

EVERETT-GREEN EVELYN

**THE LORD OF
DYNEVOR: A TALE OF
THE TIMES OF
EDWARD THE FIRST**

Evelyn Everett-Green

**The Lord of Dynevor: A Tale of
the Times of Edward the First**

«Public Domain»

Everett-Green E.

The Lord of Dynevor: A Tale of the Times of Edward the First /
E. Everett-Green — «Public Domain»,

© Everett-Green E.
© Public Domain

Содержание

CHAPTER I. DYNEVOR CASTLE	5
CHAPTER II. THE BROTHERS	11
CHAPTER III. THE EAGLE'S CRAG	17
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	24

Evelyn Everett-Green

The Lord of Dynevor: A Tale of the Times of Edward the First

CHAPTER I. DYNEVOR CASTLE

"La-ha-hoo! la-ha-hoo!"

Far down the widening valley, and up the wild, picturesque ravine, rang the strange but not unmusical call. It awoke the slumbering echoes of the still place, and a hundred voices seemed to take up the cry, and pass it on as from mouth to mouth. But the boy's quick ears were not to be deceived by the mocking voices of the spirits of solitude, and presently the call rang out again with greater clearness than before:

"La-ha-hoo!"

The boy stood with his head thrown back, his fair curls floating in the mountain breeze, his blue eyes, clear and bright and keen as those of a wild eaglet, fixed upon a craggy ridge on the opposite side of the gorge, whilst his left hand was placed upon the collar of a huge wolfhound who stood beside him, sniffing the wind and showing by every tremulous movement his longing to be off and away, were it not for the detaining hand of his young master.

The lad was very simply dressed in a tunic of soft, well-dressed leather, upon the breast of which was stamped some device which might have been the badge of his house. His active limbs were encased in the same strong, yielding material, and the only thing about him which seemed to indicate rank or birth was a belt with a richly-chased gold clasp and a poniard with a jewelled hilt.

Perhaps the noble bearing of the boy was his best proof of right to the noble name he bore. One of the last of the royal house of Dynevor, he looked every inch a prince, as he stood bare-headed in the sunlight amidst the everlasting hills of his well-loved home, too young to see the clouds which were settling so darkly and so surely upon the bright horizon of his life – his dreams still of glory and triumph, culminating in the complete emancipation of his well-loved country from the hated English yoke.

The dog strained and whined against the detaining clasp upon his neck, but the boy held him fast.

"Nay, Gelert, we are not going a-hunting," he said. "Hark! is not that the sound of a horn? Are they not even now returning? Over yon fell they come. Let me but hear their hail, and thou and I will be off to meet them. I would they heard the news first from my lips. My mother bid me warn them. I wot she fears what Llewelyn and Howel might say or do were they to find English guests in our hall and they all unwarned."

Once more the boy raised his voice in the wild call which had awakened the echoes before, and this time his practised ear distinguished amongst the multitudinous replies an answering shout from human lips. Releasing Gelert, who dashed forward with a bay of delight, the lad commenced springing from rock to rock up the narrowing gorge, until he reached a spot where the dwindling stream could be crossed by a bound; from which spot a wild path, more like a goat track than one intended for the foot of man, led upwards towards the higher portions of the wild fell.

The boy sped onwards with the fleetness and agility of a born mountaineer. The hound bounded at his side; and before either had traversed the path far, voices ahead of them became distinctly audible, and a little group might be seen approaching, laden with the spoils of the chase.

In the van of the little party were three lads, one of whom bore so striking a resemblance to the youth who now hastened to meet them, that the relationship could not be for a moment doubted. As a

matter of fact the four were brothers; but they followed two distinct types – Wendot and Griffeth being fair and bright haired, whilst Llewelyn and Howel (who were twins) were dark as night, with black hair and brows, swarthy skins, and something of the wildness of aspect which often accompanies such traits.

Wendot, the eldest of the four, a well-grown youth of fifteen, who was walking slightly in advance of his brothers, greeted Griffeth's approach with a bright smile.

"Ha, lad, thou shouldst have been with us! We have had rare sport today. The good fellows behind can scarce carry the booty home. Thou must see the noble stag that my bolt brought down. We will have his head to adorn the hall – his antlers are worth looking at, I warrant thee. But what brings thee out so far from home? and why didst thou hail us as if we were wanted?"

"You are wanted," answered Griffeth, speaking so that all the brothers might hear his words. "The mother herself bid me go in search of you, and it is well you come home laden with meat, for we shall need to make merry tonight. There are guests come to the castle today. Wenwynwyn was stringing his harp even as I came away, to let them hear his skill in music. They are to be lodged for so long as they will stay; but the manner of their errand I know not."

"Guests!" echoed all three brothers in a breath, and very eagerly; "why, that is good hearing, for perchance we may now learn some news. Come these strangers from the north? Perchance we shall hear somewhat of our noble Prince Llewelyn, who is standing out so boldly for the rights of our nation. Say they not that the English tyrant is on our borders now, summoning him to pay the homage he repudiates with scorn? Oh, I would that this were a message summoning all true Welshmen to take up arms in his quarrel! Would not I fly to his standard, boy though I be! And would I not shed the last drop of my blood in the glorious cause of liberty!"

Llewelyn was the speaker, and his black eyes were glowing fiercely under their straight bushy brows. His face was the least boyish of any of the four, and his supple, sinewy frame had much of the strength of manhood in it. The free, open-air life that all these lads had lived, and the training they had received in all martial and hardy exercises, had given them strength and height beyond their years. It was no idle boast on the part of Llewelyn to speak of his readiness to fight. He would have marched against the foe with the stoutest of his father's men-at-arms, and doubtless have acquitted himself as well as any; for what the lads lacked in strength they made up in their marvellous quickness and agility.

The love of fighting seemed born in all these hardy sons of Wales, and something of warfare was known to them even now, from the never-ending struggles between themselves, and their resistance of the authority, real or assumed, of the Lords of the Marches. But petty forays and private feuds with hostile kinsmen was not the kind of fighting these brothers longed to see and share. They had their own ideas and aspirations, and eager glances were turned upon Griffeth, lest he might be the bearer of some glorious piece of news that would mean open warfare with England.

But the boy's face was unresponsive and even a little downcast. He gave a quick glance into the fierce, glowing face of Llewelyn, and then his eyes turned upon Wendot.

"There is no news like that," he said slowly. "The guests who have come to Dynevor are English themselves."

"English!" echoed Llewelyn fiercely, and he turned away with a smothered word which sounded like an imprecation upon all the race of foreigners; whilst Howel asked with quick indignation:

"What right have English guests at Dynevor? Why were they received? Why did not our good fellows fall upon them with the sword or drive them back the way they came? Oh, if we had but been there –"

"Tush, brother!" said young Griffeth quickly; "is not our father lord of Dynevor? Dost think that thou canst usurp his authority? And when did ever bold Welshmen fall upon unarmed strangers to smite with the sword? Do we make war upon harmless travellers – women and children? Fie upon thee! it were a base thought. Let not our parents hear thee speak such words."

Howel looked a little discomfited by his younger brother's rebuke, though he read nothing but sympathy and mute approbation in Llewelyn's sullen face and gloomy eyes. He dropped a pace or so behind and joined his twin, whilst Wendot and Griffeth led the way in front.

"Who are these folks?" asked Wendot; "and whence come they? And why have they thus presented themselves unarmed at Dynevor? Is it an errand of peace? And why speakest thou of women and children?"

"Why, brother, because the traveller has his little daughter with him, and her woman is in their train of servants. I know not what has brought them hither, but I gather they have lost their road, and lighted by chance on Dynevor. Methinks they are on a visit to the Abbey of Strata Florida; but at least they come as simple, unarmed strangers, and it is the boast of Wales that even unarmed foes may travel through the breadth and length of the land and meet no harm from its sons. For my part I would have it always so. I would not wage war on all alike. Doubtless there are those, even amongst the English, who are men of bravery and honour."

