

EVERETT-GREEN EVELYN

**IN THE WARS OF THE  
ROSES: A STORY FOR  
THE YOUNG**

Evelyn Everett-Green

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# Содержание

Chapter 1: A Brush With The Robbers	17
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	24

# **Evelyn Everett-Green**

## **In the Wars of the Roses: A Story for the Young**

### **Prologue**

"Mother, will the little prince be there?"

"Yes, my son. He never leaves his mother's side. You will see them all today, if fortune favours us—the good King Henry, his noble queen, to whom he owes so much, and the little prince likewise. We will to horse anon, that we may gain a good view of the procession as it passes. The royal party lodges this night at our good bishop's palace. Perchance they will linger over the Sunday, and hear mass in our fair cathedral, Our loyal folks of Lichfield are burning to show their love by a goodly show of welcome; and it is said that his majesty takes pleasure in silvan sports and such-like simple pleasures, many preparations for the which have been prepared for him to witness."

"O mother, I know. Ralph and Godfrey have been practising themselves this many a day in tilting and wrestling, and in the use of the longbow and quarterstaff, that they may hold their own in the sports on the green before the palace, which they say the king will deign to watch.

"O mother; why am I not as old and as strong as they? I asked Ralph to let me shoot with his bow; but he only laughed at me, and bade me wait till I was as tall and as strong as he. It is very hard to be the youngest—and so much the youngest, too."

The mother smiled as she passed her hand over the floating curls of the gallant boy beside her; He was indeed a child of whom any mother might be proud: beautiful, straight-limbed, active, and fearless, his blue eyes glowing and shining, his cheek flushed with excitement, every look and gesture seeming to speak of the bold soldier spirit that burned within.

And these were times when it appeared indeed as if England's sons had need of all the warlike instincts of their race. Party faction had well-nigh overthrown ere this the throne – and the authority of the meek King Henry, albeit the haughty Duke of York had set forth no claim for the crown, which his son but two short years later both claimed and won. But strife and jealousy and evil purposes were at work in men's minds. The lust of power and of supremacy had begun to pave the way for the civil war which was soon to devastate the land. The sword had already been drawn at St. Albans, and the hearts of many men were full of foreboding as they thought upon the perilous times in which they lived; though others were ready to welcome the strife which promised plunder and glory and fame to those who should distinguish themselves by prowess in field or counsel in the closet.

The gentle Lady Stukely, however, was not one of these. Her heart sank sometimes when she heard the talk of her bold husband and warlike sons. They had all three of them fought for the king at the first battle, or rather skirmish, at St. Albans four years before, and were ardent followers and adherents of the Red Rose of Lancaster. Her husband had received knighthood at the monarch's hands on the eve of the battle, and was prepared to lay down his life in the cause if it should become necessary to do so.

But if rumours of strife to come, and terrible pictures of bloodshed, sometimes made her gentle spirit quail, she had always one consolation in the thought that her youngest child, her little Paul, would not be torn from her side to follow the bloody trail of war. Her two first-born sons, the younger of whom was twenty-two, had long been very finished young gallants, trained to every military enterprise, and eager to unsheathe their swords whenever rumour told of slight to King Henry or his haughty queen from the proud Protector, who for a time had held the reins of government, though exercising his powers in the name of the afflicted king.

But Paul was still a child, not yet quite eight years old; and of the five fair children born to her between him and his brothers, not one had lived to complete his or her third year, so that the

mother's heart twined itself the more firmly about this last brave boy, and in the frequent absences of husband and sons upon matters of business or pleasure, the companionship between the pair was almost unbroken, and they loved each other with a devotion that may easily be understood. Paul felt no awe of his gentle mother, but rather looked upon himself as her champion and defender in his father's absence. It was no new thing for him to long for manhood and its privileges; for would not these make him all the stouter protector to his mother?

But she was wont when he spoke such words to check him by gentle counsel and motherly sympathy, and now she took his hand in hers and patted it smilingly as she replied:

"Ah, my little Paul, time flies fast, and you will be a man before very long now; but be content for these next days to be yet a child. Perchance the little prince will pay more heed to such as are of his age.

"You may chance to win a smile from him, even if the nobles and gentlemen regard not children."

Paul's face brightened instantly.

"O mother, yes; I had not thought of that. But I do so long to see the little prince. Oh, if he were to notice me-to speak to me-how happy I should be! We were born on the same day, were we not, dear mother-on the thirteenth of October? But I am older, am I not?"

"Yes, my child; by two years. You will be eight upon your next birthday, and he six. But I hear he is such a forward, kingly, noble child, that both in appearance and discretion he is far in advance of his actual age. Those who are brought up with royalty early learn the lessons which to others come but with advancing years."

"I love the little prince, our good king's son," cried Paul with kindling eyes; "I would that I had been called Edward, too. Mother, why was I not given his name, as I was born on his day, and that of the good St. Edward too?"

The mother fondly caressed the golden curls of the beautiful child as she answered:

"Ah, my son, we knew not till long afterward that our gracious queen had borne a little son on thy natal day. Paul is a name which many of our race have borne before, and so we called our child by it. It is the man that makes the name, not the name the man."

"I know that, mother; yet I would fain have borne the name of the little prince. But hark! I hear the sounds of the horses' feet. They are bringing them round to the door. Sweet mother, lose no time. Let us mount and depart. I would fain have been in the gallant band of gentlemen who rode out this morning at dawn to welcome and escort the king and queen; as my father and brothers were. But let us not delay. I should be sorely grieved were we to miss seeing the entry into the city."

Lady Stukely smiled at the impatience of the child, knowing well that many hours must elapse before the royal party would reach the city walls; but she was willing to gratify the ardent desires of her little son, and as she was already dressed for the saddle, she rose and took him by the hand and led him out to the courtyard, where some half dozen of the good knight's retainers were awaiting their lady and her son.

Stukely Hall was no very large or pretentious place, but it was built in that quadrangular form so common to that age, and accommodated within its walls the dependents and retainers that every man of rank had about him under the old feudal system, which obliged him to bring to his lord's service on demand a certain following of armed and trained soldiers.

In those days, when every article of common consumption was made at home, the household of even a knight or gentleman of no great wealth or note was no inconsiderable matter, and even the field labourers almost always dwelt within the walls of their lord's house, eating his bread, and growing old in his service as a matter of course, without thinking of such a thing as change.

So that although the greater part of the retainers had ridden off at dawn with the knight and his sons, there were still a good half-dozen stout fellows ready to escort their lady to the town; and besides these were many menials of lower grade standing about to see the start. Little Paul, who had

grown up amongst them, ran from one to the other, telling them excitedly how he was going to see the prince that day, and eagerly accepting from the hands of his old nurse a beautiful bunch of red roses which she had gathered that morning, in the hope that her darling might have the chance to offer them to queen or prince.

Mother and son each wore the red rose broided upon their state robes, and the boy had stuck the crimson blossom in his velvet cap. He was a perfect little picture in his white velvet tunic sloshed with rose colour, his white cloth hosen laced with gold from ankle to thigh, a short cloak flowing jauntily from his shoulders, and his bright golden curls flowing from beneath the crimson and white cap.

No wonder that his stately mother regarded him with looks of fond pride, or that his old nurse breathed a benediction on his pretty head, and invoked the saints and the blessed Virgin on his behalf. They little knew that the gallant child was riding forth to an encounter which would be fraught for him with strange results; and that the long-hoped-for meeting with the little prince would be the first step in one of those passionate attachments which almost always cost the owner of them dear.

