HENTY GEORGE ALFRED

THE BOY KNIGHT: A TALE OF THE CRUSADES

George Henty

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I.
THE OUTLAWS

It was a bright morning in the month of August, when a lad of some fifteen years of age, sitting on a low wall, watched party after party of armed men riding up to the castle of the Earl of Evesham. A casual observer glancing at his curling hair and bright open face, as also at the fashion of his dress, would at once have assigned to him a purely Saxon origin; but a keener eye would have detected signs that Norman blood ran also in his veins, for his figure was lither and lighter, his features more straightly and shapely cut, than was common among Saxons. His dress consisted of a tight-fitting jerkin, descending nearly to his knees. The material was a light-blue cloth, while over his shoulder hung a short cloak of a darker hue. His cap was of Saxon fashion, and he wore on one side a little plume of a heron. In a somewhat costly belt hung a light short sword, while across his knees lay a crossbow, in itself almost a sure sign of its bearer being of other than Saxon blood. The boy looked anxiously as party after party rode past toward the castle.

"I would give something," he said, "to know what wind blows these knaves here. From every petty castle in the Earl's feu the retainers seem hurrying here. Is he bent, I wonder, on settling once and for all his quarrels with the Baron of Wortham? or can he be intending to make a clear sweep of the woods? Ah! here comes my gossip Hubert; he may tell me the meaning of this gathering."

Leaping to his feet, the speaker started at a brisk walk to meet a jovial-looking personage coming down from the direction of the castle. The newcomer was dressed in the attire of a falconer, and two dogs followed at his heels.

"Ah, Master Cuthbert," he said, "what brings you so near to the castle? It is not often that you favor us with your presence."

"I am happier in the woods, as you well know, and was on my way thither but now, when I paused at the sight of all these troopers flocking in to Evesham. What enterprise has Sir Walter on hand now, think you?"

"The earl keeps his own counsel," said the falconer, "but methinks a shrewd guess might be made at the purport of the gathering. It was but three days since that his foresters were beaten back by the landless men, whom they caught in the very act of cutting up a fat buck. As thou knowest, my lord though easy and well-disposed to all, and not fond of harassing and driving the people as are many of his neighbors, is yet to the full as fanatical anent his forest privileges as the worst of them. They tell me that when the news came in of the poor figure that his foresters cut with broken bows and draggled plumes—for the varlets had soused them in a pond of not over savory water—he swore a great oath that he would clear the forest of the bands. It may be, indeed, that this gathering is for the purpose of falling in force upon that evil-disposed and most treacherous baron, Sir John of Wortham, who has already begun to harry some of the outlying lands, and has driven off, I hear, many heads of cattle. It is a quarrel which will have to be fought out sooner or later, and the sooner the better, say I. Although I am no man of war, and love looking after my falcons or giving food to my dogs far more than exchanging hard blows, yet would I gladly don the buff and steel coat to aid in leveling the keep of that robber and tyrant, Sir John of Wortham."

"Thanks, good Hubert," said the lad. "I must not stand gossiping here. The news you have told me, as you know, touches me closely, for I would not that harm should come to the forest men."

"Let it not out, I beseech thee, Cuthbert, that the news came from me, for temperate as Sir Walter is at most times, he would, methinks, give me short shift did he know that the wagging of my tongue might have given warning through which the outlaws of the Chase should slip through his fingers."

"Fear not, Hubert; I can be mum when the occasion needs. Can you tell me further, when the bands now gathering are likely to set forth?"

"In brief breathing space," the falconer replied. "Those who first arrived I left swilling beer, and devouring pies and other provisions cooked for them last night, and from what I hear, they will set forth as soon as the last comer has arrived. Whichever be their quarry, they will try to fall upon it before the news of their arrival is bruited abroad."

With a wave of his hand to the falconer the boy started. Leaving the road, and striking across the slightly undulated country dotted here and there by groups of trees, the lad ran at a brisk trot, without stopping to halt or breathe, until after half an hour's run he arrived at the entrance of a building, whose aspect proclaimed it to be the abode of a Saxon franklin of some importance. It would not be called a castle, but was rather a fortified house, with a few windows looking without, and surrounded by a moat crossed by a drawbridge, and capable of sustaining anything short of a real attack. Erstwood had but lately passed into Norman hands, and was indeed at present owned by a Saxon. Sir William de Lance, the father of the lad who is now entering its portals, was a friend and follower of the Earl of Evesham; and soon after his lord had married Gweneth, the heiress of all these fair lands—given to him by the will of the king, to whom by the death of her father she became a ward—Sir William had married Editha, the daughter and heiress of the franklin of Erstwood, a cousin and dear friend of the new Countess of Evesham.

In neither couple could the marriage at first have been called one of inclination on the part of the ladies, but love came after marriage. Although the knights and barons of the Norman invasion would, no doubt, be considered rude and rough in these days of broadcloth and civilization, yet their manners were gentle and polished by the side of those of the rough though kindly Saxon franklins; and although the Saxon maids were doubtless as patriotic as their fathers and mothers, yet the female mind is greatly led by gentle manners and courteous address. Thus, then, when bidden or forced to give their hands to the Norman knights, they speedily accepted their lot, and for the most part grew contented and happy enough. In their changed circumstances it was pleasanter to ride by the side of their Norman husbands, surrounded by a gay cavalcade, to hawk and to hunt, than to discharge the quiet duties of mistress of a Saxon farmhouse. In many cases, of course, their lot was rendered wretched by the violence and brutality of their lords; but in the majority they were well satisfied with their lot, and these mixed marriages did more to bring the peoples together and weld them in one than all the laws and decrees of the Norman sovereigns.

This had certainly been the case with Editha, whose marriage with Sir William had been one of the greatest happiness. She had lost him three years before the story begins, fighting in Normandy, in one of the innumerable wars in which our first Norman kings were constantly involved. On entering the gates of Erstwood Cuthbert had rushed hastily to the room where his mother was sitting, with three or four of her maidens, engaged in work.

"I want to speak to you at once, mother," he said.

"What is it now, my son?" said his mother, who was still young and very comely. Waving her hand to the girls they left her.

