thee. Get thee to bed, I say.--I have to write and think."

Kate took a step away from him, but then looked round, and said, "Tell me first, Richard, art thou taking me back, wearied of her you used to love, to the once happy dwelling from which you brought me not six months ago?--If so, I will not go with you any farther."

"Thou wilt do what I order," he answered, sternly; "I am in no mood either for squabbling or jesting to-night.--Thou wilt go no farther, ha! By heaven thou wouldst make me resolve to take thee back by force, or send thee with a billet like some packet of goods.--But no, I will not send thee," he added, "I will not take thee; and knowest thou why? Not that I love thee--not that I care for thee more than for the flower that was yesterday in my breast, and is now cast away into the dust. But they have asked me to send thee back--they have ordered me; and therefore I will not! There is no power on earth shall tear thee from me; but I will take care to make thee serviceable, too. Get thee to bed, I say, and importune me no more.--What! send thee back to please Hugh de Monthermer!"

"He is a noble gentleman," answered Kate, "and in good sooth wished me well, though I knew it not."

"Thou art a fool!" cried Richard, violently; and, at the same moment, he took a step forward and struck her a blow on the cheek with his extended hand, adding, "Get thee to bed, minion, and let me hear thy tongue no more."

Kate's flashing eyes glared at him as if she could have stabbed him where he stood; but the instant after she darted towards the bed, cast herself upon her knees beside it, and, hiding her weeping face upon the

coverings, she murmured forth some rapid and eager words, which her base seducer neither heard nor cared to hear.

Seating himself by a table on which stood a lamp, he took forth the materials for writing from some large leathern bags which lay near; but ere he commenced the letter which he proposed to send, he passed a full half hour in deep meditation. Once during the time he looked round, apparently to see if the poor girl he had treated so basely was still up; but she had retired to bed; and, hearing her breathing deep and slow, he concluded that, like a child, she had wept herself to sleep. He then turned himself to meditate again, and we must look into his bosom, and give the turbulent words which were uttered in his inmost heart as if they had been spoken aloud.

"Ay," he thought, "if Alured had been here this mischief would not have occurred. The old fool is in his dotage! I wonder how it happened, when many a brave, strong man fell at Evesham, ere the battle had raged half-an-hour, this feeble old wiseacre went through the whole day unwounded! Had he been killed it might have made a mighty difference to me, and no great harm to any one."

At that point his thoughts seemed to pause for several minutes, ruminating on the advantages which might have accrued to himself had the Earl fallen at Evesham. "And yet," he continued, "this bull-headed cousin of mine, Alured, were nearly as great a stumbling-block in my way, even if the old man were removed. He would not be long, if left alone at the head of the house, ere he wedded some fair and fruitful lady, to exclude my claims for ever with a whole host of healthy white-headed children. I was in some hopes, if he sought out Monthermer in the battle, as he said, our enemy's lance might have proved friendly to me, and sent my noble cousin to another world. But it was not to be, and I suppose I must go on the poor dependent all my life.

"No," he continued, after another pause, "no, it shall not be so.--Why should I fear for drivelling tales of other worlds told by the monks and priests, and invented by them also?--Were Alured once dead, 'twere an easy matter to remove that weak old man--and yet, perhaps, it were better to send him first to his account.--Ha! I see, I see.--If one could manage it so as to cast suspicion on Monthermer, Alured would speedily accuse him of the deed; wager of battle must follow, and I were a fool if I could not contrive it so that Alured's vain strength should go down before Monthermer's skill and courage."

"In such fields as those," he added, speaking, though in a low, thoughtful tone, "such men separate not with life.--Methinks the matter were easily managed.--'Tis no light prize one plays for!--the earldom of Ashby, the broad lands, the parks, the woods, the fields--ay, and to crown the whole, the fair hand of Lucy herself; for, her brother and her father dead, she must needs become my ward, and if my ward, my wife. It is worth striving for, and by heaven and hell, it shall be so,--ay, let what will stand in the way,--Could I but breed a quarrel between this old dotard Earl and the ancient enemy of our house, whom he is so ready to take to his bosom, I would soon accomplish the rest. But it shall be done,--it shall be done!" And leaning his dark brow upon his hands, he revolved the means for carrying his plan into execution.

For several minutes he hesitated as to whether he should write to his cousin as he had proposed or not; but then again he thought--"I will not do it!--his presence would but embarrass me. In some chance encounter with this Monthermer, with arms and weapons unprepared by me, he might prove the conqueror, and once having vanquished him, he would take him to his heart and give him half his fortune--the hand of Lucy--anything. I know my vain-glorious cousin well! No, no, we will deal with the father first.--But I must on to Nottingham, and seek the tools to work with. I will write to Ellerby too, he is ready for any desperate work, and in his store of knowledge has always information where to find persons as fearless and as shrewd as himself."

Having thus made up his mind, Richard de Ashby rose, and once more sought out the kitchen of the inn, taking the lamp with him. Revelry and merriment were still going on in all quarters of the house, and it was no unpalatable news to the groom, who was waiting below, ready to depart, that his master had changed his purpose, and would not send him as he had proposed, though he had orders to be prepared to set out by cock-crow. After having given this intimation, the Earl's kinsman retired to his chamber again, and, sitting down at the table, wrote a few lines to the man whose unscrupulous assistance he required.

It was not without long pauses of thought, however, that he did so, and in the end he put his hand to his head, saying, "I am tired." Well indeed he might be so; for though the body had been still, the mind had struggled and laboured during the last few hours, with that eager and painful energy, which communicates afterwards to the corporeal frame itself no slight portion of the lassitude which follows great exertions. He next sought to seal the letter he had written, but he could find neither wax nor silk, and laying it down upon the table again, he said, aloud, "It must wait till to-morrow; but I must take care that no one comes in and sees it before I wake, for that were ruin indeed!"

Thus speaking, he turned to the door of the room and locked it; and then, after a few minutes more given to thought, he undressed himself, and, without prayer, lay down to rest.--Without prayer!--he never prayed: the blessed influence even of an imperfect communion with Heaven never fell like the summer rain upon his heart, softening and refreshing. The idea of his dependence upon Providence, or his responsibility to God, would have been far too painful and cumbersome to be daily renewed and encouraged by prayer. He was one of the idolaters; and the god of his heart was himself. His cunning was the wisdom of his Deity, his passions, his pleasures, his power, its other attributes; and to the Moloch of self he was ready at any time to sacrifice

all else that the world contained. He rose without asking a blessing on works that he knew were to be evil, he lay down supplicating no pardon for the offences of the day.

Ay! reader, and he slept, too, with sound, unbroken, heavy sleep. What between passions, and pleasures, and schemes, and exertions, his body and his mind were usually exhausted together; and throughout a long course of years he had slept each night, as he did now, with a slumber, deep, dreamless uninterrupted.

The lamp remained unextinguished in the chamber; and for about an hour all was still, his heavy breathing being the only sound that made itself heard; except the occasional voices of revellers in other parts of the house, becoming more and more faint as the night advanced. At the end of that time, however, a female figure glided from between the curtains of the bed and approached the table.

Richard de Ashby had left, lying across the letter which he had been writing, the dagger, with the pommel of which he had prepared to seal it, and Kate Greenly, with her teeth tight shut, and her brow knit, took up the weapon, drew it from the sheath, gazed upon the edge, and felt the sharp point. She then turned her head towards the bed, and strained her eyes upon it with a wild fierce look.

The moment after, she thrust the blade back into its covering, and pressed her hand upon her brow, murmuring--"Not now!--No, no, no!--Not now!--The time may come, however--the time may come, Richard!--But I will have thee in my power--at all events, I will have thee in my power! The worm thou treadest on may sting thy heel, oppressor.--Thanks to the good priest who taught me to read and write!" she continued, taking up the letter and unfolding it. "Would I had attended to his other teaching as well;" and bending over the lamp, she read:--

"Come to me post haste, Ellerby,"--so ran the letter--"I have a stag of ten for you to strike. My mind is made up, and I am resolved to throw down the screen that keeps me from the sun. If we succeed--and success is certain--your reward shall be in proportion to the deed: ten thousand sterlings to begin with. But you must not come alone, you must bring some three or four men with you, able and willing to perform a bold act; so make no delay, but quit all vain pastimes and idle pleasures, and hasten to certain fortune and success.

"Yours, as you shall use diligence,

"R. A."

Kate Greenly read the lines again and again, as if she wished to fix them indelibly on her mind; then folding up the letter again, she laid it down upon the table, placed the dagger across it, and remained musing for several minutes in deep thought.

"No, no," she murmured, at length, "I will not believe it. No; he may wrong a poor girl like me; he may break his vows, oppress, and trample on the creature in his power; but murder--the murder of a kinsman?--No, no!--And yet," she added, "what can the words mean? They are strange--they are very strange! I will think of it no more--and yet I must think of it. I wish I had not seen that paper! But having seen it, I must see more.--I must watch--I must inquire. There shall be nothing kept from me now.--Murder? It is very horrible.--But I will go to sleep."

Kate Greenly crept quietly back to bed again; but the reader need not be told that she found there no repose. Had her heart not been burdened even with her own sin, the dangerous knowledge she had acquired of the guilt of others would have been quite sufficient to banish sleep from her eyes. Hour after hour she lay and thought over the words which she had read. She strove to find some other meaning for them; but, alas! she had,

more than once before, heard muttered hints and dark longings for the possessions of others, which directed her mind ever to the same course, and ever to the same conclusion.

The thought was agonizing to her; for, notwithstanding all her wrongs--notwithstanding anger and indignation--notwithstanding her knowledge that he was a villain--notwithstanding her certainty that he would cast her off whensoever it pleased him--ay, doom her to poverty, contempt, and disgrace--love for Richard de Ashby yet lingered in the heart of poor Kate Greenly.

At length, just as the morning was growing grey, her heavy eyelids fell for a moment; and she was still asleep when her seducer rose and began his preparations for departure. He discovered not that the letter had been examined; but making her get up in haste to find some wax and silk, he sealed the epistle; and, after dispatching it by a messenger, set out himself for Nottingham, carrying the unhappy girl with him, followed by only two attendants.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"What seekest thou, fat friar?" said one of a party of three gentlemen, who were standing under the arch which gave entrance into the great court of Nottingham Castle. He was speaking to a large heavy-looking man, with round rosy face and double chin, who had been wandering hither and thither in the court for some time, but apparently without any very definite object--"What seekest thou, incarnation of the jolly god?"

"I seek, my son," replied the friar, with a leer, "what you, perhaps, can show me, but which, nevertheless, it would be well, were you to seek it yourself."

"Nay, nay, no riddles, most jovial sphinx," replied Sir William Geary; "speak in plain language and I may help thee, but I am not inclined to play [OE]dipus for thy convenience. What is it thou meanest?"

"I mean that I seek the right way," replied the priest.

"But whither? whither?" asked Sir William. "Who, or what is it you want?"

"I want to speak with the noble lord, Hugh de Monthermer," answered the friar, "who, I hear, comes in the King's train."

"Is brought, you mean," said Sir Harry Grey; "for he comes as a prisoner. But to tell the truth, his captivity seems to captivate the whole court, for there is none now who receives any notice but Hugh de Monthermer."

"The court must be getting wise in its old age," rejoined the friar. "Methinks I shall follow it, too, as merit meets advancement. But, I beseech you, fair sir, tell me where the young lord makes abode; for though I find the doors of this castle as strait for, my fat sides as those of heaven, they are as many as those of the other place."

"By my life, friar," replied Sir William Geary, "you will find him, if I judge rightly, with a lady, in the deep window of the great hall, taking thy trade over thy head; for, as I passed them, she seemed very much as if she were making confession."

"She made the only one that was needful long ago," exclaimed Sir Harry Grey; "for as I rode near them on the way from Huntingdon, I heard her say, 'You know I do, Hugh,'"--and he mimicked the tone of

Lucy's voice, adding, "what was wanting must have been--'love you'--of course."

"Nay, then, Heaven forefend that I should interrupt confession," said the friar, with a laugh; "'tis contrary to the ordinance of Holy Church; but if you will show me, my son, which is his chamber, I will go thither and wait; for a small boy whom I met but now at the outer gate made a mock of me, and told me that if I took the third door, on the right hand, in the left hand corner, just beyond the fourth tower, after passing through the second gate, I should find a staircase which would lead me to the top of the castle; and when I had gone up, I might come down again. By my faith, if I could have reached him with my staff, I would have given him some wholesome correction; but he was too nimble for me; and my infirmities would not let me follow him."

"Your fat, you mean, friar," replied Sir Harry Grey. "But tell me, how many casks of beer and butts of wine has it cost to complete that carcase of thine and paint that face?"

"Neither are finished yet, my son," answered the friar, "but when they are, I will sum up the items, and send thee in the bill. It will profit thee nothing, however, for thou, wilt never grow fat."

"Why not?" demanded the other, somewhat piqued.

"Show me the way, and I will tell thee," replied the friar. "Well, then, go through that door under the arch," said Sir Harry, "and up the stairs, and the second door you come to leads to the Lord Hugh's chamber.--Now, then, why shall I never get fat? By my faith, I am glad to hear such news."

"Didst never hear the old rhyme?" asked the friar--

"'A pleasant heart, a happy mind,
That joy in all God's works can find,
A conscience pure without a stain,

A mind not envious nor vain,
Shall on man's head bring down God's benison,
And fatten more than ale or venison.'

Heaven speed ye, gentlemen--thanks for your civil entertainment."

Thus saying, he rolled off with a low chuckle, and took his way through the door to which the courtier had directed him.

One of the three gentlemen, as the reader may have observed, had taken no part in the conversation with the friar; he now, however, turned at once to Sir William Geary, asking--"Do you know the scurvy knave?"

"Not I," answered Sir William Geary; "this is the first time I ever set eyes upon him; but he is evidently a shrewd and caustic villain, ready to make himself serviceable in many ways: Do you know him, De Margan, for you look mysterious?"

"I have seen him within the last ten days," replied De Margan, "but in a different part of England, and with companions from whom doubtless he brings messages to this noble Lord Hugh.--This matter must be watched, Geary. I have some old scores of friendship to clear with Hugh de Monthermer; so let us mark well what follows this good priest's interview with him."

"Yes, I have heard of your adventure," said Sir William Geary, "and of your resolution to tell the old Earl of certain moonlight meetings; but you may tell what you will, De Margan, now, it will have no effect. Why, the father seems as much in love with him as the daughter; and though the noble and right valiant old lord is now over at Lindwell, preparing to eclipse all that has gone before, in his reception of the king, Hugh de Monthermer, each day since we have been here, has ridden over and spent the whole morning there, alone, I verily believe, with his lady-love."

"I heard as much," answered Guy de Margan, impatiently--"I heard as much last night after my arrival; but I will find means, one way or another, to make this Hugh de Monthermer rue his braggart insolence."

Sir William Geary paused for a moment with a thoughtful and somewhat bitter smile--"Well, De Margan," he said at length, drawing him aside from the rest, "if you want vengeance, methinks I know where there is a man to be found who will help you with his whole heart. No one knows of his being in Nottingham but myself; but I have found him out, and will take you to him if you like to go."

"Who is he--who is he?" demanded the other.

"No less a person than Richard de Ashby, the fair lady's cousin," answered Geary. "He is possessed of a goodly hatred towards these Monthermers, and, methinks, of no little love towards his bright cousin, Lucy."

De Margan, however, scoffed at the idea--"What!" he cried, "a poverty-stricken beggarly dependant like that, to dare to lift his eyes to one so much above him!"

"It may be to her dower he lifts his eyes," said Sir William Geary. "Ambition is always a bold lover. But, however that may be, depend upon it, he will help you to your vengeance upon Monthermer if you but concert your schemes together."

"Well--well!" replied Sir Guy; "I will go to him, Geary. But let us first discover, if we can, something more regarding the errand of this friar. The man is a rank rebel, and a fautor of rebels. I saw him last with Sir William Lemwood, and all the rest of that crew, who were then hot for rebellion. I was sent to negotiate; but since then, that nest of treason has been suppressed, and doubtless he now comes to Nottingham to hatch some new conspiracy if he prove strong enough. But we must watch him--we must watch him! and if Hugh de Monthermer do but trip, I will

answer for it, he shall fall--ay, and heavily, too; so let him take care. I fear there is no chance of getting into some ante-chamber, and overhearing what passes?"

"None--none!" cried his companion, "that is quite out of the question; but my room looks out upon the end of the staircase, whence we can easily see when this friar issues forth again."

"We will watch him--we will watch him!" exclaimed De Margan; "the very visit of such a man is in itself suspicious.--Say you not so, Geary?"

"Assuredly," answered Sir William, with a bitter smile--"assuredly--to a suspicious mind;" and with this sarcasm, he turned, and led the way to his own apartment in the castle.

Whatever was the Friar's errand with Hugh de Monthermer, he remained in his chamber more than an hour; and, when he issued forth, he was followed, not long after, by the young nobleman, who, on foot, and with a cloak of a sombre colour covering his gayer garments, took his way out into the town through the same gate by which the jolly cenobite had issued forth.

"Let us see where they go--let us see where they go!" cried Guy de Margan; and hurrying down, he and his companion also quitted the castle, and soon caught sight of the young nobleman.

Nottingham in those days was not so large a town as at present, but nevertheless, it was a place of very considerable importance; and then, as at present, its steep streets and rocky flights of steps running down the curious sort of cone on which it stands, gave one the idea of its being built upon a beehive. Walking down the road which led from the castle, Hugh de Monthermer proceeded for some way, and then took the first flight of steps that he came to, descending towards the lower part of the town; but, as at the bottom there were two ways which he might pursue, the gentlemen who were fulfilling the honourable office of spy upon his

actions, and both of whom knew Nottingham well, separated for the time, appointing a spot to meet again, in order that he might not escape them.

They had just rejoined each other in the lower part of the town, near the old gate, when Hugh, of whom Guy de Margan had not lost sight, paused and looked round him, as if not quite certain of his way, causing his pursuers to draw back behind a booth which protruded into the street. The moment after, he proceeded again, directing his steps straight through the gate; and they, darting out, followed him so quickly that they had well-nigh come suddenly upon him, as he stopped by the side of the friar whom they had before seen. The worthy monk however, was no longer on foot, but mounted upon a strong, tall, vicious looking mule; and, at the same time, he held by the bridle a large bony horse, equipped as for a journey.

Hugh de. Monthermer was at that moment putting his foot into the stirrup, and in an instant was upon the beast's back.

"This looks very like a prisoner making his escape," said Guy de Margan. "Shall I call upon the people to stop him?"

"No--no!" replied Geary, "he is not making his escape; and if he were, he would be gone before you could do anything. He has a thousand opportunities of escaping every day if he likes it. 'Tis unlucky we have no horses with us."

"He is going on no lawful errand, depend upon it," exclaimed Guy de Margan, "with that monk for a guide. I doubt not his journey will end in a meeting with some of the very rebels the king has come down to quell.--I will go and tell the Prince what I have seen, and what I suspect likewise."

"Pshaw! never think of telling the Prince," said Geary, with his usual shrewd look and sarcastic turn of the lip, "that will never answer *your* purpose, De Margan. The Prince is a sensible man; and, besides, you

could not if you would. Edward is away; he set out this morning with five hundred men for Derby. Tell the King--tell the King! You can make him believe anything you like.--Your mother was a Jewess, wasn't she?"

Guy de Margan turned upon him with a furious look and his hand upon his dagger, for the words of his companion implied what in that day was the grossest insult which one gentleman could offer to another; but Geary added, immediately, "An Italian, I mean--an Italian. What was I thinking of? You know a single drop of foreign blood in any one's veins is quite enough to secure the favour of the King. But come and see Richard de Ashby first; and concoct your scheme together. I will leave you with him; for I do not want to share your councils. It will be jest enough to see the result."

The gibing spirit of Sir William Geary did not well accord with Guy de Margan's mood at the moment; and he was not at all sorry to find that he was soon to be delivered from his society. Walking on through some of the narrow streets which then formed the lower part of the good town of Nottingham, with the projecting gables of the upper stories shading them from the sun, and nearly meeting overhead, they at length reached a curiously carved and ornamented wooden house, small and sunk in amongst the others, so as scarcely to be seen by any one passing hurriedly along, like a modest and retiring man jostled back from observation by the obtrusive crowd. Here Sir William Geary applied for admittance, but before it was granted a full observation was taken of his person, and that of his companion, by a servant looking through a small round window at the side. At length the door was opened, and after some difficulty Sir Guy de Margan was permitted to enter, Sir William Geary leaving him as he went in.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

It was on the day following that which saw the visit of Guy de Margan to Richard de Ashby, that the two lovers stood together at the open casement of one of the magnificent rooms in Lindwell Castle, with joy in their hearts, such as they had never before known in life. They had thought, indeed, during the journey from Eltham to Nottingham, that it was hardly possible anything so bright and sweet could last as the dream-like and uncertain delight which they then enjoyed in each other's society, in the sort of toleration which their love received, and in the hopes to which that toleration gave rise. But now Hugh de Monthermer had come with happier tidings still; and, with his arm circling her he loved, her hand clasped in his, and her head leaning on his shoulder, he told her that her father had been with him for an hour that day, previous to his noon visit to the King, and had given his decided consent to their union. He had expressed some doubts, the lover said, as to her brother Alured's view of the matter, but had promised to take upon himself the task of bringing his son's fiery and intractable spirit to reason; and certain it is that when the young nobleman left Nottingham Castle to proceed with his small train to Lindwell, the Earl of Ashby had fully and entirely made up his mind to bestow his daughter's hand upon Hugh de Monthermer with as little delay as possible.

Nor was it merely caprice which had produced so favourable a change of feeling in the present instance, although he was by nature, it must be confessed, somewhat capricious and undecided. He had always liked the young knight, even when the two houses of Ashby and Monthermer were opposed to each other in former days. He had once or twice bestowed a caress upon the boy, when he had met him accidentally at the court of the King, and Hugh had shown a degree of affection for him in return, which had produced one of those impressions in his favour that time strengthens rather than effaces.

Various circumstances had since caused him to vacillate, as we have seen; but when after the battle of Evesham he found that Hugh was in high favour with the gallant Prince, who had just saved his father's throne, when he saw the way open before him to the brightest career at the court of his Sovereign, and remembered at the same time that he must inevitably unite in his own person all the power and fortune of the two great branches of his noble house, he felt, that in a mere worldly point of view, a better alliance could not be found throughout the land.

He was, therefore, but little inclined to throw any obstacle in the way; and during the progress down to Nottingham,--a progress which in those times occupied sixteen or seventeen days--he perceived two facts which fixed his resolution: first, that his daughter whom he loved better than aught else on earth, had staked her happiness on a union with Hugh de Monthermer; and next, that it was the earnest desire of Edward--though the Prince did not make it a positive request, that no obstacle should be thrown in the way of his friend's marriage with her he loved.

Thus, he himself had, during that morning, led the way to a conversation which ended in his promising Lucy's hand to Hugh de Monthermer; and it had been arranged that, as the King, at the end of two days, was to visit Lindwell and be there entertained for a week, the announcement of the approaching marriage should be publicly made on the morning of the Monarch's arrival.

Such were the happy tidings which Hugh himself bore over to Lucy, and they now stood at that window gazing over the fair scene before their eyes, with feelings in their hearts which can never be known but once in life--feelings, the same in their nature and their character in the bosom of each, though modified of course, by sex, by habits, and by disposition. It was all joy and expectation and the looking forward to the long bright days of mutual love; but with Lucy that joy was timid, agitating, overpowering. All her gay and sparkling cheerfulness sunk beneath the weight of happy hopes, as one sometimes sees a bee so

overloaded with honey that he can scarce carry his sweet burden home; and she had neither a jest to throw away upon herself or any one else, but, as we have said, stood quiet and subdued by Hugh de Monthermer's side, his arm half supporting her, and her head leaning on his shoulder. He, too, though always tender and kind towards her, seemed softened still more, by the circumstances in which he was placed. Even the eager love within his bosom controlled itself, lest its ardour should alarm and agitate the gentle being, whom he now looked upon as all his own. He soothed her, he calmed her, his caresses were light and tender; and he even strove to win her thoughts away from the more agitating parts of the subject on which they rested, to those which would give her back firmness and tranquillity.

He called her mind back to the day they had spent together in the forest, to the promises they had made, and to the restrictions she had placed upon hers. He acknowledged that it was better she had done so, but he added--"I may now ask you unhesitatingly, dear Lucy, to pledge me here the vow that you will soon make at the altar, and to tell me that you are mine, and will be for ever mine."

"Oh, willingly, willingly, now!" answered Lucy, withdrawing her hand for a moment, and then giving it back again. "Yours I am, Hugh, whatever betide--yours and none but yours,--yours through weal and woe, through life, till death--oh, yes, and after death!" and she hid her eyes for a moment on his bosom, with the sweet tears of happy emotion rising is them till they well-nigh over-ran the dark fringed lid. Then, turning again to the view before their eyes, they both gazed forth in silence, with their hearts full and their minds busy.

Alas, poor lovers! they little knew that their fate was like the changeful autumn day, whose clouds and sunshine were sweeping rapidly over the wide forest scene on which they looked, now sparkling in the full glory of light, and the next moment, ere one could see the storm in its approach, dark and heavy with the raindrops rushing down, and tearing the brown leaves from the fading trees.

One of those heavy showers had just cleared away, and the rays of the sun were sparkling again over the jewelled ground, when, about an hour after Hugh's arrival, a large and splendid train was seen coming across the green slopes from Nottingham, betokening the return of the Earl. He rode on quickly, and Lucy and her lover advanced into the richly carved stone balcony, to wave the hand and welcome him back with looks that spoke their gratitude and joy; but the Earl did not raise his eyes, and both Hugh and his fair companion perceived, as he approached, that in the train of the Earl were several gentlemen not belonging to his own household.

A moment or two after, steps were heard ascending, and as they were many, Lucy darted away through a small door which led, by another staircase, to her own apartments, believing that her father was bringing some strangers to the castle, and wishing to remove the traces of recent agitation from her countenance before she met them.

Hugh de Monthermer was not long left alone. Lucy was scarcely gone when the voice of the Earl of Ashby was heard speaking to some of those who had accompanied him.

"Stay you here, gentlemen," he said, "he will return with you to the King--be not afraid; I will be his surety.--Let me speak with him first;" and the next instant the Earl entered the hall, with his eyes bent upon the ground and a cloud upon his brow.

Though conscious of perfect innocence, and knowing of no danger that was likely to befal him, the heart of Hugh de Monthermer sunk at the words which he heard the Lord de Ashby utter. They came upon his ear like the announcement of new misfortunes, of new obstacles between Lucy and himself. It is true they might have meant a thousand other things, they might have referred even to some other person, but how often do we see a boy in the midst of a sunshiny holiday take alarm at

the shadow of a light cloud, and fancy that a storm is coming on. Hugh de Monthermer was too brightly happy not to tremble lest his happiness should pass away like a dream.

Advancing, then, rapidly towards the Earl, he said, with his usual frank and generous bearing, "What is the matter, my noble lord? You seem sad and downcast, though you were so gay and cheerful this morning."

"Everything has changed since this morning, sir," answered the Earl, "and my mood with the rest. The King forbids your marriage with my daughter; and, as my consent was but conditional----"

Hugh's indignation would not bear restraint. "This is most unjust and tyrannical"--he replied aloud; "but I do believe some one has poisoned the King's mind against me, for until yesterday morning he was all favour and kindness. Prince Edward is now absent, and some villain has taken advantage thereof to abuse the Monarch's ear."

"Of that I know nothing," answered the Earl, coldly, "but at all events he has forbidden the marriage--and consequently I require you to give me back my plighted word that it should take place."

"Never!" exclaimed Hugh de Monthermer, vehemently, "Never!--I will never be accessory to my own bitter and unjust disappointment.--You may, my lord, if you will--but I do not think you will--you may break your promise, you may withdraw your consent, but it shall be your own act and none of mine. I stand before you here, as honest and innocent of all offence as ever man was; and, if there was no cause this morning why you should refuse me your dear daughter's hand, there is none now."

"There is--there is," cried the Earl, sharply,--"the King's express command."

"Given upon some false showing," said Hugh de Monthermer. "I will go to him this moment. I will dare my accusers to bring forward their charge to my face. I will prove their falsehood upon them--first by show of witnesses, and next by arms--and bitterly shall they repent the day that they dared sully my name by a word. I know them,--I know who they are, and their contrivances, right well. I had a warning of their being near, last night.--I do beseech you, my lord, tell me, of what do they accuse me? and fear not that I will soon exculpate myself."

"Nay, I know not, accurately, Hugh," replied the Earl, in a kindlier tone than he had hitherto used. "I have heard, however, that there is a charge against you, a general charge of conspiring with those enemies of the state who have been striving to raise once more the standard of rebellion in the North and in the marches of Wales."

"It is false--it is as false as hell!" cried Hugh; but then, after a moment, growing calmer, he took the old Earl's hand, saying, "Forgive me, my dear lord, if, in the heat of so bitter a disappointment, I have said anything that could pain or offend you. Forgive me, I entreat you--and promise me two things."

"What are they, my good lord?" demanded the Earl. "I will, if they are meet and reasonable."

Hugh de Monthermer lowered his voice from the tone in which he had before been speaking, and replied, "They are meet and reasonable, my lord, or I would not ask them. First, promise me that the moment I am gone you will write a letter to Prince Edward, telling him that his humble friend, Hugh de Monthermer, is accused of crimes which he declares he never dreamt of. Beseech him to return with all speed to see justice done, and send the packet by a trusty messenger to Derby, where the Prince now lies."

"I will--I will," answered the Earl; "it shall be done within an hour. But what more, Hugh--what more?"

"This, my dear lord," replied the young nobleman,--"your messenger will reach Derby to-night; and, if I know Prince Edward rightly, ere to-morrow's sun be an hour declined from high noon, he will be in Nottingham. I will beseech the King to wait till that moment, to hear my full defence. What I ask then is, that you will meet me in the presence, and, if you cannot lay your hand upon your heart and say that you believe me guilty, you will renew your promise of dear Lucy's hand, and urge the King with me to give his consent likewise."

The old Lord hesitated, but at length answered, "Well!"

"Then now farewell, my lord," said Hugh de Monthermer. "I must not stay till your dear daughter comes. After the happy hour we passed but now together, 'twould well-nigh break my heart to see her under other circumstances."

Thus saying, he wrung the old man's hand, and strode towards the door, but turning for an instant before he quitted the chamber, he saw that the Earl stood fixed in the midst of the hall, with a hesitating air; and he added, aloud, "You will not fail, my lord!"

"No, no," replied the Earl, "I will meet you at the hour you named.--Fear not, I will not fail."

There was a wide landing-place between the top of the stairs and the door of the hall; and Hugh de Monthermer found it crowded with gentlemen belonging to Henry's court. The moment he appeared, Sir Guy de Margan advanced towards him, saying, "Lord Hugh de Monthermer, I am commanded by the King----"

But Hugh interrupted his address, frowning upon him sternly, "To summon me to his majesty's presence!" he said. "I go thither, at once, sir, and that is enough!--Take care, Sir Guy de Margan!" he added, seeing him still approaching him; "remember, I am not fond of your close presence!"--and he brought the hilt of his long sword nearer to his right hand, striding onward to the top of the staircase, as he did so; while

the gentlemen who occupied the landing, not exactly liking the expression of his countenance, made way for him on either side, and Guy de Margan bit his lip with an angry frown, not daring to approach too closely.

The young nobleman's horse, and the attendants who had accompanied him, were ready in the court; and springing into the saddle, without giving the slightest attention to those who followed, he shook his bridle rein, and galloped on towards Nottingham. The others came after at full speed: and both parties entered the city, and passed the gates of the castle almost at the same moment. Dismounting from his horse, Hugh proceeded at once towards the royal apartments, leaving several of the pages and attendants behind him, unquestioned, on his way. In the ante-room of the audience chamber he met William de Valence, for the time one of the prime favourites of the Monarch; and stopping him, he asked, "Can I speak with his Majesty, my Lord of Pembroke? I find I have been accused wrongfully, and must clear myself."

"His Grace expects your lordship," answered the Earl, with an icy look; "but he expects to see you in custody."

"There was no need, sir," replied Hugh; "I fear not to meet my King, and never need force to make me face my foes. Will you bring me to the presence--that is all I require."

"Follow me, then," said the Earl; and opening the door, he announced the arrival of the young knight to Henry, who immediately ordered him to be brought in.

The Monarch was seated near a table, with the Lord Mortimer standing by him. They were apparently jesting upon some subject, for both were smiling when Hugh de Monthermer entered; but the moment the weak and tyrannical Sovereign's eyes fell upon him, an angry scowl

came upon his countenance, which brought King John strongly back to the minds of those who remembered that feeble and cold-blooded Prince.

"So, sir," said Henry, "you have come of your accord, to meet the reward of your high merits!"

"I come, your Grace," replied Hugh, bowing low, "to meet my accusers in your royal presence, and to give them the lie in their teeth, if they dare to charge me with any act contrary to my allegiance or my duty."

"What!" said the King--"was consorting with De Montfort, was fighting at Evesham, not contrary to your allegiance?"

"Oh! my lord," answered Hugh, "if the charge goes as far back as that, I must plead both your Grace's special pardon, and your general amnesty to all who laid down their arms, made submission, and offended not again!"

"But you have offended again," exclaimed the King; "that is the chief charge against you."

"And whoever does make it," replied Hugh de Monthermer, "is a false and perjured traitor, and I will prove it upon him, either by investigation before your Majesty, or by wager of battle--my body against his, with God for the judge."

"Nay--nay, sir," said Henry, "we know your strength and skill in arms right well; and this is not a case where we will trust plain justice to be turned from its course by a strong arm and a bold but perverse heart. We ourselves will be your accuser, with whom there can be no wager of battle; and those we call to prove your crime shall be but witnesses."

"My lord, that cannot be," replied Hugh, boldly. "My King will never be judge and accuser, both in one."

"Then you shall have other judges," cried the Monarch; "your peers shall judge you. But, if you be truly innocent, you will not scruple now to answer at once the charges made against you."

"It is for that, I come," replied the young knight. "Unprepared, not knowing what these charges are, I come to meet them as I may. I pray you, let me hear them."

While he and the King had been speaking, a number of new faces had appeared in the audience chamber, comprising all those who had followed the young nobleman from Lindwell; and Henry, running his eye over them, exclaimed--"Stand forth, Guy de Margan--and you, Hugh Fitzhugh--and you, Sir William Geary, come near also, and say of what you accuse Lord Hugh de Monthermer."

"'Faith, sire," replied Sir William Geary, with his usual sarcastic grin, "I accuse the noble knight of nothing. I was at the pass of arms at Northampton, my lord, when he unhorsed the four best lances in the field. Now, I never was particularly strong in the knees, and, moreover, am getting somewhat rusty with years; so God forbid that I should accuse any man who talks of the wager of battle. When I heard it, I trembled almost as much as Sir Guy de Margan here."

"It is false! I trembled not!" exclaimed Sir Guy.

"True--true," answered the other, "you only shook, and looked sickly."

"Sir William Geary," cried the King, "this is no jesting matter! Speak what it was you told me that you saw."

"I saw a fat monk," replied Sir William Geary, whose inclination for a joke could hardly be restrained--"a jolly monk as ever my eyes rested upon, and this fat monk, sire," he continued, more seriously, seeing that the King was becoming angry, "stopped, and asked his way to the apartments of the noble lord. He jested as wittily with Sir Harry Grey as

a court fool does with a thick-headed country lad; but when he had gone on his way, Sir Guy de Margan here, a very serious and reputable youth, as your Majesty knows, told me, in mysterious secrecy, that the friar was a very treacherous piece of fat indeed--a traitor's messenger--a go-between of rebels--a personage whom he had himself known with Sir William Lemwood and the rest, in the marches of Wales. So, inviting him sweetly into my chamber, we two watched together for the monk's going forth from this noble lord's apartments which was not for more than an hour. In the meanwhile, pious Sir Guy entertained me with his shrewd suspicions, of how the monk and the valiant knight were hatching treason together, which, as you know, sire, is a cockatrice's egg, laid by male fowls, and hatched by dragons looking at it. A very pretty allegory of a conspiracy, if we did but read fools for fowls--that by the way; but to return to my tale:--the monk at length appeared in the courtyard again, and shortly after the Lord Hugh de Monthermer, him following. Thereupon; one of those irresistible inclinations which set the legs in motion, whether man will or not, seized upon me and good Sir Guy; and drawn as if by that rock of adamant on which the Earl is fixed, we pursued, without power of resistance, the path of knight and friar. Just at the gate of the city we found our ascetic friend mounted on a mule, and holding a horse for his knightly acquaintance, on which we saw the gallant Lord spring, and after that they rode away together. This is all I have to say, sire, and what I have said is true; but far be it from me to take any accusation against a knight who can squeeze a horse to death between his two knees, or stop a charger in full course by catching hold of an iron ring, and grasping the beast with his two legs."

"What have you to answer, sir?" demanded the King, turning to Hugh.

"Simply that I saw a monk yesterday, sire," replied the young nobleman, "and that he stayed with me nearly an hour, talking much of venison, and somewhat of hunting. He may, from his language, have committed the crime of taking a fat buck when he had no right to do so;

but, by my faith, that is the only treason I should suspect him of, and not one word did he utter in my presence, either about risings, rebellions, or aught else that could move your royal displeasure."

"Ha! what say you to this, Sir Guy de Margan?" asked the King. "Tell us, who is this friar? Is he a rebel, or is he not?"

"Notoriously so, my lord," replied Guy de Margan. "I found him with Lemwood and the other traitors, to whom you, sire, sent me for the purpose of negotiation; and it would seem that he had come to comfort them with promises of assistance from the North."

"But yet that does not prove," said Mortimer, "that the Lord Hugh held any treasonable converse with him. His business with that good lord might have been of a very simple kind."

Malevolent injustice becomes most dangerous when it assumes the garb of equity; and Mortimer, who knew the whole that was to come, only assumed the style of an impartial judge, that his after persecution of the young nobleman might seem dictated by a sense of justice.

"It might have been so, indeed," replied Guy de Margan, "had it but been a visit from the friar to my Lord of Monthermer; but their setting forth together would seem strange; and the secrecy observed in the monk quitting the castle first, and the knight following at a little distance, renders it more strange still. Perhaps Lord Hugh will condescend to explain why he went, and where."

"Methinks," answered Hugh, "that the honourable spies who crept after my footsteps from the castle to the town gate, might have carried their inquiries a little farther, when they would have saved the necessity of such questions here."

"In regard to one point," said Hugh Fitzhugh, a large, burly Norman gentleman--"in regard to one point, I, at least, can give some explanation. What he went for I can but divine, but where he went I

know right well. He rode out with all speed to the forest, for I saw him there with this same monk they mention. The truth is, I had somewhat missed my way; and coming through some of the by-paths of the wood, I suddenly chanced upon a party of five persons in deep and earnest conversation. Three of them had vizards on their faces, too, and the two that were unmasked were Hugh de Monthermer and the friar we have heard of. Now, my lord the King, unless he explain that, we have no explanation at all. But your wisdom will judge."