The sun shone hot and bright as the little cavalcade set forth from the courtyard. The month was that of July, and merry England was looking its best. The fair landscape lying before the eyes of the riders seemed to breathe nothing but peace and plenty; and it was hard to think that the desolating hand of war might, before many years had passed, be working havoc and ruin over a land so smiling and happy now.

The rich valley in which the ancient city of Lichfield stands looked peculiarly beautiful and fertile that day. Lady Stukely, whilst replying to the eager talk of her excited little boy, could not but gaze around her with admiration, familiar as the scene was to her; and even the boy seemed struck, for he looked up and said:

"I hope the little prince will be pleased with our town. He will have seen many fine places on this progress, but I do think we shall give him the best welcome of all. We all love him so."

It seemed indeed as if the whole country had turned out to welcome the royal guests; for as the riders drew near to the city walls, they found themselves in the midst of a crowd of holiday folks, all bent upon the same object-namely, to take up a good position for witnessing the royal procession as it passed; and every few minutes some joyous roisterer would raise a shout, "Long live the king!" "Health to the queen!" "Down with the false friends-the House of York!" which cries would be taken up by the multitude, and echoed lustily along the road.

And as the party from Stukely Hall rode up, way being made by the crowd for persons of quality well known and beloved in those parts, little Paul vented his excitement in a new cry of his own; for, standing up in his stirrups and waving his cap in his hand, he cried in his clear boyish tones:

"Three cheers, good people, for the little prince! Three cheers for Edward, Prince of Wales, our future king!"

And this cheer was taken up with hearty goodwill by all the crowd; partly for the sake of the cause ear to the hearts of these loyal people, partly from admiration for the gallant child who had started it; and Paul rode on with a flushed and happy face, looking up to his mother and saying:

"They all love the little prince. Oh how I wish he would come!"

The captain of the little band of soldiers who guarded the gate by which the royal procession was to enter, came forward doffing his mailed head piece to greet the wife of the gallant Sir James, who was a notable gentleman in those parts. By his courtesy the lady and her child were allowed to take up a position so close to the gate as would insure for them a most excellent view of the royal party; whilst the humbler crowd was kept at a more discreet distance by the good-humoured soldiers, who exercised their office amid plenty of jesting and laughing, which showed that an excellent understanding existed between them and their brethren of the soil. The captain, as the hour for the entrance drew near, took up his position beside the lady, and conversed with her in low tones. Paul listened with all his ears the moment he discovered that the soldier was talking about his beloved little prince.

"I do not credit every idle tale I hear, or certes life would be but a sorry thing for a soldier. But there is a queer rumour flying about that some of the bold marauding fellows who follow the banner of York, Salisbury, and Warwick have been following and hanging on the trail of the royal party with a view to the capture-so it is said-of the Prince of Wales, who, once in the hands of the rival faction, would prove a hostage of no mean value. I can scarce credit such a tale myself. Sure am I that it cannot have originated in the mind of any of those noble earls, but must be the device of some meaner churl, who hopes to gain a reward for his treachery. Belike there is no truth whatever in it. Rumour is never idle, and must have some food to satisfy its cravings. I credit not so wild a tale, albeit I must be on the watch against all chances.

"But hark! hear you not that sound in the distance? and methinks I see on yonder height the glitter of the spearmen and the sheen of an armed multitude. Ay, it is truly so. They come, they come! Why, it is a goodly following our gallant knights and gentlemen have furnished. Their gracious majesties will have no cause to grumble at the loyalty of their trusty county of Lichfield <sup>1</sup>."

Paul's breath went and came. The words of the captain had stirred his heart, and now the actual approach of the royal family set every pulse throbbing. Eagerly his eyes were fixed upon the advancing column of gallant riders, the self-appointed bodyguard of the king and queen-a bodyguard which, changing and shifting as the royal party progressed through the kingdom, yet never deserted them throughout the triumphal march, and did not a little to raise within the breast of the queen that martial ardour which was to be so severely tested in days to come.

Nearer and yet more near came the gay procession; banners flying, trumpets sounding, the joy bells from the town giving back gay response. And now the mounted gentlemen-amongst whom Paul's quick eyes have already discovered his father and brothers-wheel rapidly aside to right and left, forming a sort of avenue to the gateway through which the royal riders are to pass, to receive the loyal welcome of the venerable prelate and the city dignitaries.

Paul's breath comes and goes as the cheering in the crowd grows vociferous. He grasps his bunch of roses firmly in his hands, his cheeks glowing till they almost rival the damask bloom of the flowers, his eyes fixed in all their eager brightness upon the advancing band, which consists of the king and queen and prince and their own immediate attendants. It is a moment never forgotten by the boy in after life-the moment when first his glance fell upon the royal child around whose history romance has woven so many a tale; and it was with a start of peculiar surprises and a thrill of emotion he could not have analyzed, that the boy beheld the little prince of his dreams. For in those beautiful princely features, in the alert graceful figure and the floating curls of gold, Paul seemed to see his own lineaments reproduced, and gave one bewildered glance toward his mother to see if perchance the same thought struck her.

And indeed it did; for the chance resemblance between the young heir of the House of Lancaster and the son of an obscure Staffordshire knight was so remarkable that none who saw the two children could fail to be struck by it. Paul for a moment was almost awed, feeling as if he had no right thus to have aped the outward aspect of the little prince; but the next moment all else was forgotten in the excitement of the moment and in the vigorous cheering which greeted the close approach of royalty.

The party moved slowly forward, returning the loyal salutations of the crowd right graciously. The little prince was charming in his friendly gestures, and Paul observed that to one and another of the knights and gentlemen drawn up to do them honour he held out some little token, which was received with every demonstration of respect and gratification.

His intense excitement caused the little Paul to push out somewhat further than the line observed by the soldiers, and no one recalled him to his place; and thus it was that when, as the cortege moved forward, the Prince of Wales dropped the plumed hat with the white ostrich feather, which he was raising in response to the salutations showered upon him, it was Paul who had leaped to the ground

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<sup>1</sup> Lichfield had the right in these days of calling itself a county.

and caught up the costly headgear from beneath the very feet of the king's horse, and, with glowing face and ardent gaze of admiration and homage, had bent the knee to the princely child, and restored the cap, whilst his bunch of roses was offered at the same moment with an air of modest eagerness that touched all hearts.

The little prince took both the cap and the flowers, thanking the lad with friendly smiles; but when he saw how closely that bright face resembled his own, and how those floating curls of shining gold uncovered to the hot sunshine were but as the counterpart of his, he too glanced at his mother, whose smiling face was bent with a proud pleasure upon the pretty picture formed by the two children, and he said in his clear, joyous tones:

"Why, verily, this must be a brother or a cousin of mine own. Tell me your name, good lad. Surely we must be akin."

"Nay, gracious prince," answered Paul in low tones; "I am but the son of a simple knight, who has ever been your royal father's loyal servant. But I was born, like you, upon St. Edward's Day, and perhaps our patron saint smiled kindly on us both."

The boy was so excited he scarce knew what he said; but his words seemed to please the little prince, who replied:

"Nay, now, if you share the good offices of my patron saint, you must wear my badge too, for love of me. See here, this little silver swan, the device of my noble ancestor King Edward the Third, it is now my badge, and you must wear it for my sake. Farewell for the nonce; we shall meet again-I am sure of it-ere we say goodbye to this pleasant city. I would I had a brother like you. But we will meet anon. Farewell, and forget me not."

The royal cavalcade was yet moving onward whilst these gracious words of childish greeting were spoken. The next moment the bewildered Paul was standing looking after the pretty child prince, the silver swan he grasped tightly between his hands alone convincing him that the whole encounter had not been a fair fleeting dream.