"Mother," he said, when they were alone, "I fear me that Sir Walter is about to make a great raid upon the outlaws. Armed men have been coming in all the morning from the castles round, and if it be not against the Baron de Wortham that these preparations are intended, and methinks it is not, it must needs be against the landless men."

"What would you do, Cuthbert?" his mother asked anxiously. "It will not do for you to be found meddling in these matters. At present you stand well in the favor of the earl, who loves you for the sake of his wife, to whom you are kin, and of your father, who did him good liegeman's service."

"But, mother, I have many friends in the wood. There is Cnut, their chief, your own first cousin, and many others of our friends, all good men and true, though forced by the cruel Norman laws to refuge in the woods."

"What would you do?" again his mother asked.

"I would take Ronald my pony and ride to warn them of the danger that threatens."

"You had best go on foot, my son. Doubtless men have been set to see that none from the Saxon homesteads carry the warning to the woods. The distance is not beyond your reach, for you have often wandered there, and on foot you can evade the eye of the watchers; but one thing, my son, you must promise, and that is, that in no case, should the earl and his bands meet with the outlaws, will you take part in any fray or struggle."

"That will I willingly, mother," he said. "I have no cause for offense against the castle or the forest, and my blood and my kin are with both. I would fain save shedding of blood in a quarrel like this. I hope that the time may come when Saxon and Norman may fight side by side, and I may be there to see."

A few minutes later, having changed his blue doublet for one of more sober and less noticeable color, Cuthbert started for the great forest, which then stretched to within a mile of Erstwood. In those days a large part of the country was covered with forest, and the policy of the Normans in preserving these woods for the chase tended to prevent the increase of cultivation.

The farms and cultivated lands were all held by Saxons, who although nominally handed over to the nobles to whom William and his successors had given the fiefs, saw but little of their Norman masters. These stood, indeed, much in the position in which landlords stand to their tenants, payment being made, for the most part, in produce. At the edge of the wood the trees grew comparatively far apart, but as Cuthbert proceeded further into its recesses, the trees in the virgin forest stood thick and close together. Here and there open glades ran across each other, and in these his sharp eye, accustomed to the forest, could often see the stags starting away at the sound of his footsteps.

It was a full hour's journey before Cuthbert reached the point for which he was bound. Here, in an open space, probably cleared by a storm ages before, and overshadowed by giant trees, was a group of men of all ages and appearances. Some were occupied in stripping the skin off a buck which hung from the bough of one of the trees. Others were roasting portions of the carcass of another deer. A few sat apart, some talking, others busy in making arrows, while a few lay asleep on the greensward. As Cuthbert entered the clearing several of the party rose to their feet.

"Ah, Cuthbert," shouted a man of almost gigantic stature, who appeared to be one of the leaders of the party, "what brings you here, lad, so early? You are not wont to visit us till even, when you can lay your crossbow at a stag by moonlight."

"No, no, Cousin Cnut," Cuthbert said, "thou canst not say that I have ever broken the forest laws, though I have looked on often and often, while you have done so."

"The abettor is as bad as the thief," laughed Cnut, "and if the foresters caught us in the act, I wot they would make but little difference whether it was the shaft of my longbow or the quarrel from thy crossbow which brought down the quarry. But again, lad, why comest thou here? for I see by the sweat on your face and by the heaving of your sides that you have run fast and far."

"I have, Cnut; I have not once stopped for breathing since I left Erstwood. I have come to warn you of danger. The earl is preparing for a raid."

Cnut laughed somewhat disdainfully.

"He has raided here before, and I trow has carried off no game. The landless men of the forest can hold their own against a handful of Norman knights and retainers in their own home."

"Ay," said Cuthbert, "but this will be no common raid. This morning bands from all the holds within miles round are riding in, and at least five hundred men-at-arms are likely to do chase to-day."

"Is it so?" said Cnut, while exclamations of surprise, but not of apprehension, broke from those standing round. "If that be so, lad, you have done us good service indeed. With fair warning we can slip through the fingers of ten times five hundred men, but if they came upon us unawares, and hemmed us in, it would fare but badly with us, though we should, I doubt not, give a good account of them before their battle-axes and maces ended the strife. Have you any idea by which road they will enter the forest, or what are their intentions?"

"I know not," Cuthbert said; "all that I gathered was that the earl intended to sweep the forest, and to put an end to the breaches of the laws, not to say of the rough treatment that his foresters have met with at your hands. You had best, methinks, be off before Sir Walter and his heavily-armed men are here. The forest, large as it is, will scarce hold you both, and methinks you had best shift your quarters to Langholm Chase until the storm has passed."

"To Langholm be it, then," said Cnut, "though I love not the place. Sir John of Wortham is a worse neighbor by far than the earl. Against the latter we bear no malice, he is a good knight and a fair lord; and could he free himself of the Norman notions that the birds of the air, and the beasts of the field, and the fishes of the water, all belong to Normans, and that we Saxons have no share in them, I should have no quarrel with him. He grinds not his neighbors, he is content with a fair tithe of the produce, and as between man and man is a fair judge without favor. The baron is a fiend incarnate; did he not fear that he would lose by so doing, he would gladly cut the throats, or burn, or drown, or hang every Saxon within twenty miles of his hold. He is a disgrace to his order, and some day, when our band gathers a little stronger, we will burn his nest about his ears."

"It will be a hard nut to crack," Cuthbert said, laughing. "With such arms as you have in the forest the enterprise would be something akin to scaling the skies."

"Ladders and axes will go far, lad, and the Norman men-at-arms have learned to dread our shafts. But enough of the baron; if we must be his neighbors for a time, so be it."

"You have heard, my mates," he said, turning to his comrades gathered around him, "what Cuthbert tells us. Are you of my opinion, that it is better to move away till the storm is past than to fight against heavy odds, without much chance of either booty or victory?"