"Let him explain, if he will," said the King, "or rather, if he can. I doubt it much; but I am willing to hear."

"My lord," replied Hugh de Monthermer, "for once in their lives these noble gentlemen have told the truth: I did go out after the priest; I did accompany him into the forest; I did meet three men there--but with no evil purpose; nor did one word transpire which any man could call treason."

"Who were the men you went to see?" demanded the King.

"Nay, sire," replied Hugh, "you must forgive me, if I give not their names. My accusers, if they charge me with crime, must show that I have been guilty of it. Now no such thing is even attempted to be proved. All that they assert is, that I spoke with a friar, rode out with a friar, and was seen conversing with three unknown persons in Sherwood. If this be held as treason, God defend the innocent!"

"But, my good lord," said Mortimer, to whom the King turned his eyes, "it is shown that this friar, who took you forth to speak with three other men, is himself a notorious traitor, and you must show that the others were not so also, or the imputation will lie against you of consorting with, and concealing the counsel of, the King's enemies."

"Which is a high crime, my lord," added Henry, sternly.

Hugh de Monthermer gazed down thoughtfully on the ground for a moment, for he found that he was placed in a situation of much greater difficulty and danger than he imagined; but looking up at length, he answered, "My lord the King, I am here in this presence without friends or counsellors to aid or to assist me. I have come without forethought or preparation, as fast as my horse would hear me, to answer a charge, cunningly contrived beforehand by my enemies. I do beseech you, give me but four-and-twenty hours to consider well how I ought to act. If I may have any one to advise with me, I shall esteem it as a grace; but if not, at all events let me have time for thought myself. I know that I can prove my innocence, beyond all doubt, if I have time to do it."

"You shall have time and counsel too," replied the King, "but it shall be under custody. My Lord of Mortimer, attach him in our name. Let him be conveyed to his chamber; set a strong guard upon the door; and give access to any one of his servants, but not more, that he may have free leave to send for what counsellor he will; let that counsellor visit him; and as he asks for four-and-twenty hours, bring him before us again at this same time to-morrow."

The Earl of Mortimer took a few steps forward, as if to attach the young nobleman for high treason, but Hugh de Monthermer bowed his head, saying, "I surrender myself willingly, my lord, and fixing my full reliance on the King's justice, await the event of to-morrow without fear."

He then left the presence under the custody of Mortimer, and was conducted to the chamber which he had occupied since his arrival at Nottingham, and which comprised, as was usually the case with those assigned to noblemen of high rank, a bed-room for himself, and an ante-room, across the entrance of which one or two of his attendants usually slept, barring all dangerous access to their lord during the night.

Having beckoned some of the King's guard as they passed along, Mortimer stationed two soldiers at the door of the ante-room, and took measures for their regular relief on the rounds. He then entered with his prisoner, and finding stout Tom Blawket in the ante-room, he asked whether the young nobleman would choose him as the attendant who was to be permitted to wait upon him, or would send for any other.

"I should have asked for him, my lord, had I not found him here," replied Hugh. "I thank you for your courtesy, however, and trust that the time may come when, having proved my innocence, I may repay it."

"I hope to see you soon at liberty," rejoined Mortimer, with a dark smile; and retiring from the chamber, he ordered another guard to be stationed at the foot of the staircase.

No sooner was he gone, than Hugh called the stout yeoman into the inner room, and bade him shut the door.

"Nay, look not downcast, Blawket," he said, as the man entered with a sad and apprehensive look, "this storm will soon pass away. Indeed, it would have been dissipated already, but that I was embarrassed by a matter which will be joyful tidings to you."

"I know what you would say, my lord," replied the good yeoman, "for, since we have been here, I have heard of the noble Earl. That urchin boy who served you some time at Hereford, sprang up behind me one day when I was crossing the forest, and told me all about it."

"Well, then, Blawket," continued Hugh, "no time is to be lost; get to your horse's back with all speed, and ride along upon the east side of Sherwood, taking the Southwell road till you come to the *Mere mark*--a tall post painted with red stripes--There turn into the wood for some five hundred yards, and sound three mots upon your horn, whoever comes to you, will lead you to my uncle. Tell him I have been watched; that the man who passed while we were speaking together yesterday recognised me; and combining that fact with others, has given a face of truth to an

accusation of treason against me. Show him that I dare not say who it was I met, lest the forest should be searched and his retreat discovered. When twenty-four hours are over, however, I must speak, if I would save my head from the axe, for I see that there is a dark conspiracy against me, and I am without support. Beseech him to put as many miles as may be between himself and Nottingham, ere this hour to-morrow, for the King's wrath burns as fiercely against him as ever. Away, good Blawket--away!--Should any one stop you, and ask you where you are going, say for Master Roger More, a clerk well skilled in the laws, and lose no time."

"I will not spare the spur, my lord," replied Blawket, and withdrew, leaving Hugh de Monthermer in meditations, which were sad and gloomy, notwithstanding all his efforts to convince himself that no real danger hung over him.

CHAPTER XXIX.

The wind was from the south, sighing softly through the trees--the sun had gone down about half an hour--the moon was rising, though not yet visible to the eye, except to the watchers on castle towers, or the lonely shepherd on the mountain. The night was as warm as midsummer, though the year had now waned far; and in the sky there were none but light and fleecy clouds, which scarcely dimmed the far twinkling stars as they shone out in the absence of the two great rulers of the night and day. It was one of those sweet evenings which we would choose to wander through some fair scene with the lady that we love, looking for the moon's rising from behind the old ivy-clad ruin, and re-peopling the shady recesses of wood and dale with the fairy beings of old

superstition, though they have long given place to the harsher realities of a state of society which has become, to use Rosalind's term, "a working-day world indeed."

Such was the night when, under the brown boughs of the wood, with yellow leaves overhead and long fern around, sat a party of some seven or eight stout men, dressed in the green garb which we have already described in another place. Their bows rested against the trees close by, their swords hung in the baldrics by their side, some horses were heard snorting and champing at no great distance, and a large wallet lay in the midst, from which the long-armed dwarf, Tangel, was drawing forth sundry articles of cold provision, together with two capacious leathern bottles and a drinking cup of horn. There were two persons there whom the reader already knows--the bold leader of the forest outlaws, and the old Earl of Monthermer--now, alas! an outlaw likewise. Though his wounds had been severe, and he had suffered much both in body and in mind, the old knight's spirit seemed still unquenched. On the contrary, indeed, with no weighty matters pressing on his mind, with the fate and fortune of others, nay, of his country itself, no longer hanging on his advice, it seemed as if a load had been removed from his bosom; and as he half sat, half lay, upon the turf, he could jest with the men around him more lightly than in his stately hours of power and influence.

"Poor hunting, Robin! poor hunting!" he said. "Now I would not have this day's sport recorded against us, as true foresters, for very shame."

"'Tis no want of craft, my good lord," replied Robin, "'tis the nearness of the court which drives all honest beasts away. We might have had bucks enough, but that they are rank just now."

"Like the age, Robin--like the age!" answered the Earl. "However, we must e'en make the best of our fate, and put in the bag what fortune chooses to send. There are hares enow, and a fine doe, though you were as tender of them as if they had been children."

"I never love to wing an arrow at a doe," said Robin Hood. "I know not why, they always look to me like women, and often do I lie in the spring time and see them trip along with their dainty steps, their graceful heads moving to and fro, and their bright black eyes looking as conscious as a pretty maid's at a May-day festival; and I think there must be some truth in the old story of men's souls sometimes taking possession of a beast's body."

"Not so often, Robin," rejoined the Earl, "as a beast's soul taking possession of a man's body. I could pick you out as goodly a herd from the court of England as ever trooped through the shades of Sherwood, or were driven out by the piping swineherd to eat acorns in the lanes by Southwell."

"Doubtless, doubtless, my lord," replied Robin; "men will make beasts of themselves in all places, while the honester four-legged things of the forest seem as if they wanted to gem up, manward. Why, down by that very place, Southwell, there is a fallow doe who knows me as well as if she were one of my band; she comes when I call her, if she be within hearing, and lets me rub her long hairy ears by the half-hour. Then what long talks will we have together! I ask her all sorts of questions; and she contrives to answer one way or another, till, if I be too saucy with her about her antlered loves, she butts at me with her round hornless head, and stamps her tiny foot upon the ground. You would say 'twas a very woman, if you saw her."

"'Tis a wonder that she has escaped without an arrow in her side," replied the Earl.

"Nay," cried Robin; "there is not a man in Sherwood or twenty miles round, who would pierce a hole in her brown bodice for all that he is worth. Every one knows Robin Hood's doe; and foul befal him that hurts her. But come, Tangel, what hast thou got there? 'Tis so dark, I cannot see."

"A huge hare pie," said Tangel, "and bottles of stuff to baste it with; but the crust's as hard as the sole of a shoe, and unless thine anelace be somewhat sharper than thy wit, thou wilt go without thy supper, and be obliged to take the testament of the Scotch tinker."

"And what is that?" asked Robin.

"Drink for all," replied the dwarf; "but I will light a torch, Robin, lest thou shouldst cut thine invaluable thumb, and spoil thy shooting for the next month."

A torch was soon lighted; and, seated round the great hare pasty, Robin Hood and his friends began their evening meal. But the horn cup had only gone once round when the outlaw held up his hand, crying, "Silence!" and interrupting a burst of merriment which one of Tangel's hard jests upon a forester opposite had just produced. All was silent in a moment amongst the little party; but no other sound reached their ears, and Robin Hood was again resuming the conversation, saying, "I thought I heard a horn," when the notes were repeated, but it was still far in the distance.

"It is Yockley, from the second mere," said the outlaw, starting up. "It must be your nephew, my lord, who sounded first. I expect no one from such a quarter to-night; but I must answer; and Yockley will bring him hither."

Thus saying, he put his horn to his lips and blew a long blast upon it, very different from that which they had just heard, but well understood by all the foresters as indicating where their leader was to be found.

"Is it not dangerous, Robin?" said the Earl. "I expect not my nephew here, and we are but six."

"We could soon call more," replied Robin; "and our horses are near. But if there be any danger in the party, Yockley will not bring them hither. Now, take some more food, my lord, and send round the cup

again. It must be the Lord Hugh, escaped from the revel of the castle, to take a ride in Sherwood by the moon's light."

No more was said in regard to the sounding of the horn; and the merry jest again went on, around the green table where their viands were spread. The torch, stuck in a hole in the ground, shed its light upon the various faces in the circle and upon the sylvan repast; and a song from one of the foresters cheered the minutes, till, at length, again the horn hastened much nearer, and Robin again gave his accustomed reply. In about three minutes more the forms of a man on horseback and another on foot by his side, were seen coming through the trees, while the eyes of the whole party round the torch were turned towards them.

"Why, who is this?" exclaimed the Earl; "my good yeoman, Tom Blawket, as I live! He has found his old lord out, even in Sherwood."

The eyes of Blawket had not been idle as he came up; and though the Earl was no longer habited as the high noble of a splendid and ostentatious age, the faithful servant singled him out instantly. Springing from his horse, he kissed his master's hand with affectionate reverence, while a tear stood in his eye; but he could utter nothing except, "Oh, my lord!"

"Well, Blawket," replied the Earl, laying his hand on the yeoman's shoulder, "I am glad to see thee, my good friend, though thy coming may be somewhat dangerous."

"I come not without cause, my lord," said Blawket, "and sad cause too, and I must give my message hastily, for there is no time to lose. Your nephew, sir, has been arrested on suspicion of treason, being seen conversing with three masked men in the forest. He dared not say that one of them was yourself, my lord, because a price has been set upon your head; and the first word of your being near would send half the nobles of the court hunting you through Sherwood."

"Let them come!" said Robin Hood, calmly; "we would entertain them well."

"He refused to answer their questions," continued Blawket, "and has gained some four and twenty hours--that is, till to-morrow at the hour of two or three, when they will be put to him again, he, in the meantime, remaining a close prisoner. He therefore prays you, my lord, to provide for your own safety with all speed, leaving this part of the forest, and betaking yourself to a distance from Nottingham."

"Where is the Prince?" demanded the old Earl.

"He is gone to Derby, as I hear," replied the yeoman, "to put down some rough-handed clowns amongst the mountains there, who will not believe that the great Earl of Leicester is dead."

"These are bad tidings, indeed," said Robin Hood; "we cannot storm Nottingham Castle, I fear, and set him free."

"Bad tidings, indeed," repeated the Earl; "and I know not well whether to go at once to the King's court and justify poor Hugh, or----"

"Nay, nay, my lord," cried Robin Hood, "that will not do. I have always found it best when one of sound discretion, whom we love, beseeches us for his sake to do this or that, not to aim at more than he requires, thinking that we can better his advice, but simply to perform his bidding if we can. Otherwise, not knowing all the secret causes of his desire, we often break his purpose while we seek to mend it. He asks you to go, my lord; 'twere better to do so far. I will remain: nay, go nearer still to Nottingham, this very night; and the castle walls will be thicker and stronger than they ever have been yet, if I hear not all that takes place within them. Nay, more--should danger threaten the good young lord, we will find means to give him help. Although, as the old song goes, 'The castle walls are strong and high,' yet there are means of leaping over them, if one have but a good will.--Fear not, my lord--fear not! All that

your nephew asks is to be enabled, by your absence in some place of safety, to acknowledge whom it was he met in the forest here, without danger to yourself. Was it not so, Tom?"

"Exactly so," replied the yeoman, "and he seemed no way cast down. But the King's people are eager enough after him, that is clear, for I found that they dogged me nearly to Lambley Haggard, which made me so long, otherwise I should have been down two hours ago, for I was forced to ride on, and then come back again. I found one of them still waiting near the Mere; but, as he was teasing a pretty boy who seemed to have lost his way, I picked a quarrel with the vermin, and so belaboured him that he will dog no honest man again for some weeks to come, even if he can contrive to drag his bones back to Nottingham to-night."

"Well done, yeoman--well done, Tom!" cried several voices; and the old Earl, who had been buried in thought while his servant spoke, now turned to his forest companion, saying, "Send a quick messenger to the Prince, Robin. It is with him that Hugh's safety rests. It seems that I ought to go hence, and therefore I will do so at once; but, Blawket--you speed back to Lord Hugh, and tell him, that if need be, I am willing, at a moment's notice, to surrender myself into the Prince's hand--ay, or the King's, though that, I know, were death--for the few days of my old life are worth nought compared with the long high course before him. Speed you back, Blawket, at once, while I will mount and away! Robin, let me have one of your men with me. Come, Morton of the Moor, you shall show me the way."

A few words more passed between Robin and the Earl, ere the old nobleman departed; but, as soon as he was gone, the bold forester turned to Blawket, who was already on his horse's back, exclaiming, "Stay, Tom, a moment! Who was this boy you spoke of?--Where have you left him?"

"I know not, the boy," answered Blawket, "and I left him with one of your people, upon assurance of safety and of freedom to come and go, for he was weary and seemed terrified."

"He is with Harry of Mansfield," joined in Yockley, who had accompanied the yeoman thither, "and we both promised that we would let him go when he liked, for it was of being kept he seemed most afraid. But he asked for you, Robin, and so Harry is bringing him along down the vert course and by the roe lane."

"We must on, and meet them," said Robin Hood. "Go you back, good Blawket, speedily, and should anything new happen, come again to the second mere. You, Yockley, go on to the lodge as fast as your legs can carry you, and bring up the people there to the Royal-hart Pond. Lead on the horses,--I will afoot."

Thus saying, he walked on, with his arms folded on his broad chest and his eyes bent upon the ground. His countenance was seldom, if ever, gloomy, for serenity was one of its peculiar characteristics. Sometimes it was grave indeed, and very often thoughtful, but the wrinkled frown had no place there, and even when the quick burst of anger crossed it, it showed itself only in the lightning of the eye and the expansion of the nostril. His face was now anxious, however, and as he walked along, his lips, as was very frequent with him, gave unwitting utterance to that which was passing in his heart.

"We must not let him perish," he said. "I doubt this King--he is too weak to be honest. 'Tis strange how near the fool and the rogue are akin. Wisdom and goodness,--ay, wisdom and goodness,--they are brother and sister; the one somewhat gentler than the other, but of the same blood."

The pace of a thoughtful man is generally slow, but it was not so with Robin Hood upon the present occasion; for while he thus meditated, and murmured broken sentences to himself, he strode on at a rapid rate, till,

at the distance of about a mile from the spot where he had been seated with the Earl, the sound of voices speaking met his ear, and pausing, he turned to one of those behind him, saying, "You must ride to Derby, Dickon; seek out the Prince, say you bring him a message from the Lord Hugh de Monthermer, and, when you see him, add that if he would save a friend's life, he must to Nottingham with all speed. Take one of the horses as far as Beeston--it will carry you well so far; but you must use speed. So, knock up the merry miller, and bid him, for love of Robin Hood, to lend you his black mare to Derby. Away, with you, good Dickon, and when in Derby, tell good Margery Green, of the Setting Sun, to send me what tidings she has had out of Cumberland,--Here, bring forward the torch!--Now, boy, what do you want with me?"

These last words were addressed to a slight youth, dressed in a page's habit, but not such as we represent--upon the stage or in pictures--as the garb of a page of the middle ages. The upper garment which he wore was one of the loose cassocks then very generally is use, of a rich purple cloth, descending considerably below the knee, and somewhat longer indeed than the ordinary petticoat of the English peasant girl of the time. From underneath this, appeared a small foot, covered with long-toed riding boots; and a green hood with a trimming of grey squirrel fur, clasped round the neck with a gilt fermail or buckle, was brought far over the forehead, concealing the greater part of the face. Over the right shoulder was slung a belt, holding a long dagger, underneath which appeared a wallet or pouch of velvet trimmed with fur. To judge from his size and general appearance, the boy might be some fourteen years of age, and apparently not of a very strong and hardy make. Ere he answered, he shaded his eyes with his hand, somewhat dazzled it seemed by the light of the torch, and Robin had to ask him again, "What want you with me, my good lad?"

"I would speak with you alone," said the boy--"I would speak with you alone, and immediately; for the matter is of life and death."

Robin Hood took the torch from the man that held it, and bade the rest stand back. Then, fixing his eyes with a calm, searching gaze upon the part of the youth's countenance which was visible under the hood, he waited in silence to hear what the boy had to say. The page hesitated for a moment, and then murmured, "The Lord Hugh de Monthermer----"

"Oh, we know about him!" cried Robin Hood. "Stale news, young gentleman, if that be all!"

The boy, who had seemed at first abashed and uncertain, now lifted his head with an angry toss, as if offended, replying boldly, "You are rash and hasty. Hear before you answer, Sir Forester. The news is not stale, though you think yourself so wise. You know that the Lord Hugh is in prison, for you have had his man with you; but you know not that he is condemned to death, and that his head will be struck off in the castle-yard, to-morrow, at daybreak. Do you know that?"

"No, by the Blessed Virgin!" replied Robin Hood, "I do not know it; and I say that it shall not be, if I have power to help it!"

"Ay, there is the question," cried the boy. "Have you the power?"

"Of that anon," replied Robin Hood; "first show me that the tidings are true."

"There," said the page, "read that, if thou canst read. If not, I will for thee;" and he held out an open letter to the Outlaw, who took it eagerly from his hand, and gazed at it by the light of the torch.

The writing consisted of two parts, traced by different hands, the latter being evidently an answer to the former, scrawled down in haste at the bottom of the paper. The first was to the following effect:--

"To, my noble and well-beloved Lord the Earl of Mortimer, greeting. These from the humblest and most devoted of his servants, Richard de Ashby.

"If the time given, my good lord, till three to-morrow, be permitted to run on, the game will escape us, for I doubt not the Prince is already informed; and be you sure that he will set off with all speed, and if he arrive in time, will save the criminal. I therefore send you up a man who is ready to swear that he heard the criminal say to the monk, as they passed through the gates together, that out of De Montfort's ashes would soon rise up a ph[oe]nix to destroy his enemies. The fellow is well tutored in his tale, so that you shall not catch him tripping, and I do beseech you to make use of him before the King without delay, so that, if possible, there may be an axe between our enemy's head and his body before noon to-morrow. If the forfeited estates be divided between you and my good lord of Pembroke, I would advise the one I love best to choose the northern ones. They are worth five hundred marks a year more than the others."

All this was written in a fine and clerkly hand, while the letters below were rough and dashing, and somewhat difficult to read. The words, however, were as follows:--

"TRUSTY FRIEND,--

"The matter is settled. The King has called together all the Barons on the spot--luckily, Gloucester was away, and Talbot's voice was drowned in the rest. He dies to-morrow at daybreak. I have the warrant under the King's hand. Thanks for the hint. The northern estates are mine, and friends shall not go unrewarded by yours,

"MORTIMER."

"Ha!" said Robin Hood, after he had read the letter and the reply--"ha! this is mighty good. Why, what a nest of scorpions have we here; and this is the court of England! Oh, De Montfort!--noble De Montfort! if thou didst want an advocate to plead thy cause and justify thy holy zeal to crush the venomous reptiles that infest the land, this paper has a tongue that would convince the dead. But we will see. May God so help me, as I am at this execution to-morrow--if we find not other means to stay it! and beware, my Lord of Mortimer, how you come within mark of the English yew--for thy breast must be cased in steel, indeed, if I drown not the peacock's feather in your heart's black blood!--Do you hear them coming from the lodge, Miller?"

"Not yet, Robin," replied the man to whom he spoke. "Tom is upon the hill--he will sound his horn."

"We must give the youth warning what we are about to do," said Robin Hood, running his eye attentively over the form of the page before him--"we must give him warning.--Ha! Richard de Ashby! So--so!--Boy, this is news, indeed, you have brought me. Have you aught else to tell?"

"Not now," answered the boy, "for I must be back to Nottingham with all speed, lest I be missed. To-morrow will do for my other tidings--I cannot think he will be so hasty there."

"Nay--nay, if thou hast aught to tell," exclaimed Robin; "tell it now. One never can say to-morrow's sun will rise. There are precipices at every rood on the highway of human life, over which our best intentions fall, and dash themselves to pieces. Speak out--speak out! it will but take thee a spare minute."

"Well, then," replied the boy, "doubtless you love not much the Earl of Ashby?"

"Not much," answered Robin Hood, bluffly, "but his son much less."

"It matters not," rejoined the page; "but I tell you the Earl's life is in danger from secret foes. There is a man--a base, bad man--the betrayer of all that trust in him----" The boy paused, and seemed to gasp for breath. "He seeks the Earl's death; ay, and that of his son also," he continued, "in order that--that--that he may wed the heiress of the house, and himself become its head. If I did know a friend of the Earl, I would beseech him earnestly to watch the old man well; ay, to watch his food--to watch his steps--to have his wine tried before he drinks it--never to let him forth alone, if it be but to taste the morning air upon a sunny bank.--But you are his enemies."

"Yet we will act as friends," said Robin Hood. "He shall have warning, ay, and assistance at hand, in case of need.--And now," he added, in a low and soft tone, advancing a step, and taking the page's hand--"and now what is to become of thee, poor thing?--Dost thou think I do not know thee, Kate?"

She shook terribly, and cast down her eyes, without reply.

"'Tis well," he continued, finding that she did not answer. "But listen to me, Kate Greenly--listen to one that speaks to thee kindly. Thou hast done a good act this night; let it be balm to thy heart; nay, let it be more--let it be but as seed that thou hast sown, to bring forth still more plentiful fruit hereafter. Cast off the villain, whom thy better nature hates; leave him to the deeds which will, ere long, bring down destruction on his head; let him receive the reward of his own wickedness, and then----"

"Die!" said Kate Greenly--"there is nothing else left for me to do. Nay, speak not of my father--utter not his name, for it is worse than fire even to hear it mentioned. Talk not to me of the cloister, where I might linger out long days of miserable memory. My life is near its close--my heart is broken--by my own act, I know; but all the more dreadful is the wound. There is no balm that can heal this--there is no time that can soothe it. He whom I trusted is a villain. Me he might have injured,

betrayed, cast off, trampled upon. I might have wept, or raved, and still lived on; but to find him a traitor--a murderer--a fiend--to be forced, as if for my punishment on earth, to betray him who has betrayed me, and to blast his schemes and his fame who has blasted my name and my happiness--this is the cup of death, I tell thee, and a bitter death it is!--But I must go back! Thy people have promised that they will not stay me, and I must go back. Whatever tidings I can give, you shall have; for I have sworn to unravel the dark clue--to frustrate the wicked scheme, and to bring down upon his head the punishment he merits. God will give me strength to tread this path where every step is agony; and, oh! when it is done, may he receive the broken heart and penitent spirit, for the sake of Him who died to save us!"

"Amen!" said Robin Hood. "Yet stay a moment, thou must have some one to guide thee back; thou art nearer the town than thou thinkest for.--I will speak a word with thee by the way."

CHAPTER XXX.

It was an hour past midnight--the sentries had just been relieved upon the castle wall--and Hugh de Monthermer sat by the window, looking out into the depth of sight, and gazing at the far twinkling of the stars. The mind was occupied in the same manner as the body, for it was looking forth into the dark night of death, and marking the small bright shining lights from heaven, that tell of other worlds beyond.

His fate had been announced to him--that he had been judged and condemned without his presence--and that the first ray of the morning sun was to witness his death. He had solemnly appealed against the sentence, telling Lord Pembroke, who had brought the announcement thereof, that such a deed was mere murder. Neither had he left anything undone that behoved him to do, to check the base purposes of his enemies, by apprehensions of after retribution.

But they scoffed at his threats, and heeded not his remonstrances, justifying the illegal course they pursued by declaring that he had been taken in the act of treason. All communication was denied him with the world without, and even the materials for writing were refused--perhaps to guard against the chance of his doom being made known to others who might interfere to stay the execution, or, perhaps, to prevent him from recording for after times the iniquity that was about to be committed. A priest eras promised him in the morning; but in the meanwhile he remained in solitude. He heard his good yeoman, Blawket, driven back from the door by the guards; and, with nought but his own thoughts to comfort and console him, he sat preparing himself for the grave as best he might.

How often had he met the abhorred enemy, Death, in the battle-field? How often he staked life's bright jewel on the chances of an hour? How often had fate seemed near at hand in the burning march through the barren sands of the east, and in the deadly pestilence? But in all these shapes had the grim inevitable Lord of the grave seemed less terrible than when waiting through the livelong night, with the certainty of being murdered, unresisting, on the morning.

Active exertion, gallant daring, the exercise of the high powers of the soul, set at nought the idea of annihilation; and when, with eager fire, man puts forth all his faculties in the moment of danger, their very possession tells him that he is immortal, and makes the open gate of the tomb appear but the portal of a better world. It is the cold, calm, slow approach of the dark hour of passage, when the mind has nought to

work upon but that one idea, which smears the dart with all the venom that it is capable of bearing. Then rise up all those dark doubts and apprehensions with which the evil spirit besieges the small garrison of faith. Then come the sweet and lingering affections of the world--the loves, the hopes, the wishes, the prospects, the enjoyments. Then speak the memories of dear things past, never to be again--of voices heard for the last time--of looks to be seen no more. Oh! it is a terrible and an awful thing, even for the stoutest heart and best prepared spirit, to wait in silence and in solitude for the approach of the King of Terrors!

The young knight strove vigorously to repel all weakness; but he could not shut out regret. Twelve hours had scarcely passed, since, in the pride of success and the vanity of hope, he had clasped her he loved in his arms, and fancied that fate itself could scarcely sever them--and now he was to lose her for ever. Would she forget him when he was gone? Would she give her hand to another? Would the gay wedding train pass by, and the minstrel's song sound loud, and the laugh, and the smile, and the jest go round, and all be joyful in the halls of Lindwell, and he lay mouldering in the cold earth hard by? But love, and trust, and confidence said, No; and, though it might be selfish, there was a balm in the belief that Lucy would mourn for him when he was gone--ay, that she had promised to love him and be his even beyond the grave.

Of such things were his thoughts, as he gazed forth on that solemn night; but suddenly something, he knew not what, called his attention from himself; and he looked down from the window of his chamber upon the top of the wall below. The distance was some thirty feet, the night was dark, for the moon had gone early down, but, even in the dim obscurity, he thought he saw something like a man's head appear above the battlement.

In a moment after, with a bound as if it had been thrown over by an engine, a human body sprang upon the top of the wall, ran forward to the tower in which he was confined, and struck the stonework with its arm. The next instant, without any apparent footing, he could perceive

one leg stretched upwards, while the hand seemed to have obtained a grasp of the wall itself, and then the rest of the body ascended to the height of about four feet from the ground, sticking fast, like a squirrel swarming up a large beech tree. A long thin arm was then extended, far overhead, to a deep window, just beneath that at which the young knight stood, and by it the whole body was drawn up into the aperture of the wall, while a sentinel passed by with slow and measured steps. As soon as the soldier was gone, the arm was again stretched forth in the direction of the casement from which Hugh was gazing down, and the hand struck once or twice against the wall, in different places, making a slight grating sound, as if it were armed with some metal instrument. At length it remained fixed, and then the head and shoulders were protruded from the opening of the window below, the feet resting upon the stonework.

Then came one of those extraordinary efforts of agility and pliability of limb which Hugh had never witnessed but in one being on the earth. By that single hold which the fingers seemed to have of the wall, the body was again swung up till the knee and the hand met, and the left arm was stretched out towards the sill of the casement above.

Although the figure appeared to be humpbacked and, consequently, in that respect unlike the dwarf, Tangel, Hugh de Monthermer could not doubt that it was he, and, reaching down as far as possible, he whispered, "Take my hand, Tangel!"

In an instant the long, thin, monkey-like fingers of the dwarf clasped round his, as if they had been an iron vice, and with a bound that nearly threw the stout young soldier off his balance, Tangel sprang through the window into the room.

"Ha, ha!" said he, in a low tone, "who can keep out Tangel?"

"No one, it seems, my good boy," answered Hugh, "but what come you here for? I fear I cannot descend as you have mounted."

"Here, help me off with my burden," rejoined the boy, "and thou wilt soon see what I come for. But we must whisper like mice, for tyrants have sharper ears than hares, and keener eyes than cats. Here's a priest's gown and a hood for thee, and a chorister's cope for Tangel. Thou art just the height of the king's confessor, and I shalt pass for his pouncet-bearer. Here's a ladder, too, not much thicker than a spider's web, but strong enough to bear up the fat friar of Barnesdale."

The feelings of Hugh de Monthermer, at that moment, must be conceived by the reader, for I will not attempt to describe them. Life, liberty, hope, were before him; and the transition was as great from despair to joy as it had lately been from happiness to grief. He caught the poor dwarf in his arms, saying, "If I live, boy, I will reward thee. If I die, thy heart must do it."

"No thanks to me," replied Tangel, in a somewhat trembling voice, "no thanks to me, good knight. It is all Robin's doing, though I was glad enough to have finger in the pie, and he, great cart horse, could no more climb up that wall than he could leap over Lincoln Church. But, come, come, fix these hooks to the window--get the gown over thee, and then let us look out for the sentinel--he will pass again before we have all ready."

"But there are sentries in the outer court, too," said Hugh de Monthermer. "How shall we manage, if we meet with any of them?"

"Give them the word," said Tangel. "I waited, clinging as close to the wall as ivy to an old tower, till I heard the round pass, and the word given. It was 'The three leopards.' But there he goes now--let us away--quick!--he will soon be back again!"

Letting the ladder, made of silken rope, gently down from the window, Hugh bade the dwarf go first, but Tangel replied, "No, no, I will come after, and bring the ladder with me. I have got my own staircase on

the four daggers that I fixed into the crevices. Go down, holy father, go down, and if that book be a breviary take it with you."

"It may serve as such," said Hugh; "but, ere I go, let me leave them a message;" and, taking a piece of half-charred wood from the fire, he wrote a few words with it upon the wall. Then approaching the window he issued forth, and descended easily and rapidly to the battlements.

The dwarf seemed to have some difficulty in unfastening the hooks of the ladder, however, for he did not follow so quickly as Hugh expected; and, whether the sentinel had turned before he got fully to the end of his beat, or his pace was more rapid than before, I know not, but, ere the boy began to descend, the soldier's steps were heard coming round from the other angle of the wall. Hugh gave a quick glance up to the window in the tower, and saw that the dwarf was aware of the sentry's approach, and also that the ladder hung so close to the building as not to be perceptible without near examination. His mind was made up in an instant; and, folding his arms upon his chest, he drew the hood farther over his face, and walked on to meet the sentinel, with a slow pace, and his eyes bent upon the ground.

The moment the soldier turned the angle, and saw him, he exclaimed, "Who goes there? Stand! Give the word!"

"The three leopards," replied Hugh, in a calm tone.

"Pass," cried the sentinel. "Your blessing, holy father! This is a dark night."

"Dominus vobiscum," replied Hugh; "it is dark, indeed, my son. But no nights are dark to the eye of God;" and turning with the sentinel on his round, he added, in a loud tone, as they passed immediately under the window, "You did not see my boy upon your round, did you! He was to come hither with the books; but, marry, he is a truant knave, and is doubtless loitering with the pages in the King's ante-room."

"I saw him not, holy father," said the soldier. "Is the King still up?"

"Ay, is he," answered Hugh, "and will be for this hour to come." And on he walked by the side of the man till they were out of sight of the window.

"The boy is marvellous long in coming," observed the pretended priest.

"Shall we turn back and see, good father?" asked the soldier.

"Oh, no!" replied Hugh; "this is the way he should come; for he has to pass round by the court, you know; unless, indeed, he goes up the steps at the other side." Just as he spoke, the sound of quick feet following was heard, and the sentry turned sharply once more, exclaiming, "Who goes there?"

"The three leopards," said a childish voice, very unlike that of Tangel, but Tangel it proved to be, dressed in his white cope and hood, and bearing a small bundle beneath his arm.

"Thou hast been playing truant," cried the knight, "and shalt do penance for this."

But he did not venture to carry far his pretended reprimand, lest some mistake between him and Tangel might discover the deceit; and walking on by the side of the sentinel to the top of the flight of steps which led down into the great court close by another of the towers; he there wished him good night, giving him a blessing in a solemn tone.

The guard at the bottom of the stone stairs heard the conversation between his comrade and the seeming priest above, and without even asking the word walked on beside the young knight and the dwarf, and passed them to the sentry at the gate.

The large wooden door under the archway was ajar, while several of the soldiery were loitering without, telling rude tales of love to some of the fair girls of Nottingham, who had ventured upon the drawbridge, even at that late hour, to lose their time and reputation (if they had any) with the men-at-arms; for human nature and its follies were the same, or very nearly the same then as now. At the end of the drawbridge, however, was a sentinel with his partizan in his hand, taking sufficient part in the merriment of the others, notwithstanding his being on duty, to make him start forward in alarm at the sound of a step, and show his alertness by lowering his weapon and fiercely demanding the word. Hugh gave it at once; adding, in a quiet tone.

"Ought you not to be more upon your guard, my son, against those who come in than those who go out?"

"Pass on, and mind your own business, Sir Priest!" replied the sentry, who was not a very reverent son of the church. "These knaves in their black gowns," he murmured, "would have no one speak to a pretty lass but themselves."

Hugh had continued to advance, and he certainly did not now pause to discuss the question of duty with the soldier, but hastened into the town through a great part of which it was absolutely necessary to pass, and then through the dark streets of Nottingham, descending the hill rapidly, and breathing lighter at every step.

"Hark!" he said at length, speaking to the boy in a low tone. "Do you not hear people following!"

"It is likely," replied the dwarf; "I am not alone in Nottingham. We may have some difficulty at the gates, however; for the warder at the tower is as surly as a bear, and though we all know him well, yet it is a robe of cendal to a kersey jerkin he refuses to get up and turn the key."

In another minute the question was put to the proof the boy running forward to the town gate, and knocking at the low door under the arch. At first there was no answer whatsoever, and the dwarf, after knocking again, shouted loudly. "Ho, Matthew Pole! Matthew Pole! open the door for a reverend father, who is going forth to shrive a sick man."

"To shrive a harlot, or a barrel of sack!" grumbled an angry voice from within. "I will get up for none of ye; and if I did, I could not open the gate wide enough at this hour of the night for the fat friar of Barnesdale to roll his belly out."

"'Tis neither he of Barnesdale nor Tuck either," cried the boy, "but a holy priest come from the castle."

"Then he had better go back whence he came," replied the warder. "Get you gone, or I will throw that over thee which will soil thy garments for many a day. Get thee gone, I say, and let me sleep, till these foul revelling lords come down from the castle, who go out every night to lie at Lamley."

A noise of prancing horses, and of eager voices, was heard the moment after coming rapidly down the hill; and Hugh de Monthermer, putting his hand under his black robe, seized the hilt of the anelace, or sharp knife, which had been accidentally left with him when his sword was taken away.

"I will sell my life dearly," he said, speaking to the dwarf.

"Stand in the dark," whispered Tangel, "and they will not see you;--these are the Lords who sleep out of the town."

Hugh de Monthermer had scarcely time to draw back when a troop of horsemen, who had in fact left the castle before him, came down to the gate having followed the highway, while he had taken a shorter cut by some of the many flights of steps of which the good town of Nottingham was full.

"What ho!" cried a voice, which the young lord recognised right well. "Open the gate. Are you the warder's boy?"

"No, please you, noble lord," replied Tangel. "And I cannot make old surly Matthew Pole draw a bolt or turn a key, although he knows we are in haste."

"What ho! open the gate," repeated the voice in a loud tone. "How know you that I am a noble lord, my man?"

"Because you sit your horse like the Earl of Mortimer," answered the boy.

"You may say so, indeed," said the other, laughing. "But who is that under the arch?"

"That is my uncle," replied Tangel, "the good priest of Pierrepont. He is going to shrive the man that fell over the rock, as your lordship knows, just at sun-down."

"I know nothing about him," exclaimed Mortimer; "but I do know, that if this warder come not forth, his thrift shall be a short one. Go in, Jenkin, and slit me his ears with thy knife till they be the shape of a cur's,--Ha! here he comes at length. How now, warder! How dare you keep me waiting here? By the Lord, I am minded to hang thee over the gate."

The burly old man grumbled forth something about his lanthorn having gone out; and then added, in a louder tone, "I did not expect you, my lord, so soon, to-night. You are wont to be an hour later."

"Ay, but we have some sharp business at daybreak to-morrow," cried Mortimer; "so we must be a-bed by times."

Slowly, and as if unwillingly, the warder drew down the large oak bar, saying, "You must give the word, my lord."

"The three leopards," replied Mortimer. "Come, quick, open the gate, or, by my halidome, it shall be worse for you."