The great green meadow just without the walls of the city presented an animated spectacle even to eyes accustomed to the gay and party-coloured dresses of the Middle Ages, and to the hardy sports of her bold sons. The whole town and countryside had assembled to witness or bear a share in the merry silvan sports, instituted with a view of amusing the royal guests, who had halted at Lichfield for three nights in order that the pious monarch might hear mass on Sunday at the cathedral; and the Saturday was given over to the revels and pastimes at all times dear to the people, but more so than ever when royalty deigned to be the witness of the feats of skill and strength. And King Henry loved to watch the sports of his subjects. His simple mind; that shrank from the intrigues of court life, seemed to gather strength and health when removed from the strife and turmoil of parties. His malady, which at times completely incapacitated him from tasking part in the government, was always liable to recur, and it was with a view of recuperating his health, and calming his anxieties and fears for himself and those he loved best, that the queen had decided upon this progress through the loyal midland counties, and encouraged the people to display their skill in manly sports before their king; for nothing seemed more beneficial to him than the interest evoked by any spectacles of this kind.

And little Paul Stukely was an eager spectator of the encounters and feats that were taking place before royalty that bright summer day. Paul felt as if he were living and moving in a wonderful dream. He kept pulling off his little velvet cap to make sure that the silver swan-the prince's token-was still in its place; and even when most interested in any contest going on upon the green, his eyes would turn instinctively toward the fair child leaning upon his father's knee, and eagerly watching the rustic revels.

The royal guests were sumptuously lodged beneath a silken awning under a mighty oak tree that gave a refreshing shade. A platform had been erected for them beneath the awning, and chairs of state set thereon. From this vantage ground they could watch everything that went on, and reward the victors with words of praise, small pieces of silver, or some fragment of lace or ribbon from the royal

apparel, as best suited the rank of the aspirant for honour; and the kindly smiles and gracious words bestowed upon all who approached increased each hour the popularity of the Lancastrian cause and the devotion of the people to their king.

But Paul had not, so far, ventured to present himself before the platform where the little prince was standing. He had not forgotten a single one of the kind words spoken by the youthful Edward yesterday, but he was fearful of presuming upon the favour thus shown him, and his very admiration for the princely child seemed to hold him back.

He knew that his father and brothers might rebuke him for forwardness if he presumed to thrust himself into notice. Sir James was one of those appointed to keep order upon the ground, and withhold the rustics from incommoding in any way the royal visitors; and the child knew that he would be the first to rebuke his own son for putting himself unduly forward. As the youngest in the house, Paul was accustomed to be held in small repute, and had no desire to provoke a rebuff which might even reach the ears of the little prince himself.

So he contented himself by hanging about on the outskirts of the crowd, casting many longing, lingering glances toward the group beneath the giant oak, and at other times diverting himself by watching the wrestlers, the mummers, or the archers, who in turn came forward to try their skill and strength. The quarterstaff contests were very exciting, and several broken heads were the result of the hearty encounters with that formidable weapon.

But Paul was familiar with most of the sports, and presently grew weary of watching. It was hot, too, and there was not much shade to be had in that big meadow; so he wandered a little apart, toward a copse beside a small stream, on the opposite side of which a thick forest rose stately and grand, and sitting down beside the merry brook, he clasped his hands round his knees and sank into a reverie.

He was so engrossed in his thoughts that he did not notice the light tread of approaching footsteps, and gave a great start when he suddenly felt an arm flung caressingly about his neck. He sprang to his feet with a cry of astonishment, and stood face to face with the little prince.

"You see I have found you," cried the child gleefully. "I saw you several times in the crowd today, but you would not come near me. Never mind; this is much better, for here we can talk, here we can be friends. Are you weary of their gay shows? So am I, in faith. We have seen the same thing everywhere, and it is so good to be alone sometimes. I love not to be always followed and watched.

"See you that dim, dark wood? Let us e'en hide ourselves therein for a short hour. My mother will miss me from her side anon, and will send to seek me. I would not be found too easily. Come, let us hide ourselves there, and you shall tell me all about yourself, and we will play at being trusty friends and comrades.

"It is dull work being always a prince. I would that we could change parts for once. You shall be the prince and I will be the bold knight's son, and your very faithful servant."

"O my lord!" faltered Paul, almost overcome with excitement and pleasure at this strange encounter.

But the little prince stamped his foot and spoke with the air of a regular little autocrat.

"Nay, call me not that. Did I not say I would be nobody's lord for the nonce? What is your name? Paul? Then I will be called Paul for this next hour, and you shall be Edward. See, here is my jewelled collar and the cap with the ostrich plume—the badge of the Prince of Wales. Yes, put them on, put them on. Marry, I could think it was my very self, but a short inch the taller.

"Now, see, I take your cap instead; and now I am Paul, and you must bid me follow you and attend you in your journey through the forest. See, we will be fugitives, flying from the wicked Duke of York, who would fain grasp at the king's power, but my mother will not let him."

For a moment the child's eyes flashed, and his clenched hands and heaving breast showed that the spirit of Margaret of Anjou lived again in her child; but pulling himself up short with a laugh, the little prince added with a deferential bow, resuming his character of subject, "But I crave your pardon, sweet prince, if I lose control of myself in the thought of your wrongs. Lead on, noble lord,

and I follow. Let us seek safety in the dim aisles of yon giant wood. Surely there is some ford or bridge nigh at hand which will give us safe crossing without wetting ourselves."

Children are children all the world over, and at any period of its history. Childhood ever delights in romance and imaginative situations and adventures; and before ten minutes had passed the boys had completely entered into the spirit of their play. Paul, shaking off the awe which had at first held him silent and abashed, played the part of prince with an energy and zeal which evoked the delight and admiration of his companion; whilst the younger boy was amused to lay aside for the moment any pretence at royalty, and pay his humble devoirs to his liege lord.

Paul knew of some stepping stones which led across the stream into the dark wood, and soon the boys were in what seemed to them the heart of the great forest. The prince was delighted by all he saw. The sense of freedom was enchanting, and his curiosity unbounded. He had never in his life before enjoyed a game of play in so unfettered a fashion with a comrade of nearly his own age; and soon forgetting even their own game, the boys were walking with arms twined round each other's neck, telling each other all that was in their hearts, and exchanging vows of unalterable affection.

"When I am grown to manhood, and am a belted knight with noble gentlemen of mine own to attend me, you shall be my very first esquire, Paul," said the prince emphatically; "and we will ride through the world together, seeking adventures which shall make all men wonder when they hear of them. And when I am king you shall be my first counsellor and greatest lord. I will degrade from office and dignity those proud nobles who have been traitors at heart to my kingly father, and to you I will give their broad lands and high titles. We will thus be comrades and friends through life. You would never desert me, would you, Paul?"

"I would lay down my life for your highness," cried Paul with enthusiasm. "I will live and die true to the Red Rose-to the sign of the silver swan."

The little prince's eyes kindled.

"I believe you would. I love you, Paul, and methinks that you would love me too. I would that I could take you with me now to be my friend and comrade through life; but perchance your lady mother could ill spare you, by what you say. I know what a mother's love is like."

Paul's face was grave. For the first time in his life he was confronted by the problem of a divided duty-that problem which troubles us all more or less at some time in our history.

"I would gladly go with your highness to the world's end," he said. "I should love to live and die at your side; but I doubt me if it would not be cruel to my mother. She sometimes tells me that her life would be a lone one without me."

"And you must stay with her," said the prince with decision; "at least so long as you are a child. When you are a grown man it will be different. Some day I will send for you, and you shall be my first and best friend; but it cannot be now. My mother might not approve my choice, and yours might not let you go. Princes as well as other men have to wait for what they want" – and the child sighed-"but some day our turn will come."