A general chorus proclaimed that the outlaws approved of the proposal for a move to Langholm Chase. The preparations were simple. Bows were taken down from the boughs on which they were hanging, quivers slung across the backs, short cloaks thrown over the shoulders. The deer was hurriedly dismembered, and the joints fastened to a pole slung on the shoulders of two of the men. The drinking-cups, some of which were of silver, looking strangely out of place among the rough horn implements and platters, were bundled together, carried a short distance and dropped among some thick bushes for safety; and then the band started for Wortham.

With a cordial farewell and many thanks to Cuthbert, who declined their invitations to accompany them, the retreat to Langholm commenced.

Cuthbert, not knowing in which direction the bands were likely to approach, remained for awhile motionless, intently listening.

In a quarter of an hour he heard the distant note of a bugle.

It was answered in three different directions, and Cuthbert, who knew every path and glade of the forest, was able pretty accurately to surmise those by which the various bands were commencing to enter the wood.

Knowing that they were still a long way off, he advanced as rapidly as he could in the direction in which they were coming. When by the sound of distant voices and the breaking of branches he knew that one, at least, of the parties was near at hand, he rapidly climbed a thick tree and ensconced himself in the branches, and there watched, secure and hidden from the sharpest eye, the passage

of a body of men-at-arms fully a hundred strong, led by Sir Walter himself, accompanied by some half dozen of his knights.

When they had passed Cuthbert again slipped down the tree and made at all speed for home. He reached it, so far as he knew, without having been observed by a single passer-by.

After a brief talk with his mother he started for the castle, as his appearance there would divert any suspicion that might arise; and it would also appear natural that seeing the movements of so large a body of men, he should go up to gossip with his acquaintances there.

When distant a mile from Evesham he came upon a small party.

On a white palfrey rode Margaret, the little daughter of the earl. She was accompanied by her nurse and two retainers on foot.

Cuthbert—who was a great favorite with the earl's daughter, for whom he frequently brought pets, such as nests of young owlets, falcons, and other creatures—was about to join the party when from a clump of trees near burst a body of ten mounted men.

Without a word they rode straight at the astonished group. The retainers were cut to the ground before they had thought of drawing a sword in defense.

The nurse was slain by a blow with a battle-ax, and Margaret, snatched from her palfrey, was thrown across the saddlebow of one of the mounted men, who then with his comrades dashed off at full speed.

CHAPTER II.
A RESCUE

The whole of the startling scene of the abduction of the Earl of Evesham's daughter occupied but a few seconds. Cuthbert was so astounded at the sudden calamity that he remained rooted to the ground at the spot where, fortunately for himself, unnoticed by the assailants, he had stood when they first burst from their concealment.

For a short time he hesitated as to the course he should take.

The men-at-arms who remained in the castle were scarce strong enough to rescue the child, whose captors would no doubt be reinforced by a far stronger party lurking near.

The main body of Sir Walter's followers were deep in the recesses of the forest, and this lay altogether out of the line for Wortham, and there would be no chance whatever of bringing them up in time to cut off the marauders on their way back.

There remained only the outlaws, who by this time would be in Langholm Forest, perhaps within a mile or two of the castle itself.

The road by which the horsemen would travel would be far longer than the direct line across country, and he resolved at once to strain every nerve to reach his friends in time to get them to interpose between the captors of the Lady Margaret and their stronghold.

For an instant he hesitated whether to run back to Erstwood to get a horse; but he decided that it would be as quick to go on foot, and far easier so to find the outlaws.

These thoughts occupied but a few moments, and he at once started at the top of his speed for his long run across the country.

Had Cuthbert been running in a race of hare and hound, he would assuredly have borne away the prize from most boys of his age. At headlong pace he made across the country, every foot of which, as far as the edge of Langholm Chase, he knew by heart.

The distance to the woods was some twelve miles, and in an hour and a half from the moment of his starting Cuthbert was deep within its shades. Where he would be likely to find the outlaws he knew not; and, putting a whistle to his lips, he shrilly blew the signal, which would, he knew, be recognized by any of the band within hearing.

He thought that he heard an answer, but was not certain, and again dashed forward, almost as speedily as if he had but just started.

Five minutes later a man stood in the glade up which he was running. He recognized him at once as one of Cnut's party.

"Where are the band?" he gasped.

"Half a mile or so to the right," replied the man.

Guided by the man, Cuthbert ran at full speed, till, panting and scarce able to speak, he arrived at the spot where Cnut's band were gathered.

In a few words he told them what had happened, and although they had just been chased by the father of the captured child, there was not a moment of hesitation in promising their aid to rescue her from a man whom they regarded as a far more bitter enemy, both of themselves and their race.

"I fear we shall be too late to cut them off," Cnut said, "they have so long a start; but at least we will waste no time in gossiping."

Winding a horn to call together some of the members of the band who had scattered, and leaving one at the meeting-place to give instructions to the rest, Cnut, followed by those assembled there, went off at a swinging trot through the glades toward Wortham Castle.

After a rapid calculation of distances, and allowing for the fact that the baron's men—knowing that Sir Walter's retainers and friends were all deep in the forest, and even if they heard of the outrage

could not be on their traces for hours—would take matters quietly, Cnut concluded that they had arrived in time.

Turning off, they made their way along the edge of the wood, to the point where the road from Evesham ran through the forest.

Scarcely had the party reached this point when they heard a faint clatter of steel.

"Here they come!" exclaimed Cuthbert.

Cnut gave rapid directions, and the band took up their posts behind the trees, on either side of the path.

"Remember," Cnut said, "above all things be careful not to hit the child, but pierce the horse on which she is riding. The instant he falls, rush forward. We must trust to surprise to give us the victory."

Three minutes later the head of a band of horsemen was seen through the trees. They were some thirty in number, and, closely grouped as they were together, the watchers behind the trees could not see the form of the child carried in their midst.

When they came abreast of the concealed outlaws Cnut gave a sharp whistle, and fifty arrows flew from tree and bush into the closely gathered party of horsemen. More than half their number fell at once; some, drawing their swords, endeavored to rush at their concealed foes, while others dashed forward in the hope of riding through the snare into which they had fallen. Cuthbert had leveled his crossbow, but had not fired; he was watching with intense anxiety for a glimpse of the bright-colored dress of the child. Soon he saw a horseman separate himself from the rest and dash forward at full speed. Several arrows flew by him, and one or two struck the horse on which he rode.