With provoking slowness, however, the old man undid bolt after bolt, and then threw wide the heavy wooden valves; and, without further question, the train of Mortimer rode out, his very robes brushing against Hugh de Monthermer as he passed. The young knight and the boy followed slowly; and before the gates could be closed again, coming rapidly from the neighbouring streets, several other men on foot issued forth in silence, without giving any word to the warder.

"Ah, you thieves!" said good Matthew Pole to the last of them, "if I chose to shut you in, there would be fine hanging to-morrow."

"No, no," replied the man, "there would be one hung to-night, good Matthew, and he would serve for all. You don't think we let the hanging begin without having the first hand in it?"

A straggling house or two on the outside of the gate were passed in a few minutes; a lane amongst trees lay to the right and left, and a little stile presented itself in the hedge, formed of two broad stones laid perpendicularly, and two horizontal ones for steps. Over these the boy sprang at a leap before Hugh de Monthermer, who followed quickly, though somewhat more deliberately.

The moment he was past, a hand seized his arm, and a voice cried, "Free, free, may good lord! By my fay, we shall have all the honest part of the Court under the green boughs of Sherwood ere long. Taking the king's venison will become the only lawful resource of honest men; for if they don't strike at his deer, he will strike at their heads."

"Ah! Robin, is that you?" said Hugh. "This is all thy doing, I know; and I owe thee life."

"Faith, not mine," replied Robin Hood, "'tis the boy's--'tis the boy's! My best contrivance was to get into the castle court to-morrow, by one device or another; secure the gate, send an arrow into Mortimer's heart, and another into the headsman's eye; make a general fight of it, while you were set free, and then run away as best we could. 'Twas a bad scheme; but yet at that early hour we could have carried it through, while one half the world was asleep, and the other unarmed. But Tangel declared that he could run up the wall like a cat, so we let him try, taking care to have men and ladders ready to bring him off safe if he were caught. So 'tis his doing, my lord; for you contrived to get the elf's love while he was with you."

"And he has mine for ever," answered Hugh. "But alas! my love can be of little benefit to any one now."

"Nay, nay, never think so," replied the Outlaw; "as much benefit as ever, my good lord. Cast off your courtly garments, take to the forest-green, with your own strong right hand defend yourself and your friends, set courts and kings at nought and defiance, and you will never want the means of doing a kind act to those who serve you. I ought not, perhaps, to boast, but Robin Hood, the king of Sherwood, has not less power within his own domain than the Third Harry on the throne of England--but, by my faith, I hoped the blessed Virgin has holpen Scathelock and the Miller with their band to get out of the gates, for they are long a coming, and there will be fine hunting in every hole of Nottingham to-morrow morning--I came over the wall with Hardy and Pell."

"They are safe enough--they are safe enough, reckless Robin," cried Tangel, "I heard the Miller's long tongue, bandying words with surly old Matthew Pole, as if ever one bell stopped another. But hark! there are their steps, and we had better get on, for I have a call to sleep just now."

"Well, thou shalt sleep as long as thou wilt to-morrow," said Robin, "for thy good service to-night; but by your leave, my lord, you and I must ride far, for it were as well to leave no trace of you in the neighbourhood

of Nottingham. Here are strong horses nigh at hand, and if you follow my counsel, you will be five-and-twenty miles from the place where they expect to find you by daybreak. It will be better for us all to disperse, and to quit this part of the county; my men have their orders, and I am ready."

The counsel was one that Hugh de Monthermer was very willing to follow, and ere many minutes more had passed, he and Robin Hood were riding through the dark shady roads of Sherwood, as fast as the obscurity of the night would permit.

CHAPTER XXXI.

It was in the small wooden house in the lower part of the town, to which we have seen Sir William Geary lead his worthy companion Guy de Margan, that unhappy Kate Greenly sat in the recess of a window which looked over the meadows, and through which a faint gleam of the autumnal sun was streaming in upon her. She was as beautiful as ever, perhaps more so, for her face was paler and more refined, and though she had lost the glow of rustic health, her countenance had gained a peculiar depth of expression which was fine, though sad to see.

Her eyes were fixed intently upon those autumnal fields, with a straining gaze, and a knitted brow; but it was not of them she thought--no, nor of any of the many things which they might recal to her mind. It was not of the happy days of innocence; it was not of the companions of her childhood; it was not of the sports of her youth; it was not of her father's house; it was not of the honest lover whose pure affection she

had despised, whose generous heart she had well-nigh broken. No, no, it was of none of these things! It was of him who had wronged and betrayed her, it was of him who had trampled and despised, it was of him whom she now hated with a fierce and angry hate--ay, hated and feared, and yet loved--strange as it may seem to say so,--of him whom she had resolved to punish and destroy, and for whom she yet felt a yearning tenderness which made every act she did against him seem like plunging a knife into her own heart.

Oh! had Richard de Ashby then, even then, suffered his hard and cruel spirit to be softened towards the girl whom he had wronged, if he had soothed and tranquillized, and calmed her, if he had used but one tender word, one of all the arts which he had employed to seduce her, Kate Greenly would have poured forth her blood to serve him, and would have died ere she had followed out the stern course which she purposed to pursue. But he was all selfishness, and that selfishness was his destruction.

Hark, it is his step upon the stairs! But she no longer flies to meet him with the look of love and total devotion which marked her greeting in former days. The glance of fear and doubt crosses her countenance; she dare not let him see that she has been thoughtful; she snatches up the distaff and the wheel; she bends her head over the thread, and with a sickening heart she hears the coming of the foot, the tread of which was once music to her ear.

He entered the room, with a red spot upon his brow, with his teeth hard set, with his lip drawn down. There was excited and angry passion in every line of his face, there was a fierceness in his very step which made her grieve she had not avoided him. It was too late, however; for though he scarcely seemed to see her, she could not quit the room without passing by him. He advanced as if coming direct towards her, but ere he had much passed the middle of the chamber, he stopped and stamped his foot, exclaiming--"Curses upon it!" Then turning to the Unhappy girl, he cried--"Get thee to thy chamber! What dost thou idling

here, minion? Prepare in a few days to go back to thy father--or, if thou likest it better," he added, with a contemptuous smile,--"to thy franklin lover; he may have thee cheaper now, and find thee a rare leman."

Kate stood and gazed at him for a moment; but for once passion did not master her, and she answered, well knowing that whatever seemed her wish would be rejected--"I am ready to go back to my father. I have made up my mind to it,--Thou treatest me ill, Richard de Ashby, I will live with thee no longer. I will go at once."

"No, by the Lord, thou shalt not!" he cried, resolved not to lose the object of his tyranny. "Get thee to thy chamber, I say; I will send thee back when I think fit--away! I expect others here!" And Kate Greenly, without reply, moved towards the door.

As she passed, he felt a strong desire to strike her, for the angry passion that was in his heart at that moment, called loudly for some object on which to vent itself. She spoke not, however; she did not even look at him; so there was no pretext; and biting his lip and knitting his brow, he remained gazing at her as she moved along, with a vague impression of her beauty and grace sinking into his dark mind, and mingling one foul passion with another.

When she was gone and the door was closed, Richard de Ashby clasped his hands together, and walked up and down the room, murmuring, "That idiot Mortimer!--When he had him in his hand--to leave him in his chamber which any child could scale!--Out upon the fool! With dungeons as deep as a well close by!--But he cares nought, so that he get the land. How is this step to be overleaped? Ha! here they come!"

In a moment or two after, the door of the room again opened, and four men came in; two dressed as noblemen of the Court, and two as inferior persons. Those, however, whose apparel taught one to expect that high and courteous demeanour for which the Norman nobleman

was remarkable, when not moved by the coarse passions to which the habits of the time gave full sway, were far from possessing anything like easy grace, or manly dignity. There was a saucy swaggering air, indeed, an affected indifference, mingled with a quick and anxious turn of the eye, a restless furtive glance, which bespoke the low bred and licentious man of crime and debauchery, uncertain of his position, doubtful of his safety, and though bold and fearless in moments of personal danger, yet ever watchful against the individual enmity or public vengeance which the acts of his life had well deserved.

"Well, Dickon," cried the first who entered, "we have thought of the matter well.--But what makes thee look so dull? Has the Prior of St. Peter's made love to thy paramour? Or the king won thy money at cross and pile, or----"

"Pshaw! no nonsense, Ellerby," exclaimed Richard de Ashby; "I am in a mood that will bear no jesting. What is the matter with me? By my faith, not a little matter. Here, my bitterest enemy--you know Hugh of Monthermer.--He was in Mortimer's hands, doomed to death, his head was to be struck off this morning at daybreak. Mortimer and Pembroke were to divide his lands; and I and Guy de Margan to have revenge for our share----"

"I would have had a slice of the lands too," interrupted Ellerby, "or a purse or two of the gold, had I been in your place.--Well?"

"Well! Ill I say," replied Richard de Ashby. "What would you? the fool Mortimer, instead of plunging him into a dungeon where no escape was possible, leaves him in his chamber, thinking he cannot get out, because the window is some twenty or thirty feet from the top of the wall, with a sentry pacing underneath. Of course the man who knows his life is gone if he stays, may well risk it to fly, and when the door is opened this morning, the prisoner is gone; while on the wall of the room, written with charcoal, one reads--'My Lord the Prince,--Taking advantage of the permission you gave, in case the base falsehood of my

enemies should prevail against me, and having been condemned to death unheard, ere you could return to defend me, I have escaped from this chamber, but am ever ready to prove my innocence in a lawful manner, either by trial in court, or by wager of battle against any of my accusers. Let any one efface this ere the Prince sees it, if he dare.'--With this brag he ended; and now Guy de Margan raves--but Mortimer and Pembroke laugh, believing that they shall still share the lands! I threw some salt into their mead, however, telling them that as they had left him with his head on, he had a tongue in it that would soon clear him at the Prince's return, and as he had saved his life would save his lands, also.--Is it not enough to drive one mad, to see such fools mar such well-laid schemes?"

"No, no," replied the man who had followed Ellerby, "nothing should drive one a whit madder than the drone of a bagpipe drives a turnspit dog.--Give a howl and have done with it, Sir Richard."

"I will tell you what, Dighton," said Richard de Ashby; "you men wear away all your feelings as the edge of a knife on a grindstone----"

"That sharpens," interrupted Dighton.

"Ay, if held the right way," replied Richard, "but you have never known hate such as I feel."

"Perhaps not," answered Dighton, with a look of indifference, "for I always put a friend out of the way before I hate him heartily.--It is better never to let things get to a head. If on the first quarrel which you have with a man, you send him travelling upon the long road which has neither turning nor returning, you are sure never to have a difference with him again, and I have found that the best plan."

"But suppose you cannot?" asked Richard de Ashby. "You may be weaker less skilful, may not have opportunity--suppose you cannot, I say?"

"Why then employ a friend who can!" replied the bravo. "There are numbers of excellent good gentlemen who are always ready, upon certain considerations, to take up any man's quarrel; and it is but from the folly of others who choose to deal with such things themselves, that they have not full employment. Here is Ellerby tolerably good, both at lance and broadsword; and I," he continued, looking down with a self-sufficient air at the swelling muscles of his leg and thigh--"and I do not often fail to remove an unpleasant companion from the way of a friend. Then if secrecy be wanting, we are as wise as we are strong--are we not, Ellerby?"

"To be sure," answered Ellerby, in the same swaggering manner, "we are perfect in everything, and fit for everything--as great statesmen as De Montfort, as great soldiers as Prince Edward, as great generals as Gloucester, as great friends as Damon and Pythias."

"And as great rogues," added Richard de Ashby, who was not to be taken in by swagger--"and as great rogues, Ellerby, as--But no, I will not insult you by a comparison. You are incomparable in that respect at least, or only to be compared to each other."

"Very complimentary, indeed," said Ellerby, "especially when we come here to do you a favour."

"Not without your reward present and future," replied Richard de Ashby; "You come not to serve me without serving yourselves too."

"Well, well," cried Dighton, who carried the daring of his villany to a somewhat impudent excess--"we must not fall out, lest certain other people should come by their own. There's an old proverb against it"--for the proverb was old even in his day. "But to overlook your matter of spleen, dearly beloved Richard, and forgetting this Monthermer affair, let us take the affair up where Ellerby was beginning. We have thought well of the business you have in hand, and judge it very feasible indeed. We are willing to undertake it. If we can get the old man once to come

out of sight of his people alone, we will ensure that he shall never walk back into Lindwell gates on his own feet. However, there is a thing or two to be said upon other affairs;--but speak you, Ellerby--speak! You are an orator. I, a mere man of action."

"Well, what is the matter?" asked Richard de Ashby; "If you can do the deed, the sooner it is done the better."

"True," said Ellerby, "but there is something more, my beloved friend. The doing the deed may be easier than getting the reward. When this old man is gone, there still stands between you and the fair lands of Ashby a stout young bull-headed lord, called Alured, who having ample fortune and fewer vices, is likely to outlive you by half a century, and bequeath the world a thriving race of younkers to succeed to his honours and his lands."

"Leave him to me," replied Richard; "his bull-head, as you call it, will soon be run against some wall that will break it, as I shall arrange the matter."

"But even if such be the case," rejoined Ellerby, "how can we be sure that Richard Earl of Ashby will not turn up his nose at us, his poor friends--as is much the mode with men in high station--refuse us all reward but that small sum in gold which he now gives, and dare us to do our worst, as we cannot condemn him without condemning ourselves likewise? We must have it under your hand, good Richard, that you have prompted us to this deed, and promise us the two thousand pounds of silver as our reward."

Richard de Ashby looked at him with a sneering smiles though his heart was full of wrath, and he answered--

"You must think me some boy, raw from the colleges, and ready to play against you with piped dice. No, no, Dighton! Ellerby, you are mistaken! Being all of us of that kind and character of man who does not trust his neighbour, we must have mutual sureties, that is clear. Now

hear me:--I will make over to you by bond, this day, my castle in Hereford, with all the land thereunto appertaining.--You know it well.--In the bond there shall be a clause of redemption; so that if I pay you two thousand pounds of silver before this day two years, the castle shall be mine again. Such is what I propose. But, in the meantime, you shall give me a covenant, signed with your hand, to do the deed that we have agreed upon. Then shall we all be in the power of each other."

"And pray what are we to have?" asked one of the two inferior men, who had followed the others into the room, and who seemed to have been almost forgotten by the rest.

"What you were promised," replied Richard de Ashby; "each of you fifty French crowns of gold this night, when the deed is done!"

"Ay," cried the spokesman; "but we must have a part of that two thousand pounds of silver."

But Dighton took him by the breast, in a joking manner, saying, "Hold thy tongue, parson! I will settle with thee about that. If thou art not hanged before the money is paid, we will share as officer and soldier. You and Dicky Keen shall have a fourth part between you, and we two the rest."

This promise appeared to satisfy perfectly his worthy coadjutor, who seemed to rely upon the old proverb, that "there is honour amongst thieves," for the performance of the engagement. Such, however, was not the base with Richard de Ashby and the two superior cutthroats, who proceeded to draw up the two documents agreed upon for their mutual security.

The bond of Richard de Ashby was soon prepared, and the only difficulty that presented itself regarded the written promise he had exacted from his two friends; for Dighton boldly avowed that he could not write any word but his own name, and Ellerby was very diffident of his own capacity, though either would have done mortal combat with

any man who denied that they were gentlemen by birth and education. Richard de Ashby, for his part, positively declined to indite the document himself, even upon the promise of their signature; and at length Ellerby, after much prompting and assistance, perpetrated the act with various curious processes of spelling and arrangement.

"And now," said Richard de Ashby, when this was accomplished, "all that remains is to lure the old man from the castle, which we had better set about at once; for if Alured were to return, our plan were marred."

"But upon what pretence," asked Dighton, "will you get him to come forth?"

"I have one ready," answered Richard de Ashby; "one that will serve my purpose in other respects, too. But who we shall get, to bear the letter, is the question."

"Why not the woman you have with you?" said Ellerby. "We could dress her up as a footboy."

"No," replied Richard de Ashby, thoughtfully, "no!--I did buy her a page's dress to employ her in any little things that might require skill and concealment, for she is apt and shrewd enough; but in this matter I dare not trust her. When the old man and the note were found she would tell all.--She needs some further training yet, and she shall have it; but at present we must deal by other hands.--You must get some rude peasant boy as you go along, and only one of you must show himself even to him. But I will write the note and come along with you myself. There is no time to spare."

Richard de Ashby then--who was, as we have hinted, a skilful scribe--sat down and composed the fatal letter to his kinsman which was to draw him from his home and give him to the hands of the murderers: and, knowing well the Earl's character, he took care so to frame the epistle as to insure its full effect. The handwriting, too, he disguised as

much as might be; though never having seen that of the person whose name he assumed, he endeavoured to make it as much like the hand of a clerk or copyist as possible. The note was to the following effect:--

"To the most noble and valiant Lord the Earl of Ashby,
greeting.

"Dear and well-beloved Lord,

"A false, cruel, and horrible accusation having been brought against me, and I having been doomed to death unheard by the ears of justice and clemency, have been compelled to seek my own safety by flight from the castle of Nottingham, leaving my fair fame and character undefended. Now I do adjure you, as one who has ever been held the mirror of chivalry, and the honour of arms and nobility, to meet me this day at the hour of three, by what is called the Bull's Hawthorn; which you, my lord, know well, and which is but one poor mile from your manor of Lindwell. I will there give to you, my lord, the most undoubted proofs of my perfect innocence, beseeching you to become my advocate before the King and the Prince, and to defend me as none but one so noble will venture to do. Lest you should think that I seek to entangle you more on my behalf, I hereby give you back all promises made to me regarding the Lady Lucy, your daughter, and declare them null and void, unless at some future time you shall think fit to confirm them. It is needful, as I need not say, that you should come totally alone, for even the chattering of a page might do me to death.

"Hugh de Monthermer."

Richard de Ashby mentioned to none of his companions what the letter contained; but folding it, he tied it with a piece of yellow silk and sealed it, stamping it with the haft of Ellerby's dagger.

"Now," he cried--"now all is ready; let us be gone.--Are your horses below?"

"They are at the back of the house," said Dighton.

"Quick, then, to the saddle!" cried their companion. "I will get mine, and join you in a minute, to ride with you some way along the road; for I must have speedy tidings when the deed is done."

"By my faith," said Ellerby, walking towards the door, "you are growing a man of action, Richard!--But keep us not waiting."

"Not longer than to come round," replied Richard de Ashby, descending the stairs with them; and in a minute after, the heavy door of the house banged to behind the party of assassins.

Scarcely were they gone, when poor Kate Greenly ran into the room, and snatched up a large brown wimple which lay in the window, casting it over her head as if to go forth. Her eyes were wild and eager, her face pale, her lips bloodless, and her whole frame trembling. She seemed confused, too, as well as agitated, and muttered to herself, "Oh, horrible! Where can I find help?--What can I do?--I will seek these men; but it will be too late if I go afoot. I will take the page's dress again, and hire a horse."

She paused, and thought for an instant, adding, "But the mere is far from Lindwell,--'tis the other way. It will be too late! it will be too late!"

Her eyes fixed vacantly on the window, and a moment after she uttered a slight scream, for she saw a head gazing at her through the small panes. Shaken and horrified, the least thing alarmed her, so that

she caught at the back of a tall chair for support, keeping her eyes fixed, with a look of terror, upon the face before her, and asking herself whether it was real, or some frightful vision of her own imagination.

"It is the boy!" she cried, at length, "it is the dwarf boy I saw with them in the wood!" and, running forward with an unsteady step, she undid the great bolt of the casement.

Tangel instantly forced himself through, and sprang in, exclaiming, "Ha! ha! I watched them all out, and then climbed to tell you----"

But, before he could end his sentence, Kate Greenly sank fainting upon the floor beside him.

CHAPTER XXXII.

There was a low deserted house, standing far back from the road, in a piece of common ground skirting the forest between Lindwell and Nottingham. There were some trees before it, and some bushes, which screened all but the thatched roof from observation as the traveller passed along. There was a dull pond, too, covered with green weed, between it and the trees, which, exhaling unwholesome dews, covered the front of the miserable-looking place with yellow lichens, and filled the air with myriads of droning gnats: and there it stood, with the holes, where door and window had been, gaping vacantly, like the places of eyes and nose in a dead man's skull. All the woodwork had been carried away, and part even of the thatch, so that a more desolate and miserable place could not be met with, perhaps, in all the world, though, at that

time, there was many a deserted house in England; and many a hearth, which had once blazed brightly amidst a circle of happy faces, was then dark and cold.

It was a fit haunt for a murderer; and before the door appeared Richard de Ashby, a few moments after he had parted from his fell companions, sending them onward to perform the bloody task he had allotted them. His dark countenance was anxious and thoughtful. There was a look of uncertainty and hesitation about his face; ay, and his heart was quivering with that agony of doubt and fear which is almost sure to occupy some space between the scheme and the execution of crime. The ill deed in which he was now engaged was one that he was not used to. It was no longer some strong bad passion hurrying him on, step by step, from vice to vice, and sin to sin; but it was a headlong leap over one of those great barriers, raised up by conscience, and supported by law, divine and human, in order to stop the criminal on his course to death, destruction, and eternal punishment.

He sprang from his horse at the door--he entered the cottage--he stood for a moment in the midst--he held his hands tightly clasped together, and then he strode towards the door again, murmuring, "I will call them back--I can overtake them yet."

But then he thought of the bond that he had given--of the objects that he had in view--of rank, and wealth, and station--of Lucy de Ashby, and her beauty--of triumph over the hated Monthermer.

Never, never, did Satan, with all his wiles and artifices, more splendidly bring up before the eye of imagination all the inducements that could tempt a selfish, licentious, heartless man, to the commission of a great crime, than the fiend did then for the destruction of Richard de Ashby.

He paused ere he re-crossed the threshold--he paused and hesitated. "It is too late," he thought, "they will but scoff at me. It is too late; the die is cast, and I must abide by what it turns up. This is but sorry firmness after all! Did I not resolve on calm deliberation, and shall I regret now?"

He paced up and down the chamber for a while, and then again murmured, "I wish I had brought Kate with me. I might have toyed or teased away this dreary hour with her--But no, I could not trust her in such deeds as this.--They must be at the hawthorn by this time. I hope they will take care to conceal themselves well, or the old man will get frightened; he is of a suspicious nature. There's plenty of cover to hide them.--I will go tie the horse behind the house that no one may see him."

His true motive was to occupy the time, for thought was very heavy upon him, and he contrived to spend some ten minutes in the task, speaking to the charger, and patting him; not that he was a kindly master, even to a beast, but for the time the animal was a companion to him, and that was the relief which he most desired. He then turned into the cottage again, and once more stood with his arms folded over his chest in the midst.

"What if they fail?" he asked himself. "What if he suspect something, and come with help at hand? They might be taken, and my bond found upon them--They might confess, and, to save themselves, destroy me--'Twere a deed well worthy of Ellerby.--No, no, 'tis not likely--he will never suspect anything--Hark! there is a horse! I will look out and see;" and, creeping round the pond to the side of the bushes, he peered through upon the road.

But he was mistaken, there was no horse there. The sound was in his own imagination, and he returned to his place of shelter, feeling the autumnal air chilly, though the day was in no degree cold. It was that the blood in his own veins had, in every drop, the feverish thrill of anxiety and dreadful expectation.

No words can tell the state of that miserable man's mind during the space of two hours, which elapsed while he remained in that cottage. Remorse and fear had possession of him altogether--ay, fear; for although we have acknowledged that perhaps the only good quality he possessed was courage, yet as resolution is a very different thing from bravery, so were the terrors that possessed his mind at that moment of a very distinct character from those which seize the trembling coward on the battlefield.

There was the dread of detection, shame, exposure, the hissing scorn of the whole world, everlasting infamy as well as punishment. Death was the least part indeed of what he feared, and could he have been sure that means would be afforded him to terminate his own existence in case of failure, the chance of such a result would have lost half its terror.

But there was remorse besides--remorse which he had stifled till it was too late. He saw his kinsman's white hair; he saw his countenance. He endeavoured in vain to call it up before his eyes, with some of those frowns or haughty looks upon it, which his own vices and follies had very often produced. There was nothing there now but the smile of kindness, but the look of generous satisfaction with which from time to time the old earl had bestowed upon him some favour, or afforded him some assistance. Memory would not perform the task he wished to put upon it. She gave him up to the anguish of conscience, without even awakening the bad passions of the past to palliate the deeds of the present. He leaned on the dismantled window-frame with his heart scorched and seared, without a tear to moisten his burning lid, without one place on which the mind could rest in peace. The hell of the wicked always begins upon earth, and the foul fiend had already the spirit in his grasp, and revelled in the luxury of torture.

At length there came a distant sound, and starting up, he ran forth to look out. His ears no longer deceived him, the noise increased each moment, it was horses' feet coming rapidly along the road. He gazed earnestly towards Lindwell; but instead of those whom he expected to

see, he beheld a large party of cavalry riding by at full speed, and as they passed on before him, galloping away towards Nottingham, the towering form of Prince Edward rising by the full head above any of his train, caught the eye of the watcher, and explained their appearance there. The rapid tramp died away, and all was silent again.

Some twenty minutes more elapsed, and then there was a duller sound; but still it was like the footfalls of horses coming quick. Once more he gazed forth, and now he beheld, much nearer than he expected, four mounted men approaching the cottage, but avoiding the hard road, and riding over the turf of the common. One of them seemed to be supporting another by the arm, who bent somewhat feebly towards his horse's head, and appeared ready to fall. In a minute they came round, and Ellerby--springing to the ground, while the man they had called Parson, held the rein of Dighton's horse--aided the latter to dismount, and led him into the cottage.

"It is done," said Ellerby, in a low voice, "it is done, but Dighton is badly hurt. The old man passed his sword through him, when first he struck him, and would have killed him outright, if I had not stabbed the savage old boar behind. We cast him into the little sandpit there--but poor Dighton is bad, and can scarce sit his horse."

"Yes, yes, I can," said Dighton, in a faint tone; "if I had a little wine I could get on."

"I have some here in a bottle," cried one of the others.

Dighton drank, and it seemed to revive him. "I have had worse than this before now," he said, "I can go on now; and we had better make haste, for there were certainly people coming."

"Away, then," said Richard de Ashby, "away then to Lenton, and then run down to Bridgeford. If you could get to Thorp to-night, you would be safe. I will to the castle, and be ready to console my fair cousin when the news reaches her."

"She will have heard it before that," murmured Dighton, "for I tell you there were certainly people coming," and taking another deep draught of the wine, he contrived to walk, almost unassisted, to the horse's side, and mount. There was a black look, however, under his eyes, a bloodless paleness about his face, and a livid hue in his lips, which told that his wound, though "not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door," to use the words of Mercutio, "was enough."

"Fail not to give me tidings of you," said Richard de Ashby, speaking to Ellerby; and going round to the back of the cottage, he mounted his horse--which by his pawing, seemed to show that the long delay had not been less tedious to himself than to his master--and galloped away to Lindwell, anxious to reach the castle before the news.

Even at the rapid pace at which he went, he could not escape thought. Black care was behind him; and eagerly he turned in his mind all the consequences of the deed that had been done. His own conduct was the first consideration, and a strange consideration it was. What was he to say? what was he to do? At every step he must act a part: ay, and--like the poor player, who sometimes, distressed in circumstances, pained in body, or grieved in mind, has to go laughing through the merry comedy--the character which Richard de Ashby had now to play, was the direct reverse of all the feelings of his heart.

Crime, however, produces an excitement of a certain kind independent of the very gratification obtained. We have, in our own day, seen murderers laugh and sing and make merry, with hands scarcely washed from the blood of their victim; and, strange to say, when Richard de Ashby resolved to assume a face of cheerful gaiety on arriving at Lindwell Castle, the only danger was that he would over-act the part. In truth, remorse, like a tiger, lay waiting to spring upon him the moment action ceased; but for the time his mind was much relieved, and more buoyant than it had been while watching in the cottage. Doubt, hesitation, apprehensions regarding the failure of the deed, were all gone: it was done irretrievably. It was accomplished, not only without

any mischance, but with a circumstance which promised to remove one of his accomplices, and that was no slight satisfaction. So smooth does one crime make the way for another, that he who had lately pondered with no small hesitation the very deed in which he was engaged, now felt glancing through his mind with satisfaction the thought of disposing of Ellerby also by some similar means, and leaving none but the two inferior ruffians, whom he might easily attach to himself, and render serviceable in the future. Crimes are gregarious beings, and are seldom, if ever, met with single.

His horse was fleet; the distance was not great; and in the space of about a quarter of an hour, he saw the towers of Lindwell rising over the woody slopes around. He then checked his speed, in some degree, going on at a quick, but still an easy canter, knowing that there was always some one on the watchtower, who might remark the furious gallop at which he came, unless he slackened his pace.

He had soon reached the open space--he had soon mounted the hill. The drawbridge was down, the doors of the barbican were open, one of the warders sitting quietly on a bench in the sun, two or three stout yeomen and armed men were amusing themselves between the two gates, and all turned to salute their master's kinsman as he passed, without giving the slightest indication that anything was known amiss within the walls of Lindwell.

Dismounting at the inner gate, and giving his horse to one of the grooms, Richard de Ashby was upon the point of asking for his cousin Lucy, but recollecting his part again, he inquired if the Earl were there, adding, "I thought to have met him between this and Nottingham."

"No, Sir Richard," replied the porter, moving slowly back the great gate of the hall; "my lord had ordered his horses and train to be ready for Nottingham by noon, but news came from the city, which stopped him;

and then the son of old Ugtred, the swine-driver, brought a letter, on which my lord went out on foot and alone. He would not even have his page, but carried his sword himself."

"Methinks that was rash," said Richard de Ashby; "these are not times to trust to. Can I speak with the lady Lucy? Know you where she is?"

"In her own chamber, I fancy, poor lady," replied the porter. "Go, Ned, and tell her, that Sir Richard is in the hall, and would fain see her."

Richard de Ashby was a hypocrite--he was a hypocrite in everything. Though a man of strong passions and of fierce disposition, it was not when he seemed most furious or most angry that he really was so, any more than when, as on the present occasion, he seemed most gay and light-hearted, that he was in reality cheerful. While the page went to seek for his fair cousin, he walked up and down the hall, humming a light tune, and seemingly occupied with nothing but those dancing phantasms of imagination which serve a mind at ease to while away a few idle minutes. The only thing which, during the whole time he was kept waiting, could have betrayed even to eyes far more keen and scrutinizing than those which now rested upon him, that there were more deep and anxious thoughts within, was a sudden start that he gave on hearing some noise and several persons speaking loudly in the court; but the sounds quickly passed away, and the next minute Lucy herself entered the hall.

She was pale, and her countenance seemed thoughtful; but her demeanour was calm; and though she had never loved the man that stood before her, she addressed him in a kind tone, saying, "I give you good day, Richard; we have not seen you for a long time."

"No, fair cousin," he replied, "and I rode here in haste from Nottingham, thinking I might be the bearer of good tidings to you; but I fancy from your look you have heard them already."

"What may they be?" said Lucy, the colour slightly tinging her cheek.

"Why," answered Richard de Ashby, "they are that a certain noble lord, a dearer friend of yours than mine, fair cousin, who lay in high peril in Nottingham Castle, has made his escape last night."

"So I have heard," replied Lucy, her eyes seeking the ground; "people tell me they had condemned him to death without hearing him."

"Not exactly so," said Richard de Ashby; "they heard him once, but then----"

"Oh, lady! oh, lady!" cried one of the servants, running into the hall, with a face as pale as ashes, and, a wild frightened look, "here's a yeoman from Eastwood who says he has seen my lord lying murdered in the pit under the Bull's hawthorn!"

Lucy gazed at the man for a moment or two, with her large dark eyes wide open, and a vacant look upon her countenance, as if her mind refused to comprehend the sudden and horrible news she heard; but the next moment she turned as pale as ashes, and fell like a corpse upon the pavement.

"Fool! you have killed her!" cried Richard de Ashby, really angry; "you should have told her more gently.--Call her women hither."

The man remarked not, in his own surprise and horror, that Richard de Ashby was less moved by the tidings he had given, than by the effect they produced upon Lucy. All was now agitation and confusion, however; and in the midst of it, the poor girl was removed to her own chamber. The peasant, who had brought the news, was summoned to the presence of the murdered man's kinsman; and informed him that, in passing along, at the top of the bank, he had been startled by the sight of fresh blood, and at first thought some deer had been killed there, but, looking over the hedge, he had seen a human body lying under the bank, and, on getting down into the pit, had recognised the person of the Earl.

He was quite dead, the man, said, with a cut upon the head, and a dagger still remaining in a wound on his right side. Instantly coming away for help to bear him home, he had found by the way, not far from the pit, the murdered man's sword, which he picked up and brought with him. On examination, the blade was found to be bloody, so that the Earl had evidently used it with some effect, but the peasant had found no other traces of a conflict, and had come on with all speed for aid.

One of the flat boards, which in that day, placed upon trestles, served as dining-tables in the castle hall, was now carried out by a large party of the Earl's servants and retainers, in order to bring in the corpse. Richard de Ashby put himself at their head, and by his direction they all went well armed, lest, as he said, there should be some force of enemies near. It was now his part to assume grief and consternation; and as they advanced towards the well-known spot, he felt, it must be acknowledged, his heart sink, when he thought of the first look of the dead man's face. But he was resolute, and went on, preparing his mind to assume the appearance of passionate sorrow and horror, calculating every gesture and every word.

The old hawthorn tree, which was a well-known rendezvous for various sylvan sports, was soon in sight, and a few steps more brought them to the bloody spot, near the edge of the pit, where both the green grass and the yellow sand were deeply stained with gore in several places. Many an exclamation of grief and rage burst from the attendants, and Richard de Ashby, with a shudder, cried, "Oh, this is terrible!"

"Hallo! but where's the body?" cried a man, who had advanced to the side of the pit.

"Don't you see it?" said the peasant who had brought the news, stepping forward to point it out. "By the Lord, it is gone!"

Richard de Ashby now became agitated indeed.

"Gone!" he exclaimed, looking down, "Gone!--The murderers have come back to carry it off!" and, running round to a spot where a little path descended, after the manner of a rude flight of steps, into the sandpit, he made his way down, followed by the rest, and searched all around.

The spot where the body had lain was plainly to be seen, marked, both by some blood which must have flowed after the fall from above, and also by a fragment of the Earl's silken pourpoint, which had been caught and torn off by a black thornbush, as he fell.

"They cannot be far off," said the peasant, "for the poor gentleman was a heavy man to carry, and there seemed nobody near when I was here."

"Pshaw!" cried Richard de Ashby, "there might have been a hundred amongst the bushes and trees without your seeing them. However," he continued, eagerly, "let us beat the ground all round. Some one, run back to the castle for horses; if we pursue quickly, we may very likely find the murderers with the corpse in their hands."

"It may be, Sir Richard," said one of the attendants, "that some of the neighbouring yeomen, or franklins, coming and going from Eastwood to Nottingham market, which falls today, may have chanced upon the body, and carried it to some house or cottage near."

"Well, we must discover it at all events," said Richard de Ashby, who feared that one-half of his purpose might be frustrated if the letter, which he had written under the name of Hugh de Monthermer, was not actually found upon the corpse. "Spread round! spread round! Let us follow up every path by which the body could be borne, shouting from time to time to each other, that we may not be altogether separated. But here come more men down from the castle; we shall have plenty now.

Let six or eight stay here till the horses arrive, then mount, and pursue each horse-road and open track for some two or three miles; they cannot have gone much farther."

All efforts, however, were vain. Not a trace could be found of the body, or of those who had taken it; and, although Richard de Ashby at first had entertained no doubt that they would find it in the hands of some of the neighbouring peasantry, and only feared that the important letter might be by any chance lost or destroyed, he soon became anxious, in no ordinary degree, to know what had become of the body itself.

Had it been found, he asked himself, by those bold tenants of Sherwood, whose shrewdness, determination, and activity he well knew? and if so, might not the dagger, which Ellerby had left in the wound, and with the haft of which he himself had sealed the letter, prove, at some after period, a clue to the real murderers? His heart was ill at ease. Apprehension took possession of him again; and, towards nightfall, he returned to the castle, accompanied by a number of the men who by that time had rejoined him, with a spirit depressed and gloomy, and a heart ill at ease indeed.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

The grey twilight hung over the world when Richard de Ashby re-entered the outer court of the castle at Lindwell; but still he could perceive horses saddled and dusty, attendants running hither and thither, armed men standing in knots, as if resting themselves for a moment after a journey, and every indication of the arrival of some party

having taken place during his absence. His first thought was, that the corpse must have been found and brought back by some of the small bodies of Prince Edward's troops, which were moving about in all directions; but he soon saw that such an event was impossible, as he himself, or some of those about him, must have met any party which had passed near the scene of the murder. The next instant, in going by one of the little groups of soldiers we have mentioned, he recognised the face of some of the retainers of the house of Ashby, and exclaimed, "What! has the Lord Alured returned?"

"Not half an hour ago, Sir Richard," replied a soldier; and Richard de Ashby hurried like lightning into the hall. There was a coldness at his heart, indeed, as he thought of meeting the man whose father's blood was upon his hand, and against whose own life he was devising schemes as dark as those which had just been executed. But he was most anxious nevertheless to meet his cousin, ere he had conversed long with Lucy, and to give those impressions regarding the causes of the bloody deed which best suited his purposes.

Alured de Ashby was not in the great hall, but Richard, without a moment's delay, mounted the great staircase to the upper chamber, where Hugh de Monthermer's last happy hour had been passed with Lucy. There were voices speaking within, but the kinsman paused not a moment; and opening the door, he found the sister weeping in the arms of her brother. They had been sometime together; the first burst of sorrow, in speaking of their father's death, had passed away; an accidental word had caused them to converse of other things connected therewith, indeed, but not absolutely relating to that subject, and the first words that met Richard de Ashby's ear were spoken by the Lord Alured.

"Never, Lucy," he was saying--"never! Fear not, dear girl! I will never force your inclination. I will try to make you happy in your own way. As my poor father promised, so I promise too."

Their dark kinsman saw at once that the proud and stubborn heart of his hasty cousin was softened by the touch of grief, and that he had made a promise which no other circumstances would have drawn from him, but which--however much he might regret it at an after period--would never be retracted.

Lucy started on her cousin's entrance; and, why she knew not, but a shudder passed over her as she beheld him. He advanced towards them, however, with an assumption of frank and kindly sympathy, holding out a hand to each. But Lucy avoided taking it, though not markedly, and saying in a low voice to her brother, "I cannot speak with any one, Alured," she glided away through the door which led to her own apartments, leaving Richard de Ashby with all the bitter purposes of his heart only strengthened by what he had seen and heard. Alured took his cousin's hand at once, asking, "Have you brought in the body? Where have you laid him?"