Then they resumed their play, and the hoary wood resounded to the merry shouts of the boys as they ran hither and thither in active sport, till the little prince was fairly tired out, though, still exulting in his escape from maternal vigilance, he stoutly protested against going back.

"See, good Paul," he said, "here is a right commodious hollow tree, heaped with last year's dead leaves. I will rest awhile hidden away here, where none will find me were they to look for me ever so. And if you could find and bring me here a draught of water from the brook or from some spring, I should be ever grateful. I am sore athirst and weary, too."

The child was nevertheless much pleased with his nest, and forthwith curled himself up in it like a young dormouse, delighting in the conviction that no attendants despatched by his mother to capture him would ever find him here. Boys have been young pickles ever since the world began, and were just as full of pranks in the fifteenth century as they are now. Edward had: a full share of boyhood's mischievous delight in his own way, and owing to the strong will and the ever-present vigilance of his

mother, he had not had many chances of indulging his natural craving for independence. Therefore he rejoiced the more in it now, and was quite determined to return to his royal parents at such time only as it suited his own whim.

Paul was willing enough to do the behest of the prince, and stayed only to make him comfortable before starting off on the quest for water. He thought young Edward would soon be asleep, as indeed he was, so luxurious was his leafy couch within the giant oak; and resolved to run as far as a certain well he knew of in the wood, the water of which was peculiarly fresh and cold and clear, and where a cup was always kept by the brothers of a neighbouring monastery for the benefit of weary travellers.

Paul sped away on his mission with a light heart. He was elated above measure by his day's adventure, and his head was brimming over with plans and dreams of the future, which was to be so glorious and so distinguished.

He the chosen comrade of their future king! he the loyal upholder of that king's rights, the bulwark of the throne, the trusted noble, the shrewd counsellor, the valiant warrior! A boy's ambition is boundless-innocent of envy or evil, but wild in its flights.

Paul went on his way with glowing cheeks and sparkling eyes, till a stealthy sound in the bushes beside him made him stop short, listening intently. He heard voices in cautious whisper.

"He cannot be far away. He certainly came to the wood. Long Peter says he had another boy with him; but be that as it may, he is here, and close at hand. We must lose no time. The alarm will be given if he is missed. Take one, or take both, it matters not if we but get the prince into our hands. He may be known by his ostrich plume and his golden curls, and the jewelled collar he wears about his neck."

Paul heard these words plainly, and it seemed as if his heart were in his mouth. It beat so violently that he fancied the conspirators must surely hear. The words he had heard but yesterday flashed back into his mind.

It was true then. There was a conspiracy to carry off the young prince, and the band of men pledged to the deed were actually on their track and close at hand. How could he warn the prince in time? How could he save him from their hands?

For a moment the boy's courage seemed to desert him. A cold sweat broke out on his face, his knees trembled beneath him. But his fear was not a selfish or unworthy one; it was all for the royal child, whose peril was so imminent.

And then, with a sudden revulsion of feeling, he recollected that he himself wore the cap with the white plume, the jewelled collar of royalty, and the dagger the little prince habitually carried in his girdle. And had he not the same floating golden curls, the same cast of features, the same active figure, and almost the same stature? Might he not save the real prince by playing his part to some purpose for the time being? The men would not distinguish between the pair—he felt certain of that; they would at once make off with their prize. Later on, of course, they would discover the trick, but then the prince would be safe. His own followers would have long since discovered him. Yes, he would do it—he would save the prince at all cost. What did it matter if his own life were the forfeit? The heir of England would be saved.

It was no small act of heroism to which the boy made up his mind in those few moments. Those were lawless days, and human life was held very cheap. The band of fierce men who had believed they were carrying off a prince, would think nothing of running him through with their swords when they discovered how they had been tricked, and that by a mere child. Paul set his teeth hard and braced himself up for the task he had set himself. He knew his peril—he realized it too; but he was a soldier's son, and had he not said he would live and die for the prince? Would he ever be worthy of the knighthood every lad looked forward to as the goal of his ambition, if he shrank now from the task he had set himself?

Hardly had that resolution been taken before there sprang out from the thick underwood two or three fierce-looking men, armed to the teeth.

"Ha, my young springal! well met, in sooth," cried the foremost of the band, laying a firm hand upon the boy's shoulder. "We have been looking long for you.

"To horse, brave fellows! we have our prize. We may not linger here."

"Hands off, varlet!" cried Paul, throwing himself into the character of prince with great energy and goodwill. "Know you to whom you speak-whom ye thus rough handle? Have a care; the Prince of Wales is not thus to be treated."

"Pardon, sweet prince," cried the leader, with ironical courtesy, his grasp not relaxing one whit from the boy's arm. "Time leaves us scant opportunity for the smooth speech of the court. We must use all despatch in conveying your worshipful presence hence, to the safe custody of England's friends.

"Nay, struggle not, boy. We would not harm you. You are safe with us-"

"I know you not. I will not be thus insulted. I will to my royal parents," cried Paul in well-feigned indignation.

But remonstrance and resistance were alike useless. At the sound of a peculiar whistle from one of the party, there immediately appeared some half score of mounted troopers, leading other horses with them. The boy was swung upon the saddle of one of the horses and fastened there by means of thongs, which, although not incommoding him whilst riding, utterly precluded all idea of escape. Moreover the steed was placed between those of two of the stalwart troopers, each of whom kept a hand upon the reins of the supposed prince; and thus, silently but rapidly, the little band threaded the intricacies of the wood, by paths evidently known to them, and ere the dusk had fully come, had cleared the forest altogether, and were galloping steadily and fast across the open country toward the north.

Paul had not spoken another word. He had been in terror lest by some inadvertent phrase he might betray himself, and let those fierce men know that he was not the prince; in which case not only might his own life be forfeit, but the real prince might fall into their hands. But now as the dusk overtook them, and still they were flying farther and farther away from the city where the prince lay, his heart rose, and beat with a generous triumph; for though his own fate might be a speedy death, the heir of England was safe.

It was dark before the lights of a wayside hostelry became visible across the dreary waste they were traversing. The leader of the band turned and addressed a few words to the troopers who had the care of the captive; and at once he felt himself deprived of the tell-tale cap and collar, the former of which was replaced by a cloth cap belonging to one of the men, which almost concealed the boy's features. He was also wrapped in a mantle that further disguised him; and thus they rode up to the inn.

A ruddy stream of light poured out from that comfortable hostelry, and Paul saw, seated on his stout nag, with three of his servants behind him, the well-known figure of a neighbouring farmer, whom business often took to a town many miles from his native place.

The troopers were dismounting and hurrying into the inn. Two only remained with their prize. Paul's resolution was quickly taken. He threw off the encumbering mantle and cap, and cried aloud:

"Gaffer Hood, Gaffer Hood, come and help me! These men have carried me off, and are taking me I know not whither. Come and help me to get free, and my father will richly reward you. They think I am the Prince of Wales, who was playing with me but this afternoon. Tell them who I really am, and they will let me go."

"By the mass, if that be not the voice of little Paul Stukely!" exclaimed the honest farmer in great amazement, as he brought his stout nag alongside the animal that carried the child. The troopers drew their swords as if to interpose (and in those days it was considered better to leave these reckless gentlemen alone when they had booty in their hands, however come by, and no doubt they were in league with the host of the inn); but the character of the dialogue between the farmer and the child was so astounding that the men remained mute and motionless, whilst the leader of the gang, who had heard something of the words, came hurrying to the spot, to see that his prize was safe.