The animal, however, kept on its way.

Cuthbert leveled his crossbow on the low arm of a tree, and as the rider came abreast of him touched the trigger, and the steel-pointed quarrel flew true and strong against the temple of the passing horseman. He fell from his horse like a stone, and the well-trained animal at once stood still by the side of his rider.

Cuthbert leaped forward, and to his delight the child at once opened her arms and cried in a joyous tone:

"Cuthbert!"

The fight was still raging fiercely, and Cuthbert, raising her from the ground, ran with her into the wood, where they remained hidden until the combat ceased, and the last survivors of the baron's band had ridden past toward the castle.

Then Cuthbert went forward with his charge and joined the band of outlaws, who, absorbed in the fight, had not witnessed the incident of her rescue, and now received them with loud shouts of joy and triumph.

"This is a good day's work indeed for all," Cuthbert said; "it will make of the earl a firm friend instead of a bitter enemy; and I doubt not that better days are dawning for Evesham Forest."

A litter was speedily made with boughs; on this Margaret was placed, and on the shoulders of two stout foresters started for home, Cnut and Cuthbert walking beside, and a few of the band keeping at a short distance behind, as a sort of rearguard, should the baron attempt to regain his prey.

There was now no cause for speed, and Cuthbert in truth could scarce drag one foot before another, for he had already traversed over twenty miles, the greater portion of the distance at his highest rate of speed.

Cnut offered to have a litter made for him also, but this Cuthbert indignantly refused; however, in the forest they came upon the hut of a small cultivator, who had a rough forest pony, which was borrowed for Cuthbert's use.

It was late in the afternoon before they came in sight of Evesham Castle. From the distance could be seen bodies of armed men galloping toward it, and it was clear that only now the party were returning from the wood, and had learned the news of the disappearance of the earl's daughter, and of the finding of the bodies of her attendants.

Presently they met one of the mounted retainers riding at headlong speed.

"Have you heard or seen anything," he shouted, as he approached, "of the Lady Margaret? She is missing, and foul play has taken place."

"Here I am, Rudolph," cried the child, sitting up on the rude litter.

The horseman gave a cry of astonishment and pleasure, and without a word wheeled his horse and galloped past back at headlong speed toward the castle.

As Cuthbert and the party approached the gate the earl himself, surrounded by his knights and followers, rode out hastily from the gate and halted in front of the little party. The litter was lowered, and as he dismounted from his horse his daughter sprang out and leaped into his arms.

For a few minutes the confusion and babble of tongues were too great for anything to be heard, but Cuthbert, as soon as order was somewhat restored, stated what had happened, and the earl was moved to fury at the news of the outrage which had been perpetrated by the Baron of Wortham upon his daughter and at the very gates of his castle, and also at the thought that she should have been saved by the bravery and devotion of the very men against whom he had so lately been vowing vengeance in the depths of the forest.

"This is not a time," he said to Cnut, "for talk or making promises, but be assured that henceforth the deer of Evesham Chase are as free to you and your men as to me. Forest laws or no forest laws, I will no more lift a hand against men to whom I owe so much. Come when you will to the castle, my friends, and let us talk over what can be done to raise your outlawry and restore you to an honest career again."

Cuthbert returned home tired, but delighted with his day's work, and Dame Editha was surprised indeed with the tale of adventure he had to tell. The next morning he went over to the castle, and heard that a grand council had been held the evening before, and that it had been determined to attack Wortham Castle and to raze it to the ground.

Immediately on hearing of his arrival, the earl, after again expressing his gratitude for the rescue of his daughter, asked him if he would go into the forest and invite the outlaws to join their forces with those of the castle to attack the baron.

Cuthbert willingly undertook the mission, as he felt that this alliance would further strengthen the position of the forest men.

When he arrived there was some considerable consultation and discussion between the outlaws as to the expediency of mixing themselves in the quarrels between the Norman barons. However, Cnut persuaded them that as the Baron of Wortham was an enemy and oppressor of all Saxons, it was in fact their own quarrel that they were fighting rather than that of the earl, and they therefore agreed to give their aid, and promised to be at the rendezvous outside the castle to be attacked soon after dawn next morning. Cuthbert returned with the news which gave great satisfaction to the earl.

The castle was now a scene of bustle and business; armorers were at work repairing headpieces and breastplates, sharpening swords and battle-axes, while the fletchers prepared sheaves of arrows. In the courtyard a number of men were engaged oiling the catapults, ballistas, and other machines for hurling stones. All were discussing the chances of the assault, for it was no easy matter which they had set themselves to do. Wortham Hold was an extremely strong one, and it needed all and more than all the machines at their disposal to undertake so formidable an operation as a siege.

The garrison, too, were strong and desperate; and the baron, knowing what must follow his outrage of the day before, would have been sure to send off messengers round the country begging his friends to come to his assistance. Cuthbert had begged permission of his mother to ask the earl to allow him to join as a volunteer, but she would not hear of it. Neither would she suffer him to mingle with the foresters. The utmost that he could obtain was that he might go as a spectator, with strict injunctions to keep himself out of the fray, and as far as possible beyond bow-shot of the castle wall.

It was a force of some four hundred strong that issued from the wood early next morning to attack the stronghold at Wortham. The force consisted of some ten or twelve knights and barons, some

one hundred and fifty or one hundred and sixty Norman men-at-arms, a miscellaneous gathering of other retainers, two hundred strong, and some eighty of the forest men. These last were not to fight under the earl's banner, but were to act on their own account. There were among them outlaws, escaped serfs, and some men guilty of bloodshed. The earl then could not have suffered these men to fight under his flag until purged in some way of their offenses.

This arrangement suited the foresters well.

Their strong point was shooting; and by taking up their own position, and following their own tactics, under the leadership of Cnut, they would be able to do far more execution, and that with less risk to themselves, than if compelled to fight according to the fashion of the Normans.

As they approached the castle a trumpet was blown, and the herald advancing, demanded its surrender, stigmatized the Baron of Wortham as a false knight and a disgrace to his class and warned all those within the castle to abstain from giving him aid or countenance, but to submit themselves to the earl, Sir Walter of Evesham, the representative of King Richard.