In a rapid but clear manner, Richard explained that the search had been ineffectual, and told all that had been done in vain for the discovery of the corpse. After some time spent in conjectures as to what could have become of the body, the peasant who had first discovered it was called in, and questioned strictly as to what he had seen, and his knowledge of the old Lord's person. His replies, however, left no doubt in regard to the facts of the murder; and when he was dismissed, Alured turned, with a frowning brow and a bewildered eye, to his cousin, asking, "Who can have done this?"

Richard de Ashby looked down in silence for a moment, as if almost unwilling to reply, and then answered, "I know of but one man whom he has offended."

"Who, who," demanded Alured, sharply. "I know of none."

"None, but Hugh de Monthermer," said Richard de Ashby.

"Hugh de Monthermer!" cried the young Earl.--"Offended him! Why he has loaded him with favour. 'Twas his letter, telling me that he intended to give our Lucy's hand to one of our old enemies, that brought me back with such speed. Offended him! He is the last man that had cause of complaint."

"You know not, Alured--you know not all," cried his false cousin. "Far be it from me to accuse Hugh de Monthermer behind his back. I have ever said what I have had to say of him boldly, and to his face; and all I wish to imply is, without making any accusation whatsoever, that I know of not one man on earth whom your poor father has offended but Hugh de Monthermer."

"And how offended him?" asked the young Earl.

"By withdrawing his promise of your sister's hand," answered his cousin. "'Tis but yesterday, upon some quarrel--I know not what--that he who is now dead retracted every rash engagement of the kind, and told him he should never have her. Lucy will tell you the same."

"Ha!" cried Alured, knitting his brows thoughtfully--"Ha! But--no, no, no! To do him justice, Monthermer is too noble ever, to draw his sword upon an old man like that. His name was never stained with any lowly act. He might be a proud enemy, but never a base one."

"I dare say it is so;" answered Richard; "though I have seen some mean things, too. Did he not avoid meeting you in arms, on quarrel concerning my poor little paramour? But all this matters not; I bring no charge against him--'tis but suspicion, at the most. Only when I recollect that yesterday your father crossed all his hopes, and that Guy de Margan, Geary, and the rest who were with this poor Earl, told me that there was a violent quarrel, with high and fierce words on both sides, I may well say that he was offended--and, as far as I know, he was the only one offended--by the good old man. Lucy will tell you more, perhaps."

"Stay!" cried Alured, "I will go and ask her."

"Nay," rejoined his cousin, "I must away with all speed to Nottingham, to learn if aught has been heard of the body there. I will ask Guy de Margan and the others, what really passed when they were here yesterday, and let you know early to-morrow."

"Bring them with you--bring them with you said Alured.

"I will," replied Richard; "but in the meantime, by your good leave, my lord. I will take some of your men with me, for I came alone, and am not well loved, as you know, of these Monthermers."

"Take what men you will," said the young Earl; "but yet I cannot think they have had a hand in this. Good night, Richard--good night!"

So prone is the mind of man to suspicion, so intimately are we convinced in our own hearts of the fallibility of human nature at every point, that accusation often repeated will ever leave a doubt in the most candid mind. "Be thou as cold as ice, as chaste as snow, thou shalt not 'scape calumny," cried Shakspeare, addressing woman; and he might have said to the whole race of man--"Armour thyself in the whole panoply of virtue, cover thee from head to foot in the triple steel of honour, honesty, and a pure heart, still the poisoned dart of malice shall pierce through and wound thee, if it do not destroy."

In the heart of Alured de Ashby, there had never been a doubt that Hugh de Monthermer was, in every thought and in every deed, as high, as noble, and as true, as ever was man on earth; and yet--alas, that it should be so!--the words of a false, base man, whom he himself knew to be full of faults and detected in falsehoods, left a suspicion on his mind, in favour of which, his jealous hatred of the race of Monthermer rose up with an angry and clamorous voice.

It was with such feelings that he now strode away to his sister's chamber; but ere he knocked at the door he paused thoughtfully, remembering that she was already grieved and shaken by the sad events of that evening. He called to mind that he was her only protector, her

only near relation, now; and a feeling of greater tenderness than he had ever before suffered to take possession of his heart rose out of their relative position to each other, and caused him to soften his tone and manner as far as possible.

He knocked at the door, then, and went in, finding Lucy with her maids; the latter following mechanically the embroidery--on which one half a woman's life was then spent,--the former sitting in the window, far from the lamp, with her cheek resting on her hand, and a handkerchief beside her to wipe away the tears that ever and anon broke from the dark shady well of her long-fringed eyes.

As gently as was in his nature to do, Alured sat down beside her, and questioned her as to what had passed on the preceding day. She answered very briefly; for his inquiries mingled one dark and terrible stream of thought with another scarcely less dreadful. She knew little, she said, as she had not been present. She was not aware why her father had so acted; but she acknowledged that he had withdrawn his consent to her union with the man she loved, and had spoken words concerning him which had wrung and pained her heart to hear.

So far, the tale of Richard de Ashby was confirmed; and Alured left her, with a moody and uncertain mind, hesitating between new-born suspicions and the confidence which the experience of years had forced upon him. He paced the hall that night for many an hour, ever and anon sending for various members of the household, and questioning them concerning the transactions of the day. But he gained no farther tidings; and in gloom and sadness the minutes slipped away--the gay merriment, the light jest, the tranquil enjoyment, all crushed out and extinct, and every part of the castle filled with an air of sorrow and anxiety; all feeling that a terrible deed had been done, and all inquiring--"What is to come next?"

The last words of the young Earl, ere he retired to rest, were, "Let horses be prepared by nine in the morning. I will to Nottingham myself. This must be sifted to the bottom."

Ere he set out, however, Richard de Ashby, accompanied by several gentlemen of the court, had reached Lindwell, and were met by Alured in the hall, booted and spurred for his departure.

"Ha! give you good day, sirs," he exclaimed, in his quick and impetuous manner, "I was about to seek you, if you had not come to me."

"This is a sad affair, my lord the Earl!" said Sir Guy de Margan. "Little did I think, when I rode over hither the day before yesterday with your noble father, that it was the last time I should see him living!"

"Sad, indeed, sir--sad, indeed!" replied the young Earl. "But the question now is, 'Who did this deed?'"

"Who shalt say that?" said Sir Guy de Margan.

Alured de Ashby paused, and crushed his glove in his hand, wishing any one to touch upon the subject of the suspicions which had been instilled into his mind, before he spoke upon them himself; but finding that Guy de Margan stopped short, he said, at length, "May I ask you, Sir Guy, to tell me the circumstances which took place here during your stay with my father yesterday? Any act of his is of importance to throw light upon this dark affair."

"I can tell you very little, my noble lord," replied Sir Guy. "When we arrived, we were told that the Lord Hugh de Monthermer was in the upper hall with your fair sister, the Lady Lucy. We all went thither together; but, as we came to the Lord Hugh with a somewhat unpleasant summons to the presence of the King, your noble father, wishing to spare his feelings, desired us to wait without at the head of the stairs, while he went in to break the tidings. We soon, however, heard high

words and very angry language on the part of the young lord. Then there was much spoken in a lower tone; and then Monthermer came nearer to the door, where he stopped, and said aloud, 'You will not fail, my lord?' Your father answered, in a stern tone, 'I will meet you at the hour you named. Fear not, I will not fail!'"

Alured de Ashby turned his eyes upon his cousin with a meaning look, and Richard de Ashby raised his to heaven, and then let them sink to the earth again.

"I heard those words myself," said Sir William Geary, "and thought it strange Monthermer should appoint a meeting when he was aware he was going to a prison. It seems, however, that he well knew what he was about."

"God send he met him not too surely!" burst forth Alured de Ashby, with his eyes flashing.

"After all, we may be quite mistaken," observed Richard, who knew that now, having sown the suspicions,--ay, and watered them, too,--it was his task to affect candour, and seem to repress them; as a man lops off branches from a tree to make it grow the stronger. "Hugh de Monthermer was always noble and true, and of a generous nature, as you well said last night, Alured."

"But you forget," said Guy de Margan, "he was at this very time under a strong suspicion of a base treason, and had been seen speaking secretly in the forest with three masked men unknown!"

"Ha!" cried Alured de Ashby, seizing the speaker by the arm, and gazing into his face, as if he would have read his soul. "Ha! three masked men?"

"It is true, upon my life!" replied Guy de Margan.

"Be calm--be calm, my dear cousin," exclaimed Richard de Ashby.

"Calm!" shouted the young Earl--"Calm! with my father's blood crying for vengeance from the earth, and my sword yet undrawn!"

"But listen," said Richard. "I have thought, as we came along, of a fact which may give us some insight into this affair. Yesterday evening, on my arrival here, ere any of us knew aught of your father's death, the old hall porter told me, on my inquiring for him, that the Earl had gone forth alone, having received a letter brought by some peasant boy. He mentioned the boy's name, for he seemed to know him, and therefore I ventured, as we passed the gates just now, to bid the warder speak with the old man, and have the boy sent for with all speed. 'Tis but right that we should know who that note came from."

"Let the porter be sent for," cried Alured--"let the porter be sent for."

"I will call him," said Richard, and left the ball.

In a moment after, he returned with the old man, followed by a young clown of some thirteen years of age. The boy stayed near the door, but Richard de Ashby advanced with the porter, the latter bowing low to his lord as he came up.

"Who brought the letter given to my father just before he went out yesterday?" demanded the young Earl, in a stern tone.

"Dickon, the son of Ugtred, the swine-driver, my lord," replied the porter; "he lives hard by, and there he stands."

"Did he say aught when he delivered it?" asked Richard de Ashby.

"Nothing, Sir Richard," answered the porter, "but to give it to my lord directly."

"Come hither, boy," cried Alured. "Now speak truly; who gave you that letter?"

"There were four of them, my lord," replied the boy; "but I never saw any one of them before."

"Were they masked?" demanded Richard de Ashby.

The boy replied in the negative; but his wily questioner, having put suspicion upon the track, was satisfied, so far, and Alured proceeded.

"What did they say to you?" he asked.

"They bade me take it to the castle," replied the boy, "and tell the people to give it to my noble lord the Earl, as fast as possible."

"Did they say nothing more?" demanded Alured de Ashby. The boy looked round and began to whimper.

"Speak the truth, knave," cried the young Earl, "speak the truth, and no harm shall happen to you; but hesitate a moment, and I'll hang you over the gate."

"They told me," answered the boy, still crying, "that if I saw the Earl, I might say it came from the Lord Hugh de Monthermer, but not to say so to any one else."

The whole party looked round in each other's faces, except Richard de Ashby, who gazed down upon the ground, as if distressed, though to say truth, his heart swelled with triumph, for the words the men had used had been suggested by him at the last moment before he left them. He would not look up, however, lest his satisfaction should appear; and Alured set his teeth hard, saying, "This is enough!"

"But one more question, my good lord," cried Sir William Geary, "Do you know the Lord Hugh de Monthermer, boy?"

"Yes, sir, very well," replied the boy; "I have seen him many a time with my lord and my lady."

"And was he amongst them?" asked Sir William Geary.

"Oh, no," cried the boy, his face brightening up at once. "There was one of them as tall, and, mayhap, as strong, but then he was black about the mazzard; and the other who was well-nigh as tall, had a wrong looking eye."

"This serves no farther purpose," said the young Earl. "I must to Nottingham at once. You, gentlemen, will forgive a son who has his father's death to avenge; but you must not quit my castle unrefreshed. Richard will play the host's part while I am absent; so fare you well, with many thanks for your coming.--Ho! are my horses ready, there?"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

It was night; and in the castle of Nottingham sat the Princess Eleanor, with one or two ladies working at their embroidery near. Each had a silver lamp beside her; and while they plied the busy needle, they spoke in low tones, sometimes of the rumours of the day, sometimes of the colours of this or that flower, that grew up beneath their hands upon the frame. The princess was differently employed; for though an embroidery frame stood near her also, she had turned away from it, and by the light of a taper at her side was reading attentively a paper which she held in her hand. There was a pleased smile upon her countenance, the high and noble expression of which was seldom what may be called very cheerful, though rarely very sad; for as yet she never had cause for actual sadness; and even during the imprisonment of her beloved

husband, amidst the wild chances of civil war, and the daily dangers of faction and strife, her heart had been lighted by high hope and confidence in the all-protecting hand of Heaven.

In every countenance that is at all capable of displaying what is passing in the mind--every countenance, except the dull, unlettered book, where mere animal desires appear written in their unvarying coarseness--there are two expressions; the one permanent, pervading every change and indicating the natural disposition--the inherent qualities of the spirit within; the other, altering with every affection of the mind, brightening with joy or hope, growing dark under sorrow and disappointment, but still receiving a peculiar character from the permanent expression, as the sunshine and the cloud cast different light and shade upon the brown masses of the wood and the wild waters of the sea.

The permanent expression of Eleanor's countenance was calm, and full of that thoughtfulness which approaches, in some degree, the bounds of melancholy; and yet the transient expression was often gay and happy in a very high degree; for that very thoughtfulness and sensibility of character which produced the former, enabled her to love, and hope, and enjoy, with the high zest which sparkled in the latter. And now, upon her countenance was a look of well-pleased relief, as if something had grieved her and was taken away; and after she had read the paper, she suffered her hand to drop over the arm of the chair, looking up, with her large, dark eyes, towards heaven, as noble minds generally do when the heart is busy with high and elevating thoughts.

"I was sure," she murmured to herself--"I was sure that young man was not guilty of that crime with which they charged him; and I am convinced also that he is as little guilty of this that they now lay to his account."

A page stood near the door, as if waiting for some reply, now fixing his eyes upon the ground, now stealing a furtive glance at the pretty faces bending over their embroidery. To him Eleanor now beckoned, saying, "Come hither; take the letter back to my dear lord, and say I thank him for the sight of it. Tell him I would fain speak with him when his leisure serves; and that I beseech him, when the Lady Lucy comes, to send her to me, that I may accompany her to the presence of the king. She will need a friend beside her."

The boy took the letter, bowed, and retired; and Eleanor resumed her work, pausing, from time to time, as if to think, and then busying her hands again, though her mind went on with other things. In about a quarter of an hour the door opened, and Edward entered, with a brow somewhat sad and gloomy. Nor did that expression altogether pass away, though the accustomed smile cheered it for a moment, as he met her whom he so deeply loved.

"She cannot be long," he said, after a few words of greeting. "This is a strange as well as a dark affair."

"But you do not think him guilty?" demanded Eleanor.

"Assuredly not," replied the Prince; "but it has so happened--all has been so arranged, that I fear he will seem guilty though he be not. You read that letter, and you saw how easily he explained all that appeared suspicious in his former conduct; and yet a body of barons, Mortimer amongst the rest, were ready enough to urge my father to put him to death, without those forms and circumstances of customary law which are the only safeguards of men's liberty."

"Do you think they would have executed him?" demanded Eleanor.

"They would have murdered him," replied the Prince, "for such a death without law is murder."

Eleanor put her hands before her eyes, and after a moment's pause, added, "And yet he was innocent, clearly innocent--oh! I never doubted it, Edward! I have seen him, when you knew it not, gaze upon the countenance of my noble prince; and in his face, as in a moving picture, rise up a thousand images of kindly thoughts within;--affection, gratitude, esteem, and admiration; and I could have sworn that he would never plot against your father's throne, however reckless be the men of this world, of faith and honesty."

"I was sure also," answered Edward, "for I know him well, and am convinced that when, with a mistaken zeal, he was once found in arms against us, 'twas that he thought duty and honour called him to do that which wounded his own heart even in the doing.--But 'twas not alone that conviction which made me think the late accusation false," he continued, in a lower tone, that the women near might not catch his words--"I knew the men who made it, Eleanor: I knew Mortimer to be cruel and treacherous; I knew Pembroke to be cold, and hard, and selfish. And now I find," he added, with a smile, "they were to divide his lands between them. Here was Guy de Margan, too--a thing so light and frail, one would scarce think that such a delicate vessel could hold strong passions and fierce hatreds; yet 'tis evident to me that there was no slight rancour there."

"Oh! I know, I know!" replied Eleanor. "One night, when Lucy and her lover--with my connivance, I will own--walked by the moonlight under the southern cloisters at Eltham, this Guy de Margan, with some three or four other young idlers of the court, would have stopped her by force as she was returning to me, when the knight, whom she had just left, came up, and felled him with a blow. But hark! she is coming, Edward. See if that be the Lady Lucy, Alice."

One of the ladies who sat near, rose, went to the door, and returned immediately, bringing Lucy de Ashby with her. She was pale and very sad, but not less beautiful than ever; and as she came forward to the Princess, and knelt down upon the cushion at her feet to kiss her hand,

she kept her dark eyes fixed upon the ground, as if she feared that, should she open them, the fountain of tears, which had so lately sprung up, would well over.

"The King has sent for you, fair lady," said Prince Edward, after Eleanor had spoken a few words of consolation to her--"the King has sent for you to ask you some questions with his own voice upon a matter very painful to you in all respects, I fear. But be comforted; the bitter loss you have sustained is one that every child who lives the ordinary length of life must undergo. The death of those we love is a salutary preparation for our own; and, as to the other cause of the anxiety and pain which may mingle with your feelings to-night, be assured that the noble lord who has fallen under some wrongful suspicion has now a friendly voice near to do him justice, and be raised in his behalf. We are confident of his innocence, and will maintain him to be guiltless till he can appear in person and defend his own cause."

The Prince paused, as if for an answer; but Lucy would not trust her voice with many words, merely replying, "I thank you deeply, my most gracious lord."

"I will go then to the King," continued Edward, "who has been expecting your arrival for some time. The Princess will accompany you to his presence, when he is ready to receive you. So be calm, dear lady, and firm; and, ever before you reply, think well what you are saying."

The Prince quitted the room, and Eleanor proceeded to give that womanly comfort to her fair young friend which was better calculated to support and calm her than even the Prince's encouraging tone; for whatever may be the wisdom and the strength of man's exhortations, there is a roughness in them far different from that soothing balm which was given to the lips of woman to enable her to tranquillize and console.

But little time, however, was afforded them for conversation, a summons being almost immediately received for the lady Lucy to appear before the King; and drawing the fair girl's arm through her own, Eleanor led her to the hall where Henry was seated. The first glance of the King's countenance shewed that he was in an irritable state of mind. Weak and vacillating, as well as oppressive, he yielded, it is true, to the influence of his wiser and nobler son, but not without impatience and resistance.

The Prince was now standing on his right hand, a circle of nobles was formed in front, and next to Edward appeared Alured de Ashby--his brows bent, his eyes cast down upon the ground, and his left hand resting upon the hilt of his sword. He gave no glance towards his sister as she entered, but remained stern and gloomy, without moving a feature or a muscle. The Princess seated herself in a chair beside the King, but still holding Lucy's hand, and drawing her gently close to her side.

"Lady," said Henry, smoothing down his look, and affecting a tone of sadness, "we have been compelled to send for you, even though we thereby break in upon the sanctity of your sorrow; for it becomes necessary immediately, or at least as speedily as may be, to ascertain the author of a terrible crime, which has deprived you of a father, and us of a loving subject and faithful friend. Speak, then, and tell us what you know of this matter."

"Sire, I know nothing," replied Lucy, "but that my poor father left me in health some short time before the hour of three yesterday, and that long after, while I was speaking with my cousin Richard, who had just arrived from Nottingham, news came that my father was murdered."

"Nay," said the King, "we must hear what took place previously regarding the gentleman accused of this offence."

"I know not who is accused, sire," replied Lucy, looking up with an air of surprise; "I have not heard that the murderer was discovered."

"The gentleman on whom strong suspicion lights," rejoined the King, in a stern tone, "is an escaped prisoner from this castle, Hugh de Monthermer."

Lucy clasped her hands with a start, and turned as pale as death. But the next instant, the blood rushed glowing into her face, and throwing back her head with a sparkling eye and a curling lip, she cried--"It is false! my lord the King--it is false!--I know whence this foul suspicion has arisen. Ay, and perhaps art may have overdone itself. I have gained a light I never thought of till now, which may yet perhaps bring the felon to justice."

The King seemed somewhat surprised at the sudden energy which had taken possession of the fair and gentle being before him.

"Pray tell me," he said, after gazing at her for a moment "whence you think this suspicion has arisen, since you say you know."

"It has sprung, sire," replied Lucy, in a calmer tone--"it has sprung from a letter which was given to my father shortly before his death. He was with me at the time. We were speaking of him who is now accused of a deed that he never dreamed of, and my father showed me the letter, saying, it came from him. I answered instantly that it was not his writing, which I have often seen. My father replied that he must have made some clerk write for him, as is so common. The explanation satisfied me, and I thought no more of it till this moment; but now I see that letter was a forgery to lure my poor father to his death."

"You read the letter, then?" enquired the King.

"I did," replied Lucy.

"Can you repeat what it contained?" asked Edward, with a look of keen anxiety.

"The matter, not the words," answered Lucy, her voice slightly faltering. "It told my father that Hugh de Monthermer, doomed to death unheard, though innocent, had escaped from the castle of Nottingham, leaving behind his fair fame undefended; and it besought the Earl to meet him alone at the place called the Bull's hawthorn."

"The very place where he was murdered," said a voice from the circle.

"Peace, Sir Guy de Margan," cried Prince Edward, turning suddenly upon him; "you are a known enemy of the man accused."

"I, my lord!" exclaimed Guy de Margan.

"Ay, sir," replied the Prince, "we know more than you suppose. You hate him for chastising your insolence towards a lady; and we little doubt that you were well aware the friar whom you accused of carrying treasonable communications between him and Sir John Lemwood, had only been sent by the old Earl of Monthermer to beseech Sir John not to risk the life and honour of his friends by hopeless rebellion. I have it, sir, under the knight's own hand, and have also reason to believe you knew it when you made the charge. Let me not discover that you are bringing other false accusations, for there is a punishment for such offences."

"Go on, lady," said the King, as Guy de Margan shrunk back from the stern eye of the Prince. "Go on. What more did the letter say?"

"I think it promised, sire," replied Lucy, "to give my father full proof of the innocence of the Lord Hugh, and it besought him to come alone, not even bringing a page with him. But I assert now, my lord, that letter was a forgery of some one to decoy my poor father to his death."

"May it not," asked the King, "have been the letter of an angry and disappointed man, seeking means to wreak his vengeance upon one who had denied him his daughter's hand, and disappointed his hopes? Here it is proved, fair lady that your lover and your father quarrelled, and that the Earl promised to meet him--wherefore, or when, no one knows,--and that as soon as this young stubborn lord makes his escape from this castle of Nottingham, your father receives a letter from him, calling upon him to come alone to a secluded place. Your father is there found murdered; the boy that bears the letter is bidden to tell no one that it comes from Hugh de Monthermer; it wants but the letter to be in his writing to make the whole case clear enough."

"My lord," replied Lucy, earnestly, "clear your mind from the false tales of deceitful men. Hugh and my father did not quarrel; though natural disappointment regarding one whom he loved--though scarcely worthy of such love--might make the friend of your noble son speak loud and hasty words, even to the father of his promised wife. But they did not quarrel, sire. My father saw him go, in the full hope that he would prove his innocence before your Majesty, and induce you to withdraw the bar you had placed against our union--He came and told me so, the moment Hugh was gone. Then, sire, as to the promised meeting, I can tell you, wherefore, and when, and where, from my dead parent's lips. It was to be here in this presence; it was to be at one hour after noon yesterday it was to hear him fully exculpate himself of the charge then made against him, not only in the presence of your Majesty, but in the presence of Prince Edward also; and the noble Prince himself knows that my father sent a messenger to him, calling him to Nottingham with all speed, lest the voice of many enemies without one friend might prevail even with your majesty."

"It is true," replied Edward, "the messenger came, and had he not been kept from me somewhat foolishly, I should have been here shortly after noon this day."

"He did wrong," said the King, "to suspect that we would not do him justice."

The colour came into Edward's cheek, and he bent down his eyes upon the ground, feeling the ridicule of his father talking of justice, when so gross an act as the late condemnation of Hugh de Monthermer had just been committed. But Henry went on to cross-question poor Lucy, to whom zeal and anxiety for her lover had given a temporary strength which was now failing rapidly.

"You said, lady," he continued, "that the explanation which your father gave of this letter being written in another hand satisfied you completely at the time. What makes you think now that it is a forgery?--Has love nothing to do with the defence?"

The colour mounted into Lucy's cheek, and Eleanor was about to interpose, to shield her from such questions, before such an assembly. But the poor girl gained courage both from the depth and strength of her own feelings, and from the discourteous mockery of the King. She raised her eyes, bright and sparkling, to his face, and answered--"Perhaps love has, my lord. But has hate no part in the accusation?--God in his mercy grant that it may have none in the judgment!"

A dead silence succeeded for a moment to this bold reply; and then Lucy, turning pale again and dropping her eyes, went on to say--"You asked me why I think it forged, my lord? Because I now see a motive for the forgery, which I did not see before--because I perceive no cause why Hugh de Monthermer should not write with his own hand--because he could have had still, less to kill the father of her beloved--because he did not even sign the letter; for the name was not his writing--because not even the seal was, from his signet. These are strong reasons, sire--even," she added, with the tears rising into her eyes--"even if there were not a reason stronger still:--that he has ever been honest, honourable, and true; that no mean, dark act lies chronicled against him; that his whole

life gives the lie to the accusation; and that he has never taken advantage of any opportunity to do a thing that he thought to be wrong, even when the opinion of the world might have extolled the act."

She wiped the tears from her yes, for they were now running; over fast, and Eleanor rose from her seat, saying, "I beseech you, sire, let her depart. She is grieved and faint--I see it."

"One more question," rejoined Henry, "and she shall go. You say, lady, that you see a motive for the forgery;--is it that you have any suspicion of another having done this deed?" Lucy ran her eye round all the circle, suffering it to pause for a moment upon the face of Richard de Ashby, which turned pale under her glance. She carried it round to the other extreme, however, and then replied, "I have a strong suspicion, sire."

"Of whom?" demanded the King, eagerly.

"Forgive me, gracious lord," answered Lucy; "though strong, it is but suspicion, and I, for one, will not make a charge upon suspicion alone. But let me warn my brother Alured, who is too noble to doubt and too brave to be prudent, that those who have destroyed the father may not have any greater tenderness for the son."

Again her words were followed by a silent pause, and Eleanor, taking advantage of it, drew Lucy away, saying, "We have your leave, sire--is it not so?"

The King bowed his head; and the moment the Princess, her fair companion, and her attendants, had departed, a buzz ran round the room, while the Prince and the King spoke in a low tone together.

The young Earl of Ashby, let it be remarked, had not uttered one word during the whole of his sister's interrogation, and had scarcely moved a muscle from the time she entered, excepting changing his hand occasionally from the pommel of his sword to the hilt of his dagger. But

he now stepped forward, as soon as Edward raised his head, saying, "Sire, this is a doubtful case, which, without farther evidence, cannot be tried by an ordinary court. Perhaps Lucy is right, and Hugh de Monthermer innocent. She loves him, and I love him not; but still I will do justice to him, and own that the case is not proved against him, so far as to warrant his peers in condemning him; but there is an eye that sees, though ours be blinded--there is a Judge to decide, though mortal judges are debarred of proof. To that great Judge I will appeal the cause, and my body against his try, under God's decision, whether this man be guilty or not guilty. A son must not sit quiet, even under a doubt concerning his father's murderer; and I do beseech you, sire, to cause proclamation to be made over the whole land, that Hugh de Monthermer stands charged with the murder of William, Earl of Ashby, and is bound to appear and clear himself within fourteen days of this time."

"I must not refuse," replied the King; "the request is just and lawful."

"I must, moreover, entreat you, my lord," continued the young Earl, "not to proclaim the name of the accuser. I say it in no vanity, for, though my lance be a good one, there is not a better in all Christendom than that of Hugh de Monthermer. But yet I doubt that he would meet me in the field, on such a quarrel as this. For his love's sake, he would not bar himself for ever from Lucy's hand, by risking the death of her brother--that is to say, if he be innocent."

"That is fair, too," replied the King; "Lord Pembroke, see such proclamation made!--and now to more cheerful thoughts! for, by my faith, our time passes here but gravely."

CHAPTER XXXV.

The forest of Sherwood, which we have already had so much occasion to notice, though at that time celebrated for its extent, and the thickness of the woody parts thereof, was not even then what it once had been, and vestiges of its former vastness were found for many miles beyond the spots where the royal meres, or forest boundaries, were then placed. A space of cultivated country would intervene; meadows and fields would stretch out, with nothing but a hawthorn or a beech overshadowing them here and there; but then suddenly would burst upon the traveller's eye a large patch of wood, of several miles in length, broken with the wild, irregular savannahs, dells, dingles, banks, and hills, which characterized the forest he had just left behind.

This was especially the case to the north and east, but one of the largest tracts of woodland, beyond the actual meres, lay in the south-eastern part of Yorkshire. It was separated by some three or four miles of ground irregularly cultivated, and broken by occasional clumps of old trees, and even small woods, from Sherwood itself, and, being more removed from the highway between the southern portion of England and the northern border, was more wild and secluded than even the actual forest.

In extent it was about five miles long, and from three to four broad, and had evidently, in former times, been a portion of the same vast woody region which occupied the whole of that part of England. No great towns lying in the country immediately surrounding it, and no lordly castle, belonging to any very powerful baron, this tract was without that constant superintendence which was exercised over the forest ground in the southern parts of the island; and the game was left open as an object of chase, alike to the yeomen of the lands around, the monks of a neighbouring priory, and some of the inferior nobles who held estates in that district.

Under a yellow sandy bank, then, upon the edge of this wood, with tall trees rising above, and the brown leaves of autumn rustling around, sat the old Earl of Monthermer, with his nephew, Hugh, six or eight of his own retainers, and four of the band of the bold Outlaw, finishing their forest meal, on a fine afternoon, some three days after the escape of the young nobleman from Nottingham Castle.

The old Earl and his own personal attendants had all donned the forest green, but Hugh still remained in the same attire which he had worn at the court; and looking daily for the intelligence that Prince Edward had justified him with the King, and pleaded his cause with the old Earl of Ashby, he entertained not the slightest intention of taking upon him either the outlaw's life or garb.

His uncle, indeed, was of a somewhat rougher school of chivalry than himself, and, from his earliest days till his hair had grown white with age, had known little but a life of adventure and privation, so that the calm and tranquil passing of peaceful hours seemed dull and wearisome to one whose corporeal vigour was but little decayed, and the wild sports of the forest, the mimic warfare of the chase, the constant change of circumstance, the very dangers of the outlaw's life, were to him as familiar things, pleasant as well as wholesome in their use. The old Earl had never loved but once, and that had been in early days, but love had been followed by bitterness and regret; and fixing his hopes upon his brother's son, he had forsworn the bonds of domestic life, and had no tie in wife or children to make him regret the castle hall, when he was under the boughs of the forest.

It was not so, however, with Hugh; and, though it might be agreeable enough, for a day or two, to roam the country with a bold band of foresters, yet he looked forward anxiously to the day of his return to the court, from no great love to the court itself, but for the sake of Lucy de Ashby.

Uncle and nephew, however, and all around, saw cheerfully the sun sinking, growing of a brighter and a brighter yellow as he went down, and beginning to touch the tips of the hills of Derbyshire and the clouds above them with purple and with gold. The merry song, the gay laugh, and jest passed round; and, if a memory of friends he had lost, and fortunes that were gone, and plans that were defeated, and expectations that were blasted, crossed the mind of the old Earl, they shadowed him but for a moment; and, with the true philosophy of the old soldier, he thought--"I have done my best, I have won renown, I have fought for the liberty of my country, and as for the rest, 'twill be all the same a hundred years hence."

With Hugh, hope had risen up, as we have shewn, almost as bright as ever; for in the heart of truth and honour there is a spring of confidence which needs all the burdens of age, experience, and disappointment, to weigh it down for any length of time.

"Look there!" he cried, at length--"there are three horsemen coming hither by the green road! News from the court, I'll warrant.--A letter from Prince Edward, perhaps."

"Who are they, Scathelock?" demanded the Earl. "My eyes are dim, now-a-days; and yours are sharp enough."

"The man that made the millstone," answered Scathelock, "cannot see much further through it than another. And, good faith, my lord, they are still too far for me to tell who they are; though I do wish with all my heart you, my good lord, had trusted to my eyes some six months ago. We should have had no Evesham, then."

"How so?" demanded the Earl, turning eagerly towards him.

"Why," replied Scathelock, "I sent you word there was a traitor amongst you, and told you who he was; but I was not believed. And Richard de Ashby was left to snap asunder the ties between his house

and the cause of the people, and to furnish the horse that bore Prince Edward from Hereford. There is more venom yet in that viper's fangs--it were well they were drawn."

"'Tis Robin himself!" cried another of the men, who had risen, and, shading his eyes from the setting sun, was gazing out over the grounds below, while the old Earl had let his head droop at the memories which Scathelock's speech called up, and sat looking sadly on the green blades of grass. "'Tis Robin himself! I see his broad shoulders and his little head. You will hear his horn anon."

"By my faith, your eyes are keen!" cried Scathelock, as the moment after, the mellow winding of the Outlaw's horn came in round, soft notes, up the side of the hill. "'Tis Robin's own mots! There's none can bring such sounds out of the brass as he can. Forgive me, my lord!" he continued, to the Earl--"I have vexed you."

"Not so, not so, good fellow," answered the old man; "'twas but the memories of the past. I acted then as ever, Scathelock--by what seemed best and noblest to be done; and that man's a fool, be his conduct what it will, who, having shaped it by the best light God gives, feels regret when he can lay his hand upon his breast, and say, 'My heart is pure!'--This, then, is Robin coming? Doubtless he brings good news."

"To us, he is rarely an ill-omened bird," replied Scathelock; "but, by my faith, the Abbot of St. Anne's, after he has skinned his poor tenants of a heavy donation, or a king's warden, full of fines and free gifts, or the Sheriff of Nottingham's bailiff and collector, would not think the sight of Robin Hood's nut head and brawny arms the pleasantest apparition he could meet with between Nottingham and Doncaster."

"Well, well," rejoined another, "if he frightens the purse-proud and the greedy, his footstep, on the threshold of the poor and the oppressed, has no ill sound, Scathelock."

"Wind your horn, Tim of the Lane!" cried Scathelock. "He cannot see us though we see him."

In such conversation some ten minutes passed away; at the end of which time Robin Hood and two of his companions came round under the bank, and sprang to the ground in the midst of the little party there assembled. He greeted them all frankly and with cheerful speech; but although no frown wrinkled his brow, it was easy to perceive that his mood was not a gay one.

"Come," he said, after his first salutation to the two noblemen was over, "what have you here to eat? By my life, we three are hungry and thirsty too. A fat brawn's head and a bustard scarcely touched! By our Lady, a supper for an emperor! Why, my lord, it seems you have not finished yet?"

"We had well-nigh ended," said the Earl: "but in such an evening as this one loves to prolong the minutes with careless talk, good Robin. There is rich store of the prior's wine, too, under the bank. Scathelock, it seems, resolved to make us merry."

"He is right, he is right," replied Robin; "the King can make men rich and noble too; but not every one can make you merry for the nonce. I wish it were."

"Why, Robin, you seem sad," observed Hugh de Monthermer, sitting down beside him. "If you bring me bad tidings, let me hear them quickly."

"Good or bad, as you take them," answered Robin Hood; "though some are foul enough for any ears."

"Well, then, speak, speak!" said Hugh de Monthermer. "The sting of bad tidings is suspense, Robin. The burden is soon borne, when once it is taken up.--They do not believe my story;--is it so?"

"No," answered Robin Hood; "the Prince, as I hear, has done you justice. He came over from Derby at once. I took care your letter should reach him instantly; and ere twelve hours from the time your head was to be struck off, the sentence was reversed, and you were declared innocent."

"And this is the administration of the law under Henry the Third?" said the old Earl. "The life of a peer of England is a king's plaything.--This will mend itself."

"Ha!" cried Robin Hood, with a degree of sorrowful impatience in his tone, "others have been making sport of peers' lives besides the King. Has not that news reached you, that Lindwell Castle has a new lord?"

Hugh de Monthermer started up, with a look of half incredulous surprise--"Dead?" he exclaimed,--"the Earl of Ashby dead?"

"Ay, marry," answered Robin Hood.--"murdered! so they say, by the Bull's hawthorn, under Lindwell Green, nor far from the skirt of Thornywood--You know the place, my lord?"

"Right well," replied Hugh de Monthermer;--"but is it sure, Robin?"

"Nothing is sure," answered Robin Hood--"nothing is sure in this world that I know of. But this news is all over the country; and as I came by Southwell this morning, I heard proclamation made upon the Green concerning this sad murder."

"This is most strange," said Hugh; "such things will make us infidels: while fools and villains reach to honours and renown, honest men are driven to herd in Sherwood with the beasts of the forest, and good men murdered at their own castle-gate. Who can have done this, Robin?--Do you know?"

"I know right well," replied Robin Hood. "'Tis Richard de Ashby has done it; and now the base beast--part wolf, part fox, part serpent--contrives to put the bloody deed upon another. But he shall find himself mistaken, if my advice is followed--I will see to it, I will see to it; for I am somewhat in fault in this matter. I was warned of the purpose, and might have stopped it; but in the hurry of other things, I forgot, and was too late."

"Yes," said Hugh de Monthermer, "it could be none other--the base villain! But can you bring him to punishment, Robin?"

"That must be your affair," replied Robin Hood, "I will prove his guilt; but you must punish him."

"That will I, right willingly," cried Hugh de Monthermer, "I will accuse him of the deed, and dare him to show his innocence in arms."

"Nay, that is not needful," answered Robin Hood; "'tis he accuses you."

"Me? me?" asked Hugh de Monthermer.

"What! my nephew," exclaimed the old Earl--"a prisoner or a fugitive?"

"Even so," replied the Outlaw, "ay, and with fair and specious showing, makes his case good; forges a letter, as I hear, and doubtless has hired witnesses, too. I have not been able to gather much of how this new plot has been framed; but, as I was going to tell you, my good lords: on Southwell Green this morning, as I passed, I saw a king's pursuivant with sundry men-at-arms, and stopping amongst the crowd, who laughed to see bold Robin Hood, the outlaw, the robber, the murderer, of much venison, stay and front the royal officers, I heard them make proclamation, saying, 'Know all men that Hugh Monthermer, Lord of Amesbury and Lenton, is accused, on strong suspicion, of traitorously and feloniously doing to death William Earl of Ashby, and that he is

hereby summoned to appear before the King at Nottingham, to purge himself of the said charge by trial, oath, ordeal, or wager of battle, at his choice, according to the laws of the realm and chivalry.'--Those are the very words."

"And strange ones, too," said the old Earl. "The form is somewhat varied from the usual course, and the name of the accuser left unmentioned."

"All is out of course now," answered Robin Hood, "and this not more than the rest. But it matters not--'twill come to the same in the end."