"I doubt it not," answered Wendot, with a gravity rather beyond his years. "If all our mother teaches us be true, we Welshmen have been worse enemies to one another than ever the English have been. I would not let Llewelyn or Howel hear me say so, and I would fain believe it not. But when we see how this fair land has been torn and rent by the struggles after land and power, and how our own kinsman, Meredith ap Res, is toying with Edward, and striving to take from us the lands we hold yet – so greatly diminished from the old portion claimed by the lords of Dynevor – we cannot call the English our only or even our greatest foes. Ah, if Wales would but throw aside all her petty feuds, and join as brothers fighting shoulder to shoulder for her independence, then might there be some hope! But now – "

Griffeth was looking with wide-open, wondering eyes into his brother's face. He loved and revered Wendot in a fashion that was remarkable, seeing that the elder brother was but two years and a half his senior. But Wendot had always been grave and thoughtful beyond his years, and had been taken much into the counsels of his parents, so that questions which were almost new to the younger lad had been thought much of by the eldest, the heir of the house of Dynevor.

"Why, brother, thou talkest like a veritable monk for learning," he said. "I knew not thou hadst the gift of such eloquent speech. Methought it was the duty of every free-born son of Wales to hate the English tyrant."

"Ay, and so I do when I think of his monstrous claims," cried Wendot with flashing eyes. "Who is the King of England that he should lay claim to our lands, our homage, our submission? My blood boils in my veins when I think of things thus. And yet there are moments when it seems the lesser ill to yield such homage to one whom the world praises as statesman and soldier, than to see our land torn and distracted by petty feuds, and split up into a hundred hostile factions. But let us not talk further of this; it cuts me to the heart to think of it. Tell me more of these same travellers. How did our parents receive them? And how long purpose they to stay?"

"Nay, that I have not heard. I was away over yon fell with Gelert when I saw the company approach the castle, and ere I could find entrance the strangers had been received and welcomed. The father of the maiden is an English earl, Lord Montacute they call him. He is tall and soldier-like, with an air of command like unto our father's. The damsel is a fair-faced maiden, who scarce opens her lips; but she keeps close to our mother's side, and seems loath to leave her for a moment. I heard her father say that she had no mother of her own. Her name, they say, is Lady Gertrude."

"A damsel at Dynevor," said Wendot, with a smile; "methinks that will please the mother well."

"Come and see," cried Griffeth eagerly. "Let us hasten down to the castle together."

It was easy work for the brothers to traverse the rocky pathway. Dangerous as the descent looked to others, they were as surefooted as young chamois, and sprang from rock to rock with the utmost confidence. The long summer sunlight came streaming up the valley in level rays of shimmering gold, bathing the loftier crags in lambent fire, and filling the lower lands with layers of soft shadow flecked

here and there with gold. A sudden turn in the narrow gorge, through which ran a brawling tributary of the wider Towy, brought the brothers full in sight of their ancestral home, and for a few seconds they paused breathless, gazing with an unspeakable and ardent love upon the fair scene before them.

The castle of Dynevor (or Dinas Vawr = Great Palace) stood in a commanding position upon a rocky plateau overlooking the river Towy. From its size and splendour – as splendour went in those days – it had long been a favourite residence with the princes of South Wales; and in a recent readjustment of disputed lands, consequent upon the perpetual petty strife that was ruining the land, Res Vychan, the present Lord of Dynevor, had made some considerable sacrifice in order to keep in his own hands the fair palace of his fathers.

The majestic pile stood out boldly from the mountain side, and was approached by a winding road from the valley. A mere glance showed how strong was the position it occupied, and how difficult such a place would be to capture. On two sides the rock fell away almost sheer from the castle walls, whilst on the other two a deep moat had been dug, which was fed by small mountain rivulets that never ran dry; and the entrance was commanded by a drawbridge, whose frowning portcullis was kept by a grim warder looking fully equal to the office allotted to him.

Lovely views were commanded from the narrow windows of the castle, and from the battlements and the terraced walk that ran along two sides of the building. And rough and rude as were the manners and customs of the period, and partially uncivilized as the country was in those far-off days, there was a strong vein of poetry lying latent in its sons and daughters, and an ardent love for the beautiful in nature and for the country they called their own, which went far to redeem their natures from mere savagery and brute ferocity.

This passionate love for their home was strong in all the brothers of the house of Dynevor, and was deepened and intensified by the sense of uncertainty now pervading the whole country with regard to foreign aggression and the ever-increasing claims upon Welsh lands by the English invaders. A sense as of coming doom hung over the fair landscape, and Wendot's eyes grew dreamy as he stood gazing on the familiar scene, and Griffeth had to touch his arm and hurry him down to the castle.

"Mother will be wanting us," he said. "What is the matter, Wendot? Methinks I see the tears in thine eyes."

"Nay, nay; tears are for women," answered Wendot with glowing cheeks, as he dashed his hand across his eyes. "It is for us men to fight for our rightful inheritance, that the women may not have to weep for their desolated homes."

Griffeth gave him a quick look, and then his eyes travelled lovingly over the wide, fair scene, to the purple shadows and curling mists of the valley, the dark mysterious woods in front, the clear, vivid sunlight on the mountain tops, and the serried battlements of the castle, now rising into larger proportions as the boys dropped down the hillside towards the postern door, which led out upon the wild fell. There was something of mute wistfulness in his own gaze as he did so.

"Brother," he said thoughtfully, "I think I know what those feelings are which bring tears to the eyes of men – tears of which they need feel no shame. Fear not to share with me all thy inmost thoughts. Have we not ever been brothers in all things?"

"Ay, truly have we; and I would keep nothing back, only I scarce know how to frame my lips to give utterance to the thoughts which come crowding into my brain. But see, we have no time for communing now. Go on up the path to the postern; it is too narrow for company."

Indeed, so narrow was the track, so steep the uncertain steps worn in the face of the rock, so deep the fall if one false step were made, that few save the brothers and wilder mountaineers ever sought admission by the postern door. But Wendot and Griffeth had no fears, and quickly scaled the steps and reached the entrance, passing through which they found themselves in a narrow vaulted passage, very dark, which led, with many twists and turns, and several ascending stairs, to the great hall of the castle, where the members of the household were accustomed for the most part to assemble.

A door deeply set in an embrasure gave access to this place, and the moment it was opened the sound of a harp became audible, and the brothers paused in the deep shadow to observe what was going on in the hall before they advanced further.

A scene that would be strange and picturesque to our eyes, but was in the main familiar to theirs, greeted them as they stood thus. The castle hall was a huge place, large enough to contain a muster of armed men. A great stone staircase wound upwards from it to a gallery above. There was little furniture to be seen, and that was of a rude kind, though not lacking in a certain massiveness and richness in the matter of carving, which gave something baronial to the air of the place. The walls were adorned with trophies of all sorts, some composed of arms, others of the spoil of fell and forest. The skins of many savage beasts lay upon the cold stone flooring of the place, imparting warmth and harmony by the rich tints of the furs. Light was admitted through a row of narrow windows both above and below; but the vast place would have been dim and dark at this hour had it not been that the huge double doors with their rude massive bolts stood wide open to the summer air, and the last beams of the westering sun came shining in, lying level and warm upon the group at the upper end of the hall, which had gathered around the white-haired, white-bearded bard, who, with head thrown backwards, and eyes alight with strange passions and feelings, was singing in a deep and musical voice to the sound of his instrument.