The reply to the summons was a burst of taunting laughter from the walls; and scarcely had the herald withdrawn than a flight of arrows showed that the besieged were perfectly ready for the fray.

Indeed the baron had not been idle. Already the dispute between himself and the earl had come to such a point that it was certain that sooner or later open hostilities would break out.

He had therefore been for some time quietly accumulating a large store of provisions and munitions of war, and strengthening the castle in every way.

The moat had been cleaned out, and filled to the brim with water. Great quantities of heavy stones had been accumulated on the most exposed points of the walls, in readiness to hurl upon any who might try to climb. Huge sheaves of arrows and piles of crossbow bolts were in readiness, and in all, save the number of men, Wortham had for weeks been prepared for the siege.

On the day when the attempt to carry off the earl's daughter had failed, the baron, seeing that his bold stroke to obtain a hostage which would have enabled him to make his own terms with the earl had been thwarted, knew that the struggle was inevitable.

Fleet messengers had been sent in all directions. To Gloucester and Hereford, Stafford, and even Oxford, men had ridden, with letters to the baron's friends, beseeching them to march to his assistance.

"I can," he said, "defend my hold for weeks. But it is only by aid from without that I can finally hope to break the power of this baggart [Transcriber's note: sic] earl."

Many of those to whom he addressed his call had speedily complied with his demand, while those at a distance might be expected to reply later to the appeal.

There were many among the barons who considered the mildness of the Earl of Evesham toward the Saxons in his district to be a mistake, and who, although not actually approving of the tyranny and brutality of the Baron of Wortham, yet looked upon his cause to some extent as their own.

The Castle of Wortham stood upon ground but very slightly elevated above the surrounding country. A deep and wide moat ran round it, and this could, by diverting a rivulet, be filled at will.

From the edge of the moat the walls rose high, and with strong flanking towers and battlements.

There were strong works also beyond the moat opposite to the drawbridge; while in the center of the castle rose the keep, from whose summit the archers, and the machines for casting stones and darts, could command the whole circuit of defense.

As Cuthbert, accompanied by one of the hinds of the farm, took his post high up in a lofty tree, where at his ease he could command a view of the proceedings, he marveled much in what manner an attack upon so fair a fortress would be commenced.

"It will be straightforward work to attack the outwork," he said, "but that once won, I see not how we are to proceed against the castle itself. The machines that the earl has will scarcely hurl stones strong enough even to knock the mortar from the walls. Ladders are useless where they cannot be

planted; and if the garrison are as brave as the castle is strong, methinks that the earl has embarked upon a business that will keep him here till next spring."

There was little time lost in commencing the conflict.

The foresters, skirmishing up near to the castle, and taking advantage of every inequality in the ground, of every bush and tuft of high grass, worked up close to the moat, and then opened a heavy fire with their bows against the men-at-arms on the battlements, and prevented their using the machines against the main force now advancing to the attack upon the outwork.

This was stoutly defended. But the impetuosity of the earl, backed as it was by the gallantry of the knights serving under him, carried all obstacles.

The narrow moat which encircled this work was speedily filled with great bundles of brushwood, which had been prepared the previous night. Across these the assailants rushed.

Some thundered at the gate with their battle-axes, while others placed ladders by which, although several times hurled backward by the defenders, they finally succeeded in getting a footing on the wall.

Once there, the combat was virtually over.

The defenders were either cut down or taken prisoners, and in two hours after the assault began the outwork of Wortham Castle was taken.

This, however, was but the commencement of the undertaking, and it had cost more than twenty lives to the assailants.

They were now, indeed, little nearer to capturing the castle than they had been before.

The moat was wide and deep. The drawbridge had been lifted at the instant that the first of the assailants gained a footing upon the wall. And now that the outwork was captured, a storm of arrows, stones, and other missiles was poured into it from the castle walls, and rendered it impossible for any of its new masters to show themselves above it.

Seeing that any sudden attack was impossible, the earl now directed a strong body to cut down trees, and prepare a moveable bridge to throw across the moat.

This would be a work of fully two days; and in the meantime Cuthbert returned to the farm.

CHAPTER III.
THE CAPTURE OF WORTHAM HOLD

Upon his return home, after relating to his mother the events of the morning's conflict, Cuthbert took his way to the cottage inhabited by an old man who had in his youth been a mason.

"Have I not heard, Gurth," he said, "that you helped to build the Castle of Wortham?"

"No, no, young sir," he said; "old as I am, I was a child when the castle was built. My father worked at it, and it cost him, and many others, his life."

"And how was that, prithee?" asked Cuthbert.

"He was, with several others, killed by the baron, the grandfather of the present man, when the work was finished."

"But why was that, Gurth?"

"We were but Saxon swine," said Gurth bitterly, "and a few of us more or less mattered not. We were then serfs of the baron. But my mother fled with me on the news of my father's death. For years we remained far away with some friends in a forest near Oxford. Then she pined for her native air, and came back and entered the service of the franklin."

"But why should your mother have taken you away?" Cuthbert asked.

"She always believed, Master Cuthbert, that my father was killed by the baron to prevent him giving any news of the secrets of the castle. He and some others had been kept in the walls for many months, and were engaged in the making of secret passages."

"That is just what I came to ask you, Gurth. I have heard something of this story before, and now that we are attacking Wortham Castle, and the earl has sworn to level it to the ground, it is of importance if possible to find out whether any of the secret passages lead beyond the castle, and if so, where. Almost all the castles have, I have been told, an exit by which the garrison can at will make sorties or escape; and I thought that maybe you might have heard enough to give us some clue as to the existence of such a passage at Wortham."

The old man thought for some time in silence and then said:

"I may be mistaken, but methinks a diligent search in the copse near the stream might find the mouth of the outlet."

"What makes you think that this is so, Gurth?"