Hugh de Monthermer, while this was passing, stood buried in thought, with his arms folded on his chest.

"The villain!" he repeated, at length--"the villain! But he shall rue the day.--I will away at once, Robin, and face him ere the world be a day older. If my right hand fail me against Richard de Ashby, my conscience must be worse than I believe it. I will away at once; I must not lie beneath such a charge an hour longer than needful."

"Nay, nay, my good lord," cried Robin Hood, "sit down and be ruled by me!--haste may spoil all. I have the clue fully in my hands; and although I do hope and trust to see your lance an arm's length through the traitor, or your good sword in his false throat, yet I promise, that you shall, moreover, have the means in your hand of proving to all men's conviction, not only that you are innocent, but that he himself is the doer of the deed. In the first place, then, you must not go to the court of England without a safe-conduct. Methinks you should know better than that."

"Oh, but Prince Edward!" cried Hugh de Monthermer.

"Prince Edward may be away again," interrupted the Outlaw; "you must have a safe-conduct, and the time spent will not be lost. Sit you down--sit you down, my lord, and take a cup of wine.--This news has

shaken you.--I will arrange it all. The third day hence, you shall be at the English court; but even then you must contrive to delay the combat for a week. Then, ere you go to the lists, you shall put the proofs which I will give you in the hand of the Prince, to be opened when the fight is over. Come, sit you down, and let us talk of it; I'll show you reasons for so doing. Here, one of your own men shall ride to the Prince, and ask for a safe-conduct.--He may be back by to-morrow night."

Hugh sat down beside him again, the old Lord leaned upon the grass, his faithful followers and those of the bold forester made a circle at a little distance, passing the wine-cup round; and--as with the general world, in which mirth and gaiety and every-day idleness have their common course, while many a tragedy is acting in the houses near--while, in the one group the jest, and the laugh, and the song went on; in the other, was grave and deep thought, regret, and indignation, and that feeling of awe with which great crimes naturally inspire the mind of man. The golden sun went down, and a cold, clear, autumnal night succeeded. A fire was lighted of dry branches, serving the purpose of a torch likewise, and still those three sat discussing the subject which was uppermost in their thoughts with long and earnest debate.

About an hour after nightfall a letter was written with materials which one or other of the forest party was seldom without; and, as soon as it was ready, it was dispatched to Nottingham by an attendant of the old Earl, who promised to return with all speed. Still, however, the Earl, his Nephew, and the Outlaw continued their conversation, while the stars came out bright and clear, and everything around was lost to the eye but the dim outlines of the trees. The wind whispered through the branches with a long, sighing sound, and every now and then, in the manifold long pauses that broke the conference, the rustling noise was heard of a withered leaf dropping upon its dead companions that once flourished green upon the same bough, but had fallen before it to the earth. It was as an image of the passing away of mortal life; and such, probably, as the rustle of that leaf, is the only sound that rises up to

superior beings as, one by one, we drop into the tomb which has received before us the bright and beautiful we have known; an existence is extinguished, a state of being is over, and other things are ready to spring up from the mouldering remnants of our decay.

At length, however, the quick ear of the Outlaw caught something more: a creeping, quiet, but rapid noise--and exclaiming "Hark!" he looked around, adding in a loud voice, "Who goes there?"

There was no answer, but the instant after, with a bound from the top of the bank, came down the dwarf Tangel into the party below.

"Ha! Robin--ha!" he exclaimed--"I never yet could discover whether thou art ass or hare."

"How now, sirrah?" cried Robin Hood, striking him a light blow with his hand; "I pr'ythee find more savoury comparisons."

"Why one or the other thou must be," said Tangel, "by thy long ears. Do what I will, I cannot catch thee napping. But I think thou art most like a hare, which we see sitting with one long ear resting, while the other stands upright, like a sentinel upon the top of a mound. But I have come far, Robin, to bring a lady's errand to a truant knight. Here, runaway--here is a billet for thee!--It was sent for Robin Hood or any of his people--the messenger took me for a people, and so gave it to me, though, Heaven knows, they might as well have taken me for a steeple, as far as the difference of size is concerned."

As he spoke, he handed a small billet or note, to the Outlaw, who stirred the fire into a blaze, and was opening it to read, when he remarked some words written on the outside, which ran--"To the Lord Hugh of Monthermer, with speed, if he may be found--If not, for Robin Hood of Sherwood."

"'Tis for you, my lord," said Robin, handing it to Hugh, who instantly tore it open, and ran his eye eagerly over the contents.

When he had done so, he turned back again and read aloud, omitting one sentence at the beginning.

"Your accuser is Richard de Ashby,"--so ran the letter; "and I tremble when I tell you my suspicion lest it should be unjust. But I have marked it on his face,--I have seen it in his changing colour,--I have heard it in the very tone of his voice. There is an impression upon me which nothing can efface that this deed was his. I know not how to counsel or advise, but it is fitting that you should know this; your own wisdom must do the rest. I fear for you; I fear for my brother Alured, too. There is but one between that man and the wealth and rank which he has long envied; he has gone too far to pause at any human means; and my apprehensions are very great for him who stands in the way."

"Thus it is," said the old Earl--"thus it is with the wicked; they very often contrive to cloak their acts from the wise and prudent of this world, but to innocence and simplicity seems to be given light from Heaven to detect them under any disguise."

"Give me a woman for finding out man's heart," cried Robin Hood; "that is, if she loves him not; for then all are fools.--But, come, my lord--let us seek a better place of shelter for the night; my blood is not very chilly, but still I feel it cold.--Make much of Tangel, merry men, and give him a leg of the bustard and a cup of wine; but look to the flask, look to the flask, with him. Remember last Christmas eve, Tangel, when you mistook a stag-hound for a damsel in distress, and sagely wondered in your drunkenness how she came by such a beard."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

In a dark small room, high up in the back part of one of the houses in the lower town of Nottingham, with the wall covered on one side by rough oak planking, and having on the other the sharp slope of the roof; on a wretched truckle bed, with a small table and a lamp beside it, lay the tall and powerful form of a wounded man, with languor in his eyes, and burning fever in his cheek.

On a stool at the other side sat Richard de Ashby, looking down upon him with a countenance which did not express much compassion, but on the contrary bore an angry and displeased look; and, while he gazed, his hand rested upon his dagger, with the fingers clutching, every now and then, at the hilt, as if with a strong inclination to terminate his companion's sufferings in the most speedy manner possible.

"It was madness and folly," he said--"I repeat, it was madness and folly to bring you here into the very midst of dangers, when I showed you clearly how to shape your course."

"We saw a party of horse upon the bridge, I tell you," replied Dighton, for he it was who lay there, with the punishment of one of his evil deeds upon him, "and could not find a ford. But, in the name of the fiend, do not stand here talking about what is done and over; let me have 'tendance of some kind. Send for a leech, or fetch one."

"A leech!" cried Richard de Ashby, "the man's mad! There is none but the one at the court to be found here. Would you have the whole story get abroad, and be put to death for the murder?"

"As well that, as lie and die here," answered Dighton. "Why I tell thee, Dickon, I feel as if there were a hot iron burning through me from my breast to my shoulder, and every throb of my heart seems to beat against it, and add to the fire. I must have some help, man!--If thou art not a devil, give we some water to drink. I am parched to death."

Richard de Ashby walked thoughtfully across the room, and brought him a cup of water, pausing once as he did so, to gaze upon the floor and meditate.

"I will, tell thee what, Dighton," he said, "thou shalt have 'tendance. Kate here, it seems, saw them bring thee in. She is a marvellous leech; and when I was wounded up by Hereford at the time of the Prince's escape, she was better than any surgeon to me. She shall look to thy wound; but mind you trust her not with a word of how you got it; for a woman's tongue is ever a false guardian, and hers is not more to be depended on than the rest."

"Well," answered the man, discontentedly, "anything's better than to lie here in misery, with nobody to say a word to; I dare say you would as soon see me die as live."

"No," replied Richard de Ashby, with a bitter smile, "I should not know what to do with the corpse."

"I thought so," said Dighton, "for I expected every minute, just now, that your dagger would come out of the sheath. But I have strength enough still left, Dickon, to dash your brains out against the wall, or to strangle you between my thumbs, as men do a partridge; and I do not intend to die yet, I can tell you. But come, send this girl quick; and bid her bring some healing salve with her. There is a quack-salver lives at the top of the high street; he will give her some simples to soften the wound and to take out the fire."

"I will see to it--I will see to it," replied Richard de Ashby, "and send her to you presently. I cannot visit you again to-night, for I must away to the castle, but to-morrow I will come to you."

Thus saying, he quitted the wretched room, and closed the door after him. The wounded man heard the key turn in the lock, and murmured to himself--"The scoundrel! to leave me here a whole night and day without help or 'tendance; but if I get better, I'll pay him for his care--I'll break

his neck, or bring him to the gallows. I surely shall live--I have been wounded often before, and have always recovered,--but I never felt anything like this, and my heart seems to fail me. I saw worms and serpents round me last night, and the face of the girl I threw into the Thames up by the thicket,--it kept looking at me, blue and draggled as when she rose the last time. I heard the scream too!--Oh yes, I shall live--'tis nothing of a wound! I have seen men with great gashes--twice as large. Ha! there is some one coming!" and he started and listened as the lock was turned, and the door opened.

The step was that of a woman, and the moment after, Kate Greenly approached his bed-side. Her fair face was pale, her lips had lost their rosy red, her cheek had no longer the soft, round fulness of high health; and though her eye was as lustrous and as bright as ever, yet the light thereof was of a feverish, unsteady, restless kind. There was a sort of abstracted look, too, in them. It seemed as if some all-engrossing subject in her own heart called her thoughts continually back from external things, whenever she gave her mind to them for a moment.

Walking straight to the bed, and still holding the lamp in her hand, she gazed full and gravely upon Dighton's face; but the brain was evidently busy with other matters than that on which her eyes rested; and it was not till the wounded man exclaimed, impatiently--"Well, what do you stare at?" that she roused herself from her fit of abstraction.

"He has sent me," she said, "to tend some wounds you have received, but I can do you little good. The priest of our parish indeed gave me some small skill in surgery; but methinks 'tis more a physician for the soul than for the body that you want."

"That is no affair of thine," replied the man, sharply--"look to my wound, girl, and see if thou hast got any cooling thing that will take the fire out, for I burn, I burn!"

"Thou shalt burn worse hereafter," said Kate, sitting down by his bed-side; "but show me the hurt, though methinks 'tis of little avail."

"There," cried the man, tearing down the clothes, and exposing his brawny chest, "'tis nothing--a scratch--one may cover it with a finger; and yet how red it is around, and it burns inwardly, back to my very shoulder."

Kate stooped her head down, and held the lamp to the spot where the sword of the old Earl of Ashby had entered, and examined it attentively for a full minute. As the man had said, it was but a small and insignificant looking injury to overthrow the strength of that robust form, and lay those muscular limbs in prostrate misery upon a couch of sickness, as feeble as those of an infant. You might indeed have covered the actual spot with the point of a finger; but round about it for more than a hand's breadth on either side, was a space of a deep red colour, approaching to a bluish cast as it came near the wound. It was swollen; too, though not much, and one or two small white spots appeared in the midst of that fiery circle.

When she had finished her examination, she raised her eyes to the man's face, and gazed on it again, with a look of grave and solemn thought.

"Art thou in great pain?" she said.

"Have I not told you," he answered, impatiently--"it is hell."

"No," she replied, shaking her head, "no, 'tis nothing like hell, my friend. Thou mayest some time long to be back again there, on that bed, writhing under ten such wounds as this, rather than what thou shalt then suffer. But thou wilt be easier soon. Seest thou that small black spot upon the edge of the wound?"

"Ay," he answered, looking from the wound to her face with an inquiring glance--"what of that?--Will that give me ease?"

"Yes," she replied, "as it spreads.--Art thou a brave man? Dost thou fear death?"

"What do you mean, wench?" he cried, gazing eagerly in her face, "Speak out--you would drive me mad!"

"Nay," she replied, "I would call you back to reason. You have been mad all your life, as well as I, and many another!--Man, you are dying!"

"Dying!" he exclaimed, "dying!--I will not die! Send for the surgeon--he shall have gold to save me.--I will not--I cannot die!" and he raised himself upon his elbow, as if he would have risen to fly from the fate that awaited him.

He fell back again the moment after, however, with a groan; and then, looking anxiously in the girl's face, he said, "Oh, save me--I cannot die--I will not die in this way! Send for a surgeon--see what can be done!"

"Nothing!" replied Kate. "If all the surgeons in England and France were here, they could do nothing for thee. The hand of death is upon thee, man!--The gangrene has begun. Thou shalt never rise from that bed again--thou shalt never feel the fresh air more--thou art no longer thine own--thou art Death's inheritance--thy body to the earth, thy spirit to God that gave it, there to render an account of all that thou hast done on earth.--Think not I deceive thee!--Ask thine own heart Dost thou not feel that death is strong upon thee?"

"I do," groaned the man, covering his eyes with his hand. "Curses be upon my own folly for meddling with this scheme! Curses be upon that foul fiend, Dickon of Ashby, for bringing me into it, and leaving me here till it is too late--till the gangrene has begun!--Curses upon him!--and may the lowest pit of hell seize him for his villany!"

"Spare your curses," said Kate, "they can only bring down fresh ones upon your own head. Think upon yourself now, poor wretch!--think whether, even at this last hour, you may not yet do something to turn away the coming anger of God!"

"God!" cried the man--"shall I see God?--God who knows all things--who has beheld all I have done--who was near when--Oh! that is terrible--that is terrible, indeed!"

"It is terrible, but true," replied Kate; "but there is hope, if thou wilt seek it."

"Hope!" exclaimed the man, mistaking her--"hope! Did you not tell me I must die?"

"Ay, your body," replied Kate, "'tis your soul that I would save. A thief obtained pardon on the cross. God's mercy may be sued for till the last."

"But how--how?" cried he, "I know naught of prayers and paternosters. 'Tis twenty years since, when a beardless stripling, I got absolution for stealing the King's game;--and what have I not done since? No, no, there is no hope! I must die as I have lived! God will not take off his curse for aught I can say now! If I could live, indeed, to undo what I have done--to fast, and pray, and do penance--then, in truth, there might be a chance."

"There is still hope," answered Kate--"thou hast still time to make a great atonement. Thou hast still time to save thy soul. God, as if by an especial mercy, has provided the means for you to cancel half your wickedness. I know all the tale: thou hast slain a poor old man, that never injured thee: but I tell thee that another is accused of his murder--an innocent man, who--"

"I know! I know!" cried Dighton, interrupting her, "'tis all his fiendish art!" And then, gazing in her face for a moment, he added, "but why talkest thou to me of repentance?--why preachest thou to me, girl, and dost not practise thine own preaching? Art not thou a sinner, too, as well as I am, ha?--and do not they tell us that the soft sins damn as surely as the rough ones? Why dost thou not repent and make atonement?"

"I do," said Kate, firmly; "at this very hour I am aiming at nought else. Thinkest thou that I love that man? I tell thee that I hate him--that I abhor the very sight of his shadow, as it darkens the door--that the touch of his very hand is an abomination. But I abide with him still to frustrate his dark deeds--to protect those that are innocent from his fiendish devices--to give him to the arm of justice--and then to lay my own head in the grave, in the hope of God's mercy."

"But who tells thee thou shalt find it?" asked Dighton.

"God's word," replied Kate, "and a good priest of the holy church, both tell me that, if, sincerely repenting, I do my best to make up for all that I have done amiss--if, without fear and favour, I labour to defend the innocent even at the expense of the guilty, I shall surely obtain mercy myself in another world, though I wring my own heart in this."

"Did a priest say so?" demanded Dighton, looking up, with a ray of hope breaking across his face--"send for that priest, good girl!--send for that priest!--quick! He may give me comfort!"

Kate paused for a moment, without reply, gazing down upon the ground, and then said, "'Twould be hard to keep thee from the only hope of forgiveness, yet----"

"Yet what?" exclaimed he, impatiently. "In God's name, woman, I adjure thee----"

"Wilt thou do what the priest bids thee do?" demanded Kate.

"Yes--yes!" cried he--"I will do all sorts of penance!"

"Even if he tells thee," continued Kate, "to make such a confession----"

"Ay, ay," said the man, "that's what I want--I want to confess."

"Nay, but," replied Kate Greenly, "not a mere confession to the ear of the priest, buried for ever under his vow, but such a confession as may save the innocent--as may bring the guilty to justice--as may declare who was the murderer, and who instigated the murder?"

"No," cried the man, "I will not betray Ellerby. As to Richard de Ashby, if I could put a stone upon his head to sink him deeper into hell, I would do it,--but I wont betray my comrade."

"Well, then," said Kate Greenly, "you must even die as you have lived.--I can do nothing for you."

"Get thee gone, then, harlot!" cried the man. "If thou art not a fiend, send me a priest!"

Kate Greenly's eye flashed for a moment at the coarse name he gave her, and her cheek burnt; but the next instant she cast down her gaze again, murmuring, "It is true!" Then turning to the wounded man, she said, "I mind not thy harsh words; but it is needless for me to seek a man of God, unless thou wilt promise to do what I know he will require before he gives thee absolution. I promised to let no one see thee at all. To send for any one I must break my promise, and I will not do so for no purpose. Wilt thou do what the priest tells thee, even if it be to make public confession of who did that deed?"

"No," cried the man, "I will not betray him! Get thee gone, if thou wilt!--Curses upon you all!"

Kate moved towards the door, but turned ere she went, and said, "I am in the chamber beneath! Think well what it is to go into the presence of God unrepenting and unabsolved--to meet all that thou hast injured, and all that thou hast slain, accusing thee at the high throne above, without the voice of a Saviour to plead for thee! Think of all this, I say; and if thy heart turn, and thou wilt resolve to do an act of atonement and repentance, strike on the ground with thy sword, it stands at thy bedhead; and I will come to thee with the best physician that thou cant now have. One that can cure the wounds of the spirit."

The man glared at her without reply, and Kate Greenly passed out, closing and locking the door. She paused at the stairhead, and clasped her hands, murmuring, "What shall I do?--He must not die without confession.--He must have consolation--Perhaps Father Mark might persuade him. But he will last till morning. 'Tis now near eight; I will wait awhile--solitude is a great convincer of man's heart." And, descending the stairs, she entered the room below.

Half an hour passed without the least sound, and Kate sat gazing into the fire, unable to occupy herself with any indifferent thing. The time seemed long; she began to fear that the murderer would remain obdurate, and she had risen, thinking it would be better to send for Father Mark at once. She had scarcely taken three steps towards the door, however, when there was a stroke or two upon the floor above, and then the clanging fall of some piece of metal, as if the heavy sword had dropped from the weak hands of the wounded man.

Kate ran up with a quick foot, descended again in a few minutes, and, ere half an hour was over, a venerable man, with silver hair, was sitting by the bed of death; and Kate Greenly kneeling with paper before her, writing down the tale of Dighton's guilt from his own lips.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

The King and Prince Edward stood in the great hall of Nottingham Castle, about to go forth on horseback. But few attendants, comparatively, were around them; and a good deal of unmeaning merriment was upon the King's countenance, as he jested with a horribly contorted humpback, who, tricked forth in outrageous finery, displayed upon his own deformed person more ribands, feathers, and lace, than all the rest of the Court put together. Full of malice, wit, and impudence, every tale of scandal, every scurvy jest and ribald story of the Court, were familiar to him, and with these he entertained the leisure hours of the King, when the monarch was not seeking amusement in the society of his foreign favourites.

The brow of Edward, on the contrary, was somewhat stern and sad. Many things had gone contrary to his wishes; his father seemed resolved not to perform any of the promises which he had made to the more patriotic noblemen who had supported the royal cause; and though Edward carried filial respect and deference to an extent which his commanding mind, high purposes, and great achievements, might perhaps have justified him in stopping short of, yet he could not but suffer his countenance to show his disappointment and disapprobation.

The King had descended from his apartments before his horses had been brought into the court; and when the door at the farther end of the hall opened, he took a few steps towards it, followed by the gentlemen who were with him, supposing that some of the attendants were coming to announce that all was ready.

Two or three of the royal officers did certainly appear, but in the midst was seen the tall and powerful form of Hugh de Monthermer, with an old knight, Sir John Hardy, on one side, and a page on the other. He advanced with a quick step up the hall, and, bowing reverently to the King and to the Prince, he said--

"I have come, your grace, according to the tenour of the safe-conduct I have received, with one well known in feats of arms to be my god-father in chivalry, and with twenty-five attendants and no more, to meet my accuser face to face, to declare that his charge is false before God and man, and to do battle with him in this behalf--my body against his, according to the law of arms. I do beseech you, my lord, let me know my accuser."

"'Tis I," answered a voice from behind the King, and Alured de Ashby stepped forward to Henry's side--"'tis I, Alured de Ashby, who do accuse you, Hugh of Monthermer, of feloniously and maliciously doing to death William de Ashby, my noble father. I put myself on the decision of Heaven, and God defend the right!"

Hugh of Monthermer had turned very pale. His lip quivered, his eye grew anxious and haggard, and for a moment or two he remained in deep silence. At length, however, he replied--

"You do me bitter wrong, Alured de Ashby--you should know better."

"How so?" demanded his opponent; "there is strong and dark suspicion against you."

"Which I can disperse in a moment," said Hugh de Monthermer, "like clouds scattered by a searching wind. But even were there suspicions ten times as strong, I say that you, of all men, should not receive them."

"How pale he turns!" observed one of the noblemen near, loud enough for Hugh to hear.

"Ay, sir, I do turn pale," replied the young nobleman, looking sternly at him "I turn pale to find that one against whom I would less willingly draw the sword than any man living, is he, who, by a false and baseless suspicion, forces me to do so. Alured de Ashby, you knew right well when you concealed the name of my accuser that no provocation would induce me to dip my hand in the blood of your sister's brother."

"I did," replied Alured de Ashby; "that was the reason I concealed it."

"Then should you not have likewise known," demanded Hugh, "that the same reason which makes me shrink from injuring her brother, would still more withhold my arm, if raised, to spill the blood of her father. You know it, Alured de Ashby--in your heart you know it well. Nothing, so help me God, would have made me do one act to injure him, even if there had been quarrel or dispute between us, when, I call Heaven to witness, there was none."

"This is all vain," answered Alured de Ashby, with an unmoved countenance; "you, Hugh de Monthermer, underlie my challenge; you have accepted it, and I will make it good. There lies my glove!" and he cast it down before the King.

Sir John Hardy instantly advanced and took it up, saying, "In the name of the most noble lord Hugh de Monthermer, Baron of Amesbury, I take your gage, Alured, Earl of Ashby, and do promise on his behalf that he will do battle with you in his quarrel when and where the king shall appoint, on horse or foot, with the usual arms and equipments, according to the law of arms, and the customs of the court of England."

Hugh de Monthermer folded his arms on his chest, and bent down his eyes upon the ground; and oh, how bitter were his feelings at that moment! The deed was done--the irretrievable engagement was made; he must either dip his hand in the kindred blood of her he loved best on earth, or he must abandon honour, and name, and station, for ever--ay,

and remain gained with the imputation of a base and horrible act, which would equally put a barrier between him and the object of his long-cherished hopes.

Darkness was round him on every side, Between two black alternatives, both equally menacing and fearful, he could but go on upon the course before him--upon the course to which he seemed driven by fate. He must meet his accuser in arms, he must do battle with him at outrance, he must conquer, he must slay him. He knew well his own powers and his own skill, and he doubted not that he should obtain the victory; but he also knew that Alured de Ashby was not one to be overthrown with ease, that he was not one whom he should be able to wound, disarm, or save. Once in the field together, it was hand against hand, body against body, life against life, till one or the other was no more. Death was the only warder that would part them after the barrier of the lists fell behind him. Nor could he hesitate, nor could he spare his adversary, even though he were willing to risk or lose his own life rather than slay the brother of Lucy de Ashby; for with the accused, ignominy, and condemnation followed overthrow, and it was not alone death, but disgrace, that was the mead of the vanquished. No; his fate was sealed, his doom determined, with his own hand was he destined to destroy his own happiness, to tear the sweetest ties of the heart asunder, and to consign himself to grief, and disappointment, and solitude through life.

As the last words broke from the lip of Sir John Hardy, the scene around him seemed to disappear from his eyes. He felt like one of those, who, on some bitter sorrow, forswear the world and the world's joys for the dark cell of the monastery, the living tomb of the heart. He felt like one of them, when the vow is pronounced, when their fate is sealed, and when all earth's things are given up for ever. The whole hall and all that it contained swam indistinctly before him, and he bent down his eyes lest their giddy vacancy should betray the intensity of his feelings to these who watched him.

In the meanwhile Henry and the Prince conferred for a moment apart; and the King turned first to the accuser, then to the accused, saying, "My lords, we will name Monday next for the decision of this wager of battle; the place to be the Butts by the side of Trent, below the bridge. We will take care that fitting lists be prepared; and, until the day of combat, we charge you both to keep the peace one towards the other, to live in tranquil amity, as noble knights and gallant gentlemen may do, although there be mortal quarrel between them, to be decided at a future time."

Thus speaking, the King turned to leave the hall, but Edward paused a moment, and took Hugh de Monthermer's hand. "I grieve, Hugh," he said, "most deeply that by some sad mistake--ay, and by some reckless conduct," he continued, aloud, "on the part of some gentlemen of this court, a false and wrongful charge was brought against you in the first instance, out of which this second accusation has in some degree arisen. Of the first charge you have cleared yourself, to the satisfaction of the King and every honourable man; and of the second, I know you will clear yourself also as becomes you. In the meantime, you are my guest; one of the towers on the lower wall is prepared for you and your people, and as the day fixed is somewhat early for this trial, my armourer is at your command, to furnish you with such things as may be needful; for your own dwelling is too far distant to send for harness; and we know this gallant Earl too well," he added, turning towards Alured de Ashby, "not to feel sure that his opponent in the lists must use every caution and defence which the law of arms permits."

The young Earl smiled proudly, and followed the King, who, together with his son and the rest of the court, quitted the hall, leaving Hugh de Monthermer standing in the midst, paying but little attention to anything but his own sad thoughts.

"My lord, I have charge to show you your apartments," said an attendant, approaching with a simpering air. "The tower is very convenient, but the stables are not quite so good, and you must put six of

your horses in the town. This way, my lord, if you so please."

Hugh de Monthermer followed in silence, and the man led him accordingly across the court to one of the towers, which stood as an independent building, only connected with the rest of the castle by the walls.

"This, sir," said the servant, entering with him, "is the hall for your people, who will be supplied by the King's purveyors with all they need. Here are two sleeping chambers behind, and here a chamber for this gallant knight. Now, up these steps, my lord--Here is a vacant room for you to range your arms, and see that all be well prepared for man and horse; here is a pinion for your hood and chapel-de-fer, here are stays for your lances, and nowhere will you find better wood than in Nottingham; a hook for your shield, and a block for the hauberk and other harness. This way is the ante-room, my lord, with truckle-beds for a yeoman and a page. That door leads direct through the wall to the apartments of the Prince, and this to your bed-room."

Hugh gave him some money; and, saying, "Largesse, my lord, largesse," the man withdrew, promising to send in the young nobleman's followers, and to show them where to stable their horses.

"Take heart, my lord--take heart," said Sir John Hardy, after the royal attendant was gone; "this is a bitter change of adversaries, it is true; but now 'tis done, it cannot be helped, and you must do your devoir against this Earl, who will bring his fate upon his own head."

"I thought him two hundred miles away," replied Hugh; "but, as you say, I must do my devoir. See to all things necessary, Hardy; for I have no heart to think of anything but one. A good plain harness is all I want: the horse that brought me hither will do as well as another."

"Nay, my lord, you must not be rash," answered the old. Knight, "lest some misfortune happen."

"The worst misfortune that life has in store for me is sure to befal," replied Hugh de Monthermer: "it is, to slay the brother of Lucy de Ashby, Hardy; for he fights with a desperate man, one to whom all things on earth are indifferent--who must live, though life be hateful to him--who cannot die, as he would fain do, lest ignominy should cleave unto his name. I will trust all to you, Hardy--I will trust all to you; but I cannot think or talk of anything at present, so I betake me to my chamber. If any one should come, tell them I am busy--busy enough, indeed, with dark and bitter fancies."

Thus saying, he retreated to the bed-room which had been assigned him, and casting himself down on a settle, he spread his arms upon the table, and buried his eyes in them.

It were vain to attempt by any words of ours to depict the state of Hugh de Monthermer's heart, as he sat there, given up entirely to sad memories and gloomy expectations. Oh, how his thoughts warred with one another--how the idea of flying from the task he had undertaken was met by the repugnance of an honourable spirit to disgrace and shame--how the image of Lucy de Ashby's brother dying beneath his blows, rose up before his sight, followed by the cold, averted look with which she would meet him ever after, the chilling tone of her voice, the shrinking horror of her demeanour, when she should see the destroyer of her nearest kinsman. Then came the thought of what if he were to avoid the combat?--What would be the consequences then? Would he not be considered recreant and coward?

The time allowed was so short, too--but three brief days--that there was no hope of gaining proof of his own innocence, and of the guilt of another, before the period appointed. A week, a fortnight--often more, was allotted for the preparation; but in this instance the time had been curtailed as there were evil tidings from the Isle of Axholme, which were likely to call Prince Edward speedily from Nottingham.

He could send, indeed, to the forest; he could even make inquiries in person, if he liked--for his safe-conduct specified that he was free to come and go as he thought fit; but he had been especially warned, that the proofs against Richard de Ashby could not be produced for at least a week, and his own eagerness to meet the charge had led him to the court much sooner than the judgment of his forest friends warranted. Thus, on every side he seemed shut in by difficulties, and nought was left him but to defend his innocence, to the utter extinction of all happiness for life.

"Would she could see me," he thought; "would that she could see the agony which distracts my heart, at the very idea of raising my hand against her brother!--However that may be," he continued, "that villain shall not escape. Although I cannot dare him to the field, now that I underlie the challenge of another, yet I will publicly accuse him before I enter the lists; and, either by my lance or the hand of the executioner, he shall die the death he has deserved."

He raised his head quickly and fiercely as he thus thought; the door opposite to him was slowly opening when he did so, and the face of Prince Edward appeared in the aperture.

"I knocked," said the Prince, "but you did not answer."

"Forgive me, my gracious lord," replied Hugh, rising, "but my thoughts have been so sadly busy, that it would seem they close the doors of the ear lest they should be interrupted. I heard no one approach; but, God knows, your presence is the only thing that could give me comfort."

"This is a sad business, indeed," said Edward, seating himself. "Come, sit, Monthermer, and tell me how all this has happened."

"Good my lord, I know not," replied Hugh. "You must have more information than I have; for here, in this neighbourhood, has the plot been concerted. Here, in your father's court, where they contrived to

have me doomed to death some time since, untried, unheard, undefended--here have they, when frustrated in that, devised a new scheme for my destruction."

"Nay," said Edward, "it was not that I meant. I asked how it is you proposed this rash appeal to arms, when I expected that you would demand fair trial and judgment according to law?"

"I have been deceived, my lord," replied Hugh--"terribly deceived! Even Lucy herself supposed that Richard de Ashby was my accuser, and I never knew that Alured had returned; otherwise, well aware of his quick and fiery spirit, I should have judged that he would make the quarrel his own, whether he believed the charge or not."

"That Richard is the real accuser, there can be no doubt," said the Prince. "His cousin is but a screen for his malice; but yet you were rash, Monthermer, and I know not now what can be done to help you.--Who is there that can prove where you were, and how employed, upon the day that this dark deed was done?"

"Outlaws and banished men--none else, my lord," replied Hugh de Monthermer; "witnesses whose testimony cannot be given or received. But I will beseech you to let me know in what arises the suspicion that I had any share in this? I do not believe that there is a single act in all my life which could bring upon me even the doubt of such a crime."

"The scheme has been well arranged," answered Edward; "the proofs are plausible and various--but you shall hear the whole;" and he proceeded to tell him all that the reader already knows concerning the accusation brought against him.

For a moment, Hugh remained silent, confounded, and surprised; but gradually his own clear mind, though for an instant bewildered by the case made out against him, seized on the clue of the dark labyrinth with which they had surrounded him.

"Well arranged, indeed, my lord," he replied, "but too complicated even for its own purpose. Villany never can arrive at the simplicity of truth. Was there no one, sir, who, even out of such grounds as these, could find matter to defend me?"

"Yes," answered Edward, "there was, and she was one you love. She stood forward to do you right--she swept away half of these suspicions from the minds even of your enemies--she showed that one half of the tale was false, the other more than doubtful."

"Dear, dear girl!" cried Hugh de Monthermer; and, gazing earnestly in Edward's face, he asked, "and shall my hand spill her brother's blood?"

"Nay, more," continued the Prince, without replying to what the young Lord said, "she declared her belief that the real murderer had brought suspicion upon you to screen himself."

"The scheme, my lord, is deeper still," answered Hugh de Monthermer--"the scheme is deeper still, or I am very blind. Did this dear lady point at any one whom she believed the culprit?"

"She would not say," replied Edward, "she would not even hint, before the whole court, who was the object of her suspicions; but since, in private, the Princess has drawn from her the secret of her doubts. We entertain the same.--Have you, too, any cause to fix upon the murderer?"

"Cause, my lord!" cried Hugh, "I know him as I know myself. *I* have no doubts. Mine are not suspicions. With me 'tis certainty, and full assurance.--Were it not a fine and well-digested scheme, my lord--supposing that between you and high fortune and the hand of the loveliest lady in the land, there stood a father and a brother and a lover--to slay the old man secretly, and instigate his son to charge the daughter's promised husband with the deed--to make them meet in arms, in the good hope that the lover's well-known lance would remove

from your path the sole remaining obstacle, by drowning out, in her brother's blood, the last hope of his marriage with the lady? Thus, father, brother, lover would be all disposed of, the lands and lordship yours, and the lady almost at your mercy likewise. Do you understand me, my lord?"

"Well!" answered the Prince, "But who is the man?"

"Richard de Ashby, my lord; and, if the day named for this sad combat had not been so soon, I was promised evidence, within a week, which would have proved upon the traitor's head his cunning villany."

Edward mused, and turned in his mind the possibility of postponing the event. But--though it may seem strange to the reader that such a state of things should ever have existed--a judicial combat of that day was a matter with which even so great and high-minded a prince as Edward I. dared not meddle as he would. We know how far such interference, at an after-period, contributed to lose his crown to Richard II.; and Edward saw no possibility of changing the day, or even hour, appointed for the trial by battle, unless some accidental circumstance were to occur which might afford a substantial motive for the alteration. Otherwise, he knew that he would have the whole chivalry of Europe crying out upon the deed; and that was a voice which even he durst not resist.

"'Tis unfortunate, indeed," he said, "most unfortunate; but my father having fixed it early, and at my request, too, it cannot be changed. But do you feel sure, quite sure, that within one week you could bring forward proofs to exculpate yourself, and to show the guilt of this wretched man?"

"As surely as I live," replied Hugh de Monthermer. "I have the word of one who never failed me yet--of one who speaks not lightly, my good lord."

"And who is he?" demanded Edward.

A faint smile came upon Hugh de Monthermer's countenance: "He is one of the King's outlaws," he answered; "but yet his word may be depended on."

The Prince mused for a moment or two without reply, and then rejoined--"It is probable these forest outlaws in our neighbourhood may know something of the matter. Think you they had any share in it?"

"What! in the murder?" cried Hugh de Monthermer. "Oh, no, my lord, Would to God you had as honest men in Nottingham Castle as under the boughs of Sherwood!"

"You are bitter, Hugh," replied the Prince, and then added--"I fear the day cannot be changed; and all that remains to be done is, to send to these friends of yours as speedily as may be, bidding them give you, without delay, whatever proofs may be in their hands. 'Tis probable that other things may arise to strengthen our conviction. When we see what they can furnish us with, our course will be soon decided. If there be anything like fair evidence that Richard de Ashby has done this deed, I will stop the combat, and proclaim his guilt; but unless I am sure, I must not pretend to do so, lest I bring upon myself the charge of base ingratitude. He it was, Hugh, who furnished me with the swift horse, whereon I fled from Hereford; and though I own that I would have chosen any other man in all England to aid in my deliverance rather than him, yet I must not show myself thankless. And 'tis but yesterday that I moved my father to give him the lands of Cottington as his reward."

"The very act, my lord," replied Hugh, "which merits your gratitude, was one of treachery to the party which he pretended to serve. For that I will not blame him, however; but he is a dark and deceitful man, and the proof can be made clear, I do not doubt. I will send instantly, as you direct. All that I gain in way of proof I will give into your hand, my lord, and let you rule and direct my conduct. It is so terrible a choice which lies before me, that my brain seems bewildered when I think of it."

"It is sad, indeed!" replied Edward. "I have put it to my heart, Monthermer, how I should act, were I placed as you are, and I know how painful would be the decision. Whatever happens in the lists--whoever lives, whoever dies--you must be the loser. If you are vanquished--if, by a hesitating heart or unwilling hand, you give the victory to your adversary, you lose not only renown, but honour and esteem with all men; you lose not only life but reputation. If you conquer--if you win honour, and maintain your innocence--your love and happiness is gone for ever. 'Tis a hard fate, Monthermer; and whatever can be done to avert it shall be done by me;--but I must leave you now. You will of course be present at the King's supper. Bear, I beseech you, a calm and steady countenance, that your enemies may not triumph. Your accuser is gone back to Lindwell; and Edward's friend must not seem cast down."

Thus saying, he rose to quit the chamber; but before he went, he bent his head, adding, in a lower voice, "Doubtless you know your lady-love is here--ay, here, in Nottingham Castle, with the Princess Eleanor. Of course, in these days of mourning, she mingles not with the court; but if it be possible, I will contrive that you shall see her. Methinks the laws of chivalry require it should be so."

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed Hugh, clasping his hands--"wherever she were, I would demand to see her; and no one bearing knightly sword and spur would venture to refuse me. Have I not to tell her how my heart is wrung?--Have I not to show her that this is no deed of mine?--Have I not to prove to her that I am but a passive instrument in the hands of fate?--that the death which he calls upon his head, is her brother's own seeking; and that I am no more answerable for it than the lance that strikes him?--Oh yes, my lord, I must see her!"

"You shall, you shall," replied Edward, "but it must not be to-night. Farewell, for the present;" and thus saying, he quitted the room.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

It was evening; but one day remained to pass away before the arrival of that appointed for the wager of battle; and all Nottingham had been in hurry and confusion with the excitement of the approaching spectacle. The residence of the King in the Castle had already filled the town fuller than it was ever known to be before; but now a still greater influx of people poured into it from all the country round, to witness a transaction, which combined all the splendor and display of one of the military pageants of the day with the interest of a deep tragedy. The citizens had flocked out of the town during the morning, to see the preparation of the lists; parties of pleasure had been made to the spot where the deadly struggle was to take place; and mirth and merriment had surrounded the scene, where two fellow-creatures were soon to appear armed for mutual destruction--where bright hopes and fair prospects were to be blighted, and death and sorrow to share the victory.