Old Wenwynwyn was a study in himself; his flowing hair, his fiery eyes, his picturesque garb and free, untrammelled gestures giving him a weird individuality of his own. But it was not upon him that the eyes of the brothers dwelt, nor even upon the soldier-like figure of their stalwart father leaning against the wall with folded arms, and eyes shining with the patriotic fervour of his race. The attention of the lads was enchained by another and more sumptuous figure – that of a fine-looking man, approaching to middle life, who was seated at a little distance from the minstrel, and was smiling with pleasure and appreciation at the wild sweetness of the stream of melody poured forth.

One glance at the dress of the stranger would have been enough to tell the brothers his nationality. His under tunic, which reached almost to the feet, was of the finest cloth, and was embroidered along the lower border with gold thread. The sur-tunic was also richly embroidered; and the heavy mantle clasped upon the shoulder with a rare jewel was of some rich texture almost unknown to the boys. The make and set of his garments, and the jewelled and plumed cap which he held upon his knee, alike proclaimed him to be English; yet as he gazed upon the noble face, and looked into the clear depths of the calm and fearless eyes, Wendot felt no hostility towards the representative of the hostile race, but rather a sort of reluctant admiration.

"In faith he looks born to command," he whispered to Griffeth. "If all were like unto him – "

But the lad did not complete the sentence, for he had suddenly caught sight of another figure, another face, and he stopped short in a sort of bewildered amaze.

In Dynevor Castle there had never been a girl child to share the honours with her brothers. No sister had played in its halls, or tyrannized over the lads or their parents. And now when Wendot's glance fell for the first time upon this little fairy-like creature, this lovely little golden-haired, blue-eyed maiden, he felt a new sensation enter his life, and gazed as wonderingly at the apparition as if the child had been a ghost.

And the soft shy eyes, with their fringe of dark lashes, were looking straight at him. As he gazed the child suddenly rose, and darted towards the brothers as if she had wings on her feet.

"Oh, you have come back!" she said, looking from one to the other, and for a moment seeming puzzled by the likeness; "and – why, there are two of you," and the child broke into the merriest and silveriest of laughs. "Oh, I am so glad! I do like boys so much, and I never have any to play with at home. I am so tired of this old man and his harp. Please let me go somewhere with you," and she thrust her soft little hand confidingly into Wendot's, looking up saucily into his face as she added, "You are the biggest; I like you the best."

Wendot's face glowed; but on the whole he was flattered by the attention and the preference of the little maiden. He understood her soft English speech perfectly, for all the Dynevor brothers had been instructed in the English tongue by an English monk who had long lived at the castle. Res Vychan, the present Lord of Dynevor, foresaw, and had foreseen many years, the gradual usurpation of the English, and had considered that a knowledge of that tongue would in all probability be an advantage to those who were likely to be involved in the coming struggle. The boys all possessed the quick musical ear of their race, and found no difficulty in mastering the language; but neither Llewelyn nor Howel would ever speak a single word of the hated tongue if they could help it, though Wendot and Griffeth conversed often with the old monk right willingly.

So as Wendot looked down into the bright little upturned face, he was able to reply readily and smilingly:

"Where would you like to go, little lady, and what would you like me to show you?"

"Oh, everything – all out there," said the little girl, with a wave of her hand towards the front door. "I want to go and see the sun. I am tired of it in here."

Wendot led the child through the hall, and out upon the great terrace which overlooked the steep descent to the valley and away to the glowing west. Griffeth followed, glad that his elder brother had been preferred before himself by the little maiden, yet half fascinated by her nameless charm. Wendot lifted her up in his strong arms to see over the wide stone balustrade, and she made him set her down there and perch himself by her side; for she seemed loath to go back to the hall again, and the boys were as willing as she to remain out in the open air.

"It is pretty here," said the child graciously; "I think I should like to live here sometimes, if it was always summer. Tell me your name, big boy. I hope it is not very hard. Some people here have names I cannot speak right."

"They call me Res Wendot," answered the lad; "generally Wendot at home here. This is Griffeth, my youngest brother. Those are not hard names, are they?"

"No, not very. And how old are you, Wendot?"

"I am fifteen."

"Oh, how big you are!" said the little lady, opening her eyes wide; "I thought you must be much older than that. I am twelve, and you can lift me up in your arms. But then I always was so little – they all say so."

"Yet you travel about with your father," said Wendot.

"I never did before; but this time I begged, and he took me. Sometimes he says he shall have to put me in a nunnery, because he has nobody to take care of me when he has to travel about. But I don't think I should like that; I would rather stay here."

Wendot and Griffeth laughed; but the child was not at all disconcerted. She was remarkably self possessed for her years, even if she was small of stature and infantile in appearance.

"What is your name?" asked Wendot; and the little maid answered, with becoming gravity and importance:

"I am called Lady Gertrude Cherleton; but you may call me Gertrude if you like, because you are kind and I like you. Are there any more of you? Have you any sisters?"

"No; only two brothers."

"More brothers! and what are their names?"

"Llewelyn and Howel."

"Llewelyn? Why, that is the name of the Prince of North Wales that the king is going to fight against and conquer. Do you think when he has done so that he will come here and conquer you, too?"

Wendot's cheek burned a sudden red; but he made no reply, for at that moment a head suddenly appeared round an angle of the wall, and a heavy grip was laid upon the shoulder of the child. A wild face and a pair of flashing black eyes were brought into close proximity with hers, and a smothered voice spoke in fierce, low accents.

CHAPTER II. THE BROTHERS

"What is that you dare to say?"

The voice was harsh, the words were spoken with a rough accent, unlike the gentler tones of Wendot and Griffeth. The child uttered a little cry and shrank back away from the grip of the strong hand, and might have been in some danger of losing her balance and of falling over the balustrade, had not Wendot thrown a protecting arm round her, whilst pushing back with the other hand that of the rude interloper.

"Llewelyn! for shame!" he said in his own tongue. "Art thou a man, and claimest the blood of princes, and yet canst stoop to frighten an inoffensive child?"

"She spoke of conquest – the conquest of our country," cried Llewelyn fiercely, in the hated English tongue, scowling darkly at the little girl as he spoke. "Thinkest thou that I will stand patiently by and hear such words? What right hath she or any one besides to speak of that tyrant and usurper in such tones?"

"He is not a tyrant, he is not a usurper!" cried the little Lady Gertrude, recovering herself quickly, and, whilst still holding Wendot by the hand, turning fearlessly upon the dark-faced lad who had startled and terrified her at the first. "I know of whom you are speaking – it is of our great and noble King Edward. You do not know him – you cannot know how great and good he is. I will not hear you speak against him. I love him next best to my own father. He is kind and good to everybody. If you would all give your homage to him you would be happy and safe, and he would protect you, and – "

But Llewelyn's patience was exhausted; he would listen no more. With a fierce gesture of hatred that made the child shrink back again he turned upon her, and it seemed for a moment almost as though he would have struck her, despite Wendot's sturdy protecting arm, had not his own shoulder been suddenly grasped by an iron hand, and he himself confronted by the stern countenance of his father.

"What means this, boy?" asked Res Vychan severely. "Art thou daring to raise thine arm against a child, a lady, and thy father's guest? For shame! I blush for thee. Ask pardon instantly of the lady and of her father. I will have no such dealings in mine house. Thou shouldst be well assured of that."

The black-browed boy was crimson with rage and shame, but there was no yielding in the haughty face. He confronted his father with flashing eyes, and as he did so he met the keen, grave glance of the stranger's fixed upon him with a calm scrutiny which aroused his fiercest rage.

"I will not ask pardon," he shouted. "I will not degrade my tongue by uttering such words. I will not – "

The father's hand descended heavily upon his son's head, in a blow which would have stunned a lad less hardy and hard-headed. Res Vychan was not one to be defied with impunity by his own sons, and he had had hard encounters of will before now with Llewelyn.

"Choose, boy," he said with brief sternness. "Either do my will and obey me, or thou wilt remain a close prisoner till thou hast come to thy senses. My guests shall not be insulted by thy forward tongue. Barbarous and wild as the English love to call us, they shall find that Res Vychan is not ignorant of those laws which govern the world in which they live and move. Ask pardon of the lady, or to the dungeon thou goest."