He was quite prepared to make short work of farmer and men alike if there should be any futile attempt at rescue. The man knew his trade, and long habit had made him utterly reckless of human life. But the words he heard exchanged between the child and the farmer held him spellbound, too.

"I was playing with the prince," cried Paul, loud enough for all to hear. "He bid me take his collar and cap and be prince in fantasy, whilst he was my esquire. Afterwards, when he was weary, he lay down to rest, and these fellows caught me and carried me off, thinking I was prince indeed. I would not tell them what they had done, lest they should return and capture him. But bid them loose me now, good Gaffer, and give them all the money in your pouch as my ransom, and I warrant my father will repay you double.

"It is the heir of the House of Lancaster you want, gentlemen, not a poor knight's youngest son, a lad of no account. This good man will pay you some broad gold pieces if you will let me go; but if you are resolved to take my life as the price of my deceit, why, take it now. I am not afraid to die in a good cause, and this worthy man will perchance take home my body to my mother, that it may lie in time beside hers."

"Nay, lad, we will all die ere they shall touch a hair of thy bonny head," cried the honest farmer, signing to his men to come and be ready. "If there's a man in this troop dastard enough to lay a hand upon thee, he shall settle accounts with Gaffer Hood ere he leaves the place. A farmer can fight, ay, and give good strong blows, too.

"Now, gentlemen, which of you will lay hands on that gallant child? for he will have to do it across my dead body first."

"Tush, man, put up thy sword," cried the leader of the band, who, being a man prompt both in action and thought, had taken in the bearings of the situation with great rapidity, and upon whom the simple heroism of the child had not been thrown away.

Rough and self-seeking and cruel as lawless times had made such men, they were not devoid of all better feelings; and although, had there been no interposition on his behalf, Paul might have been a victim to their irritation at being thus duped, as it was his life was now safe enough.

"We war not with babes and children. The boy has borne himself gallantly, and we will take the gold pieces and let him go free. Our chance may come another time, and we want not the cumbrance of children on our march. He would not be hostage worth having, so ransom him and begone. We have the prince's jewels if we have not the lad himself.

"Go your way, boy; you will make a soldier in time. You have the right grit in you. Farewell! one day we may meet again."

And thinking, perhaps, that he and his band had better not linger longer, the captain gave the word to mount; and as soon as Paul's thongs were cut and the ransom paid over, the troopers set spurs to their horses' sides and vanished away in the darkness.

Once again little Paul Stukely stood in the presence of royalty. The prince's arm was about his neck, the proud queen's eyes-moist now with tears-were bent upon him in loving gratitude, whilst from the king's lips he was receiving words of praise that set the hot blood mounting to his brow. Behind him stood his father, all around were the attendants of the royal family; and Paul, unaccustomed to be thus the centre of attention, almost wished the ground would open to hide him, although his heart could not but beat high in gratification and loving loyalty.

All the city was ringing with the daring attempt that had been made to carry off the young Prince of Wales, and the gallantry of the boy who had dared to brave the consequences, and take upon himself the personality of the youthful Edward. The child himself, the farmer who had been the means of his restoration, and the knight who owned so brave a son, all had been heroes of the past six-and-thirty hours.

A special mass of thanksgiving had been sung in the cathedral on the Sunday. The captain of the town, who had heard a rumour which had sent him flying into the forest the previous afternoon, to find the true prince vainly seeking his missing comrade, could not make enough of the boy whose

simple-hearted gallantry had saved him from a lasting remorse, and perhaps a lasting disgrace. Indeed, Sir James Stukely had had to hurry his child home in haste to his mother's care, lest he should hear too much of his own prowess; and, thrusting him into her loving arms, had said, in a voice which quivered in spite of himself:

"Here, dame, take the boy and give him a kiss to show that he has been a good lad. He has done his duty, as a Stukely ought to do, and that should be enough for all of us. But let us have no nonsense talked. What will the country come to if everyone who does his duty as it should be done expects to be called a hero, and I know not what besides? The prince is safe, and the boy likewise. Now off to bed with him, and no more nonsense to be talked in my hearing.

"God bless you, child! You'll live yet to be a credit to the name you bear."

And Paul was made happier by that one word from his stern though loving sire than by all the praises he had heard lavished upon himself during the past hours. For there was no one in the wide world that the child so revered as his dark-browed father, who seldom praised his children, and was inflexible in his punishments whenever they were deserved. To be told by him that he had done his duty, and would be a credit to his house, was happiness far beyond his deserts, he thought; and he registered a mental vow, deep down in his brave little heart, that he would never in time to come give the world cause to say he had not lived up to the promise of his boyhood.

The loving sympathy with which his mother listened to his story, the caresses she showered upon him in thought of the deadly peril in which he had stood, and the hearty approbation of his brothers and the retainers and servants in his father's halls, were a small pleasure as compared with those few brief, almost stern, words from that father himself. Even the notification that he was to present himself on the Monday before the king and queen added little to his happiness, although the idea of seeing once again his admired little prince could not but fill him with gratification.

His father led him to the royal presence, and bowed low on hearing himself thanked for having brought up sons who so well demonstrated the loyalty and devotion which had been born and bred in them. But Paul scarce heard what passed, for the little prince dashed forward to take him round the neck, kissing him with all the natural grace of childhood, whilst half rebuking him for having denied him his own legitimate share in the adventure.

"If we had but been together we would have achieved our own liberty," he said, his bright eyes flashing with the spirit of his ancestors. "We would have shown them what Plantagenet blood could do. I would I had been there. I would I had shared the adventure with you. It would have been a thing for our bards to write of, for our soldiers to sing over their campfires. But now I shall have none of the glory. I was sleeping in a tree. It was you who were the hero, the prince."

"Ah, sweet prince, had they once laid hold on the true prize, methinks neither you nor I would so easily have escaped," said Paul, who had vivid recollections of the iron hands that had been laid upon him by the stern men who had carried him off. "I know not how I could have escaped, had it not been that they were willing to be quit of me when they found out I was not him whom they sought."

But the prince was hardly satisfied with the rather tame ending to the adventure.

"To be rescued by a farmer, and carried home on his nag!" he said, tossing back his curls with a gesture of hauteur. "Paul, I would that you had cut your way through the very heart of them. I would you had left at least one or two dead upon the spot. Had we been together-" He clenched his hands for a moment, but then laughed a little, and said in a whisper-"But no matter, Paul; they all say that you played the hero, and I will not envy you for it. We shall be men one day, and then I shall come and claim your promise. You will be my faithful esquire, and I will be your liege lord. Together we will roam the world in search of adventure, and well I know that we shall meet with such as will not disgrace the royal house of the Plantagenet."

The child's eyes flashed, and an answering spark was kindled in the breast of the hardy little Paul. He put his hand within that of the prince, and cried loud enough to be heard by those who stood by:

"Dear my lord, I will serve you to the death. I will go with you to the world's end."

Sir James laid a warning hand upon his son's shoulder.

"Boy," he said in a low voice, "it becomes thee not thus to put thyself forward in the presence of royalty. Be silent before thy betters, and show thy loyalty by thy deeds, not by high-sounding words of which thou canst have but little understanding."

Paul was instantly abashed. Indeed, in those days it was not usual for children to make their voices heard in the presence of their elders; but the prince was privileged, and it was his words that had drawn forth this exclamation from Paul.