No tidings had been received by Hugh de Monthermer from his forest friends. No circumstance had transpired which could aid him in proving his innocence, or could fix the guilt upon another. Prince Edward was evidently anxious and uneasy; and the only person who seemed pleased with the whole affair was the King himself, who, affecting a dignified grace and calmness and declaring that he assumed the young Lord of Monthermer to be innocent till he was proved guilty, treated him with courtesy, and even with distinction. It was the pampering of a gladiator before sending him into the arena; for the secret of Henry's good humour was, that he was pleased at the excitement, and satisfied with those who contributed to it.

Not to show favour, however--as one of the most favourite-ridden monarchs that ever lived thought fit to term it, he sent expressly to invite the young Earl of Ashby to repair with his train to Nottingham Castle, and partake of the royal hospitality before the combat; and Alured had already arrived, and taken possession of the apartments prepared for him.

He had twice met with Hugh de Monthermer, once in the hall, when many others were present, and once in the court when they were nearly alone. Their meeting had been watched by the frivolous and malicious, always so numerous in courts, who hoped and expected to see some outburst of angry feeling, which might afford amusement for the passing hour. But in this they were altogether disappointed--the two adversaries saluted each other with grave courtesy; and it was particularly remarked, that Alured's fierce impetuosity and somewhat insolent pride were greatly softened down and moderated. Nay, more, when his eyes lighted upon Hugh de Monthermer, the expression was more sad than stern, and some thought that there was hesitation in it also.

"It is clear enough," said Sir Harry Grey to Sir William Geary--"it is clear enough, he doubts the truth of the charge he has made--he does not think the Monthermer guilty."

"He knows that some one must be guilty," answered the other, "and that is generally enough for an Ashby, to make him vent his rage upon the first thing near."

"But what has become of his good cousin Dickon?" demanded Grey. "I have not seen him all day, nor yesterday either."

"I suppose be keeps at Lindwell," replied Sir William Geary, "or else has gone to his new manor of Cottington. People look cold on him--I know not why."

"There are two or three reasons why," said Sir Harry Grey. "First, it is evident that this charge is of his hatching, and yet he puts the fighting part upon his cousin."

"And very wise, too!" exclaimed Sir William Geary. "First, because Hugh de Monthermer would break his neck, as a man does a rabbit's with his little finger; next, because there is but one between him and the Earldom of Ashby, and a good lance and a fair field is very likely to diminish the number."

"Is it just possible," said Grey, "that he may have taken means to diminish the number already?"

Sir William Geary shrugged his shoulders significantly, but made no other answer, and the conversation dropped.

Such as it was, however, it was a fair specimen of many others that took place in Nottingham that day. But Richard de Ashby heard them not, for he was many miles away, deep in conference with his companion, Ellerby, who remained to watch the progress of events, hidden in the wild and mountainous parts of Derbyshire.

Nevertheless, that night towards seven o'clock, when every one in Nottingham had returned home from the sight-seeing and amusements of the day, and all was profoundly quiet, both in the castle and the town, two armourers, who sat burnishing a magnificent hauberk in the outer chamber of the young Earl of Ashby's apartments in Nottingham Castle, were interrupted by some one knocking at the door. In a loud voice they bade the visitor come in; and in a moment after, the brown face and head of an old woman were thrust into the room, asking to see the Earl of Ashby.

The two men had been going on merrily with their work, giving no thought or heed to the bloody purposes which the weapons under their hands were to be applied to, nor of the danger that their lord ran, should that linked shirt of mail prove insufficient to repel the lance of an enemy.

They looked up then as cheerfully as if the whole were a matter of sport, and one of them replied, "He will not receive you, good dame, seeing you are old and ugly. Had you been young and pretty, by my faith, you would have found admission right soon.--What is it that you wish?"

"I wish to tell him," answered the old woman, "that he is wanted immediately down at the house of Sir Richard de Ashby."

"Well--well," cried the man, "I will tell him. Get thee gone, and close the door after thee, for the night wind is cold."

Thus saying, he went on with his work, and seemed to have no inclination to break off, for the purpose of carrying any messages whatsoever.

"Come--come!" cried his companion, "you must tell my lord."

"Pooh, that will do an hour hence," he replied; "to-morrow morning will be time enough, if I like it. What should Richard de Ashby want with my lord:--Borrow money, I dare say. Some Jew has got him by the throat, and wont let him go. There let him stay--nasty vermin!"

"Nay--nay, then I will go," said his brother armourer, rising, and proceeding into another chamber, where several yeomen and a page were sitting, to the latter of whom he delivered the message, and then returned to his work.

The young Earl of Ashby was seated in an inner room, with but one companion, when the old woman's commission was at length executed.

"Ay! I am glad to hear he has returned," he said, as the page closed the door. "I wonder he comes not hither! but I will go and speak with him. My mind misgives me, Sir Guy--my mind misgives me! And what you say does not convince me. My sister knows better--Lucy is truth itself. Remember, sir, I have to swear that my quarrel is just--that I believe, so help, me, God! that my charge is true. I doubt it, Guy de

Margan--I doubt it. If you can give new proof--speak! But 'tis useless to repeat over and over again what I have heard before, and what has been refuted."

"It may be that your cousin, my lord, can furnish you with new proof," said Guy de Margan. "'Tis on that account, perhaps, he has sent for you."

"I will go directly," cried the Earl, starting up--"I will go directly!--But where does he live in Nottingham?--I thought he was in the castle with the rest, or at our lodging in the town.--Down at the house of Sir Richard de Ashby!--Where may that be, I wonder?"

"I can show you, my lord," answered Guy do Margan--"'tis half-a-mile hence or more."

"Tell me--tell me," replied the Earl; "I will go by myself."

"I will put you in the way, my lord," said his companion, "and leave you when you are in the street.--You will never find it by yourself."

Giving him but little thanks for his courtesy, the young Earl strode into the ante-room; and with none but a page to carry his sword, and Guy de Margan by his side, issued forth into the court of the castle, and thence through the gates into the dark streets of Nottingham.

"Had you not better have a torch, my lord?" said Guy de Margan.

"No--no," replied the Earl, "'tis but that our eyes are not accustomed to the obscurity, We have no time to wait for torches; the hour of supper will be here anon."

"Down the first flight of steps, my lord," said Guy de Margan, "let us not miss the mouth of the alley--Oh, 'tis here!" and hurrying on with a quick step, the two gentlemen and their young attendant descended to the lower part of the town, and entered the street in which Richard de Ashby had hired the house we have so often mentioned.

When they had proceeded some way down it, the young Earl asked, with even more than his usual impatience--"Are we not near it yet?"

"Yes, my good lord," replied Guy de Margan; "you can now find it for yourself, I doubt not. 'Tis the first small house standing back between two large ones, with eaves shooting far over into the street."

"I shall find it!--I shall find it!" cried Alured de Ashby, "Good night, and thanks, Sir Guy. We shall meet again to-morrow."

With this short adieu, he took his way forward, and in his quick, impetuous haste, had well-nigh passed the house which he was seeking, but the boy pulled him by the sleeve, saying, "This must be it, my lord;" and looking round, he plunged into the dark, retreating nook in which it stood, and feeling for the door, struck sharply upon it with the hilt of his dagger.

For near a minute there was no sound, and the young Earl was about to knock again, when a light, shining through the chinks, shewed him that somebody was coming. He drew back a step; and a moment after, the door was opened with a slow and deliberate hand, which suited ill with the young nobleman's impatient mood. The sight that he beheld, however, when his eyes recovered from the first glare of the light, struck him with surprise, and calmed him also, by the effect of gentler feelings than those which had lately agitated his bosom.

It was the form of fair Kate Greenly that presented itself--it was her face that the rays of the lamp shone upon; but oh, what a change had been wrought in that face, even within the last three days! Still more terrible was the alteration since the Earl had last seen it, when he jested for a moment with his cousin's leman some months before in Hereford. Then it had been bright and blooming, full of life and eagerness, with much of the loveliness which then characterized it depending upon youth and high health. Now, though beauty still lingered, and the fine line of the features could not be altered, yet the face was sharp and pale

and worn, the lips bloodless; and the bright, dark eyes, though shining, with almost preternatural lustre, had a fixed, stern look, no longer wild and sparkling, but full of intense thought, and strong, yet painful purpose. The form, too, seemed shrunk and changed; the grace indeed remained, but the rounded contour of the limbs was withered and gone.

"Why, Kate," exclaimed the Earl--"why how now--what is this? You seem ill."

"I seem what I am, my lord," replied Kate Greenly. "I am glad you are come; your presence is much wanted."

"Where?" demanded the Earl. "What do you mean, my poor girl? Some new mishap, I warrant you. Where is my presence wanted, Kate?"

"I will show you, my lord," replied Kate Greenly, "if you will follow me;" and she led the way up the stairs.

At the end of the first flight, the Earl paused, saying, "Is not Dickon here, that he comes not forth?"

Kate gave him no direct answer, merely replying, "This way, my lord--this way, sir."

"He must be ill," thought the Earl, "and she, too, is ill, that is clear. 'Tis some fever, belike. I have heard there is one in Nottingham."

At the top of the next flight, the girl laid her hand upon the latch of a rough door, formed of unsmoothed wood, holding the lamp so as to give the Earl light in his ascent. The moment after, she opened the door and entered, leading the way towards the foot of a small bed, by which was burning a waxen taper.

The Earl followed, murmuring, "This is a poor place," but raised his eyes as he approached the foot of the bed, and to his surprise, beheld the ghastly face of a dead man, stretched out, with a sprig of holly resting on his breast.

"Good Heaven!" he exclaimed.--"Who is this?"

"The murderer of your father!" replied Kate Greenly, without adding a word more.

Alured de Ashby clasped his hands, with deep and terrible emotion. His mind at the moment paused not to inquire whether the tale were true or false; but flashing at once through, his heart and brain came the feeling of wrath, even at the inanimate mass before him, for the deed that had been done, mingled with grief and anxiety at having charged it upon another, and the memory of all the embarrassments which that charge must produce.

"The murderer of my father!" he said, "The murderer of my father--Is that the murderer of my father!--Then Monthermer is innocent!"

"As innocent as yourself," replied Kate Greenly. "This is one of those who did the deed; but there were more than one, Hugh de Monthermer, however, was many a mile away, and there lies the man who struck the first blow. Look here!" she cried, and partly drawing down the sheet, she pointed to the wound upon the dead man's breast, saying, "There entered your father's sword; for the old man died gallantly, and sent one at least to his account."

"Ay, I remember," replied the Earl, thoughtfully, "they found his sword naked and bloody--But how is this?" he continued, turning towards Kate, and gazing on her face. "You seem to know it all, as if you had been present.--Now I perceive what makes you haggard and pale."

"'Tis seeing such sights as this," replied Kate Greenly--"ay, and many another sad cause besides. But you ask, how I know all this? I will tell you, Earl of Ashby: by taking down from that man's own lips, in his dying moments, the confession of his crime. The priest adjured him to make full avowal of the truth, not only to the ear of the confessor, which could but benefit his own soul, but for the ear of justice, that the innocent might not be punished for the guilty. Such confession as he did

make, I myself wrote down, he signed it with his dying hand, and I and Father Mark were the witnesses thereunto. Here is the paper--read and satisfy yourself! The priest I have sent for--he will soon be here."

Alured de Ashby took the paper, and, by the light of the lamp held by Kate Greenly, read the few words that it contained:--

"I do publicly acknowledge and confess," so ran the writing, which followed exactly the broken words of the dying man; "that I, Ingelram Dighton, did, on the afternoon of Tuesday last, together with three others--no, I will not mention their names--who had come down with me the day before from the good city of London, lay wait for the Earl of Ashby, at a place called the Bull's Hawthorn. I struck at him first, but only wounded him; whereupon he drew his sword and plunged it into my side, from which I am now dying. The Lord have mercy upon my soul! El----, but no, I will not mention his name--another man then stabbed him behind, and we threw him into the pit. The Lord Hugh de Monthermer had nothing to do with the deed. We used his name, because the person that set us on wanted the charge to fall on him, and a letter was written, as if from him, asking the old Earl to see him alone, at the place of the murder; but he never wrote it, or knew of it. I have never seen him or spoken to him in my life, but only heard that morning that he had escaped from prison. This has been read over to me now dying, at the house of Sir Richard de Ashby; and I swear by the Holy Sacrament and all the Saints, that it is true, so help me God!"

It was signed, with a shaking hand, "Ingelram Dighton," and below were the names of Kate Greenly and the priest, as witnesses.

The young Earl read and re-read it, and then looking upon his companion somewhat sternly, he asked, "Why did you not produce this before?"

"For many reasons," replied Kate Greenly, calmly:--"first, because I had not the means. Do you suppose that the cruel and deceitful villain into whose power I have fallen leaves me to roam whither I please? 'Tis but when he is absent that I dare quit the house. In the next place, you were at Lindwell; and in the next, I wished, ere I brought forward even so much as this, to have the whole in my hands; to be able not only to say, 'This man is innocent,' but also, 'That man is guilty!' I tell you, Earl, I would not now have told you what I have, but that you must not risk your own life in a false quarrel, nor bring upon yourself the guilt of slaying another for deeds that he did not commit. Knowing as much as you do now know, it is your task and duty to sift this matter to the bottom, and to discover the instigator of this murder; for he who now lies there, and his companions, were but tools. I am ready and willing to speak all I know, when the time and place is fitting. Yet you must be neither too quick nor too slow: for if you are slow, I shall not be here--my days are numbered, and are flying fast; and if you are hasty, the guilty one will escape you."

"And who is the guilty one?" demanded Alured de Ashby, bending his brows sternly upon her--"Who is the guilty one? Name him, girl, I adjure thee--name him! Name him, if ever thou hast had the feelings of a child towards a father!"

Kate gave a low cry, as if from corporeal pain, and then, shaking her head mournfully, she said, "I have had the feelings of a child towards a father, Earl of Ashby; and for the sake of your false cousin, I tore those feelings from my heart in spite of all the agony--for his sake, I brought disgrace upon that father's house--for his sake, I strewed ashes upon a parent's head--for his sake, I poured coals of fire upon my own; and how has he repaid me! But you ask me, who is the man? I will not be his accuser till all other means fail. I must not be accuser and witness too. You have the clue in your hands; use it wisely and firmly, and you will soon discover all you seek to know."

The Earl gazed in her face for a minute with a keen and searching glance, then turned his look once more upon the corpse, took a step or two nearer, and examined the features attentively.

"Give me the lamp," he said; and taking it from her hand, he bent down his own head, and seemed to scan every lineament, as if to fix them on his mind for ever. But his thoughts were in reality turning to the past, not the future; and raising himself to his full height again; he added, aloud, "I have seen that face before, though where I cannot tell. The memory will return, however. How came he here?--Who brought him here to die?"

"Those who took him hence to slay," answered Kate Greenly.

"Didst thou ever see him before that day?" demanded the Earl.

"Twice," was the reply.

"Hark! there is the curfew," exclaimed the Earl. "I must away."

"Stay till the priest comes!" cried Kate, eagerly. "He will be here ere long."

"I cannot," answered Alured de Ashby; "I am expected at the castle even now. But fear not that I will forget this business. I will find out the truth, even if I have to cut it from the hearts of those that would conceal it; and I will be calm, too--tranquil, and calm, and cautious."

"Go, then!" said Kate. "Yet tell me--But no, you will not dream of it!--You have no thought of meeting in arms an innocent and blameless man upon a false and unholy charge? Promise me--promise me!"

"I will make no promise!" answered the Earl. "You seem to feel some deep interest in this Monthermer?"

"I never saw his face but twice!" replied Kate, solemnly. "I never heard his voice but once--I have no interest in him; but, weak and fallen and disgraced as I am, I have still an interest in right and truth! Neither would I see you fall before his lance--for fall assuredly you will, if you go forth to meet him! Nay, look not proud, Earl of Ashby, before a dying girl, who knows nought of these haughty strifes, and can little tell whether you or he--if all were equal--would bear away the prize of chivalry. But, I say, all is not equal between you; and if you meet Hugh de Monthermer, you fall before his lance as sure as you now live: for he is armoured in high innocence, with a just quarrel, and an honest name to vindicate; you fight, weighed down with the consciousness of wrong upon your arm, a false oath upon your lips, and doubt and discouragement at your heart! Were you twenty times the knight you are, that burden were enough to make you fall before a peasant's staff! One thing, however, I have a right to demand: you shall give that paper to Prince Edward, fully twelve hours before you go into the lists--this you must promise me to do, or I myself will go and cast myself--"

"I have no right to refuse," interrupted the Earl; "on my honour, as a knight, the Prince shall have the paper. Be you ready to prove that it is genuine?"

"I am ever ready," answered Kate; "and though I may shrink and quiver, like a wounded limb when a surgeon draws the arrow forth, yet I shall be glad when each step of my bitter task is begun, and the time of rest comes nearer. If they wish to remove this body?"--she added, as the Earl walked towards the door,

"Let them do it," answered Alured--"let them do it--they shall be watched!"

Thus saying, he left the room, and slowly descended the stairs, Kate Greenly lighting him down to the bottom. He went thoughtfully and sadly, with a heart full of gloom, anxiety, and strife; but there were kindly parts in his character, too; and when he reached the bottom step,

he turned and looked once more in the face of his unhappy companion. Then, taking her hand, he said, "Poor girl, I am sorry for thee! Can nought be done to save thee?"

"Nothing, my lord!" replied Kate Greenly, calmly; "I have but one Saviour, and he is not of earth."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"THE King has sat down to supper, my good lord," said one of the young Earl's attendants, meeting him at the door of his apartments, "and wondered that you were not there. A seat is kept for you, however."

"Is it near the Prince?" demanded Alured.

"Nay, my lord, the Prince is gone," replied the man; "did you not know it?"

"Gone!" exclaimed the young nobleman. "Gone, whither?"

"To Leicester, my lord," said the servant. "While you and Sir Guy de Margan were conversing here, news came from Leicester of a revolt amongst the peasants there; and the Prince set out at once, with some fifty men--'tis not half an hour since."

"Why, he is to be the judge of the field the day after to-morrow!" cried the Earl, in surprise and evident disappointment.

"I heard film tell the King myself, my lord," replied the man, "that he would be back ere sunset to-morrow."

"This is unfortunate," murmured Alured--"this is most unfortunate; but it can't be helped!" and after making some slight change in his apparel, and giving some orders in a low but earnest voice, he hastened to the hall. Henry, as soon as he appeared, greeted him with light merriment, saying, "You are late for the banquet, noble Earl; but we forgive you, as we doubt not some fair lady held you in chains of dalliance not to be broken."

"Nay, sire," replied the Earl, gravely, "my heart is too full of other things to think of levities. I was with a sick friend, and the time, though it passed heavily, was not noted."

"A sick friend is as good an excuse as a fair lady," said the King, "and one that may be pleaded at all times."

"Nay, sire," replied Mortimer, who was sitting near, "neither fair lady nor sick friend can be a moment's excuse for delay in day of battle, or even, I hold, of tournament."

"A high question of chivalry," replied the King. "Let some of our old knights decide it. What say you, Sir John Hardy?"

"That the matter has been decided often, my liege," said the old soldier, who was placed some way down the table, and who spoke with grave deliberation on the subject which he considered all-important. "No excuse on earth can be received for the man who has touched a challenger's shield, or taken an accuser's glove, or received his leader's command to prepare for battle, if he be more than a quarter of an hour behind the time appointed. That space is given in case of accident, or men's judgment differing as to time. Thus the trumpets may sound thrice, with five minutes between each blast; but if he comes not at the third call, he is held coward and recreant by all civilized men, and can plead nothing, unless it be the commands of his sovereign, as his excuse."

"The honour of a knight," said another old soldier, in an authoritative and somewhat pedantic tone, "should be as bright as his shield, as clear and cutting as his sword, and as pointed and steady as his lance. What he has once asserted, that he should maintain to the death; for whatever cause there may be for retracting, an imputation on his courage will still lie, if he make a moment's delay in meeting an enemy in the field."

Hugh de Monthermer remained calm and pale, but the cheek of Alured de Ashby flushed as if every word he heard was fire. As soon as possible after the banquet, he quitted the hall and sought his apartments, with a hurried and irregular step.

He found the armourers still busy in their task, as he passed through the outer chamber; and, pausing at the bench where they were working, he gazed down upon the weapons under their hands with a thoughtful but abstracted look. Then, with a sudden start, clenching his hand tight, he said, "See that all be firm and strong, Mapleton, yet not too heavy."

"Fear not, my lord--fear not," replied the armourer, "there never was better steel in all the world; and these poylins are a rare invention for the defence of the elbows and knees. I have prepared a garland, too, my lord, for your neck. I know you love it not, but 'tis much safer, if you will but wear it, though it does spoil the look of the hauberk, it must be confessed. But very often I have known the blow of a lance right in the throat kill or disable a knight, though the spear went not through the rings--'tis a trick with the Lord Hugh, too, I hear, to aim at the throat. They say he killed two men so at Evesham, and the Soldan of Egypt's brother, when he was in Paynimrie."

Alured de Ashby had long ceased to listen; but with his brow bent and his eyes fixed upon the arms, he stood thinking of other things, till the armourer ceased and looked up in his face; and then, turning away, he quitted the room without any reply. When in his own chamber, he

closed the door, and for nearly two hours his foot might be heard, walking to and fro, sometimes, indeed, pausing for a minute or two, but still resuming its heavy tread.

Who can depict all the stormy passions that agitated him at that moment--the struggle that was taking place in his bosom, so different from that which had torn the heart of Hugh de Monthermer, though as violent in its degree, and proceeding from the same events. To fight in an unrighteous quarrel!--to go, solemnly appealing to Heaven for the justice of his cause, and to feel that that cause was unjust!--deliberately to persist in charging an innocent man with a horrible crime, of which he knew him to be innocent!--It was a fearful contemplation for one in whom conscience had not been smothered under many evil deeds, notwithstanding the faults and follies which sometimes blinded his eyes to right and wrong. But yet, to retract the accusation he had made--to acknowledge that he had erred--to own that he had been rash and weak--to see Hugh de Monthermer triumph--all this was repugnant to the most powerful vices of his character--to jealous pride and irritable vanity.

Nevertheless, this he might have overcome; for, as we have shown, there was a high sense of honour in his nature, and the voice of conscience was strong enough, when the question was one of such mighty moment, to overpower the busy tongue of passion, and lead him to what was right; but, alas! there was another consideration. He feared the loss of renown! The very suspicion of any dread of his adversary was enough to put every good resolution to flight; and, unhappily, the laws of chivalry opposed a barrier to his pursuing the only course of rectitude, which would have been difficult enough to surmount even had his natural disposition been different from what it was.

Then came back the remembrance of the conversation which had taken place at the banquet. It seemed to him as if the two old knights, who had declared the rules of arms, had been sitting in judgment on the cause pleaded by the disputants in his own bosom. They had

pronounced against the voice of conscience--they had given sentence in favour of that fantastic honour which was based more on personal courage than on truth.

Good Heaven! he thought, that the world should suspect he was afraid to meet in arms the man he had accused! That *he* should fear Hugh de Monthermer--that *he* should take advantage of any new risen doubt to withdraw a charge which he had solemnly made, and shrink from a combat which he had himself provoked! How would men jeer at his name--how silent would the heralds stand, when he entered the court or the tilt-yard? He pictured to himself a thousand imaginary insults:--he saw knights refusing to break a lance with one who had shrunk from the wager of battle he had demanded; he saw ladies turning away their heads in scorn from the craven knight who had feared to meet an equal in the field. He could not--he would not do it!--and yet conscience still cried aloud; ay, and the voice of Kate Greenly rang in his ears, telling him that conscience was powerful to overthrow as well as to admonish; prophesying to him that he would fall before the lance of the man he knowingly injured, and that shame and defeat, as well as injustice and falsehood, would be his companions on that fatal field.

"Foul befal the girl!" he cried, "for putting such thoughts into my head; they hang upon me like a spell--they will cling to me in the hour of battle. Many a man has fought in an unjust cause--ay, and many a one has fallen. In this ordeal, is the judgment of God shown, or is it not? Is it possible to conceive that we can appeal to Him, and call upon Him to defend the right, and solemnly swear that our cause is just, all the time having a lie upon our lips, and that He will not punish? He were worse than the God of the Moslemah, if he did not. What then shall I gain? For the first time in life, I shall soil my soul with an untruth--I shall take a false oath--I shall be defeated, disgraced, with the judgment of God pronouncing that I am perjured, and die, leaving a stained and blackened name behind.--And yet, to withdraw the charge is impossible!" he continued. "Better disgraced, and hide me from

contumely in the grave, than live and meet the scornful looks of every knight in Europe! My only chance is in the Prince--perhaps he may stop it. Would he were here!--I would give him the paper now! Yet I must show no desire to recant the accusation. I remember how his proud lip curled when that braggart, De Poix, slunk from the mêlée at the Northampton tournament, on pretence that his horse was lame. Curses on my own precipitate haste!--but still deeper curses on that traitor, Richard, who urged me on!--Would I could know the truth.--Oh! if I thought that it was so, I would tear his heart from his body, and trample it quivering in the dust.--The foul villain!--And my father so good to him!"

Such were some of the broken and disjointed thoughts which crossed the mind of Alured de Ashby, and from them the reader may form some idea of the agitated state of his feelings during that night. He slept scarcely at all till morning; but he then fell into a deep slumber, which lasted several hours, and from which he rose refreshed and calmer, but, nevertheless, stern and sad. He was restless, too, and the hesitating and undecided state of his mind on the most pressing subject before him, rendered him wavering in all his actions.

In the morning, several of his servants, who had been out all night, according to orders he had given them, came in to make their report, and informed him, that though they had watched steadily at the spot which he had pointed out, no one had come out of the house but a priest and a little boy bearing a torch. He then sent for some of the old retainers of the family, who had been at Lindwell when his father was slain, and on their arrival questioned them minutely on many points; and then he told his people that he was going to the apartments of his sister; but, when he came to the foot of the stairs, he paused, turned back again, and strode up and down the court for half an hour.

His next proceeding was to order his horses instantly, and he set out the road to Leicester. When he was about halfway there, however, he turned his charger's head, and reached the gates of Nottingham just as

night was falling. The city warder told him, in answer to his questions, that the Prince had not returned, but that a messenger from him had arrived an hour before, and it was rumoured that Edward would not be back until the following morning.

The Earl shook the bridle of his horse fiercely, and galloped up to the castle. Before he reached it, however, the fit of angry impatience had passed away; and on dismounting, he proceeded direct to the apartments of the Prince, and sent in a page to say he wished to see the Lady Lucy. He was instantly admitted to her chamber, where the sight of her fair face, bearing evident marks of tears, and full of deep and inconsolable sorrow, shook his purposes again, and added to all the bitterness of his feelings.

Alured kissed her tenderly, but he perceived that though she uttered not a word of reproach, she shrunk from him, and that was reproach enough. At his desire she sent away her maids, and then, sitting down beside her, he took her hand in his, saying, "Lucy, I have come to see you--perhaps for the last time!"

She cast down her eyes, and made no reply, and he went on--"It is not fit, Lucy, that you and I should part with one cold feeling between us; and I come to ask forgiveness for any pain that I have caused you throughout life."

"Oh, Alured!" exclaimed Lucy, "the last and most dreadful pain may yet be avoided; but I know your stern and unchangeable heart too well to hope. You cannot but feel how horrible it is to see my brother and my promised husband armed against each other's life--meeting in lists, from which one or the other must be borne a corpse. You cannot but know, Alured, that to me the misery is the same, whichever is the victor--that I have nothing to hope--that I have nothing to look for. If Hugh de Monthermer is vanquished, my brother is the murderer of him I love.--Ay, murderer, Alured!" she added, solemnly; "for you are well aware,

that in your heart you believe him innocent. If you fall before Hugh de Monthermer's lance, the man I love becomes the butcher of my brother, and I can never see his face again."

"Stay, Lucy, stay," said the Earl; "it is on this account that I have come to you. I have had much and bitter thought, Lucy. Hugh de Monthermer may be innocent--God only knows the heart of man, and he will decide; but if I die in the lists to-morrow, and he you love is proved to be innocent of my father's death, let my blood rest upon my own head; hold him guiltless of my fate, and wed him as if Alured de Ashby had not been."

"Oh, Alured!" cried Lucy, touched to the heart, casting her arms around him, at the same time, and weeping on his bosom. "No--no! that can never be."

"Yes, but it must, and shall be!" replied her brother. "I will not do you wrong, Lucy, in my dying hour. Here I have put down in a few brief words my resolution and my wishes. Read, Lucy.--What! your eyes are dim with tears!--Well, I will read it. Mark!--'I, Alured de Ashby, about to do battle with the Lord Hugh de Monthermer, to whom the hand of my sister Lucy was promised by my father before his decease--having lately had some cause to doubt the truth of the charge which I have brought against the said lord, of having compassed the death of my father--do hereby give my consent to the marriage of my sister with the said Hugh de Monthermer, if at any time he can prove fully, and clearly, that he is innocent of the deed; and I do beseech my sister--entreat, and require her, in that case, to give her hand to Hugh de Monthermer, whatever may have taken place between him and myself.'--There, girl--keep that paper, and use it when thou wilt.--Now, art thou contented?"

"Contented, Alured!" cried Lucy, looking reproachfully in his face--"contented! Do you think I can be contented, to know that either he or you must die? What you take from one scale you cast into the other. If my heart can be lightened respecting him by this generous act, how

much more heavy the grief and terror that I feel for you. Oh! Alured, you say, that you now doubt his guilt. Why not boldly, and at once, express that doubt?--Why not----"

"My honour, child--my honour, and renown!" cried Alured de Ashby. "But you will unman me, Lucy. Here, give this sealed packet to the Prince whenever he returns."

"Perhaps he has returned," said Lucy--"the Princess told me he would be back ere nightfall."

"He has changed his purpose," replied her brother, "and will not be in Nottingham till to-morrow."

"Alas! alas!" exclaimed Lucy, "that is unfortunate."

"It cannot be helped!" answered the young Earl--"but give it to the Prince whenever he comes. Tell him, that therein are contained the proofs which have lately made me doubt the justice of my charge against Monthermer.--He must act as he thinks fit regarding them. But, remember, Lucy, that if I fall, and you become Monthermer's wife, he takes the retribution of blood upon him, and must pursue the murderers of our father till he approve their guilt upon them, and give them up to death.--And now, girl, fare thee well!"

"Nay, Alured!" she cried, clinging to him. "Listen to me yet one word. If you be so doubtful, can you swear----"

"Hush--hush!" he answered. "My mind is now made up beyond all alteration. I will do everything to clear me before God, and make my conscience easy; but I must never shrink from battle--I must never sully my renown--I must never bear the name of coward, or know that one man suspects I am such.--Farewell, Lucy, farewell--not one word more!" and kissing her tenderly, he unclasped the clinging arms that would have held him, and left her chamber.

For a moment, Lucy covered her eyes and wept, but the next instant, clasping her hands together, she cried, "I will go to Hugh, and will beseech him! He is more tender; he has more trust in his own great renown. The victor at Damietta, the conqueror of the lists at Sidon, need fear no injurious suspicion. I will go to him. I will entreat him on my knees.--But first to the Princess, with this packet. She must give it to her husband.--What does it contain, I wonder?"

Lacy gazed at it for a moment, and then at the other paper which her brother had given her. Suddenly a light like that of joy broke upon her face, and she exclaimed, "He will! he will!--Why should I fear? why should I doubt? He told me himself that in seven days he could prove his innocence.--He will, he will!---and with this before me, I need fear no shame. But now to the Princess." And with a quick step she hurried to the apartments of Eleanor, whom, for once, she found alone.

She was too deeply agitated for courtly ceremony; and gliding in, she approached the Princess as she sat reading, and knelt on the cushion at her feet.

"What is it, my poor Lucy?" said the Princess, bending down her head, and kissing her fair forehead, with a look of tender compassion; "there seems some happiness mingled with the sorrow of your look."

"'Tis that I have hope!" replied Lucy; and with rapid but with low words she related all that had passed between her brother and herself. She then put the packet into Eleanor's hands, saying, "It will prove his innocence, I am sure; but the Prince is absent, and I am afraid you will not open it."

"Nay," answered Eleanor, "I must not venture on such an act as that. I am only bold where it is to show my love for him, but not to meddle in matters of which he alone can judge. Neither is there occasion here, my Lucy; he will be back ere long."

"But Alured thought not," replied her fair companion. "He had heard that the Prince's journey from Leicester was put off till to-morrow morning!"

"Not so, not so!" cried the Princess; "'twas but delayed for an hour or two, and he sent lest I should fear the rebels had detained him. I expect him each minute, Lucy. But in the meantime, tell me more clearly what caused that look of joy just now?"

Lucy hesitated. "'Twas that a hope has crossed my mind," she said--"a hope that I might yet save them both; and surely, lady," she continued, raising her soft, dark eyes to Eleanor's face--"and surely to save both the life of a brother and a lover; to spare them deeds that can never be atoned; to shield Alured, not only from Monthermer's lance, but from the more terrible fate of going to his God with a false charge upon his lips--a charge which he knows to be false,--a woman may well put on a boldness she would otherwise shrink from--ay, and do things which maiden modesty would forbid, were not the cause so great and overpowering."

"Certainly," rejoined Eleanor, "so long as virtue and religion say not nay."

"God forbid that I should sin against either!" replied Lucy, eagerly. "That could never be, lady--But there be small forms, and prudent cautions, reserves, and cold proprieties, which, in the ordinary intercourse of life, are near akin to virtues, though separate. These surely may be laid aside, when the matter is to rescue from crime, from death, or from disgrace, beings so much beloved as these?"

"Assuredly!" exclaimed Eleanor, "who can doubt it? To save my Edward, what should stand in my way? Nothing but that honour which I know he values more than all earthly things, or even life itself."

"Thanks, lady, thanks!" cried Lucy; "you confirm me in my purpose."

"But what is your purpose, my sweet cousin?" asked the Princess. "I do not yet comprehend you."

"Will you promise me," said Lucy, "that if I tell, you will let me have my will; that you will put no bar or hindrance in my way, nor inform any one of my scheme, but with my leave."

Eleanor smiled. "I may well promise that," she answered, "for if you please, you may conceal your scheme, and then I am powerless. No bar or hindrance will I place, dear Lucy, but kind remonstrances, if I think you wrong. What is this plan of yours?"

"This, this!" cried Lucy. "Here on this paper has my brother written down that he doubts Hugh de Monthermer's guilt; that he so much doubts the truth of the charge which he himself has made, as to require his sister to overlook the shedding of his blood, and unite her fate with the man who slays him, if he should fall in those fatal lists.--Nay, lady, look you here; he puts no condition, but that Hugh de Monthermer should prove his innocence."

"Well," said Eleanor, "I see he is kind and generous, and evidently believes the charge was rashly made, and is not just."

"Yet nought will keep him," replied Lucy, "from sustaining that charge to-morrow at the lance's point, although he knows it to be false. Tears, prayers, entreaties, appeals to conscience and to honour, are all in vain with him: he will die, but yield no jot of what he thinks his fame requires. He would not withdraw the accusation if an angel told him it were untrue. But Hugh is not so stern and cruel, lady; he will listen to reason and to right. He told me himself that he would have laid down his battle hand, would but the King have named a few days later; for he is as sure as of his own life, to prove the guilt upon another man. Oh, lady! in that long, sad interview, he was as much shaken as I, a poor weak girl. Yet what could I say, what could I do, so long as my brother maintained the charge in all its virulence? Now, however, now I will hie to him--ay,

lady," she continued, "even to his chamber! I will beseech him, for mercy's sake, for my sake, for our love's sake, to avoid this unholy encounter; for the peace, for the comfort throughout life of the lady that he loves, to quit this place ere morning's dawn to-morrow."

"He will not do it," answered Eleanor, sadly; "you will but wring his heart, and break your own.--He will not do it."

"I will soften him with my tears!" said Lucy vehemently, "I will kneel to him on the ground; I will cover his hand with my kisses and water it with my eyes--"

Eleanor shook her head.

"I will offer to go with him!" said Lucy, in a low and thrilling tone, fixing her eyes, with a look of doubt and inquiry, on the Princess's face.

"Ha!" cried Eleanor, starting, while, for a moment, the colour mounted into her cheek. But the next instant she cast her arms round Lucy, and bent her head towards her with a smile, saying--"And thou wilt conquer!--Dear, devoted girl, I dare not altogether approve and sanction what you do; yet, I will add, hard were the heart, and discourteous were the lip, to blame thee. The object is a mighty one; no common means will reach it; and, surely, if thou dost succeed in saving thy brother both from a great crime and a great danger, and proving thy lover innocent, without risking his renown, thou shalt deserve high praise and honour, and no censure, even in this foul-tongued world in which we live. But stay yet awhile, Edward will soon be here, and perchance this letter itself may render the trial needless. You say that it contains proofs of your lover's innocence?"

"So my brother told me!" replied Lucy--"proofs that have shaken even his stern spirit; but, lady, you must not betray my secret to the Prince, for he will stop our departure."

"If I tell him," answered Eleanor, "my promise shall bind both; but, doubtless, the King, if there be any clear proofs here, in these papers, will order the wager of battle to be delayed. But go--get thee ready for thy task, dear Lucy; when Edward comes, I will send for thee again."

CHAPTER XL.

About an hour before the return of the young Earl of Ashby from his ride towards Leicester, his cousin Richard had presented himself in his ante-chamber, expecting to find him within. He was no favourite of the servants of the house, and a feeling of doubt and distrust towards him had become general amongst them. A cold look from the armourers, and a saucy reply from a page--importing that the Earl was absent, and that no one could tell when he would come back--was all the satisfaction which Richard de Ashby could obtain; and, returning into the court, he paced slowly across towards the gate where he had left his horses.

Sir William Geary passed him just at that moment, but did not stop, merely saying, with his cold, supercilious look, "Ha, Dickon! thou art in the way to make a great man of thyself, it seems!"

"Stay, Geary, stay!" cried Sir Richard, not very well pleased either with his tone or his look.

But Sir William walked on, replying, "I can't at present, Dickon. For once in my life, I am busy."

"They all look cold upon me," muttered Richard de Ashby, as he walked slowly on; "can anything have been discovered?" His heart sunk at the thought, and the idea of flying crossed his mind for a moment. But he was, as we have shown, not without a dogged sort of courage, and he murmured, "No, I will die at the stake sooner. I must find out, however, what has taken place, that I may be prepared."

He somewhat quickened his pace, and had already put his foot in the stirrup, to mount his horse, when he heard a voice calling him by name, and turning round with a sudden start, he beheld Guy de Margan coming after him with rapid steps.