Llewelyn glanced up into his father's face, and saw no yielding there. Howel was making vehement signs to him which he and he alone could interpret. His other brothers were eagerly gazing at him, and Griffeth even went so far as to murmur into his ear some words of entreaty.

It seemed as though the silence which followed Res Vychan's words would never be broken, but at last the culprit spoke, and spoke in a low, sullen tone.

"I meant no harm. I would not have hurt her."

"Ask her pardon then, boy, and tell her so."

"Nay, force him no more," said the little lady, who was regarding this curious scene with lively interest, and who began to feel sorry for the dark wild boy who had frightened her by his vehemence before; "I was to blame myself. I should not have spoken as I did.

"Father, tell them how my tongue is always running away with me. Hast not thou told me a hundred times that it would get me into trouble one of these days? It is right that he should love his country. Do not think ill of him for that."

"Ay, let the lad go now, good friend," quoth Lord Montacute. "No doubt this little witch of mine was at the bottom of the mischief. Her tongue, as she truly says, is a restless and mischievous possession. She has found a staunch protector at least, and will come to no harm amongst thy stalwart lads. I could envy thee such a double brace of boys. I would it had pleased Providence to send me a son."

"Nay, father, say not so," cried little Lady Gertrude coaxingly. "I would not have a brother for all the world. Thou wouldst love him so well, if thou hadst him, that thou wouldst have none to spare for thy maid. I have seen how it ever is. I love to have all thy heart for mine own."

The father smiled, but Res Vychan's face was still severe, and he had not loosed his clasp upon Llewelyn's arm.

"Say that thou art sorry ere I let thee go," he said, in low but very stern tones; and after a moment's hesitation, Llewelyn spoke in audible tones.

"I am sorry," he said slowly; "I am sorry."

And then as his father's clasp upon his arm relaxed he darted away like an arrow from the bow, and plunged with Howel through a dark and gloomy doorway which led up a winding turret stair to a narrow circular chamber, which the brothers shared together.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry!" he panted fiercely; "ay, that indeed I am. Sorry that I did not wring her neck as the fowler wrings the neck of the bird his shaft hath brought down; sorry I did not cast her headlong down the steep precipice, that there might be one less of the hated race contaminating the air of our pure Wales with their poisonous breath. Sorry! ay, that I am! I would my hand had done a deed which should have set proud Edward's forces in battle array against us. I would that this tampering with traitors were at an end, and that we warriors of South Wales might stand shoulder to shoulder, firmly banded against the foreign foe. I would plunge a dagger in the false heart of yon proud Englishman as he lies sleeping in his bed tonight, if by doing so I could set light to the smouldering flame of national hatred.

"What sayest thou? Can we do nought to bring upon us an open war, which is a thousand times better than this treacherous, hollow peace? Our father and mother are half won over to the cause of slavery. They – "

Llewelyn paused, choking back the fierce tide of passion which went far to unman him. He had not forgotten the humiliation placed upon him so recently, when his father had compelled him to sue for pardon to an English maiden. His heart was burning, his soul was stirred to its depths. He had to stop short lest his passion should carry him away.

Howel seemed to understand him without the medium of words. The links which bound the twin brothers together were very subtle and very strong. If Llewelyn were the more violent and headstrong, Howel was more than his equal in diplomacy. He shared every feeling of his brother's heart, but he was less outspoken and less rash.

"I know what thou wouldst do," he said thoughtfully: "thou wouldst force upon our father a step which shall make a rupture with the English inevitable. Thou wouldst do a thing which should bring upon us the wrath of the mighty Edward, and force both ourselves and our neighbours to take arms against him. Is not that so?"

"Ay, truly; and could such a thing be, gladly would I lay down my life in the cause of liberty and freedom."

Howel was pondering deeply.

"Perchance it might be done," he said.

Llewelyn eagerly raised his head.

"Thinkest thou so? How?"

"I know not yet, but we shall have time for thought. Knowest thou that the maid will remain here beneath our mother's charge for a while, whilst our father goes forward as far as the Abbey of Strata Florida with yon stranger, to guide him on his way? The maid will remain here until her father's return."

"How knowest thou that?"

"I had it from Wenwynwyn's lips. He heard the discussion in the hall, and it seems that this Lord Montacute would be glad to be free of the care of the child for a while. Our mother delights in the charge of a little maid, and thus it will be as I have said."

A strange fire gleamed in Llewelyn's eyes. The brothers looked at each other a good while in silence.

"And thou thinkest – " said Llewelyn at last.

Howel was some time in replying, and his answer was a little indeterminate, although sufficiently significant.

"Why, the maid will be left here; but when her father returns to claim her, perchance she will not be found. If that were so, thinkest thou not that nought but open war would lie before us?"

Llewelyn's eyes glowed. He said not a word, and the darkness gathered round the boys in the narrow chamber. They thought not of descending or of asking for food, even after their day's hunting in the hills. They were hardy, and seasoned to abstemious ways, and had no room for thoughts of such a kind. Silence was settling down upon the castle, and they had no intention of leaving their room again that night. Dark thoughts were their companions as they undressed and made ready for bed; and hardly were they settled there before the door opened, and the old bard Wenwynwyn entered.

This old man was almost like a father to these boys, and Llewelyn and Howel were particularly attached to him and he to them. He shared to the full their ardent love for their country and their untempered hatred of the English race. He saw, as they did, nothing but ill in the temporizing attitude now to be found amongst the smaller Welsh chieftains with regard to the claims made by the English monarch; and much of the fierce hostility to be found in the boys had been the result of the lessons instilled into their mind by the wild-eyed, passionate old bard, one of the last of a doomed race.

"Wenwynwyn, is it thou?"

"Ay, boys, it is I. You did well to abstain from sitting at meat with the stranger tonight. The meat went nigh to choke me that was swallowed in his presence."

"How long stays he, contaminating our pure air?"

"He himself is off by sunrise tomorrow, and Res Vychan goes with him. He leaves behind the little maid in the care of thy mother."

A strange smile crossed the face of the old man, invisible in the darkness.

"Strange for the parent bird to leave the dove in the nest of the hawk – the eyry of the eagle."

"Ha!" quoth Llewelyn quickly, "that thought hath likewise come to thee, good Wenwynwyn."

The old man made no direct response, but went on speaking in low even tones.

"The maid has dwelt in the household of the great king. She has played with his children, been the companion of the young princesses. She is beloved of them and of the monarch and his wife. Let them but hear that she is lost in the fastness of Dynevor, and the royal Edward will march in person to her rescue. All the country will rise in arms to defend itself. The north will join with the south, and Wales will shake off the hated foreign yoke banded as one man against the foreign foe."

The boys listened spellbound. They had often talked together of some step which might kindle the conflagration, but had never yet seen the occasion. Hot-headed, rash, reckless as were the youths; wild, tameless, and fearless as was the ancient bard; they had still been unable to hit upon any device which might set a light to the train. Discontent and resentment were rife all over the country, but

it was the fashion rather to temporize with the invader than to defy him. There was a strong party gathering in the country whose policy was that of paying homage to Edward and retaining their lands under his protection and countenance, as being more truly patriotic and farsighted than continuing the old struggle for supremacy among themselves. This was a policy utterly incomprehensible both to the boys and the old man, and stirred the blood of the lads to boiling pitch.

"What can we do?" asked Llewelyn hoarsely.

"I will tell you," whispered the old man, approaching close to the bed whereon the brothers lay wide-eyed and broad awake. "This very night I leave the castle by the postern door, and in the moonlight I make my way to the commot of Llanymddyvri, where dwells that bold patriot Maelgon ap Caradoc. To him I tell all, and he will risk everything in the cause. It will be very simply done. You boys must feign a while – must feign friendship for the maid thus left behind. Your brothers have won her heart already; you must not be behind them. The dove must have no fear of the young eaglets. She has a high courage of her own; she loves adventure and frolic; she will long to stretch her wings, and wander amid the mountain heights, under the stanch protection of her comrades of Dynevor.