The king and the queen, however, smiled upon the boy; and the latter said in tender tones, that would have amazed some amongst her enemies:

"Nay, chide not the boy, good Sir James; he does but speak as his heart dictates, and I would indeed that my son might look forward to the day when he and your gallant son might be companions in arms. But I ask no pledge in these troublous, stormy days. Only I will cherish the hope that when brighter days dawn for the House of Lancaster, and her proud foes are forever subjugated to their right position, this bold boy may appear again before us to receive at our hands the guerdon he is too young for yet. And be sure that never will knighthood be more gladly accorded to any than to him, for the deed which saved England's heir and hope from the deadly peril which menaced him but a few short hours ago."

Sir James and his son both bowed low, and the father prepared to lead away the boy. But the prince had once more thrown his arms round Paul's neck, and was speaking in his eager way:

"You and I will be knighted together when we are grown. I shall think of you, and you will not forget me—promise that you will not. And when we meet next, wherever it may be, we shall know each other for the likeness we bear the one to the other. Kiss me, Paul, and promise never to forget. Farewell now, but my heart tells me we shall meet again."

The king's son and the knight's embraced with all the warmth of a real and deep affection, albeit of only a few hours' growth, and gazing at each other to the last they parted.

"I shall always wear the silver swan," Paul had said as their lips met. "You will know me by that. And I—oh, I never could forget you! Your face will live always in my heart."

The doors closed behind the retiring knight and his son. The vision alone conjured up by the words of the prince lived in the heart of Paul Stukely. His face was very brightly grave as he rode home beside his father. How little he or any in that noble company guessed where and under what circumstances the prince and Paul would meet next!

## Chapter 1: A Brush With The Robbers

"Help-help-help!"

This cry, growing feebler at each repetition, was borne by the evening breeze to the ears of a traveller who was picking his way along the dark mazes of Epping Forest one cool, fresh October day. Instinctively he drew rein and listened, laying his hand unconsciously upon the hilt of his poniard.

"A woman's voice," he said half aloud, as he spurred more rapidly onward in the direction whence the cry proceeded. "A woman set upon, no doubt, by some band of these marauders who are desolating the country and disgracing humanity. Cowards! I wonder how many of them there are? A solitary traveller has not much chance against a gang of them; but at least I can sell my life dear. I have little enough to live for now; and it would be a stain for ever upon my father's fame were I to pass by unheeding the cry of a damsel in distress.

"Forward, then, good Sultan; there is work for both of us before we can think of food or lodging after our weary day of travel. Forward, good horse."

The coal-black charger, who, despite his jaded air and look of neglect, had evidently come of a good stock, and had both blood and mettle of the true soldier sort in him, pricked his ears, arched his neck, and appeared to be fully aware of what was required of him by his loved master. He broke into a gentle canter, and despite the roughness of the ground, maintained that pace for several hundred yards, until the hand of the traveller upon his rein warned him to moderate his pace.

The shades of evening were falling fast, but a young moon rode high in the sky, and helped to light up the expanse of broken ground and piled-up tree trunks which suddenly became visible to the traveller as he reached a clearing in the forest, through which the rough trail or path he was pursuing led. And here in this clearing he came upon the object of his search, and saw that his surmise as to the cause of the cries he had heard was only too correct. Four big burly men, all armed with the weapons of the day-bills, maces, and even the handgun, which was beginning to find a place amongst the more time-honoured arms of offence and defence-were surrounding the struggling figure of a woman, a young woman the traveller fancied, from her slimness and the cat-like agility which she displayed in struggling with her captors.

It appeared as if the men did not desire to hurt her if they could avoid doing so, but rather wished to make of her a prisoner; whilst she was making the most frantic efforts to escape from their restraining hands, and was uttering strangled cries for help, which were so deadened by the thick folds of the heavy driving cloak, which had been wrapped about her head, as to be barely audible even at a short distance.

"Let her fight and struggle," said a tall, broad-shouldered man with a darkly sinister face, who stood a little apart all this while, keeping, however, a very close watch upon the group. "She will soon tire herself out, and then we can carry her away peacefully. Don't hurt her. Let her have her fling-it won't last long-and she will be all the tamer afterward."

The traveller, who was but a stripling himself, set his teeth hard as he heard these words spoken. Something in the cool arrogance of the man, who appeared to be a leader of the rest, stirred his blood and made his hands tingle to be at his throat.

But it would not do to act rashly in an encounter with four stalwart men, all armed to the teeth, and plainly well used to the practice of arms. The youth saw that he must husband his strength and use his opportunity with every care. His best chance lay in taking the party by surprise.

He examined his weapons with a keen eye. He too possessed one of the handguns of the period, and was a good marksman to boot. He had, too-and glad enough was he of it at that moment-the deadly guisarme, that old-fashioned weapon that combined a spear and scythe, and was used with horrible effect in the charges of the day. Then there was the short battle-axe, slung across his saddlebow,

which at close quarters would be a formidable weapon, and the poniard in his belt had in its time done deadly work before this.

But although he had plenty of weapons for offence, he had not much defensive armour upon him. Only a cloth cap protected his head, and although his jerkin was of the tough leather which often defied the thrust of a dagger almost as successfully as mail, it might not prove a defence against the combined attack of a number of enemies; and his legs were unprotected save by the long leather riding boots laced up the front, and ornamented with silken tassels, now much faded and stained.

Altogether, he appeared hardly equipped for so desperate an encounter as the one that lay before him; but it was plain that he did not on that account shrink from it. His appearance upon the scene had not been observed by any of the robbers-for such they plainly were-and he was thus able to take his time and weigh his chances carefully.

The girl was suffering no injury from her captors; but what her fate might be if rescue did not come was what no one could say. It was plain that it was the desire of the leader of the band to possess her as a captive. It was he who was the leading spirit in the attack. He was just as determined to carry her off as he was wishful to accomplish the capture without inflicting injury.

The stripling astride the good warhorse-who seemed to scent battle in the air, and stood perfectly still, quivering with excitement-unslung his handgun from his shoulder, and levelled it at the leader of the band. The next instant a sharp report rang through the silent forest. The robber chief flung up his hands with a stifled cry and sank down upon the ground; whilst the other men, astonished beyond measure at this sudden attack from they knew not what quarter, ceased to heed their prisoner, and turned round with loud execrations, laying their hands upon their weapons.

But before they had time to draw these the horseman was upon them. He had his battle-axe in his hand-a light small axe, but one of exquisite temper and workmanship-and dashing through the group, he dealt such a blow with it upon the head of one of the ruffians as cleft his skull in two; and the man dropped with never a groan, a dead corpse upon the ground.

"Two done for," quoth the youth to himself as he wheeled about for a second encounter. "Well, a mounted man should be a match for two on foot.

"Ha! what is that?" for even as he spoke he felt a sharp, stinging pain in one shoulder, and simultaneously the report of firearms rang out once more. His adversaries had not been slow to avenge the death of their comrade, and their aim was as true as his own. The traveller knew that his only chance was now to close with his foes and grapple with them before they could load their piece again.

His right arm was partially disabled, as he felt in a moment. He could no longer swing the trusty little axe which had done good service before; but there was the deadly guisarme at his side. Sultan could be trusted to carry him straight to the foe without any guidance beyond that of the pressure of knee and foot; and grasping the weapon in both hands, he gallantly charged back upon the men, who stood grimly awaiting his next movement with every intention of unhorsing and slaying him.

The odds were heavy against him. The two ruffians who stood to bar his way were stalwart, powerful fellows, well inured to this kind of warfare; and the chief, who though wounded was not killed, had struggled to his feet, and was plainly endeavouring, though with difficulty, to reach the handgun and reload it. The girl was still encumbered by the heavy cloak which had been knotted about her head and hands, and was not at once thrown off. The traveller plainly saw that there was no time to be lost if he was to escape with his own life, or save the damsel from a fate perhaps worse than death.