"I had been with my mother to carry some clothes to my father on the last occasion on which I saw him. As we neared the castle I saw my father and three other of the workmen, together with the baron, coming down from the castle toward the spot. As my mother did not wish to approach while the baron was at hand, we stood within the trees at the edge of the wood and watched what was being done. The baron came with them down to the bushes, and then they again came out, crossed the river, and one of them cut some willows, peeled them, and erected the white staves in a line toward the castle. They walked for a bit on each side, and seemed to be making calculations. Then they went back into the castle, and I never saw my father again."

"Why did you not go in at once according to your intention?"

"Because my mother said that she thought some important work was on hand, and that maybe the baron would not like that women should know aught of it, for he was of suspicious and evil mind. More than this I know not. The castle had already been finished and most of the masons discharged. There were, however, a party of serfs kept at work, and also some masons, and rumor had it that they were engaged in making the secret passages. Whether it was so or not I cannot say, but I know that none of that party ever left the castle alive. It was given out that a bad fever had raged there, but none believed it; and the report went about, and was I doubt not true, that all had been killed, to preserve the secret of the passage."

Cuthbert lost no time in making use of the information that he had gained.

Early next morning, at daybreak, he started on his pony to Wortham.

As he did not wish the earl or his followers to know the facts that he had learned until they were proved, he made his way round the camp of the besiegers, and by means of his whistle called one of the foresters to him.

"Where is Cnut?" he asked.

"He is with a party occupied in making ladders."

"Go to him," Cuthbert said, "and tell him to withdraw quietly and make his way here. I have an important matter on which I wish to speak to him."

Cnut arrived in a few minutes, somewhat wondering at the message. He brightened greatly when Cuthbert told him what he had learned.

"This is indeed important," he said. "We will lose no time in searching the copse you speak of. You and I, together with two of my most trusty men, with axes to clear away the brush, will do. At present a thing of this sort had best be kept between as few as may be."

They started at once and soon came down upon the stream.

It ran at this point in a little valley, some twenty or thirty feet deep. On the bank not far from the castle grew a small wood, and it was in this that Cuthbert hoped to find the passage spoken of by Gurth.

The trees and brushwood were so thick that it was apparent at once that if the passage had ever existed it had been unused for some years.

The woodmen were obliged to chop down dozens of young saplings to make their way up from the water toward the steeper part of the bank.

The wood was some fifty yards in length, and as it was uncertain at which point the passage had come out, a very minute search had to be made.

"What do you think it would be like, Cnut?" Cuthbert asked.

"Like enough to a rabbit-hole, or more likely still there would be no hole whatever. We must look for moss and greenery, for it is likely that such would have been planted, so as to conceal the door from any passer-by, while yet allowing a party from inside to cut their way through it without difficulty."

After a search of two hours, Cnut decided that the only place in the copse in which it was likely that the entrance to a passage could be hidden was a spot where the ground was covered thickly with ivy and trailing plants.

"It looks level enough with the rest," Cuthbert said.

"Ay, lad, but we know not what lies behind this thick screen of ivy. Thrust in that staff."

One of the woodmen began to probe with the end of a staff among the ivy. For some time he was met by the solid ground, but presently the butt of the staff went through suddenly, pitching him on his head, amid a suppressed laugh from his comrades.

"Here it is, if anywhere," said Cnut, and with their billhooks they at once began to clear away the thickly grown creepers.

Five minutes' work was sufficient to show a narrow cut, some two feet wide, in the hillside, at the end of which stood a low door.

"Here it is," said Cnut, with triumph, "and the castle is ours. Thanks, Cuthbert, for your thought and intelligence. It has not been used lately, that is clear," he went on. "These creepers have not been moved for years. Shall we go and tell the earl of our discovery? What think you, Cuthbert?"

"I think we had better not," Cuthbert said.

"We might not succeed in getting in, as the passage may have fallen further along; but I will speak to him and tell him that we have something on hand which may alter his dispositions for fighting to-morrow."

Cuthbert made his way to the earl, who had taken possession of a small cottage a short distance from the castle.

"What can I do for you?" Sir Walter said.

"I want to ask you, sir, not to attack the castle to-morrow until you see a white flag waved from the keep."

"But how on earth is a white flag to be raised from the keep?"

"It may be," Cuthbert said, "that I have some friends inside who will be able to make a diversion in our favor. However, sir, it can do no harm if you will wait till then, and may save many lives. At what hour do you mean to attack ?"

"The bridges and all other preparations to assist us across the moat will be ready to-night. We will advance then under cover of darkness, and as soon after dawn as may be attack in earnest."

"Very well, sir," Cuthbert said. "I trust that within five minutes after your bugle has sounded the white flag will make its appearance on the keep, but it cannot do so until after you have commenced an attack, or at least a pretense of an attack."

Two or three hours before daylight Cuthbert accompanied Cnut and twenty-five picked men of the foresters to the copse. They were provided with crowbars, and all carried heavy axes. The door was soon pried open. It opened silently and without a creak.

"It may be," Cnut said, "that the door has not been opened as you say for years, but it is certain," and he placed his torch to the hinges, "that it has been well oiled within the last two or three days. No doubt the baron intended to make his escape this way, should the worst arrive. Now that we have the door open we had better wait quiet until the dawn commences. The earl will blow his bugle as a signal for the advance; it will be another ten minutes before they are fairly engaged, and that will be enough for us to break open any doors that there may be between this and the castle, and to force our way inside."

It seemed a long time waiting before the dawn fairly broke—still longer before the earl's bugle was heard to sound the attack. Then the band, headed by Cnut and two or three of the strongest of the party entered the passage.

Cuthbert had had some misgivings as to his mother's injunctions to take no part in the fray, and it cannot be said that in accompanying the foresters he obeyed the letter of her instructions. At the same time as he felt sure that the effect of a surprise would be complete and crushing, and that the party would gain the top of the keep without any serious resistance, he considered the risk was so small as to justify him in accompanying the foresters.

The passage was some five feet high, and little more than two feet wide. It was dry and dusty, and save the marks on the ground of a human foot going and returning, doubtless that of the man who had oiled the lock the day before, the passage appeared to have been unused from the time that it left the hands of its builders.

Passing along for some distance they came to another strong oaken door. This, like the last, yielded to the efforts of the crowbars of the foresters, and they again advanced. Presently they came to a flight of steps.