"Then listen, boys. The day will come when the thing is to be done. In some of the wild fastnesses of the upper Towy will be lurking the bold bands of Maelgon ap Caradoc. Thither you must lead the unsuspecting maid, first by some device getting rid of your brothers, who might try to thwart the scheme. These bold fellows will carry off the maid to the safe keeping of Maelgon, and once let her be his prisoner, there is no fear of her escaping from his hands. Edward himself and all his forces at his back will scarce wrest away the prize, and the whole country will be united and in arms ere it suffer the tyrant to march through our fair vales."

Whilst within this upper turret chamber this plot was being concocted against the innocent child by two passionate, hot-headed boys and one of the ancient race of bards, the little maiden was herself sleeping soundly and peacefully within a small inner closet, close to the room where Gladys, the lady of the castle, reposed; and with the earliest streak of dawn, when the child opened her eyes upon the strange bare walls of the Welsh stronghold, the first thing that met her eyes was the sweet and gentle face of the chatelaine bending tenderly over her.

Although the present lady of Dynevor was the sister of the bold and fierce Llewelyn, Prince of North Wales, who gave more trouble to the King of England than did anybody else, she was herself of a gentle and thoughtful disposition, more inclined to advocate peace than war, and more far-seeing, temperate, and well-informed than most persons of her time, and especially than the women, who for the most part had but very vague ideas as to what was going on in the country.

She had had many thoughts herself during the still hours of this summer night, and when she bent over the sleeping child and wakened her by a kiss, she felt a strange tenderness towards her, which seemed to be reciprocated by the little one, who suddenly flung her arms about her neck and kissed her passionately.

"Is my father gone?" she asked, recollection coming back.

"Not gone, but going soon," answered the Lady of Dynevor, smiling; "that is why I have come to waken thee early, little Gertrude, that thou mayest receive his farewell kiss and see him ride away. Thou wilt not be grieved to be left with us for a while, little one? Thou wilt not pine in his absence?"

"Not if I have you to take care of me," answered the child confidently – "you and Wendot and Griffeth. I am weary of always travelling on rough roads. I will gladly stay here a while with you."

There was the bustle of preparation going on in the hall when the lady descended with the child hanging on to her hand. Gertrude broke away and ran to her father, who was sitting at the board, with Wendot standing beside him listening eagerly to his talk. The boy's handsome face was alight, and he seemed full of eager interest in what was being said. Lord Montacute frequently raised his head and gave the lad a look of keen scrutiny. Even whilst caressing his little daughter his interest seemed to be centred in Wendot, and when at parting the lad held his stirrup for him, and gently restrained little Gertrude, who was in danger of being trampled on by the pawing charger, Lord Montacute looked

for a moment very intently at the pair, and then let his glance wander for a moment over the grand fortress of Dynevor and the beautiful valley it commanded.

Then he turned once more to Wendot with a kindly though penetrating smile.

"In the absence of your father, Wendot, you are the master and guardian of this castle, its occupants and its treasures. I render my little daughter into your safe keeping. Of your hands I shall ask her back when I return in a week's time."

Wendot flushed with pleasure and gratification. What boy does not like the thought of being looked upon as his father's substitute? He raised his head with a gesture of pride, and clasped the little soft hand of Gertrude more closely in his.

"I will take the trust, Lord Montacute," he said. "I will hold myself responsible for the safety of Lady Gertrude. At my hands demand her when you return. If she is not safe and well, take my life as the forfeit."

Lord Montacute smiled slightly at the manly words and bearing of the lad, but he did not like him the less for either. As for little Gertrude, she gazed up into the bold bright face of Wendot, and clasping his hand in hers, she said:

"Am I to belong to you now? I think I shall like that, you are so brave and so kind to me."

The father gave the pair another of his keen looks, and rode off in the bright morning sunshine, promising not to be very long away.

"I shan't fret, now that I have you and the Lady of Dynevor," said the child confidently to Wendot. "I've often been left for a long time at the palace with the ladies Eleanor and Joanna, and with Alphonso and Britton, but I shall like this much better. There is no governess here, and we can do as we like. I want to know everything you do, and go everywhere with you."

Wendot promised to show the little lady everything she wanted, and led her in to breakfast, which was a very important meal in those days. All the four brothers were gathered at the board, and the child looked rather shyly at the dark-browed twins, whom she hardly knew one from the other, and whom she regarded with a certain amount of awe. But there was nothing hostile in the manner of any of the party. Llewelyn was silent, but when he did speak it was in very different tones from those of last night; and Howel was almost brilliant in his sallies, and evoked many a peal of laughter from the lighthearted little maiden. Partings with her father were of too common occurrence to cause her much distress, and she was too well used to strange places to feel lost in these new surroundings, and she had her own nurse and attendant left with her.

Full of natural curiosity, the child was eager to see everything of interest near her temporary home, and the brothers were her very devoted servants, taking her everywhere she wished to go, helping her over every difficult place, and teaching her to have such confidence in them, and such trust in their guidance, that she soon ceased to feel fear however wild was the ascent or descent, however lonely the region in which she found herself.

Although Wendot continued her favourite, and Griffeth stood next, owing to his likeness to his eldest brother, the twins soon won her favour also. They were in some respects more interesting, as they were less easily understood, wilder and stranger in their ways, and always full of stories of adventure and warfare, which fascinated her imagination even when she knew that they spoke of the strife between England and Wales. She had a high spirit and a love of adventure, which association with these stalwart boys rapidly developed.

One thing about Llewelyn and Howel gratified her childlike vanity, and gave her considerable pleasure. They would praise her agility and courage, and urge her on to make trial of her strength and nerve, when the more careful Wendot would beg her to be careful and not risk herself by too great recklessness. A few days spent in this pure, free air seemed to infuse new life into her frame, and the colour in her cheeks and the light in her eyes deepened day by day, to the motherly satisfaction of the Lady of Dynevor and the pride of Wendot, who regarded the child as his especial charge.

But in his father's absence many duties fell upon Wendot, and there came a bright evening when he and Griffeth were occupied about the castle, and only Llewelyn and Howel had leisure to wander with the little guest to her favourite spot to see the red sun set.

Llewelyn was full of talk that evening, and spoke with a rude eloquence and fire that always riveted the attention of the child. He told of the wild, lonely beauty of a certain mountain peak which he pointed out up the valley, of the weird charm of the road thither, and above all of the eagle's nest which was to be found there, and the young eaglets being now reared therein, which he and Howel meant to capture and keep as their own, and which they purposed to visit the very next day to see if they were fit yet to leave the nest.

Gertrude sat entranced as the boy talked, and when she heard of the eagle's nest she gave a little cry of delight.

"O Llewelyn, take me with you. Let me see the eagle's nest and the little eaglets."

But the boy shook his head doubtfully.

"You could not get as far. It is a long way, and a very rough walk."

The child shook back her curling hair defiantly.

"I could do it! I know I could. I could go half the way on my palfrey, and walk the rest. You would help me. You know how well I can climb. Oh, do take me – do take me! I should so love to see an eagle's nest."

But still Llewelyn shook his head.

"Wendot would not let you go; he would say it was too dangerous."

Again came the little defiant toss.

"I am not Wendot's slave; I can do as I choose."

"If he finds out he will stop you."

"But we need not tell him, need we?"

"I thought you always told him everything."

The child stamped her little foot.