"I saw you from my window," said the courtier, hastening up, "and have much matter for your ear. But let us go down by the back way into the town, and let your horses follow."

In a moment, Richard de Ashby had banished from his countenance the look of anxiety and thought which it had just borne, not choosing that one, who was already somewhat more in his confidence than he liked, should see those traces of painful care, which might, perhaps, lead him, joined with the knowledge he already possessed, to a suspicion of those darker deeds which had not been communicated to him.

"Well, Guy!" he said, as they walked on, "how flies the crow now? I find my noble cousin, the Earl, has gone out to take an afternoon ride--not the way, methinks, that men usually spend the last few hours before a mortal encounter. But he does it for bravado; and, if he do not mind, his life and his renown will end together in to-morrow's field."

"Perhaps 'twere better they did," answered Guy de Margan, shortly; and then--replying to a look of affected wonder which Richard de Ashby turned upon him, he continued, "I know not your plans or secrets, Dickon; but I fear you will find your cousin Alured less easy to deal with than even Hugh de Monthermer. He doubts the truth of the charge he has brought!"

"Then he should not have brought it!" said Richard de Ashby. "What have I to do with that?"

"Nothing, perhaps," replied Guy de Margan, "but he loves not any of those whose reports induced him to make it. I found that, myself, while I was sitting with him last night. He was strangely uncivil to me; but you are foremost on the list, Dickon!"

"Pooh!" cried the other. "Let him but conquer in to-morrow's lists, and the pride of having done so will make him love us all dearly again. I know Alured well, De Margan, and there is no harm done, if that be all!"

"But it is not all!" said Guy de Margan. "While I was sitting with him, an old woman--a withered old woman, the servants told me after--came up to call him to your house, bearing a message, as if from you."

"'Twas false! I was far away--Did he go?" exclaimed Richard de Ashby, now moved indeed.

"That did he immediately," answered his companion. "I walked down with him, and saw him in."

"Why, in the name of hell, did you not stop him?" cried Richard de Ashby. "Old woman! I have no old woman there!"

"Perhaps he went to see the young one you have there," said Guy de Margan, in a careless tone.

"Curse her! if she have--" exclaimed Richard de Ashby; and then suddenly stopped himself, without finishing his sentence.

"Yes!" proceeded Guy de Margan, with the same affected indifference of tone; "yes, he did go down, and went in, and stayed for more than an hour, for I was at the King's banquet, and saw him come back; and I spoke with his henchman, Peter, afterwards, who told me that he was mightily affected all that night, and brought with him, from your house, a paper, which he sealed carefully up. Look to it, Dickon--look to it!"

They had now come to a flight of steps which led them down over one of the rocky descents which were then somewhat more steep than they are now in the good town of Nottingham, and Richard de Ashby, pausing at the top, ordered the horses to go round, while he with Guy de Margan took the shorter way. He said nothing till he reached the bottom; but there, between two houses, neither of which had any windows on that side, he stopped suddenly, and grasping his companion's arm, regarded him face to face with a bent brow and searching eye.

"What is it you mean, Guy de Margan?" he asked. "You either know or suspect something more than you say."

"I know nothing," replied Guy de Margan, "and I wish to know nothing, my good friend. So tell me nothing. I am the least curious man in all the world. What I suspect is another affair. But now listen to me. The death of Hugh de Monthermer, sweet gentleman though he be, would not be unpleasant to me; the death of the Earl, though you would have to wear mourning for your Earldom, would not, I have reason to believe, be very inconvenient or unpleasant to you. Now mark me, Dickon; if these two men meet to-morrow, your cousin Alured, doubting the justice of his cause, and shaken by foolish scruples, will fall before the lance of Hugh de Monthermer as sure as I live. Every one of the court sees it, and knows it. That would suit your purpose well, you think? But you might be mistaken even there. Nothing but dire necessity will drive Monthermer to take the Earl's life. The Prince is to be judge of the field, and he will drop his warder on the very slightest excuse. Thus you may be frustrated, and both you and I see our hopes marred in a minute.--But there is something more to be said: I do not choose that your purpose should be served, and not my own."

"Why, Guy de Margan," exclaimed his companion, in a bitter tone; "you do not think that I am tenderly anxious for Monthermer's life?"

"No, nor I for Alured de Ashby's," answered de Margan; "but either both shall die or both shall live, Richard de Ashby. Your cousin's mind is now in that state, that but three words from me, turning his suspicions in another channel, will make him retract his charge, and offer amends to him he has calumniated.--Ay, and worse may come of it than that. Now I will speak these words, Richard de Ashby, in plain terms--I will prevent this conflict, unless you assure me that both shall fall."

"But how can I do that?" demanded Richard de Ashby, gazing upon him with evident alarm. "How is it possible for me to insure an event which is in the hand of fate alone?"

"In the hand of fate!" cried Guy de Margan, with a scoff. "To hear thee speak, one would think that thou art as innocent as Noe's dove. Art thou not thy cousin's godfather in the list to-morrow?"

"Ay, so he said," replied Richard de Ashby.

"Then instruct him how to slay his adversary," rejoined Guy de Margan. "Tell him not to aim at shield or helmet, but at any spot; his shoulder--his arm--his throat--his hip, where he can see the bare hauberk."

"Alured knows better," said Richard. "He will drive straight upon him with his lance; and then the toughest wood--the firmest seat--the steadiest hand--the keenest eye, will give the victory."

"Nay, but tell him," answered Guy de Margan, in a lower tone, "that you know what is passing in his mind, the doubts, the hesitation, and that the conflict on foot is that wherein alone he can hope to win the day. Ask him if he ever saw Hugh de Monthermer unhorsed by a straightforward stroke of a lance whoever was his opponent? But show him that, by striking him at the side, and turning him in the saddle, he may be brought to the ground without a doubt."

"But still what is this to me?" asked Richard, impatiently; "the one or the other must win the day."

"No--no!" cried Guy de Margan. "I will show you a means by which, if you can ensure that Alured de Ashby's lance dips but its point in Hugh de Monthermer's blood, it shall carry with it as certain a death as if it went through and through his heart; a scratch--a simple scratch--will do it.--When I was in the land of the old Romans--now filled with priests and sluggards, who have nought on earth to do but to sit and debauch the peasant girls, and hatch means of ridding themselves of enemies--a good honest man, who took care that none should be long his foe, and was possessed of many excellent secrets, gave me, for weighty considerations, a powder of so balmy a quality, that either dropped into a cup or rubbed on a fresh wound, though the quantity be not bigger than will lie on a pin's-head, it will cure the most miserable man of all his sorrows, or within half an hour will take out the pain of the most terrible injury--for ever!"

"I understand--I understand," said Richard de Ashby. "Give me the powder; would I had had it long ago. But how can one fix it to the lance's point, so that in the shock of combat it is not brushed off?"

"Mix it with some gentle unguent," answered Guy de Margan; "'twill have the same effect."

"I will, I will," replied his companion; "then with a thick glove I will feel the lance's point, to make sure that all is right, like a good cautious godfather in arms, first carefully trying the wood upon my knee, with every other seeming caution which the experienced in such matters use. No fear but Alured, one way or other, will draw his blood. Oh yes! and both shall go on the same road.--Half an hour, say you?--Will he have strength to end the combat?

"Fully," replied Guy de Margan; "for within two minutes of his death he will seem as strong as ever. I tried it on a hound--just scratched his hanging lip, then took him to the field, and on he went after the game, eager and strong and loud tongued; but in full cry down dropped he in a moment, quivering and panting, and after beating the air for some two minutes with his struggling paws, lay dead."

"Give it me--give it me!" cried Richard de Ashby, and then burst into a fit of laughter, as if it were the merriest joke that ever had been told.

Guy de Margan put his hand into the small embroidered pouch he wore under his arm, and took forth an ivory box, not bigger than a large piece of money.

"What, is this all?" exclaimed Richard de Ashby, taking the little case. "Is this enough?"

"To slay more men than fell at Evesham," replied Guy de Margan; "but be careful how you mix it. Remember, the slightest scratch upon your own hand sends you to the place appointed for you, if but a grain of that finds entrance."

"I will take care--I will take care," said Richard de Ashby; "and now look upon the deed as done. Ere this time to-morrow, you will have had your revenge--and I shall be Earl of Ashby."

"Ha! ha!" cried Guy de Margan, "is the truth out at length? Well, good Richard, fare thee well; we shall meet to-morrow in deep grief for the events of this sad field. In the meantime I will go to your cousin, the short-lived Earl, and nerve him for this battle. I will inform him with mysterious looks that there is a plot afoot to delay the combat, and to make him believe his adversary innocent. You harp on the same string, when you see him; and I will tell him, too, that he shall have proof sufficient early to-morrow of Monthermer's guilt. If we but get him to the field, the matter's done--he will not retract."

"Farewell, De Margan--farewell!" said Richard de Ashby, "I will go home and make inquiries there;" and as he turned away, he murmured--"If this powder be so potent, there may be enough for you also, my good friend--but I shall have another to deal with first. Kate Greenly, my pretty lady, you have a secret too much to carry far; if you have not betrayed me already, I will take care that you shall not do so now."

A few minutes brought him to the house he had hired in Nottingham, and knocking hard, the door was almost instantly opened by a young lad whom he had left behind with his unhappy paramour.

"Where is the lady?" was the first question that the youth's master put to him. "In her own chamber?"

"No, noble sir," replied the servant; "she went forth some time ago."

"Gone forth!" exclaimed his master--"gone forth, when I forbade her to cross the threshold!"

"I could not stay her, sir," rejoined the youth, who had been brought up in no bad school for learning impudence, as well as other vices. "Women will gad, sir, and who can stop them?"

"Hold thy saucy prate, knave!" cried the knight, "and answer me truly. Who has been here since I went?"

"Nobody, sir," replied the boy--"nobody but the old priest."

"What old priest?" demanded his master, with a bent and angry brow.

"The old priest who was here before, noble sir," said the boy, in a more timid tone, for his lord's look frightened him. "He who was here the night you went to Lindwell."

"Ha!" cried Richard de Ashby; "a priest here that night? 'tis well for him I caught him not!--When was he here again?"

"Twice, sir," replied the youth; "once in the morning; and last night she sent me for him again."

"And no one else?" asked Richard de Ashby.

"No one," answered the boy, firmly; and then added, in a more doubtful tone--"no one that I remember."

"Boy, 'tis a lie!" replied his master. "I see it on thy face: thou know'st thou liest!"--and as he spoke, he caught him by the breast, giving him a shake that made his breath come short. "Who has been here? If thou speak'st not at a word, thou shalt have a taste of this!" and he laid his hand upon his dagger.

"No one, indeed--no one that I know of," said the boy. "I may suspect----"

"And who do you suspect?" asked Richard de Ashby.

"Why, noble sir, last night," replied the boy, "as I was going up the street to seek the priest, I saw two gentlemen come near the house; and one of them, who was the noble Earl, your cousin, I am sure, went up as if to the door, and, I think, was let in; the other turned away."

"Did my cousin go in?" demanded Richard. "Say me but yea or nay.--Did he go in, I say?"

"I think so, sir," replied the youth--"I think so, but cannot be sure; there came a sudden light across the road as if the door opened, but by that time I was too far up the street to see."

"'Tis as De Margan said," thought the knight; and striding up at once to the chamber where the corpse was laid, he found the door wide open, and the body fairly laid out and decked, as it was called. A crucifix and some sprigs of holly were on the breast; a small cup of holy water stood near; a lamp was burning, although the sun was not yet down, and

everything gave plain indication that the man had not died without the succour of the church, and that the corpse had been watched by other eyes besides those of poor Kate Greenly.

"I have been betrayed!" said Richard de Ashby to himself.--"I have been betrayed! Yet if it be but the priest, there is no great harm done. The secret of confession, at all events, is safe. But where is the girl herself, and what has been her communication with Alured? That must be known ere many hours be over--perhaps I shall know it soon enough.--And yet what can she tell, but that a wounded man died in my house, brought in by people who had once visited me, and that, too, while I was absent?--'Tis my own conscience makes me fear. If Ellerby would but betake himself to Wales or France, or anywhere but here, all would be safe enough; but he keeps hovering about, like a moth round a candle. Where are this man's clothes, I wonder?"--and taking up the lamp, for it was now rapidly growing dark, he sought carefully about the room; but neither clothes, nor sword, nor dagger were to be found.

"There is a plot against me," he continued; "'tis evident enough now. She may have gained more information than I think; she may have overheard something. A paper!--What paper could she give to Alured! Perhaps the covenant that I foolishly gave to these men! He might have had it about him. Ellerby may have forgotten it. That were damnation, indeed! Perhaps 'twere better to fly, while there is yet time!--Fly? no, never!--to be a wandering outcast upon the face of the earth, seeking my daily sustenance at the sword's point, or else by art and cunning, when the earldom of Ashby is almost within my grasp! No, never! I will go face it at once, and woe to him that crosses me!--If I could but find that girl--Hark, there is a noise below!" and with a nervous start he turned to listen, and soon heard that the sounds proceeded from the servants, whom he had sent round with his horses, talking with the lad in the hall.

"I will go face it at once," he repeated to himself--"I will wait for him at his lodging, and soon find out what he knows: doubtless he has kept it to his own breast. Alured is not one to cast a stain upon his race. No, no;

he will not accuse one of the name of Ashby!"

Thus saying, he descended the stairs; and bidding his servants keep good watch in the house till he returned, he took his way back to the castle on foot. On reaching the apartments of his cousin, he found a number of attendants in the outer room, apparently not long returned from a journey. Some time had since passed, however, for they were eating and drinking merrily, and little did they seem disposed to interrupt their meal for their lord's poor kinsman.

"My lord is out, Sir Richard," said one, "he is gone to the Prince's lodging."

"Nonsense, Ned!" cried another--"he's come back again; but he told Peter that he did not wish to be disturbed by any one."

"Of course, he did not thereby mean me," replied Richard de Ashby, sternly. "Go in, Ned, and tell him I am here."

The man obeyed, sullenly enough, and the moment after, the knight heard his cousin's voice, saying, in a hasty tone--"I want not to see him. Tell him I am engaged--going out on matters, of moment. Yet, stay, send him in."

Richard de Ashby's eyes were fixed sternly upon the ground as he heard the bitter confirmation of his fears, and he muttered to himself--"Aye, he has heard more than he should have known."

When the servant returned, however, and bade him follow to his lord's presence, he cleared his brow, and went in with as satisfied an air as he could well assume. The table was laid for supper, and his cousin was standing at the end, in the act of setting down from his hand a drinking cup of jewelled agate, the contents of which he had half-drained.

"I would not have disturbed you, Alured," said the knight, "but as I am to go with you to the field, it is necessary that we should talk over our arrangements."

"I have no arrangements to make," cried the young Earl, looking at him askance, like a fiery horse half inclined to kick at the person who approaches. "I am going to fight--that is all. I have had a lance in my hand before now, and know how to use it."

"Yes," replied Richard de Ashby, "and you will use it right well, and to the destruction of your adversary. I am aware of that, Alured; but still there may be many things to be said between us. When one knows one's opponent in the lists, consideration and skill may be employed to baffle his particular mode of fighting his art--his trick, call it what you will. Now I have often seen Hugh de Monthermer run a course--you, I think, never have but once?"

"I met him hand to hand at Evesham," replied his cousin impatiently; "that is, enough for me. I want neither advice nor assistance, cousin mine; and more, as we are now upon the subject, you go not to the field with me--I will choose another godfather.--Nay, no attitudes or flashing eyes. I tell thee, Dickon, things have come to my knowledge which may touch your life, so make the most of the hint. The time is short, for as soon as the Prince returns, he shall be made acquainted with all the facts."

"But, Alured, explain!" exclaimed Richard de Ashby.

"No need of explanation," replied his cousin; "you will hear enough of it ere long, if you wait. Let your conscience be your guide to stay or fly. At any rate, remain not here. I go for a moment to, shake hands with Hugh de Monthermer, ere I meet him to-morrow at the lance's point, and to tell him that I bear him no ill will, though honour compels me to

appear in arms against him. I would not find you here when I return; and let me not see your face at to-morrow's lists, for it would bring down a curse upon me."

Thus saying, he strode out of the room without waiting for a reply, and Richard de Ashby, in the passion of the moment, writhed his fingers in his own hair, and tore it out by the roots.

"A curse upon him!" he cried, "a curse upon him! Well, let it fall! Tell the Prince? Blast his own blood? Stain the name of Ashby for ever? Bring me to the block? But I know better," he continued, suddenly recovering himself--"he shall never do that;" and looking anxiously round the room, he drew from his pouch the small box that Guy de Margan had given him, approached the door, which his cousin had left partly open, pushed it gently to, and then, returning to the table, he poured a small portion of the white, powder it contained into the drinking cup of Alured de Ashby. A triumphant smile lighted up his countenance as he saw the powder disappear in the wine which still remained in the cup.

"He will drink again when he comes back," said the villain. "I know him, Ha! ha! ha!--and he must tell his story soon to Prince Edward's ear, or his tongue may fail him, by chance.--On my life, I think he is a coward, and afraid to face this Monthermer. But doubt and hesitation are past with me. Kate Greenly, 'tis your turn now. She is with the priest, doubtless--she is with the priest.--Her tongue once silenced, and I Earl of Ashby, who will dare to accuse me then?--Or if they do, why let them! I will unfurl my banner on my castle walls, call around me the scattered party of De Montfort, and set Edward at defiance, till, by a soft capitulation, I ensure the past from all inquiries. But now for the girl--she must see no more suns rise!"

And thus saying, he quitted the room and castle with a hasty step.

CHAPTER XLI.

"The Earl of Ashby, my good lord, desires to speak with you," said stout Tom Blawket, addressing Hugh de Monthermer, as he sat at a table, writing.

"Admit him instantly," answered Hugh. "Is he alone?"

"Quite alone, my lord," replied the man, and retired.

The burst of anger to which Alured de Ashby had given way, when irritated by his cousin's presence, had passed off; and he now entered the chamber of Hugh de Monthermer, grave and sad, but with feelings of a high and noble kind. He turned his eye back, as he passed the door towards the ante-room, where a page and some yeomen were seated; and Hugh de Monthermer, divining the meaning of the glance, bade Blawket, as he ushered the Earl in, clear the outer chamber and let no one remain there.

The Earl advanced at once towards his adversary, and with a frank though grave air, held out his hand. Hugh took it and pressed it in his own, and seating themselves together, Alured de Ashby began upon the motive of his coming.

"Monthermer," he said, "I cannot meet you to-morrow in the field, as needs must be in consequence of my own rashness and the world's opinion, without saying a word or two to clear my conscience and relieve my heart. When I made the charge I did make, I was induced by artful men to believe you guilty. Since then, however, reason and thought, and some accidental discoveries, have made me doubt the fact.

"Doubt?" exclaimed Hugh de Monthermer, in a tone of reproach.

"Well, well," said Alured, "to believe that the charge is false. Will that satisfy you?"

"It must," replied Hugh de Monthermer. "Am I then to suppose, that it is the world's opinion, the fear of an idle scoff alone, which makes you draw your sword against a friend, which makes you still urge--but I will not use a term that can pain you--which makes you risk your life and mine, a sister's happiness, and your own repose of mind for ever, all for an idle scoff?"

"Even so, Monthermer, even so!" said Alured de Ashby, in a sad, but determined tone. "I know it all--all you could urge; but yet you and I are well matched in arms; both have some renown--yours, perhaps, higher than my own, from having fought in Palestine--and it is impossible that, after having called you to the field, I can in aught retract, without drawing down upon myself a charge of fear, which must never rest upon my name. Men would say I dared not meet you, and that must not be."

Hugh rose from his seat, and walked twice across the room, then shook his head with a grieved and sorrowful expression, replying, "Ashby, you are wrong; but I, on my part, must say no word to shake your resolution. As you judge best, so must you act, but I go to the field with a heart free from wrong; sad, bitterly sad, that I am forced to draw the sword against a man whom I would fain take to my heart with love;--sad, bitterly sad, that whether I live or die, a charge I have not merited brings sorrow upon me. But, as I have said, I will urge no motive upon you to change your purpose; only hear me, Alured, when I call God and all the holy saints to witness, that the thought of injuring your father by word or deed never could cross my mind--that I am, in short, as guiltless of his death as the babe unborn!"

"I believe you--I do believe you, indeed," said the young Earl.

"Well, then," replied Hugh, "I have a charge to give you, Alured. None can tell what the result of such a day as to-morrow may be. I go with my heart bent down with care and sorrow; your sister's love blunts my lance and rusts my sword--hatred of the task put upon me hangs heavy on my arm--and 'tis possible that, though mine be the righteous cause, yours the bad one, I may fall, and you may conquer. If so, there is a debt of justice which you owe me, and I charge you execute it--ay, as an act of penitence. Proclaim with your own voice the innocence of the man you have slain, seek every proof to show he was not guilty, and bring the murderers to the block--even should you find them in your own house."

The Earl covered his eyes with his hands, and remained silent for a moment, but then looked up again, saying, "No, no; 'tis I that shall fall. The penalty of my own rashness at first, the penalty of my own weakness now--for it is a weakness--will be paid by myself, Monthermer. I feel that my days are at an end; my death under your lance will clear you of the charge that I have brought against you, and yours will be the task to seek and punish the assassins of my father."

"And your sister?" said Hugh de Monthermer.

"I have seen her," replied her brother. "I have seen her, and told her my wishes and my will. Of that no more; only remember, Monthermer, that when to-morrow I call God to witness that my cause is just, the cause I mean is not my charge against you, but the defence of my own honour against the injurious suspicions of the world."

Hugh looked at him with a rueful smile. "Alas, Alured!" he said, "I fear the eye of Heaven will not see the distinction. Ask your confessor what he thinks of such a reservation. But if it must be so, so let it be!! Yet 'tis a strange thing that two men, most unwilling to do each other wrong, should be doomed by one hasty word to slaughter each other against conscience."

"Ay, so goes the world, Hugh," replied the Earl, "and so it will go too, I fear, till the last day. We must all do our devoir as knights."

Hugh de Monthermer remembered of his knightly oath and the true duties of chivalry, and he could not help thinking that the mere reputation of a lesser virtue was held to be of more importance than the great and leading characteristics of that noble institution. He said nothing, however; for he would not urge the Earl to forego his purpose, and he knew that reproach would irritate, but not change him.

"I grieve, Alured," he said, "that you feel it so; but as you are the mover in all this, with you must it rest. I can but defend my innocence as best I may."

The tone which the young knight assumed, the calmness, the kindness, the want of all bravado, touched Alured de Ashby's heart more than aught else on earth could have done, and wringing Hugh de Monthermer's hand, he said, "Good bye, good bye! I believe you innocent, from my soul, Monthermer, and I would give my right hand that you or I were a hundred miles hence this night."

With these words he quitted the room, and turned his steps toward his own lodging. He had thought, by visiting his adversary, to satisfy those better feelings, which, under the pressure of dark and terrible circumstances, had arisen in his heart--he had thought to relieve his bosom of the load that sat upon it, to make his conscience feel light and easy, and to cast off the burden of regret. But the result had been very different: the bitterness in his heart was doubled; sorrow, shame, anxiety, were all increased; and yet not one word or look of him whom he had deeply injured, gave human nature the opportunity of rousing up anger to take the place of regret. He felt his heart burn within him, his eyeballs seemed on fire, his head ached, and, ere he entered the door which led to his apartments, he threw back his hood, and walked three or four times up and down the court.

He was just about to go in, when another figure, coming across from the same side where his lodgings lay, approached and cut him off, as it were; and in a moment after, Guy de Margan was at his side.

"Give you good evening, my lord," he said.

"Good night," rejoined Alured, advancing as if to pass him.

"Pray what is the matter with your cousin Richard?" asked the other. "I met him hurrying through the gates but now like a madman."

"I know not, sir," replied Alured, impatiently; but, the moment after he continued, in a changed tone--"By the way, Sir Guy, I would fain speak with you. Thou hast been a friend and companion of Richard de Ashby."

"Well, my lord!" exclaimed Guy de Margan.

"Thou hast aided him with all thy might, to fix the crime of my father's death on Hugh de Monthermer!" said the Earl, and then paused, as if for a reply.

None was made, however, and he went on. "The accusers may be the accused some day--so look to it! look to it!" and he turned hastily towards his lodging.

Guy de Margan stayed for a moment in the middle of the court, and then darted after Alured de Ashby, exclaiming, "My lord--my lord! one word. Do you mean to charge me with any share in your father's death? If you do, I demand, that this instant, before the King, you make it publicly. I know, too well, my lord, to dare you to arms upon such a quarrel; but if the Earl of Ashby thinks fit first to accuse one, and then another, I will put myself upon my trial by my peers, who will force you to prove your words."

"Out of my way, reptile!" cried the Earl--"Out of my way, or I will stamp upon thy head, and crush thee like a poisonous worm. Who accused thee? I did not!"

"I thought the Earl of Ashby might seek to avoid fighting his adversary," said Guy de Margan, drawing a step or two back, "and wish to do it at my expense--Hugh de Monthermer is a renowned knight, and no pleasant foe to meet at outrance."

Alured felt for the pommel of his sword, but he had left it on the table behind him; and springing at once upon Guy de Margan, he caught him by the throat before he could dart away, and hurled him backwards with tremendous force upon the pavement.

Stunned and bleeding, Guy de Margan lay without sense or motion; and the young Earl, crying, "Lie there, fox!" strode back to his apartments. Passing hastily through the other rooms to his own chamber, he paused by the side of the table, in deep thought; and then, pronouncing the words, "A set of knaves and villains!" he filled the agate cup to the brim with wine, raised it to his lips, and drained it to the dregs.

CHAPTER XLII.

Some half hour after she had left the Princess--and we will venture to hope that the reader has particularly marked at what precise moment of time each of the scenes which we have lately described were taking place in the castle of Nottingham--some half-hour after she had left the Princess, Lucy de Ashby, covered with one of those large gowns of grey

cloth which were worn by the less strict orders of nuns, while travelling, with her fair head wrapped in a wimple, and a pilgrim's bag hung over shoulder, filled with a few trinkets and some other things which she thought necessary to take with her, leaned thoughtfully upon the table in the wide, oddly-shaped chamber, which had been appropriated to her in Nottingham Castle. Near her stood one of the maids, whom we have seen with her before, and who now watched her mistress's countenance and the eager emotions that were passing over it, with a look of anxiety and affection.

At length, with a sudden movement, as if she had long restrained herself, the girl burst forth, "Let me go with thee, lady!

"You know not where I go, Claude," replied Lucy; "you know not, indeed, that I am going anywhere!"

"Yes, yes," said the girl, "I am sure you are going somewhere; if not, why have you put on that disguise?"

"But--but to see if it would do, in case of need," answered Lucy. "Here, take it off good girl! I should not recognise myself, much less would others!"

"Ay, lady, but still thou art going somewhere," said the girl, aiding her to pull off the wimple and gown. "I know not where, 'tis true, but I will go with thee, anywhere--neither distance nor danger will scare me; and I am sure I can help thee!"

"Well, be it as thou wilt!" replied Lucy, after a moment's thought, "but it may be that we shall leave behind us courts and soft beds for ever, Claude."

"I care not--I care not!" cried the girl, "I would rather live with the bold foresters in the wood than at Nottingham or Lindwell either."

Lucy smiled, as the girl's words brought back the memory of one happy day, and with it the hopes that then were bright.

"Well, haste thee," she said, "haste thee to make ready; there are many here who know thee, Claude, and we must both pass unrecognised."

"Oh!" answered her attendant, "I will transform me in a minute in such sort that my lover--if I had one--should refuse me at the altar, or else be forsworn! Hark! there is some one knocks."

"Pull it off--pull it off!" cried Lucy, disembarrassing herself of the gown. "Now run, and see!"

"The Princess, madam, requires your instant presence," said the girl, after having spoken for a moment to some one at the door; and, with a quick step, and eager eye, Lucy de Ashby advanced along the corridor, following one of Eleanor's ladies who had brought the message. The latter opened the door of the Princess's chamber for her young companion to enter, but did not, as usual, go in herself; and Lucy found Eleanor and her husband alone.

Edward was clothed in arms, as he had come from Leicester, dusty, and soiled with travelling, but his head was uncovered, except by the strong curling hair which waved round his lordly brow, while a small velvet bonnet and feather, in which he had been riding, was seen cast upon one of the settles near the door. He was walking, with a slow step, up and down the room, with his brows knit, and a glance of disappointment and even anger in his eye. Eleanor, on the contrary, sat and gazed on him in silence, with a grave and tender look, as if waiting till the first ebullition of feeling was past and the moment for soothing or consolation arrived.

"Here she is, Edward," said the Princess, as soon as Lucy entered; and those words showed her that the conversation of her two royal friends had been of herself, and made her fear that the evident anger of

Edward had been excited by something she had done.

The timid and imploring look which she cast upon him, however, when he turned towards her instantly banished the frown from his brow; and taking her hand, he said, "Be not afraid, dear lady; I am more angry perhaps than becomes me, but 'tis not with you or yours. When I came here, some twenty minutes since, my sweet wife gave me this paper, which tends to clear our poor friend Hugh, and I instantly took it to the King to beseech him but to delay the combat for a week. Judge of my surprise, when he refused me with an oath, and swore that either your brother should make good his charge or die. But 'tis not my father's fault, lady," he continued, seeing a look of horror, mingled somewhat with disgust, come upon Lucy's face--"'tis not my father's fault, I can assure you. Mortimer and Pembroke, and some others who have his ear, have so prepossessed his mind, that for the moment all words or arguments are vain; and yet this combat must not take place, or one of two noble men will be murdered."

"Then let me try to stop it," answered Lucy, "Has the Princess, my lord----"

"Yes--yes, she has," cried Edward, "and you must try, sweet Lucy; but I doubt that even your persuasions--I doubt that even the bribe of your fair hand will induce Monthermer to fly and leave his name to ignominy even for a day."

"Nay--nay, he will," said Eleanor; "certain of his own innocence, with the confession of her brother which Lucy has, that he believes him guiltless----"

"'Tis but an expression of doubt," interrupted Edward, "if you told me right."

"Nay, Edward," asked the Princess, rising and laying her hand upon his arm; "if the case were our own--if I besought you with tears and with entreaties, and every argument that she can use, would you not yield?"

"'Twere a hard case, dear lady mine," replied Edward, kissing her--"'twere a hard case, in truth, yet I may doubt. His answer might be clear; with honour, innocence, and courage on his side, why should he fly?"

"To save *my* brother," said Lucy, looking up in the Prince's face.

"Ay, but his renown!" exclaimed Edward.--"Yet he must fly. Some means must be found to persuade him."

"Cannot you, my most gracious lord?" asked Lucy,

"Ay, that is the question," rejoined the Prince, again walking up and down the room. "What will be said of me, if I interfere?--My father's anger, too.--To tell a Knight to fly from his devoir!--Yet it must be done.--Hark ye, fair lady; go to him, as you have proposed, use prayers, entreaties, whatever may most move him--do all that you have proposed--offer to go with him and be his bride. He scarcely can refuse that, methinks;" and he turned a more smiling look towards Eleanor. "But if all fails, tell him that I entreat--nay, that I command him--if he be so sure of shortly proving his innocence, that no man can even dream I have done this thing for favour--tell him I command him to fly this night, and that I will justify him--that I will avow 'twas done by my express command; and let me see the man in all my father's realms to blame it!"

"Will you, most gracious lord," said Lucy--"will you give it me under your hand? If I have but words, Hugh may think it is a woman's art to win him to her wishes."

"Is there an ink-horn there?" demanded Edward, looking round.

"Here--here," said the Princess, shewing him the materials for writing; and with a rapid hand Edward traced a few words upon the paper, and then read them, but still held the order in his hand. "Remember," he said, turning to Lucy, and speaking in an earnest, almost a stern tone, "this is to be the last means you use, and not till

every other has been tried in vain. 'Tis a rash act, I fear, and somewhat an unwise one, that I do, though with a good intent, but I would fain it were never mentioned were it possible."

"This makes all safe," said Lucy, taking the paper; "he will go now, my lord, that his honour is secure. But I promise you no entreaties of mine shall be spared to make him go without it. I will forget that I have this precious thing, until he proves obdurate to all my prayers. Even then, methinks, I may show some anger to find him go at any words of yours when he has scorned all mine.--But, good sooth, I shall be too grateful to God to see him go at all, to let anger have any part."

"Well--well, fair lady," said the Prince, "may God send us safely and happily through this dark and sad affair! We are told not to do evil, that good may come of it; but here, methinks, I only choose between two duties, and follow the greater. I act against my father's will, 'tis true; but thereby I save the shedding of innocent blood, and I spare the King himself a deed which he would bitterly repent hereafter. God give it a good end, I say once more! for we act for the best."

"Fear not--fear not, my Edward," said Eleanor; "God will not fail those that trust in him. May He protect thee, Lucy!" and as she spoke she kissed her young friend's forehead tenderly. "Now tell me," she continued, "is all prepared for your expedition?"

"All," replied Lucy. "My girl Claude has got me a grey sister's gown, which will conceal me fully."

"Is that all?" cried the Prince. "Where are the horses?--but leave that to me. If Monthermer consents to go, bid him make no delay, nor stay for any preparation. He will find horses at the city gate--the northern gate, I mean. In half an hour they shall be there. Know you the way to his lodging?"

"Not well," said Lucy; "'tis, I think, the third door down the court;--but Claude will find it quickly, I don't doubt."

"There is a speedier way than that," replied the Prince. "Follow the passage running by your room, then down the steps, and you will see a door; if you knock there, you will find his page or some other servant, for it leads into his ante-room. It were better," he continued, thoughtfully, "that you made a servant carry the disguise, and not assume it till you are sure that he will go. Were you to visit him in such a garb, fair lady," he added, taking her hand kindly, "and after to return unwedded, men might speak lightly of your reputation; and that which in holy purity of heart you did to avert a most needless combat, might turn to your discredit."

The blood came warmly into Lucy's cheek, but the moment after she looked up in the Prince's face, replying, with an air of ingenuous candour, "You think me, doubtless, somewhat bold, my lord, and many men may censure me, but I have something here"--and she laid her hand upon her heart--"which blames me not, but bids me go, in innocence of purpose, and share his fate whatever it may be. God knows this is a sad and painful bridal, such as I never thought to see. A father's death, a brother's rashness, and a lover's danger, may well cloud it with sorrow. But there is a higher joy in thinking I am doing what is right,--in thinking that I, a poor weak girl, by scorning idle tongues, and the coarse jests of those who cannot feel as I can, have a power to save my brother's life, and to spare him I love the dreadful task of putting a bloody barrier 'twixt himself and me for ever.--Judge me aright, my lord!"

"I do--I do," replied Edward; "and now, farewell. God speed you, lady, on your noble enterprise!"

Lucy kissed his hand, and without more ado returned to her own chamber. "Quick, Claude!" she cried; "are you ready?"

"Yes, madam," she answered. "Will you not put on the gown?"

"No," said Lucy, still pausing at the door; "bring them with you, and follow quickly."

The girl gathered up her lady's disguise and her own in haste, and Lucy led the way along the passage as the Prince had directed her. There were no doors on either side, and but a loophole every here and there, which showed that the corridor, along which they went, was practised in the wall. Full of renewed hope, and eager to see her scheme put in execution, the lady descended the steps, and was about at once to knock at the door, when her raised hand was stayed by hearing some one speaking.

She felt faint, and her heart beat quickly, for she recognised her brother's voice. Lucy listened, and distinctly heard the words--"I believe you innocent, from my soul, Monthermer; and I would give my right hand that you or I were a hundred miles hence this night."

A smile came upon her countenance. "He is preparing the way for me!" she murmured to herself; and again she listened, but all was silent, save a retreating step and a closing door.

"He is gone," said Lucy, turning to her maid. "Stay you here, Claude, for a minute or two;" and without knocking, she gently opened the door and looked in.

There was a small room before her, with a fire on the opposite side, and three stools near it, but no one there; and entering with a noiseless step, Lucy gazed round. A door appeared on either hand: that on the right was closed, but through it she heard sounds of talking and laughter: that on the left was in a slight degree ajar, but all was silent within. Gliding up to it with no noise but the light rustle of her garments, Lucy approached, and pushed it gently with her hand--so gently that she saw before she was seen.

Nearly in the centre of the room stood he whom she loved, with his arms folded on his broad chest, his fine head bent, his eyes fixed upon the ground, and an expression both sorrowful and stern upon his lip and brow. As the door moved farther open, it roused him from his reverie,

and he looked up; but what a sudden change came instantly upon his countenance. An expression mingled of joy, surprise, and anxiety, passed across his face, and exclaiming, "Lucy, dearest Lucy!" he sprang forward to meet her.

Drawing her gently into the room, he closed the door, and then held her for a moment to his bosom while both were silent; for the throbbing of her heart left Lucy's tongue powerless, and Hugh dared not speak lest it should dispel what seemed but too happy a dream.

"Dearest Lucy," he said, at length, "even while I thank and bless you for coming, I must ask what brings you here? It was rash, dear girl--it was rash! If you had sent to me, I would have been with you in a moment. It is not a minute yet since your brother was here."

"I know it," replied Lucy--"I know it all, Hugh. I know it was rash to come; but I am going to do everything that is rash to-night, and this is but the beginning. It is in general that you men sue to us women--till you are our masters, at least; now I come to sue to you."

"Oh, Lucy!" cried Hugh, with a sort of prescience of what she was about to say--"what is that you are going to ask? Remember, Lucy--remember my honour. If you love me, that honour ought to be dearer to you than my life. Ask me nothing that may bring shame upon me."

"Listen to me--listen to me," she replied. "You must hear me, Hugh, before you can judge. Your honour *is* dearer to me than your life; and oh, Hugh! you have yet to learn how dear that is to Lucy de Ashby;" and as she spoke, the tears rose into her eyes, but she dashed them away, and went on. "Yet it is not for your life I fear, dear as it is to me. Oh, no! your heart is safe. Panoplied in innocence and strength, you go but to conquer. It is for my brother that I fear--for my rash and hasty brother--ay, and guilty, if you will--for he who brings a false accusation against an

innocent man is guilty. I tremble for him, Hugh; I tremble for myself, too; I fear that Hugh de Monthermer will draw upon his hand my brother's blood; and a hand so stained can never clasp mine again."

"I know it," said Hugh; "but what can I do? I have no choice, Lucy, but to live for misery or to die disgraced!"

"Yes," cried Lucy, eagerly--"yes, you have. Fly, Hugh de Monthermer! give no reason to any one why you go. You are sure, ere long, to establish your innocence.--appear not at the sound of the trumpet--appear not till you can prove his guilt upon the foul wretch who did the deed with which they charge you."