"We must now be near the castle," Cnut said. "In fact, methinks I can hear confused noises ahead."

Mounting the steps, they came to a third door; this was thickly studded with iron, and appeared of very great strength. Fortunately the lock was upon their side, and they were enabled to shoot the bolt; but upon the other side the door was firmly secured by large bolts, and it was fully five minutes before the foresters could succeed in opening it. It was not without a good deal of noise that they at last did so; and several times they paused, fearing that the alarm must have been given in the castle. As, however, the door remained closed, they supposed that the occupants were fully engaged in defending themselves from the attacks of the earl's party.

When the door gave way they found hanging across in front of them a very thick arras, and pressing this aside they entered a small room in the thickness of the wall of the keep. It contained the merest slit for light, and was clearly unused. Another door, this time unfastened, led into a larger apartment, which was also at present unoccupied. They could hear now the shouts of the combatants without, the loud orders given by the leaders on the walls, the crack, as the stones hurled by the mangonels struck the walls, and the ring of steel as the arrows struck against steel cap and cuirass.

"It is fortunate that all were so well engaged, or they would certainly have heard the noise of our forcing the door, which would have brought all of them upon us. As it is, we are in the heart of the keep. We have now but to make a rush up these winding steps, and methinks we shall find ourselves on the battlements. They will be so surprised that no real resistance can be offered to us. Now let us advance."

So saying Cnut led the way upstairs, followed by the foresters, Cuthbert, as before, allowing five or six of them to intervene between him and the leader. He carried his short sword and a quarterstaff, a weapon by no means to be despised in the hands of an active and experienced player.

Presently, after mounting some fifty or sixty steps, they issued on the platform of the keep. Here were gathered some thirty or forty men, who were so busied in shooting with crossbows, and in working machines casting javelins, stones, and other missiles upon the besiegers, that they were unaware of the addition to their numbers until the whole of the foresters had gathered on the summit, and at the order of Cnut suddenly fell upon them with a loud shout.

Taken wholly by surprise by the foe, who seemed to have risen from the bowels of the earth by magic, the soldiers of the Baron of Wortham offered but a feeble resistance. Some were cast over the battlement of the keep, some driven down staircases, others cut down, and then, Cuthbert fastening a small white flag he had prepared to his quarterstaff, waved it above the battlements.

Even now the combatants on the outer wall were in ignorance of what had happened in the keep; so great was the din that the struggle which had there taken place had passed unnoticed; and it was not until the fugitives, rushing out into the courtyard, shouted that the keep had been captured, that the besieged became aware of the imminence of the danger.

Hitherto the battle had been going well for the defenders of the castle. The Baron of Wortham was indeed surprised at the feebleness of the assault. The arrows which had fallen in clouds upon the first day's attack upon the castle among his soldiers were now comparatively few and ineffective. The besiegers scarcely appeared to push forward their bridges with any vigor, and it seemed to him that a coldness had fallen upon them, and that some disagreement must have arisen between the foresters and the earl, completely crippling the energy of the attack.

When he heard the words shouted from the courtyard below he could not believe his ears. That the keep behind should have been carried by the enemy appeared to him impossible. With a roar he called upon the bravest of his men to follow, and rushing across the courtyard, rapidly ascended the staircase. The movement was observed from the keep, and Cnut and a few of his men stationed themselves with their battle-axes at the top of various stairs leading below.

The signal shown by Cuthbert had not passed unobserved. The earl, who had given instructions to his followers to make a mere feint of attacking, now blew the signal for the real onslaught. The bridges were rapidly run across the moat, ladders were planted, and the garrison being paralyzed and confused by the attack in their rear, as well as hindered by the arrows which now flew down upon them from the keep above, offered but a feeble resistance, and the assailants, led by Sir Walter himself, poured over the walls.

Now there was a scene of confusion and desperate strife. The baron had just gained the top of the stairs, and was engaged in a fierce conflict with Cnut and his men, when the news reached him that the wall was carried from without. With an execration he again turned and rushed down the stairs, hoping by a vigorous effort to cast back the foe.

It was, however, all too late; his followers, disheartened and alarmed, fought without method or order in scattered groups of threes and fours. They made their last stand in corners and passages. They knew there was but little hope of mercy from the Saxon foresters, and against these they fought to the last. To the Norman retainers, however, of the earl they offered a less determined resistance, throwing down their arms and surrendering at discretion.

The baron, when fiercely fighting, was slain by an arrow from the keep above, and with his fall the last resistance ceased. A short time was spent in searching the castle, binding the prisoners, and carrying off the valuables that the baron had collected in his raids. Then a light was set to the timbers, the granaries were fired, and in a few minutes the smoke wreathing out of the various loopholes and openings told the country round that the stronghold had fallen, and that they were free from the oppressor at last.

CHAPTER IV.
THE CRUSADES

Warm thanks and much praise were bestowed upon Cuthbert for his share in the capture of the castle, and the earl, calling the foresters round him, then and there bestowed freedom upon any of them who might have been serfs of his, and called upon all his knights and neighbors to do the same, in return for the good service which they had rendered.

This was willingly done, and a number of Cnut's party, who had before borne the stigma of escaped serfs, were now free men.

We are too apt to forget, in our sympathy with the Saxons, that, fond as they were of freedom for themselves, they were yet severe masters, and kept the mass of the people in a state of serfage. Although their laws provided ample justice as between Saxon man and man, there was no justice for the unhappy serfs, who were either the original inhabitants or captives taken in war, and who were distinguished by a collar of brass or iron round their neck.

Cnut's party had indeed long got rid of these badges, the first act of a serf when he took to the woods being always to file off his collar; but they were liable when caught to be punished, even by death, and were delighted at having achieved their freedom.

"And what can I do for you, Cuthbert?" Sir Walter said, as they rode homeward. "It is to you that I am indebted: in the first place for the rescue of my daughter, in the second for the capture of that castle, which I doubt me much whether we should ever have taken in fair fight had it not been for your aid."