"I tell him things generally, but I can keep a secret. If he would stop us from going, we will not tell him, nor Griffeth either. We will get up very early and go by ourselves. We could do that, could we not, and come back with the young eaglets in our hands? O let us go! let us do it soon, and take me with you, kind Llewelyn! Indeed I shall not be in your way. I will be very good. And you know you have taught me to climb so well. I know I can go where you can go. You said so yourself once."

Llewelyn turned his head away to conceal a smile half of triumph, half of contempt. A strange flash was in his eyes as he looked up the valley towards the crag upon which he had told the child the eyry of the eagles hung. She thought he was hesitating still, and laid a soft little hand upon his arm.

"Please say that I may go."

He turned quickly and looked at her. For a moment she shrank back from the strange glow in his eyes; but her spirit rose again, and she said rather haughtily: "You need not be angry with me. If you don't wish me to come I will stay at home with Wendot. I do not choose to ask favours of anybody if they will not give them readily."

"I should like to take you if it would be safe," answered Llewelyn, speaking as if ashamed of his petulance or reluctance.

"Howel, could she climb to the crag where we can look down upon the eyry if we helped her up the worst places?"

"I think she could."

The child's face flushed; she clasped her hands together and listened eagerly whilst the brothers discussed the plan which in the end was agreed to – a very early start secretly from the castle before the day dawned, the chief point to be observed beforehand being absolute secrecy, so that the projected expedition should not reach the ears either of Wendot, his mother, or Griffeth. It was to be carried out entirely by the twins themselves, with Gertrude as their companion.

CHAPTER III. THE EAGLE'S CRAG

"Where is the maid, mother?"

"Nay, I know not, my son. I thought she was with thee."

"I have not seen her anywhere. I have been busy with the men."

"Where are the other boys?"

"That I know not either. I have seen none since I rose this morning. I have been busy."

"The maid had risen and dressed herself, and had slipped out betimes," said the Lady of Dynevor, as she took her place at the board. "Methought she would be with thee. She is a veritable sprite for flitting hither and thither after thee. Doubtless she is with some of the others. Who knows where the boys have gone this morning? They are not wont to be absent at the breakfast hour."

This last question was addressed to the servants who were at the lower end of the board, and one of them spoke up in reply. By what he said it appeared that Griffeth had started off early to fly a new falcon of his, and it seemed probable that his brothers and little Lady Gertrude had accompanied him; for whilst he had been discussing with the falconer the best place for making the proposed trial, Llewelyn had been to the stables and had saddled and led out the palfrey upon which their little guest habitually rode, and there seemed no reason to doubt that all the party had gone somewhere up upon the highlands to watch the maiden essay of the bird.

"She would be sure to long to see the trial," said Wendot, attacking the viands before him with a hearty appetite. "She always loves to go with us when there is anything to see or hear. I marvel that she spoke not of it to me, but perchance it slipped her memory."

The early risers were late at the meal, but no one was anxious about them. When anything so engrossing as the flying of a young falcon was in the wind, it was natural that so sublunary a matter as breakfast should be forgotten. The servants had finished their meal, and had left the table before there was any sign of the return of the wanderers, and then it was only Griffeth who came bounding in, his face flushed and his eyes shining as he caressed the hooded bird upon his wrist.

"He is a beauty, Wendot. I would thou hadst been there to see. I took him up to –"

"Ay, tell us all that when thou hast had something to eat," said Wendot. "And where is Gertrude? she must be well-nigh famished by this time."

"Gertrude? Nay, I know not. I have not seen her. I would not have wearied her with such a tramp through the heavy dews."

"But she had her palfrey; Llewelyn led it away ere it was well light. Were you not all together?"

"Nay, I was all alone. Llewelyn and Howel were off and away before I was ready; for when I sought them to ask if they would come, they were nowhere to be found. As for the maid, I never thought of her. Where can they have taken her so early?"

A sudden look of anxiety crossed Wendot's face; but he repressed any exclamation of dismay, and glanced at his mother to see if by any chance she shared his feeling. But her face was calm and placid, and she said composedly:

"If she is with Llewelyn and Howel she will be safe. They have taken her on some expedition in secret, but none will harm her with two such stout protectors as they."

And then the lady moved away to commence her round of household duties, which in those days was no sinecure; whilst Wendot stood in the midst of the great hall with a strange shadow upon his face. Griffeth, who was eagerly discussing his breakfast, looked wonderingly at him.

"Brother, what ails thee?" he said at length; "thou seemest ill at ease."

"I am ill at ease," answered Wendot, and with a quick glance round him to assure himself that there was no one by to hear, he approached Griffeth with hasty steps and sat down beside him, speaking in a low, rapid way and in English, "Griffeth, tell me, didst thou hear aught last night ere thou fell asleep?"

"Ay, I heard Wenwynwyn singing to his harp in his own chamber, but nought beside."

"I heard that too," said Wendot, "and for his singing I could not sleep; so when it ceased not, I rose and stole to his room to ask him to forbear, yet so wild and strange was the song he sang that at the door I paused to listen; and what thinkest thou was the burden that he sang?"

"Nay, I know not; tell me."

"He sang a strange song that I have never heard before, of how a dove was borne from safe shelter – a young dove in the absence of the father bird; not the mother bird, but the father – and carried away to the eagle's nest by two fierce young eaglets untamed and untamable, there to be left till the kites come down to carry off the prize.

"Ha! thou startest and changest colour! What is it thou fearest? Where are Llewelyn and Howell and what have they done with the maid? What knowest thou, Griffeth?"

"I know nought," answered Griffeth, "save that Wenwynwyn has been up to the commot of Llanymddyvri, and thou knowest what all they of that place feel towards the English. Then Llewelyn and Howel have been talking of late of the eagle's nest on the crag halfway thither, and if they had named it to Gertrude she would have been wild to go and see it. We know when Wenwynwyn sings his songs how he ever calls Maelgon ap Caradoc the kite, and the lords of Dynevor the eagles. But, Wendot, it could not be – a child – a maid – and our father's guest. I cannot believe it of our own brothers."

"I know not what to think, but my heart misgives me. Thou knowest what Llewelyn ever was, and Howel is but his shadow. I have mistrusted this strange friendship before now, remembering what chanced that first day, and that Llewelyn never forgives or forgets; but I would not have dreamed of such a thing as this. Yet, Griffeth, if the thing is so, there is no time to lose. I am off for the crag this very minute. Thou must quietly collect and arm a few of our stanchest men, together with the English servants left here with their young mistress. Let all be done secretly and quietly, and come after me with all speed. It may be that we are on a fool's errand, and that our fears are groundless. But truly it may be that our brothers are about to betray our guest into the hands of one of England's most bitter foes.

"Oh, methinks were her father to return, and I had her not safe to deliver back to him, I would not for very shame live to see the day when I must avow to him what had befallen his child at the hands of my brethren!"

Griffeth was fully alive to the possible peril menacing the child, and eagerly took his orders from his elder brother. It would not be difficult to summon some dozen of the armed men on the place to accompany him quietly and secretly. They would follow upon Wendot's fleet steps with as little delay as might be, and would at least track the fugitive and her guides, whether they succeeded in effecting a rescue that day or not.

Wendot waited for nothing but to give a few directions to his brother. Scarce ten minutes had elapsed from the moment when the first illumination of mind had come to him respecting some plot against the life of an innocent child, before he had armed himself, and unleashed two of the fleetest, strongest, fiercest of the hounds, and was speeding up across the moor and fell towards the lonely crag of the eagle's nest, which lay halfway between the castle of Dynevor and the abode of Maelgon ap Caradoc.

There was one advantage Wendot possessed over his brothers, and that was that he could take the wild-deer tracks which led straight onward and upward, whilst they with their charge would have to keep to the winding mule track, which trebled the distance. The maiden's palfrey was none too clever or surefooted upon these rough hillsides, and their progress would be but slow.