"What!" exclaimed Hugh de Monthermer--"to be condemned, not only as a criminal, but as a coward and a recreant--to have my name pass from mouth to mouth throughout all Europe as a byword--to have heralds say, when they would point out a craven and a traitor--'He is like Hugh de Monthermer!' Oh, Lucy, Lucy! think of my honour--think of my renown!"

"But your honour is safe, Hugh," answered Lucy, clinging to his arm. "Alured himself admits your innocence. I heard him say but now----"

"Ay, in this room between him and me," replied Hugh de Monthermer; "but to-morrow he goes into the lists, and calls God to witness that his cause is just. To me he owns the falsehood of the charge, but to the world upholds that it is true."

"Not so!" cried Lucy--"look here, Monthermer--see what he says to me here!"--and she drew forth the paper which Alured had given her.

Hugh read it eagerly; and as he saw her brother's wish expressed, that, if he fell, their hands might be united, he turned his eyes towards the sweet girl beside him, with a look of tenderness and love deep and unutterable; but then the moment after, waving his head with a

melancholy air, he said, "He knows you not as I know you, Lucy. His wish is kind and generous--noble--most noble, and atones for all. But would Lucy follow it?"

"No!" she replied, raising her head, firmly. "Were I to waste away my life in hopeless regret and misery, my hand should never be given to him who sheds my brother's blood. I vow it, so help me God at my utmost need! But hear me; Hugh," she continued, her cheek, which had been very pale during the last words, becoming crimson--"Hear me, Hugh! hear me, my beloved!--hear me, and ho, grant my request! As eagerly, as fondly as ever you have sued for this hand, I now beseech you to take it.--On my knees, Hugh de Monthermer," and she sunk upon her knees before him--"on my knees thus, bedewing your hand with my tears, I beseech you to make Lucy de Ashby your wife."

"But how, dearest Lucy!" he cried, stooping to raise her. "What--what do you mean? How--how is this to be!"

"Fly!" exclaimed Lucy--"fly *with me* this night! Here is my brother's full consent--here, also, is your justification--here, at the very first, he proclaims your innocence!"

"Ah, no!" replied Hugh de Monthermer, shaking his head; "he says, but that he doubts my guilt. Oh, Lucy! you will drive me mad to give me such a precious sight in prospect, and then to sweep it all away. I tell thee, my beloved, there is not an honest man in all the realm that would not call me coward, if I fled."

"Is that all that stays you?" demanded Lucy. "What, if I show you that, amongst the highest and most honourable of the land, there are those who will exculpate and defend you?"

"You cannot do it, Lucy," replied Hugh. "You may think they would. They may have said some chance words--that 'twere better to fly--that I might avoid the combat for some days; but when the time came, their

voices would be raised with all the rest against me. You can shew me no more than this, dear girl."

"I can!" answered Lucy. "There! read that; and if you hesitate a moment more, 'tis that Hugh de Monthermer loves not his promised bride, rejects her proffered hand, and scorns the rash and giddy girl, who for the sake of any ungrateful man cast from her every thought but one--the saving those she loves."

Hugh de Monthermer held the paper in his hand for a moment without reading it, gazing upon the beautiful being beside him, as with her eyes full of lustre and light, her cheek glowing, her lip quivering, she addressed to him the only reproachful words which had ever fallen from her lips.

"Lucy," he said, "I will not merit that reproach. You yourself have told me that my honour is dearer to you than my life. Let it be dearer than all other things, Lucy, and then tell me whether I can go with honour. Whether, if I do, men will not cry coward on me?--whether my renown will not suffer in the eyes of Europe? If you say yes, oh, with what joy will I fly, with Lucy for my companion! With what deep devotion will I strive through life to repay her generous self-devotion, and to show her what I think of that heart which could cast away all idle forms and ceremonies, set at nought empty opinion, and entertain, as you say, but the one thought--the saving those she loves."

As he spoke, he clasped his arms around her, and Lucy hid her eyes upon his bosom, for they were running over with tears. But after a moment, she raised them again, saying--"Read--read, Hugh, that will satisfy you!"

Hugh de Monthermer approached nearer the lamp, and looking at the paper, exclaimed--"Prince Edward's writing! What is this?--

"'Follow the plan of your fair lady, Monthermer. Fly with her as speedily as may be--she will tell you more; but fear not for your honour--I will be your warranty, and will say 'twas my command. You are my prisoner still, remember, and as such, cannot fight without the consent of

"'EDWARD'"

"This changes all!" cried Hugh de Monthermer; "but why not give me this before, dear Lucy?"

"Because the Prince required me so to act," replied Lucy--"only to use this as a last resource; and she went on to tell him briefly but clearly all that had occurred.

"Let us be quick," she said, "dear Hugh! There will be horses down at the north gate by this time. My poor girl, Claude, is waiting on the steps with a nun's gown for me, and some cunning disguise for herself. Have you nothing that you could cast over these gay garments? for as you are about to travel by night with a poor grey sister, 'twere as well not to seem so much the courtly cavalier."

Poor Lucy's heart, relieved from the burden that had rested on it, beat up high with renewed hope; but still the agitation which she suffered remained, like the flying clouds that follow a summer's storm, and filled her eyes with tears, while the jest was still upon her lips. Hugh held her to his heart; and soothed her, and might have felt inclined to spend a few minutes more in such a sweet employment, but Lucy reminded him of how quickly moved the wings of time.

"Remember, Hugh," she said, "the minutes and my courage are not stable things, and both are ebbing fast. My heart beats strangely quick and fearfully, and I must not faint or lag behind till we have passed the gates."

"Nor there either!" cried Hugh; "but your courage will rise, dear Lucy, when the immediate danger is past. We had better not go quite alone, however, for we may yet have to use the strong hand by the way. I will send down Blawket and another to the gate with horses for themselves."

"But a disguise!" cried Lucy--"a disguise for you. Ere we quit the castle, all this gold and silk will send the tale abroad to every horse-boy in the place."

"I have one ready," answered Hugh; "the priest's gown, in which I escaped before, may answer well a second time. Where Is this girl of yours?"

"Upon the steps," replied Lucy. "I will call her."

"Nay, let me," said Hugh de Monthermer; and, opening the door of the ante-room and then that which opened on the stairs, he whispered, "Come in, my pretty maiden; bring the lamp with you--I will be back directly;" and passing on into the outer room, as soon as the maid was in his chamber and had shut the door, he called Blawket aside and gave him orders. Then sitting down at a table, he wrote a few words on a scrap of paper, which he entrusted to one of the armourers, saying, "Do not disturb Sir John Hardy to-night, but give him that at day break to-morrow morning."

"'Twere a hard matter to disturb him, sir," answered the man; "for he's asleep by this time, and when once his eyes are shut, lightning will not make them wink for eight hours to come."

"It matters not," rejoined Hugh, "to-morrow will be soon enough--only be sure to give it;" and thus saying, he returned to his chamber, closing the doors carefully behind him.

The young knight actually started when he beheld Lucy in the grey gown and wimple, such was the change which it had made.

"You see, Hugh," she cried, smiling as she remarked his surprise--"you see what Lucy's beauty is made of. It all disappears when you take away from her her gay apparel, and cover her with the dull stole of the nun."

There might be a little coquetry in what she said, for Hugh de Monthermer could make but one answer, and he made it; but to say the truth, it was the coquetry of agitation, for Lucy sought to cover her own fears, and prevent her mind from resting on them. No time was now lost, however; the black gown of the priest was speedily found and thrown over the other garments of the young Knight; and then the question became how they were to go forth, without passing through the room in which the servants and followers of Hugh de Monthermer were sitting.

"Can we not return by the steps in the passage, madam?" asked Claude. "Close to the door of your room there is the little staircase which leads by the tower into the great court."

"That will be the best way," said Hugh. "Draw the veil over your face, dear Lucy. No one will know us in such a guise as this; and there is little chance that we shall meet any one."

The plan proposed was adopted, and neither in the corridor nor on the staircase did they find a living creature, though, as they came near the apartments of the Prince and Princess, steps were heard going on before them, and then a door opened and shut at some little distance. They reached the court, too, in safety, and Hugh de Monthermer took a step or two forward to see that all was clear. A flash of light, however, proceeding from the main building, caused him instantly to draw back again under shelter of the doorway.

"There are torches coming," he said. "Does the King ascend by this staircase?"

"Never, that I know of," replied Lucy.

"Never," said the girl Claude--"never!"

Hugh de Monthermer pushed the door partly to, but looked out through the remaining aperture to see what was passing.

"There is a crucifix," he said, "and the host: they are carrying the sacrament to some one in extremis."

"St. Mary bless me!" cried the girl Claude, as he mentioned the word crucifix, "I have forgot mine;" and away she ran up the stairs again, to seek her cross, which she had left behind.

CHAPTER XLIII.

Richard de Ashby smoothed his brow, and calmed his look, as he crossed from a tavern, where he had been making some inquiries, to a house on the opposite side of the street, not very far from the gates of the castle. It was a large stone building--close to an old church which then stood on that part of the hill--and as it contained several habitations, the entrance of the common staircase was, as usual in such circumstances, left open.

Ascending cautiously, guided by a rope, which passing through iron rings followed the tortuous course of the staircase, Richard de Ashby reached the first floor, and knocked at a small door on his right hand. Nobody appeared, and after waiting for several minutes; he knocked again.

This time he was more successful, the door was opened by a small strange-looking being, dressed in the garb of an old woman, with a brown and wrinkled face, and little, bright, grey eyes. She held a lamp in her hand, and gazing upon the countenance of the visitor with a keen and not very placable look, she asked--"What do you want?"

"I want Father Mark," replied Richard de Ashby.

"He is out visiting the sick," said the old dame.--"Nay, now," she continued, in a petulant tone, "I will answer all your questions at once, before you can put them. They all run in the same round. Father Mark is out--I don't know where he is gone--I don't know when he'll come home.--If you want to see him here, you must come again--If you want him to come to any sick man, you must leave word where.--Now you have it all."

Richard de Ashby had some acquaintance with the world, and fancied that he knew perfectly the character of the person before him. Drawing out, therefore, a small French piece of gold, called an aignel, he slipped it into the old woman's hand, who instantly held it to the lamp, crying, "What's this--what's this?--Gold, as I live! Mary mother! you are a civil gentleman, my son. What is it that you want?"

"Simply an answer to a question," said Richard de Ashby: "Is there a young lady staying here--a pretty young lady--called Kate Greenly? You know her, methinks,--do you not?"

"Know her? to be sure I do," replied the old woman. "A blessing upon her pretty heart, she's been up here many a time, and I've carried a message for her before now; and she gave me some silver pieces, and a bodkin--I've got it somewhere about me now," and she began to feel in her bodice for poor Kate Greenly's gift.

"Then is she not here now?" said Richard de Ashby.

"No, no," answered the old woman, "she was here an hour before sunset, but she went away again. Oh, I know how it is!" she cried, as if a sudden thought had struck her--"you are the gentleman whom good Father Mark has been preaching to her to run away from, because you are living in a state of naughtiness. These friars are so hard upon young folks; and now you'd give another gold piece, like this, I'd swear, to know where she is, and get her to come back again."

"Ay, would I," replied Richard de Ashby, "two."

"Well, well," continued the old woman, "I know something, if I choose to say. She is not in Nottingham, but not far off."

"Can you show me where she is?" demanded Richard de Ashby.

"Not to-night--not to-night!" cried the old woman. "Sancta Maria! I would not go out to-night all that way--not for a purse full of gold. Why it is up, after you get out of the gates, through Back Lane, and down the Thorny Walk till you come to the edge of Thorny Wood, and then you turn to the right by old Gaffer Brown's cottage, and, round under the chapel, and along by the bank where the fountain is, and then up by the new planting, just between it and the fern hill; and then if you go straight on, and take the first to the left, and the fourth to the right, it brings you to old Sweeting's hut, where she has gone to live with him, and his good dame."

Richard de Ashby saw no possible means of discovering the way from the old lady's description, and he was about to propose some other means of arranging the affair, when, with a shrewd wink of the eye, she said--"I am going out to her in the grey of the morning myself, and if you have any message to send her, I can take it; or, if a gentleman chooses to wait at the gate, and walk into the country after an old woman, who can help it?--I mustn't go with you through the town, you know, for that would make a scandal."

"I understand--I understand!" said Richard; "and if by your means I get her back again, you shall have two gold pieces such as that."

"Oh, an open hand gets all it wants," replied the priest's maid--"a close fist keeps what it has got; an open hand gets all it wants. 'Tis a true proverb, Sir Knight--'tis a true proverb. At the north gate, you know, in the grey of the morning. Wait till you see me come out with my basket, and then don't say a word, but come after."

"You are going to her, then?" asked Richard de Ashby.

"Yes, yes," said the old woman, impatiently; "I am going to carry her news, from the good father, of all that happens at the Castle to-night. But go along, now--go along! I am afraid of his coming back and finding you here: then he might think something, you know. At the north gate in the grey of the morning."

"I will not fail," replied Richard de Ashby, and turning away, he slowly descended the stairs.

The old woman paused not to look after him, but closed the door, muttering and talking to herself.

The life of Richard de Ashby had arrived at one of those moments so fearful, so terrible, in the career of wickedness, when one offence following another has accumulated scheme upon scheme, each implying new crimes, and new dangers, and each, though intended to guard the other, offering, like the weakened frontier of an over extended empire, but new points of peril, but fresh necessity of defence.

"'Tis unfortunate," he thought, as he turned from the door--"'tis unfortunate that I have not found her; but she is absent from the city, and that is one point gained."

The moment, however, that his mind had thus cast off the thought of Kate Greenly, and the secret she possessed, it turned with maddening rapidity to all the other points of his situation.

"What shall I do with the body?" he asked himself. "I cannot let it lie and rot there.--I wonder how fares my cousin Alured? He has surely drank the wine. Oh, yes; I know him, he has drank it, and more too.--If that man Ellerby were not hovering round about, all might be secure still."

The word *still* showed better than any other the state of his mind, though he hid it from himself. He knew, in short, that he was anything but secure. Over his head hung the awful cloud of coming detection and punishment. He saw it with his eyes, he felt it in his heart, that the tempest was about to descend; and, as those who, in a thunderstorm, gallop away from the flashing lightning, are said to draw it more surely on their own heads, so his desperate efforts to save himself, only called down more surely the approaching retribution.

The next minute his mind reverted to the corpse again. "This carrion of Dighton," he thought; "it were well, perhaps, to dare the thing openly--to give him a simple but a public funeral--to call the priests to aid, and pay them well. With them, one is always sure to get a good word for one's money.--'Tis but to say he was brought to my house in my absence, and died there while I was away. What have I to do with his death? 'Tis no affair of mine.--I will hie up to the castle, and spy what is going on. Oh, that I could prove that Alured has drank wine or broken bread in the room of Hugh de Monthermer!--That were a stroke indeed! But, at all events, he has been with him. Who can tell how a man may be poisoned? 'Tis at all events suspicious, that he should be with him just before his death.--I will not go into the court; I will just look through the gates, and speak with the warder for a moment or two. The gates are not closed till nine." And thus saying, he retrod his steps to the castle gate.

When he reached it there was nobody there; but as he looked through the archway into the court, he saw the figures of the warder and several soldiers standing with their backs turned towards him, gazing towards the other side of the building. There was a bright light coming from that point; and taking a step farther forward, under the archway, he perceived a procession of priests and boys of the chapel, with torches and crucifixes borne before them, while a tall old man was seen carrying reverently the consecrated bread.

The solemn train took its way direct towards the lodging of Alured de Ashby; and turning back with feelings in which were mingled, in a strange and indescribable manner, anguish and satisfaction, horror and relief, Richard de Ashby murmured--"It is done!--It is done!" and sped his way homeward with the quick but irregular footstep of crime and terror.

It were painful to watch him through the progress of that night. Sleep was banished from his eyelids--sleep, that will visit the couch of utter despair, came not near the troubled brain of doubt, and apprehension, and anxiety. He walked to and fro in his chamber--he laid not down his head upon his bed--he sat gloomily gazing on the pale untrimmed lamp--he rested his eyes upon his folded arms, while dizzy images of sorrow and distress, and dying men, and shame, and agony, and scorn, and anguish here, and punishment hereafter, whirled before his mental vision, from which no effort could shut them out.

Thus passed he the hours, till a faint blue light began to mingle with the glare of the expiring lamp; and then, starting up, he hastily threw on a hood and cloak, and, leaving his servants sleeping in the house, proceeded towards the north gate of the town.

It had been an angry and a stormy night, and the rain, which was running off the rocky streets of Nottingham, still hung upon the green blades of grass and the boughs of the trees, which in that day came almost up to the walls of the city. The clouds were clearing off, however,

and blue patches were seen mingling with the mottled white and grey overhead, while to the right of the town a yellow gleam appeared in the sky, showing the rapid coming of the sun.

Such was the scene as Richard de Ashby looked through the gate of Nottingham, which was thronged with peasantry, bringing in their wares to the market even at that early hour. It was a sight refreshing and bright to the eye, and might have soothed any other mind than his; but the fire that burnt internally, that throbbed in his heart and thrilled through his veins, made the cool air of the autumnal morning feel like the chill of fever where shivering cold spreads over the outer frame, while the intense heat remains unquelled within.

One of the first objects that his eye lighted upon was the form of the old woman, standing without the gate, and looking back towards it; and hurrying on, he was at her side in a minute.

"Ha, ha!" she said, in her usual broken and tremulous voice, "you are a lie-a-bed--I thought you were not coming. Well, let us speed on." And forward she walked, certainly not at the most rapid pace, while Richard de Ashby asked her many a question about old Gaffer Sweeting and his good dame--what was his age? whether he had any sons, and whether there were many cottages thereabout?

The old woman answered querulously, but none the less satisfactorily. He was an old man of seventy-three, she said, and he had had two sons; but one had died in consequence of a fall from a tree, and another had been killed at Lewes.

"Houses!" she exclaimed. "Few houses, I trow. Why; that's the very reason that good Father Mark sent the girl there. Wherever there are houses or young men, there is temptation for us, poor women. But this place is quite a desert, like that where the Eremites lived that he talks of. If you don't tempt her, I don't know who will, there."

Thus talking, she tottered on, leading the way through sundry lanes and hamlets; and explaining to her companion, at each new house they came to, that this was such a place which she had mentioned the night before, and that was another. Very soon, however, the cottages grew less and less in number, for towns had not at that time such extensive undefended suburbs as they have acquired in more peaceful days and at length they came to the chapel which she had named, the bell of which was going as they approached. The good dame would needs turn in to say a prayer or two, and it was in vain that Richard de. Ashby urged her to go forward, for she seemed one of those who harden themselves in their own determinations, as soon as they see themselves in the slightest degree opposed.

"No, no," she said, "you would not have me pass the chapel, and the bell going, would you? It's very well for you men, who have no religion at all--so, go on, go on, if you will, I will not be a minute. I have five aves, and a pater-nosier, and a credo to repeat, and that wont take me a minute. You can't miss the way. Go on, I will soon overtake you."

Richard de Ashby did not think that the usual rate of the old lady's progression would produce that result; but, as the idea of prayer, and all connected with it, was unpleasant to his mind, he strode gloomily on, for some hundred yards, from the chapel, revolving still the same painful images which had tormented him during the livelong night.

In a shorter time than he had expected, however, the old woman came out of the chapel; and he again proceeded on the path, walking on before her, and losing all sight of human habitation, but following a small bye-way, along the sandy ground of which might be traced sundry footsteps, and the marks of a horse's hoofs. Though his step was slow, the old woman did not overtake him for near three quarters of a mile, still keeping in sight and talking to herself as she came after.

The trees soon grew thicker on the left hand, the country more wild and broken on the right; and, at length, about a hundred and fifty yards in front, appeared a small, low cottage, or rather hut, resting on the edge of the wood. The path now spread out into an open green space, a sort of rugged lane some forty yards broad, extending from the spot where Richard de Ashby first saw the cottage, to the low and shattered door; and the place looked so poor and miserable that he said to himself, "If this be the abode the priest has assigned to her, 'twill not be difficult to persuade her to come back to softer things. I will tell her I am going to take her with me to London, and to the gay things of the capital.--Is this the cottage, good dame?" he continued, turning his head over his shoulder, and speaking aloud to the old woman, who was now not more than a couple of yards behind.

"To be sure," replied she; "did I not tell you it was here?"

Richard de Ashby took two or three steps more in advance, straining his eyes upon the hut; but then, he thought he saw first one figure and after that another dart from the wood, and disappear behind the cottage, with a rapidity of movement not like that of old age. A sudden fear came over him, and stopping short, he exclaimed, "What is this, old hag?--There are men there?"

Dropping the basket from her hand in an instant, with a bound like that of a wild beast, and a loud scream, unlike any tone of a human voice, the old woman sprang upon the shoulders of Richard de Ashby, and writhed her long thin arms through his, with tightening folds, like those of a large serpent.

"Ha, ha, ha!" she shouted. "Come forth, my merry men!--come forth! Tangel has got him!--Tangel has got him! We'll eat his heart!--we'll eat his heart!--and roast him over a slow fire!"

In vain Richard de Ashby writhed--in vain he struggled to cast off the grasp of the strange being who held him. With a suppleness and strength almost superhuman, Tangel clung to him like the fatal garment of Alcides, not to be torn away. His fingers seemed made of iron--his arms were as ropes; and Richard de Ashby, casting himself down, rolled over him upon the ground, struggled, and turned, and strove to break loose, without unclasping in the slightest degree the folds in which he held him.

At the same time, the steps of men running fast reached his ear; his eye caught the figures of several persons hurrying from the cottage; and, when Tangel at length relaxed his grasp, Richard de Ashby found himself a prisoner, bound hand and foot.

CHAPTER XLIV.

In a wide, open field, by the side of the Trent, were erected the lists for a battle at *outrance*. All the usual preparations had been made--there was a pavilion for the king to keep his state; there were galleries for the ladies; there were tents for the challenger and the challenged; and there were numerous other booths, for the shelter and refreshment of any who might come from far to witness one of the most solemn acts of chivalry.

Before the hour of eleven, a great multitude had assembled, and every moment the crowd was increasing; for rumours of strange kinds had not only spread through Nottingham, during the early morning, but had found their way to all the country around about, and every one was eager to see with his own eyes how the whole would end. In all parts of

the field men might be seen, each inquiring what the other knew, and, for the most part, each acknowledging his own ignorance of the exact state of the case; although here, as everywhere else, persons were to be found, who pretended to know a great deal of subjects with which they were utterly unacquainted. All that seemed certain was, that the gates of the castle had been shut since the morning, and nobody had been suffered to issue forth, but one or two servants of the King and the Prince, who, after delivering some brief message in the city, had returned immediately, answering no questions, and affording, even accidentally, no information.

Two or three people reported, indeed, that a body of some ten or twelve men had entered the castle, coming from the side of Pontefract. They wore no armour, and did not seem soldiers, and, by the appearance of their dress and horses, it was judged that they had travelled all night. Numerous other rumours, indeed, circulated round the lists, and the opinion was generally gaining ground that there would be no combat at all, when this supposition was at once done away by the appearance of heralds and pursuivants on the ground, examining it scrupulously, to ascertain that all was clear and fair, without pitfall, trap for the horse's foot, molehill, or inequality, which could give an undue advantage to one or other of the combatants.

Shortly after, these officers were followed by several of the King's pages and attendants, who first busied themselves in putting the pavilion prepared for him into neat and proper order, and then stood talking in the front, making great men of themselves, and fancying that they might be mistaken for some of the royal family.

The blast of a trumpet was then heard at a short distance, and, coming at a quick pace, a body of men-at-arms appeared, and took up their station, in military array, at either end of the lists, keeping on the outside of the barriers. A pause of some five minutes ensued, and the people, watching and commenting upon all the arrangements, congratulated themselves on the certainty of seeing two fellow-creatures

engage in mortal conflict, and began to speculate upon which would be the victor. Many there present, merely guided by fancy or report, decided upon the chances of the field without ever having seen either of the two competitors. But there were many of the tenantry of Lindwell, and peasantry from the neighbourhood of the Earl of Ashby's castle, who, of course, maintained the honour of their lord, and asserted that he would win the field from any knight in Europe. It was remarked, however, that even their boldest statements regarding their young lord's prowess were coupled with an expression of their conviction that, "howsoever that might be, they were sure enough the young Lord of Monthermer had never killed the old Earl. Why should he?"

Hugh de Monthermer, indeed, was not without his partisans amongst the people, for he was well known in that part of the country; and a very general feeling that he was both innocent and injured raised up in his favour that generous spirit which is almost always found, though strangely mingled with prejudices and passions, in the bosom of an Englishman.

About half-past eleven, a number of yeomen, dressed in their holiday clothes, mingled with the crowd. They were without bows, but each had his six arrows at his side, and his short sword and buckler. Each, too, had many acquaintances amongst the crowd; and, with others, to whom they did not actually speak, a gay glance of recognition and familiar nod were interchanged as they made their way up to the lists.

"What! Miller," said one of the farmers, as a yeoman in the gay green passed him; "why have you brought your arrows with you? There are no butts here!"

"There are butts everywhere, Winken," replied the person addressed.

"But you have no bow," rejoined the countryman.

"Bows wont be wanted, if we need them," answered the yeoman, and passed on.

Scarcely was this conversation concluded, when, slowly riding down from the side of Nottingham, was seen a gallant train of gentlemen, and many a fair lady, too, it must be confessed, notwithstanding the bloody nature of the scene about to be performed.

"The King!--the King!" shouted many voices; "the King and the Prince! God bless Prince Edward!"

But few added the monarch's name to the benediction. All that Henry heard, however, was the shout of gratulation; and fancying himself popular, he bowed gracefully to the people, and rode on to the entrance of the pavilion prepared for him, which was soon filled with the lords and ladies of his court.

To the surprise of most there present, the Princess Eleanor was seen upon the King's right hand, and many were the comments made upon her appearing, for the first time, to witness a judicial combat.

In the meanwhile, Prince Edward, followed by several heralds in their brilliant tabards, and accompanied by two knights unarmed, rode on to the other end of the lists and entered the field. He himself was clothed in a shining hauberk of steel rings, with a hood of the same, but with his *chapel de fer*, shield, and lance, borne by esquires on foot. His face was thus completely seen, and it was gay and smiling. His princely carriage--his commanding height--his management of the strong fiery horse that bore him--his frank and noble expression of countenance--all had their effect upon the hearts of the people around; and loud and reiterated shouts of gratulation rent the sky as he rode along the lists.

After he had spoken for a few minutes with the heralds and pursuivants, Edward turned to one of the knights who had accompanied him, saying, "Go to the Earl of Ashby's tent, and tell him, he is too weak to fight in this day's field.--The yeoman who first drank of the cup is dead, you say?"

"He died very shortly after, my lord," replied the knight, "having scarce time to make confession, and to acknowledge that, when Sir Richard had left the Earl's lodging, he went into the chamber, and finding the cup well-nigh full of wine, drank it off."

"It must have been a subtle poison, indeed," rejoined the Prince; "Gadsden tells me it cost him all his skill to save the Earl. But go to him, and say that he is too weak. If he will withdraw the charge, well--if not, let him put off the combat for a week. No dishonour shall follow in either case."

The knight rode away, and Edward, turning to the other who had accompanied him, demanded--"They have not found him yet?"

"No, my lord," replied the other; "every place was searched in vain. There lay the dead body in the room above. It is that of a man called Dighton. I knew his face at once, having seen him often with Ellerby, and other such scurvy cattle, hanging about London and Westminster."

"Sir John has got a short answer," said the Prince, as looking towards a tent at the western corner of the lists he saw the knight he had sent away remounting his horse to return. "I have seldom seen a man so obstinate."

In two minutes the messenger was by the Prince's side again.

"He will not bear of it, my lord," exclaimed the knight as he rode up; "he declares that men, indeed, would call him coward now, if for a few hours' sickness he should shirk the conflict."

"Well, then, it must go on," replied the Prince, looking down; "he may find himself mistaken yet. Go to the other tent, and speak With Sir John Hardy; see what he says."

While the knight was absent, the Prince rode round the lists, and approached the spot where Henry and Eleanor were seated. He spoke a few words to each; but as he was about to turn away, Eleanor, whose look displayed some small anxiety, bent her head forward and asked, in a low voice, "Are you quite sure, dear lord?"

"I think so," answered the Prince; "but yet I see no one appears. It will never be too late, however, to interpose myself.--The letter said they would be here before the time.--Ha! here comes the challenger!"

At the moment that he spoke his eyes were fixed upon the tent or pavilion of the young Earl of Ashby, from which was seen to issue forth a figure clothed in a complete suit of armour--consisting of the hauberk, or shirt of mail, the chausses of mail, and the casque of steel, with a crest and a moving visor, or avantaille of bars. He wore no pourpoint over his armour; and the only thing that distinguished him from the ordinary man at arms were the poylins, or joints of steel plates at the knees and arms of the hauberk, which were the first approximation to the plate armour which soon after came into use.

All eyes were turned in that direction, as well as those of the Prince; and every one remarked, that the young Earl leaned, as he walked from the entrance of the tent to his horse's side, upon the arm of Sir Harry Grey, who appeared in the field as his godfather. And as the rumour had become by this time general, that an attempt had been made to poison him on the preceding night, a loud murmur ran amongst the people of--"He's not fit! he's not fit!--Don't let him fight!"

But Alured de Ashby put his foot into the stirrup, and mounted his horse with apparent difficulty, but then sat firm and upright in the saddle.

"Well, beast," he cried, patting the charger's neck, "thou canst bear the arms that weary me." And moving onward to the other end of the lists, his attendants following with his lance and shield, he saluted the

King and Princess as he passed, and bowed his head lowly to the Prince.

"This is mere madness, my good lord," said Edward, riding up to his side; "I really feel that, as judge of the field, I cannot let this go on."

"I must do my devoir, fair sir," answered Alured de Ashby. "I am neither craven nor recreant; and here I stand in arms to defend my honour."

Edward was about to reply; but, at that moment, the knight he had sent to the other pavilion approached at a quick pace, and whispered something in the Prince's ear.

"That they are ready for the field!" said Edward, in a tone of amazement. "What may this mean?--well, let the heralds make proclamation, then; and we will part the sun and wind."

At a sign from the Prince's truncheon, or warder, the trumpet sounded aloud, and a herald, spurring forward his horse, proclaimed that all persons were to quit the field but the knight challenger and his respondent, the heralds, and officers of arms, the judge of the combat, and his esquires.

A momentary bustle and much confusion took place, for a number of persons, upon one pretence or another, were at this time within the lists. But all was soon clear, and Alured de Ashby being placed in the spot adjudged by the heralds to the challenger, braced on his shield, and took his lance in his hand, bearing it perpendicular with the steel in the air, and the other end resting on his foot. An esquire unarmed stood on each side, with two pages behind; and the field being clear, Sir Harry Grey placed a purse of gold in the hands of the principal herald, saying, "That for the good knight's casque."

The herald bowed his head, replying, "Largesse! noble sir. Is the combat both of lance and sword?"

"That matters not," said Sir Harry Grey; "he pays for the lance, and the lance covers the sword."

The herald then spurred forward some twenty steps, followed by his pursuivants, and after a loud flourish of the trumpets, proclaimed that there stood Alured, Earl of Ashby, ready to do battle against Hugh of Monthermer, Lord of Amesbury, on certain charges brought by him, Alured, against the said Hugh, having first made oath, according to the law of arms, that his quarrel was just and righteous, and was ready to wager his body on God's decision. "Now, if the said Hugh of Monthermer," continued the herald, "will maintain that the said charge is false and groundless, and venture his body in that behalf, let him appear before the third sound of the trumpet, or if not, let him surrender himself into the hands of our Lord the King, to be dealt with according to his demerits!--Oyez! oyez! oyez! Let no man, on pain of forfeiture of life or limb, according to the pleasure of the King, give any comfort or encouragement to either the said Alured, Earl of Ashby, or Hugh, Lord of Monthermer, by sign, word, or cry; and let God defend the right!--Sound trumpets!"

A long loud call of the trumpet succeeded, and all looks turned towards the other pavilion, before which appeared two horses fully caparisoned, the banner of the house of Monthermer, and several pages and attendants. The pavilions themselves, it must be remarked, were encircled with rails, joining those of the lists, but separated from the actual field of combat by a small movable barricade. Behind the tent, on which every one was now looking, and at the side of it farthest from the royal scaffolding, a good deal of bustle and confusion seemed to be taking place; and the space of time allotted after the first call of the trumpet passed away without any one appearing to answer the challenge.

"Sound again!" cried the herald, and again the blast of the trumpet was heard, upon which the hangings of the tent were almost immediately drawn back, and Hugh de Monthermer, armed, but bare

headed, advanced towards the barrier.

"This is not right," murmured the Prince, when first his eyes fell upon him; but the next instant he saw more. On the right hand of Hugh was Sir John Hardy, and on the left his uncle, the old Earl of Monthermer. Two esquires bore the knight's lance and shield, a page between them carried his helmet; and in this guise the whole party advanced on foot towards the barrier, which was raised to give them admission into the lists. But close behind them came four men, bearing on their shoulders something like a bier, covered with a little tilt and curtains formed of some light cloth. A party of yeomen followed, guarding two men, who walked between them, with their arms tied. Their hoods were turned back, exposing the whole head and face; and, as they advanced, the first of the two prisoners rolled his eyes fiercely round, with a look like that of a maniac; while the second bent his gaze steadfastly upon the ground, and never gave a glance on either side.

"Ha! What is this?" exclaimed Alured de Ashby. "What means all this?--Ah! I see now!--'Tis Richard they have got--and the dead body in the bier, most like.--My lord, I guess the rest!"

"And so do I," said Edward; "let us ride on and see."

Both spurred forward quickly at the same moment, and reached the spot before the royal pavilion, just as Hugh de Monthermer paused there also.

"Now, Hugh, now," cried the Prince; "What is all this? But first, my good lord," he continued, extending his hand to the old Earl, "welcome back to your duty, and to England. My lord the King, may not your son promise this gentleman grace and pardon?"

It is probable that at any other time Henry would not have yielded without much entreaty; but at this moment he was too eager for explanations to hesitate, and bowing his head, he replied, "Well, be it so.--What now?"

"My lord," said Hugh, "I come before your grace to prove my innocence as may seem fit unto your grace to order, either in arms, according to the challenge given, or by still better proof, if so you will."

"None can be better, sir," answered the King; "God's own decision must surely be more just than that of men."

"Well, sire," replied Hugh de Monthermer, with a smile; "be it as your grace pleases. Alured," he continued, holding out his hand, "if I needs must fight with you, I must; but you will be compelled to seek some other cause than your good father's death. Of that, at least, I am innocent, whatever I be guilty of.--Here is a witness cannot lie.--Draw back the curtains.--Will you believe himself?"

Alured de Ashby, already pale, turned for an instant paler still, but it seemed as if the blood had but withdrawn itself into the fountain of the heart to gush forth again, purified, renewed, invigorated. For a moment he was as white as the ashes of an extinguished fire, but the next his cheek glowed, his eyes sparkled, and springing from his horse, with a light bound, as if all sickness were departed, he cast himself upon his knees beside the litter, in which, lying on a soft bed, but partly raised upon his arm, appeared the old Earl of Ashby. The son dewed the father's hand with his tears; then starting up and casting his arms round Hugh de Monthermer, he pressed him to his mailed breast, exclaiming, "I have injured you!--forgive me, my good brother!"

Hugh wrung his hand, and said, "This is all joyful, Alured; but there is something painful still behind. There stand the murderers!--the assassin and his tool! My lord the King, into your hands I give them, to be dealt with as in your high judgment you shall deem expedient. The one makes full confession of his crime, the other has not the daring to deny it; and indeed, it would be useless so to do; for, as the very consequences of our sins prove often by God's will their punishments, a poor unhappy girl, whom he seduced from virtue and her peaceful home, overheard in his house the foul conspiracy for murdering this good earl,

and charging the crime on me. She told it to those she thought might best prevent it, who came not in time to stop the deed, but soon enough to find the Earl, and staunch the bleeding of his wounds, before life was extinct. She is now ready, though her heart is broke, to give such evidence as leaves no doubt of these men's guilt, even if they still denied it."

"Oh, villain!" said Alured de Ashby, gazing on his cousin, who still looked fiercely from under his frowning brows upon him, "Oh, villain! To bring such a stain upon our house!"

"Hush, Alured, hush!" said the old Earl, "I will beseech my lord the King to pardon him."

"Ay, pardon me! pardon me!" cried Richard do Ashby, darting forward. "King, I saved your son from bondage--I gave him means of flight!--But for me there had been no Evesham--But for me De Montfort had still ruled--but for me you had both been prisoners at this hour."

"What say you, Edward?" asked the King.

"I beseech you, my lord, pardon him, pardon him," exclaimed Mortimer and Pembroke, in a breath.

"My lord, I dare not speak," said Edward, "for though justice calls for the death of the blackest villain I ever did yet know, gratitude ties my tongue. I must not speak."

"Untie his hands," cried the King, after a moment's pause. "We give him life, but banish him the realm for ever. If in ten days he be found within the seas, let him be put to death!"

"Thanks! my lord, thanks!" exclaimed Richard de Ashby, while the yeomen unwillingly loosed his arms from the cords.

As soon as he was free, he passed his cousin and Hugh de Monthermer, as if to cut straight across the lists; but when he had taken two or three steps, he turned and shook his clenched fist at them, crying, "Curses upon ye both!--but the time for vengeance may yet come!--I have not done with you!"

Even while he spoke there was a little movement amongst the crowd beyond the barriers; and as he turned again to pursue his way, a loud, clear, powerful voice, which was heard echoing over the whole field, exclaimed, in the English tongue, "This for the heart of the murderous traitor, Richard de Ashby!--Whom kings spare, commons send to judgment!"

None saw the man from whom the voice proceeded; but, the moment after, there came a sharp sound, like the twang of bowstring, the whistle of a shaft through the air, and then a dull stroke, such as an arrow makes when it hits a target.

A shrill scream, like that of a wounded seabird, burst from the lips of Richard de Ashby, and casting up his arms in the air, as if in the effort to clutch at something for support, he fell back upon the grass.

Several persons ran up; but he was dead! The arrow had gone through and through his heart; and between the peacock feathers, that winged it on its way, was found written, "Robin Hood."

Almost at the same moment a tall, stout yeoman was seen to mount a white horse, at the other side of the lists, and ride away from the field. He proceeded, at no very quick pace, and, as he went, he hummed lightly to some old, long-forgotten air,

"And this is the end of Robin Lythe
And his knave Gandelyne."

FOOTNOTES

Footnote 1: One of the posts, or marks, by which the limits of the forest were distinguished.

Footnote 2: I need not refer the learned reader to the curious investigations of M. le Grand; and perhaps for the less inquisitive it may be enough to say, that such was literally the fact.

Footnote 3: It must be remembered that Norman French was at that time the language of the court.

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FOREST DAYS: A ROMANCE OF OLD TIMES ***

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