"Forward, Sultan!" he cried.

And the good horse dashed back upon the enemy; and the youth, holding his weapon in both hands, strove as he passed to deal a deadly blow to one of his assailants. But the man was quick, and his own strength impaired by the injury he had received. The lance-like point of the weapon inflicted a deep gash upon the face of one of his adversaries, causing him to yell with rage and pain, but no vital injury had been inflicted upon either; whilst a savage blow from the other upon the youth's left arm had broken the bone, and he felt as if his last moment had surely come.

But it did not occur to him even then to save himself by flight, as he could well have done, seeing that he was mounted and that the robbers were on foot. Disabled as he was, he wheeled about once more, and half maddened by pain and the desperation of his case, rode furiously upon the only man who had not yet received some injury. The robber awaited his charge with a smile of triumph upon his face; but he triumphed a little too soon.

Sultan was a horse of remarkable intelligence and fidelity. He had known fighting before now—had carried his rider through many a skirmish before this; and his fidelity and affection equalled his intelligence. With the wonderful instinct that seems always to exist between horse and rider who have known each other long, he appeared to divine that his master's case was somewhat desperate, and that he needed an ally in his cause. And thus when the pair bore down upon the robber, who was coolly awaiting the charge, Sultan took law into his own hands, and overthrew the plan both of attack and defence by a quick movement of his own. For he swerved slightly as he approached the man, and rising suddenly upon his hind legs, brought down all the weight of his iron shoe with tremendous force upon the head of the adversary, who fell to the ground with a low groan, and lay as helpless as his former comrade.

But excellent as this manoeuvre was in one aspect, it disconcerted the rider by its suddenness; and when as the horse reared the second robber sprang upon the rider to try and drag him from his seat, the effort was only too successful. The traveller was easily pulled away from the saddle, and fell heavily to the ground; whilst the foe uttered a savage exclamation of triumph, and knelt with his knee upon the chest of the fallen man, his bloody and distorted visage bent over him in evil triumph. He was feeling in his belt for his dagger; and the young man closed his eyes and tried to mutter a prayer, for he knew that his hour had come at last.

He had sold his life dear, but sold it was, and the next moment he felt certain would be his last; when all in a moment there was another of those loud reports of the gun. The man kneeling upon his chest fell suddenly backwards; and the youth, starting to his feet, was confronted by the spectacle of the maiden he had rescued, white and trembling, and almost overcome by her own deed, holding in her hand the still smoking gun, whilst her eyes, dilated with horror, were fixed upon the helpless creature in the dust.

"Is he dead?" she asked in a hollow voice.

"I cannot tell," answered the youth hastily. "It were better not to linger longer here. Their own band will come and look to them if they return not by sundown. Let us to horse and away before any of the gang come. Sultan will carry the pair of us well, and you will tell us which course to steer; for the night will be upon us ere long, and I am a stranger to these dark forests."

Whilst thus speaking, the traveller was throwing keen glances round him, and saw that the men, though wounded, were not all dead—though one certainly was, and the other, whom Sultan had attacked, was scarce likely to look again upon the light of day. The leader of the band had fallen again to the earth, and was enveloped in the folds of the heavy cloak, from which he appeared to be feebly struggling to disentangle himself. The girl followed the direction of the youth's glance, and explained the matter in a few short words.

"He was loading the gun when I freed myself. I knew that he was going to shoot you. I am very strong, and I saw that he was bleeding and wounded. I sprang upon him and threw him down, and tied the cloak about him, as he had bidden his men bind it about me. By that time you were unhorsed, and I saw that the robber was about to kill you. The gun was loaded, and I took it and shot him. I never killed a man before. I hope it is not wicked; but he would have killed you else. And you had risked your life a dozen times to save me."

"It was well and bravely done for me and for yourself," answered the stranger, as he mounted the docile Sultan and assisted the girl to spring up behind him.

Wounded and spent as he was, the excitement of the encounter had not yet subsided, and he was only vaguely conscious of his hurts, whilst he was very much in earnest in his desire to get away

from this ill-omened spot before others of the band should return in search of their missing comrades, and take a terrible vengeance upon those who had slain or wounded them.

His companion was no less anxious than he to be gone; and as the good horse picked his way in the dim light through the intricate forest paths pointed out by the girl, who was plainly a native of the neighbourhood, she told him in whispers of the men from whom she had escaped, and of the fate which had so narrowly overtaken her.

"They are the robbers of Black Notley," she said. "There are two rival bands of robbers here—one at White Notley and one at Black Notley. We call them the Black or the White Robbers, to distinguish between them. The White are not so fierce or so lawless as the Black; but both are a terror to us, for we never know what violence we shall not hear of next."

"And these Black Robbers would have carried you away with them, by what I gathered from their words, at least from the words of him they looked to as their leader?"

The girl shuddered strongly.

"Once he lived in our village—Much Waltham, as it is called. He was no robber then; but a proper youth enough; and although I was but a little maid, not grown to womanhood, he asked my hand of my father in marriage."

"And what said your father to his suit?"

"Why, that I was too young to be betrothed as yet; but that if he were a steady youth, as time went on perchance it might be even as he wished. But instead of growing up to the plough or the anvils as other youths of our village do, he must needs go off to see somewhat of the wars; and when he returned it was as a swashbuckler and roisterer, such as my father and mother cannot abide sight of. When he came to Figeon's to ask me in marriage, he was turned from the door with cold looks and short words; but he would ever be striving to see me alone, and swear that he loved me and would wed me in spite of all. I had liked him when I was but a child, but I grew first to fear and then to hate him; and at last I spoke to Will Ives, the smith's son, of how he troubled me and gave me no peace of my life. And forthwith there was a great stir through the village; and Will Ives set upon him and beat him within an inch of his life, for all he was so proud of his skill and strength. And the good brothers spoke to him seriously of his evil courses, and I know not what besides. So the end was that he ran away once more and joined himself to the Robbers of Black Notley, and was taken in such favour by the captain of the band that he is half a captain himself; and many is the time he has ridden through our village, robbing his old neighbours, and doing more harm in a night than months of hard work will put right; and often when I have chanced to meet him he has given me a look that has frozen the blood in my veins. I have always lived in fear of him all my life; but I was never in such peril before today."

"Peril enough, in all sooth," said the traveller. "How came it, pretty maiden, that you chanced to be all alone in the wood so near to the haunts of the robbers?"

"Nay, I was far enough away from their regular haunts. I had but come a short cut through the wood to see a sick neighbour, and I tarried beside her longer than I well knew. I will never do the like again, but I have been used from childhood to roam these forest paths unharmed. The wood is thick, and if I hear the sound of horse or man I always slip aside and hide myself. But today, methinks, they must have tracked me and were lying in wait; for the wood was silent as the church till I reached the clearing, and then the whole four sprang up from behind the pile of felled trees and set upon me. Had you not been at hand, by good providence; I should ere this have been their helpless captive;" and again the girl shuddered strongly.

By this time the trees were growing somewhat thinner, and lights began to twinkle here and there, showing that some village was nigh at hand. A bell for vespers began to ring forth, and the traveller was glad enough to think his toilsome journey nearly at an end. Hardy as he was, and well inured to fatigues and hardship of all kinds, he was growing exhausted from his day's travel and his sharp fighting. He was wounded, too, and although there was no great effusion of blood, his hurt was becoming painful, and his left arm, which was undoubtedly broken, required some skilled attention.

"Is it here that you live, fair maid?" he asked. "I know not how you are named; but I gather that you are directing our course to your own home."