Wendot moved as if he had wings to his feet, and although the hot summer sun began to beat down upon his head, and his breath came in deep, laboured gasps, he felt neither heat nor fatigue, but pressed as eagerly onwards and upwards as the strong, fleet hounds at his side.

He knew he was on the right track; for ever and anon his path would cross that which had been trodden by the feet of the boys and the horse earlier in the day, and his own quick eyes and the deep baying of the hounds told him at once whenever this was the case. Upwards and onwards, onwards and upwards, sprang the brave lad with the untiring energy of a strong and righteous purpose. He might be going to danger, he might be going to his death; for if he came into open collision with the wild and savage retainers of Maelgon, intent upon obtaining their prey, he knew that they would think little of stabbing him to the heart rather than be balked. There was no feud so far between Llanymddyvri and Dynevor, but Wendot knew that his father was suspected of leaning towards the English cause, and that it would take little to provoke some hostile demonstration on the part of his wild and reckless neighbour. The whole country was torn and rent by internecine strife, and there was a chronic state of semi-warfare kept up between half the nobles of the country against the other half.

But of personal danger Wendot thought nothing. His own honour and that of his father were at stake. If the little child left in their care were treacherously given up to the foes of the English, the boy felt that he should never lift up his head again. He must save her – he would. Far rather would he die in her defence than face her father with the story of the base treachery of his brothers.

The path grew wilder and steeper; the vegetation became more scant. The heat of the sun was tempered by the cold of the upper air. It was easier to climb, and the boy felt that his muscles were made of steel.

Suddenly a new sound struck upon his ear. It was like the whinny of a horse, only that there was in it a note of distress. Glancing sharply about him, Wendot saw Lady Gertrude's small white palfrey standing precariously on a ledge of rock, and looking pitifully about him, unable to move either up or down. The creature had plainly been turned loose and abandoned, and in trying to find his way home had stranded upon this ledge, and was frightened to move a step. Wendot was fond of all animals, and could not leave the pretty creature in such a predicament.

"Besides, Gertrude may want him again for the descent," he said; and although every moment was precious, he contrived to get the horse up the steep bank and on to better ground, and then tethered him on a small grassy plateau, where he could feed and take his ease in safety for an hour or two to come.

That matter accomplished, the lad was up and off again. He had now to trust to the hounds to direct him, for he did not know what track his brothers would have taken, and the hard rocks gave no indications which he could follow. But the dogs were well used to their work, and with their noses to the ground followed the trail unceasingly, indicating from time to time by a deep bay that they were absolutely certain of their direction.

High overhead loomed the apex of the great crag. Wendot knew that he had not much farther to go. He was able to distinguish the cairn of stones which he and his brothers had once erected on the top in honour of their having made the ascent in a marvellously short space of time. Wendot had beaten that record today, he knew; but his eyes were full of anxiety instead of triumph. He was scanning every track and every inch of distance for traces of the foe he felt certain were somewhere at hand. Had they been here already, and had they carried off the prey? Or were they only on their way, and had he come in time to thwart their purpose yet?

Ha! what was that?

Wendot had reached the shoulder of the mountain; he could see across the valley – could see the narrow winding track which led to the stronghold of Maelgon. The Eagle's Crag, as it was called, fell away precipitously on the other side. No one could scale it on that face. The path from the upper valley wound round circuitously towards it; and along this path, in the brilliant sunshine, Wendot saw distinctly the approach of a small band of armed men. Yes: they were approaching, they were not retreating. Then they had not already taken their prey; they were coming to claim it. The boy could have shouted aloud in his triumph and joy; but he held his peace, for who could tell what peril might not lie in the way?

The next moment he had scaled the steep, slippery rock which led to the precipitous edge of the crag. Not a sign could he see of his brothers or the child, but the hounds led right on to the very verge of the precipice, and for a moment the boy's heart stood still. What if they had grown afraid of the consequences of their own act, and had resolved to get rid of the child in a sure and safe fashion!

For a moment Wendot's blood ran cold. He recalled the traits of fierce cruelty which had sometimes shown themselves in Llewelyn from childhood, his well-known hatred of the English, his outburst of passion with Gertrude, so quickly followed by a strange appearance of friendship. Wendot knew his countrymen and his nation's characteristics, and knew that fierce acts of treachery were often truly charged upon them. What if – But the thought was too repellent to be seriously pursued, and shaking it off by an effort, he raised his voice and called his brothers by name.

And then, almost as it seemed from beneath his very feet, there came an answering call; but the voice was not that of his brothers, but the cry of a terrified child.

"Oh, who are you? Do, please, come to me. I am so frightened. I know I shall fall. I know I shall be killed. Do come to me quickly. I don't know where Llewelyn and Howel have gone."

"I am coming – I am Wendot," cried the boy, his heart giving a sudden bound. "You are not hurt, you are safe?"

"Yes; only so giddy and frightened, and the sun is so hot and burning, and yet it is cold, too. It is such a narrow place, and I cannot get up or down. I can't see the eagle's nest, and they have been such a long time going after it. They said they would bring the nest and the young eagles up to me, but they have never come back. I'm afraid they are killed or hurt. Oh, if you would only help me up, then we would go and look for them together! Oh, I am so glad that you have come!"

Wendot could not see the child, though every word she spoke was distinctly audible. He certainly could not reach her from the place where he now stood; but the hounds had been following the tracks of the quarry they had been scenting all this way, and stood baying at a certain spot some fifty yards away, and a little lower down than the apex of the crag. It was long since Wendot had visited this spot, his brothers knew it better than he; but when he got to the place indicated by the dogs, he saw that there was a little precipitous path along the face of the cliff, which, although very narrow and not a little dangerous, did give foothold to an experienced mountaineer. How the child had ever had the nerve to tread it he could not imagine, but undoubtedly she was there, and he must get her back, if possible, and down the mountainside, before those armed men from the upper valley could reach them.

But could he do this? He cast an apprehensive glance over his shoulder, and saw to his dismay how quickly they were approaching. From their quickened pace he fancied that his own movements had been observed. Certainly there was not a moment to lose, and leaving the dogs to keep guard at the entrance, he set his foot upon the perilous path and carefully pursued his way.

The face of the cliff jutted outwards for some yards, and then made a sharp turn round an angle. At the spot where this turn occurred, a sort of natural arch had formed itself over the narrow ledge which formed the path, and immediately behind the arch there was a small plateau which gave space to stand and move with some freedom, although a step over the edge would plunge the unwary victim into the deep gulf beneath. The cliff then fell away once again, but the ledge wound round it still, until it ended in a shallow alcove some eight feet deep, which lay just beneath the highest part of the crag, which overhung it by many yards.

And it was crouched up against the cliff in this little alcove that Wendot found Gertrude; cowering, white-faced, against the hard rock, faint from want of food, terrified at the loneliness and at her own fears for the safety of her companions, and so overwrought by the tension of nerve she had undergone, that when Wendot did stand beside her she could only cling to him sobbing passionately, and it was long before he could even induce her to let him go, or to attempt to eat the contents of a small package he had had the forethought to bring in his wallet.

He heard her tale as she sobbed in his arms. They had come here after the eagle's nest. Llewelyn and Howel had been so kind! They had not minded her being so slow, but had brought her all the

way; and when she wanted to follow them along the ledge to get a better view of the nest, they had blindfolded her that she might not get giddy, and had put a rope round her and brought her safely along the narrow ledge till she had got to this place. But the nest could not be seen even from there, and they had left her to see where it really was. They said they would soon be back, but they had not come, and she had got first anxious and then terrified about them, and then fearful for her own safety. At last when faintness and giddiness had come upon her, and she could get no answer to her repeated shouts, her spirit had altogether given way; and unless Wendot had really come to her rescue, she was certain she should have fallen down the precipice. She did not know now how she should ever get back along the narrow ridge, she was so frightened and giddy. But if Llewelyn and Howel would come, perhaps she might.

Did Wendot know where they were? Would he take care of her now, and bring her safe home?

"I will if I can," answered the boy, with a strange light in his blue eyes. "Griffeth is on his way with plenty of help. He will be here soon. Do you think you could walk along the ridge now, if I were to hold you up and help you? We should get home sooner if you could."

But the child shrank back and put her hand before her eyes.

"Oh, let us wait till Griffeth comes. I am so giddy still, and I am so afraid I should fall. Hark! I'm sure I hear voices. They are coming already. Oh, I am so glad! I do want to get home. Wendot, why do you look like that? Why do you get out that thing? You are not going to fight?"

"Lady Gertrude," said Wendot, speaking in a grave, manly way that at once riveted the child's attention, "I am afraid that those voices do not belong to our friends, but to a band of men who are coming to try and take you prisoner to a castle up the valley there. No: do not be frightened; I will save you from them if I can. There is help coming for us, and I think I can hold this path against them for some time to come. You must try and keep up heart and not be frightened. You may see some hard blows struck, but you can shut your eyes and not think about it. If they do kill me and carry you off, do not give up hope, for Griffeth and our own men will be after you to rescue you. Now let me go, and try not to be afraid. I think we can hold them at bay till we are more equally matched."

The child's eyes dilated with horror. She caught Wendot by the hand.

"Give me up," she said firmly. "I will not have you killed for me. I would rather go with them. Give me up, I say!"

"No, Gertrude; I will not give you up," answered Wendot very quietly, but with an inflexibility of tone which made his voice seem like that of another person. "Your father placed you in my hands; to him I must answer for your safety. What is life to a man without honour? Would you have me stain my name for the sake of saving my life? I think not that that is the English code of honour."

Child as she was, little Gertrude understood well what was implied in those words, and a new light flashed into her eyes. Something of the soldier spirit awoke within her, and she snatched at a small dagger Wendot carried in his belt, and drawing her small figure to its full height, she said:

"We will both fight, Wendot; we will both fight, and both die rather than let them take us."

He smiled, and just for a moment laid his hand upon her head; then he drew on his mailed gloves and looked well to the buckles of the stout leathern jerkin, almost as impervious to the stabs of his foes as a suit of mail itself. The temper of his weapon he well knew; he had no fear that it would play him false. He had not the headpiece of mail; he had started in too great a hurry to arm himself completely, and speed was too much an object for him to willingly encumber himself needlessly. But as he skirted the narrow ledge, and placed himself beneath the protecting arch, he smiled grimly to himself, and thought that the stone would be as good a guard, and that here was a place where a man could sell his life dear, and send many a foe to his account before striking his own colours.

Scarcely had he well established himself in the commanding position he had resolved upon, when the sound of voices became more distinct. The party had plainly arrived at the appointed place, and Wendot could hear them discussing who was best fitted for the task of traversing the dangerous ledge to bring back the captive who was to be found there. The wild Welsh was unintelligible to

Gertrude, or she would have known at once what dark treachery had been planned and carried out by her trusted companions; but Wendot's cheek glowed with shame, and he set his teeth hard, resolved to redeem the honour of his father's name to the last drop of his blood if he should be called upon to shed it in the cause.

He heard the slow and cautious steps approaching along the path, and he gripped his weapon more tightly in his hand. The red light of battle was in his eyes, and the moment he caught sight of the form of the stalwart soldier threading his perilous way along the path he sprang upon him with a cry of fury, and hurled him into the gulf beneath.

Down fell the man, utterly unprepared for such an attack, and his sharp cry of terror was echoed from above by a dozen loud voices.

Cries and shouts and questions assailed Wendot, but he answered never a word. Those above knew not if it had been an accident, or if an ambushed foe had hurled their comrade to destruction. Again came a long pause for consideration – and every moment wasted was all in favour of the pair upon the ledge – and then it became plain that some course of action had been determined upon, and Wendot heard the cautious approach of another foe. This man crept on his way much more cautiously, and the youth held himself ready for a yet more determined spring. Luckily for him, he could remain hidden until his opponent was close to him; and so soon as he was certain from the sound that the man was reaching the angle of the rock, he made another dash, and brought down his sword with all the strength of his arm upon the head of the assailant.

Once again into the heart of the abyss crashed the body of the unfortunate soldier; but a sharp thrill of pain ran through Wendot's frame, and a barbed arrow, well aimed at the joint of his leather jerkin, plunged into his neck and stuck fast.

The first assailant whom he had disposed of was but one of a close line, following each other in rapid succession. As his face became visible to the man now foremost a shout of surprise and anger rose up.

"It is Res Wendot! It is one of the sons of the house of Dynevor!"

"Wendot, thou art mad! We are the friends of thy house. We are here at the instigation of thine own kindred. Give us the maid, and thou shalt go free. We would not harm thee."

"Stir but one step nearer, and I slay thee as I have slain thy two comrades," cried Wendot, in a voice which all might hear. "I deal not in treachery towards those that trust us. I will answer for the safety of the maid with mine own life. Of my hand her father will demand her when he comes again. Shall we men of Wales give right cause to the English to call us murderers, traitors, cowards? Take my life if you will, take it a thousand times over if you will, it is only over my dead body that you will reach that child."

"Down with him – traitor to the cause! He is sold to the English! He is no countryman of ours! Spare him not! He is worthy of death! Down with every Welshman who bands not with those who would uphold his country's cause!"

Such were the shouts which rent the air as the meaning of Wendot's words made itself understood. As for the brave lad himself, he had plucked the arrow from his neck, and now stood boldly on guard, resolved to husband his strength and keep on the defensive only, hoping thus to gain time until Griffeth and the armed men should arrive.

He had all the advantage of the position; but his foes were strong men, and came on thick and fast one after another, till it seemed as if the lad might be forced backwards by sheer weight and pressure. But Wendot was no novice at the use of arms: as his third foe fell upon him with heavy blows of his weighted axe, he stepped backwards a pace, and let the blows descend harmlessly upon the solid rock of the arch; until the man, disgusted at the non-success of his endeavours to tempt his adversary out of his defended position, threw away his blunted axe, and was about to draw his sword for a thrust, when the boy sprang like lightning upon him, and buried his poniard in his heart.

Over went the man like a log, almost dragging Wendot with him as he fell, and before the youth had had time to recover himself, he had received a deep gash in his sword arm from the foe who pressed on next, and who made a quick dash to try to get possession of the vantage ground of the arch.

But Wendot staggered back as if with weakness, let his adversary dash through the arch after him; and then, hurling himself upon him as he passed through, pushed him sheer off the ledge on the other side into the yawning gulf beneath.

The comrades of this last victim, who had just sent up a shout of triumph, now changed their note, and it became a yell of rage. Wendot was back in his old vantage ground, wounded by several arrows, spent by blows, and growing faint from loss of blood, but dauntless and resolute as ever, determined to sell his life dearly, and hold out as long as he had breath left in him, sooner than let the helpless child fall into the clutches of these fierce men, goaded now to madness by the opposition they had met with.

Hark! what was that? It was a shout, a hail, and then the familiar call of the Dynevor brothers rang through the still air.

"La-ha-boo!"

It was Griffeth's voice. He had come at last. It was plain that the foe had heard, and had paused; for if they were menaced from another quarter, it was time to think of their own safety.

Summoning up all his strength, Wendot sent back an answering hail, and the next moment there was the sound of fierce voices and the clashing of weapons overhead on the summit of the cliff; and in quick, urgent accents Wendot's foes were ordered to retreat, as there was treachery somewhere, and they had been betrayed.

Wendot saw his antagonists lower their weapons, and return the way they had come, with fearful backward glances, lest their boy foe should be following them. But he had no wish to do that. He was spent and exhausted and maimed. He turned backwards towards the safer shelter of the little alcove, and sank down beside the trembling child, panting, bleeding, and almost unconscious.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.