"My name is Joan Devenish," she answered, "and the lights you see yonder are those of Much Waltham, and it is our church bell that you hear ringing out so sweetly. My father's farm is a mile beyond. But I beseech you ride thither with me. My mother would be ill pleased did I not bring home the gallant stranger who had saved me from my foes. And Figeon's will be proud to shelter such a guest."

"I give you humble thanks, Mistress Joan, and gladly would I find so hospitable a shelter. I am but a poor traveller, however, roaming the world in search of the fame and fortune that come not. I am one of those who have ever followed the failing fortunes of the Red Rose of Lancaster, and sorry enough has often been my plight. But if rumour speaks true, and the great Earl of Warwick has placed King Henry once again on his throne, then perchance I may retrieve the fallen fortunes of my house. My father and brothers laid down their lives for his cause; his foes took possession of our fair lands, and I was turned adrift on the wide world. But tell me, ere we journey farther, which Rose you and your house favour; for I would not bring trouble upon any, and my roving life has taught me that the House of Lancaster has many bitter foes."

"O sir, be not afraid," answered Joan eagerly; "we country folk are quiet and peaceable, and care little who wears the crown, so as we may till our land in peace, and be relieved from the hordes of robbers and disbanded soldiers who have swarmed the country so long. We have called ourselves Yorkists these past years, since King Edward has been reigning; but I trow if what men say is true, and he has fled the country without striking a blow for his crown, and the great earl has placed King Henry on the throne again, that we shall welcome him back. I know little of the great matters of the day. My father bids me not trouble my head over things too hard for me. I tend the poultry and the young calves, and let the question of kings alone."

The traveller smiled at this; but his companion was evidently something of a talker, and ended with her full share of feminine curiosity.

"I would gladly know your name, fair sir," she said shyly, "for I shall have to present you to my good father ere long."

"My name is Paul Stukely," he answered. "I am the youngest and only surviving son of one of King Henry's knights and loyal adherents. My parents are both dead, and I have long been alone in the world. I have little to call my own save my good horse and trusty weapons. But I sometimes hope that there may be better days in store, if the rightful king gets back his own again."

At that moment the travellers were passing by the village forge, and a bright gleam of light streamed across their path, revealing to a brawny young fellow at the door the weary horse and its double burden. He came one step nearer, and exclaimed:

"Why, Joan, what means this? You riding pillion fashion with a stranger! What, in the name of all the saints, has befallen you?"

Sultan had paused of his own accord at the forge, and Joan was eagerly telling her story to a little crowd of listeners, and making so much capital out of the heroism of her gallant rescuer that all eyes were turned upon the battered stranger; and whilst deep curses went up from the lips of many of the men as they heard of the last attempt of the Black Robbers upon one of their own village maidens, equal meed of praise and thanks was showered upon Paul, who leaned over his saddlebow in an attitude that bespoke exhaustion, though he answered all questions, and thanked the good people for their kindly reception of him, whilst trying to make light of his own prowess, and to give the credit of their final escape to Joan, to whom, indeed, it was due.

But the elder smith, John Ives, pushed his way through the little group round the black horse, and scattered them right and left.

"Good neighbours," he said, "can you not see that this gentleman is weary and wounded, and that his good horse is like to drop as he stands?"

"Go to, Will. Lift down the maid, and lead her yourself up to Figeon's. I will conduct the gentleman thither, and tend his hurts myself.

"For, good sir, I know as much about broken bones as any leech in the countryside; and if you will but place yourself in my hands, I'll warrant you a sound man again before another moon has run her course. 'Tis a farrier's trade to be a bit of a surgeon; and the Iveses have been farriers in Much Waltham longer than any can mind.

"On then, good horse. 'Tis but a short mile farther; and a good stable and a soft bed, and as much fodder as you can eat, you will find at Figeon's Farm."

Paul was glad enough to have matters thus settled for him; and even Sultan seemed to understand the promise made him, for he pricked up his ears, dropped his nose for a moment into the kindly hand of the smith, and with the guiding hand upon his rein stepped briskly forward up the dark rough lane, through the thick belt of trees on either side. For in the days of which I write the great forest of Epping extended almost all over the county of Essex, the villages were scarcely more than small clearings in the vast wood, and only round the farms themselves were there any real fields worth calling by the name.

Will and Joan tripped on ahead more rapidly than Sultan or his master cared to go. Paul did not trouble himself any longer about the road he was traversing, leaving himself entirely in the kindly care of the smith. He even dozed a little in the saddle as the horse picked his way steadily through the darkness, and was only fully roused up again by the sight of lanterns dancing, as it seemed, over the ground, by the sound of rough yet pleasant voices, and the glimmer of steadier light through the latticed windows of some building near at hand. The next minute he was before the hospitable door of the old farmhouse.

A ruddy blaze streamed out through that open door. Friendly hands assisted him to alight, and guided him to a rude oak settle placed within the deep inglenook, which was almost like a small inner chamber of the wide farm kitchen. Some hot, steaming drink was held to his lips; and when he had drunk, the mist seemed to clear away from his eyes, and he saw that he was the centre of quite a group of simple rustics; whilst the pretty, dark-eyed Joan, in her gown of blue serge, with its big sleeves of white cloth, was eagerly watching him, all the time pouring out her story, which everybody appeared to wish to hear again and again.

"Just to think of it!" cried a burly man, whose dress bespoke him a farmer no less than his ruddy cheeks and horny hands. "Would that I had been there! He should not then have escaped with his life.

"Child, why didst thou not stab him to the heart as he lay?"

"Well has he been called Devil's Own by his former comrades and playfellows. A defenceless girl-my daughter! By good St. Anthony, if he crosses my path again it shall be for the last time. I will-

"Hush, I pray you, good husband," said his wife more gently, though from the way in which she clasped her daughter to her breast it was plain she had been deeply moved by the story of her peril. "Remember what the Scriptures say: 'Thou shalt not kill,' 'Vengeance is mine,' and many like passages-

But the woman stopped suddenly short, silenced by the grip of her husband's hand upon her arm. A quick look was exchanged between them, and she lapsed into silence.

The farmer glanced round him, and dismissed the serving wenches and labourers who had gathered round to their own quarters, and indeed in many cases to their beds; for early hours were all the fashion in those days. The farmer's wife beckoned her daughter, and went to prepare for the lodging of their guest; and before very long Paul found himself in a bed which, however rude according to our notions, was luxury itself to the weary traveller.

The smith soon saw to his hurts, pronounced them only trifling, and bound them up as cleverly as a leech would have done. Indeed, he was the regular doctor for most kinds of hurts, and could practise the rude surgery of the day with as much success as a more qualified man.

Paul had been weary enough half-an-hour before, but the good food he had taken and the hot spiced wine had effectually aroused him. He was very tough and well seasoned, and although glad enough to lie still in bed, was not particularly disposed for sleep; and when the smith was preparing to depart, he begged him to stay a while longer, and tell him something about the place and about the people he had come amongst. The worthy man was ready enough to chat, though he had little notion of imparting information. Still, he answered questions with frankness, and Paul was able to pick up a good deal of gossip as to public opinion in those parts and the feeling of the people round.

But what he heard did not give him pleasure. He had been in the north when he had heard of Warwick's sudden desertion of the Yorkist cause, and before he had been able to reach London he had heard the glad news that Henry of Lancaster was again on the throne, placed there by the power of the King Maker, who had dethroned him but a few years back. Glad as Paul was, he yet wished that any other hand had been the one to place the crown upon the gentle monarch's head. He could not but distrust Warwick, and he was eager to learn the feeling of the country, and to know whether or not the people welcomed back the sovereign so long a captive.

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