"Thanks, Sir Walter," the lad replied. "At present I need nothing, but should the time come when you may go to the wars I would fain ride with you as your page, in the hope of some day winning my spurs also in the field."

"So shall it be," the earl said, "and right willingly. But who have we here?"

As he spoke a horseman rode up and presented a paper to the earl.

"This is a notice," the earl said, after perusing it, "that King Richard has determined to take up the cross, and that he calls upon his nobles and barons to join him in the effort to free the holy sepulcher from the infidels. I doubt whether the minds of the people are quite prepared, but I hear that there has been much preaching by friars and monks in some parts, and that many are eager to join in the war."

"Think you that you will go to the war, Sir Walter?" Cuthbert asked.

"I know not as yet; it must much depend upon the king's mood. For myself I care not so greatly as some do about this question of the Holy Land. There has been blood enough shed already to drown it, and we are no nearer than when the first swarms of pilgrims made their way thither."

On Cuthbert's returning home and telling his mother all that had passed, she shook her head, but said that she could not oppose his wishes to go with the earl when the time should come, and that it was only right he should follow in the footsteps of the good knight his father.

"I have heard much of these Crusades," he said; "canst tell me about them?"

"In truth I know not much, my son; but Father Francis, I doubt not, can tell you all the particulars anent the affair."

The next time that Father Francis, who was the special adviser of Dame Editha, rode over from the convent on his ambling nag, Cuthbert eagerly asked him if he would tell him what he knew of the Crusades.

"Hitherto, my son," he said, "the Crusades have, it must be owned, brought many woes upon Europe. From the early times great swarms of pilgrims were accustomed to go from all parts of Europe to the holy shrines.

"When the followers of the evil prophet took possession of the land, they laid grievous burdens upon the pilgrims, heavily they fined them, persecuted them in every way, and treated them as if indeed they were but the scum of the earth under their feet.

"So terrible were the tales that reached Europe that men came to think that it would be a good deed truly to wrest the sepulcher of the Lord from the hands of these heathens. Pope Urban was the first to give authority and strength to the movement, and at a vast meeting at Claremont of thirty thousand clergy and four thousand barons, it was decided that war must be made against the infidel. From all parts of France men flocked to hear Pope Urban preach there; and when he had finished his oration the vast multitude, carried away by enthusiasm, swore to win the holy sepulcher or to die.

"Mighty was the throng that gathered for the First Crusade. Monks threw aside their gowns and took to the sword and cuirass; even women and children joined in the throng. What, my son, could be expected from a great army so formed? Without leaders, without discipline, without tactics, without means of getting food, they soon became a scourge of the country through which they passed.

"Passing through Hungary, where they greatly ravaged the fields, they came to Bulgaria. Here the people, struck with astonishment and dismay at this great horde of hungry people who arrived among them like locusts, fell upon them with the sword, and great numbers fell. The first band that passed into that country perished miserably, and of all that huge assembly, it may be said that, numbering at the start not less than two hundred and fifty thousand persons, only about one hundred thousand crossed into Asia Minor. The fate of these was no better than that of those who had perished in Hungary and Bulgaria. After grievous suffering and loss they at last reached Nicaea. There they fell into an ambuscade; and out of the whole of the undisciplined masses who had followed Peter the Hermit, it is doubtful whether ten thousand ever returned home.

"This first attempt to rescue the holy sepulcher was followed by others equally wild, misguided, and unfortunate. Some of them indeed began their evil deeds as soon as they had left their home. The last of these bodies fell upon the Jews, who are indeed enemies of the Christian faith, but who have now, at least, nothing to do with the question of the holy sepulcher. As soon as they entered into Germany the Crusaders put them to death with horrible torture. Plunder and rapine indeed appeared to be the object of the Crusaders. On this as well as on most other preceding bands, their misdeeds drew down the vengeance of the people. At an early period of their march, and as soon as they reached Hungary, the people fell upon them, and put the greater portion to the sword.

"Thus, in these irregular expeditions no less than five hundred thousand people are supposed to have perished. Godfrey de Bouillon was the first who undertook to lead a Crusade according to the military knowledge of the day. With him were his brothers Eustace and Baldwin, the Counts of Anault and St. Paul, and many other nobles and gentlemen, with their retainers, well armed and under good order; and so firm was the discipline of Duke Godfrey that they were allowed to pass freely by the people of the countries who had opposed the previous bands.

"Through Hungary, Bulgaria, and Thrace he made his way; and though he met with many difficulties from Alexius, the crafty and treacherous Emperor of the Greeks, he at last succeeded in crossing into Asia. There he was joined by many from England, as well as from France and other countries. Duke Robert, the son of our first William, led a strong band of Normans to the war, as did the other great princes of France and Spain.

"The army which crossed the narrow passage of the Hellespont is estimated at no less than seven hundred thousand fighting men. Of these one hundred thousand were knights clad in complete armor, the remainder were men-at-arms and bowmen.

"Nicaea, the place which had been the scene of the massacre of Peter the Hermit's hosts, was taken after a desperate conflict, lasting for many weeks, and the Crusaders afterward defeated the Turks in a great battle near the town of Doryleum. After these successes disputes arose among the leaders, and Count Baldwin, brother of Duke Godfrey, left the main body with about fifteen hundred men, and founded a kingdom for himself in Mesopotamia.

"The main body, slowly and painfully, and suffering from disease, famine, and the heat, made its way south. Antioch, a city of great strength and importance, was besieged, but it proved so strong that it resisted for many months, and was at last only taken by treachery.

"After the capture of this place the sufferings of the Crusaders so far from being diminished were redoubled. They themselves during the siege had bought up all the food that could be brought from the surrounding country, while the magazines of the town were found, when an entry was effected, to be entirely deserted. The enemy, aided by a great Persian host, came down, and those who had been the besiegers were now besieged. However, when in the last strait the Christian army sallied out, and inspired with supernatural strength, defeated the Turks and Persians, with a slaughter of one hundred thousand men. Another slow movement to the south brought them into the Holy Land, and pressing forward, they came at last within sight of Jerusalem itself.

"So fearful had been the losses of the Crusaders that of seven hundred thousand who crossed the Hellespont, not more than forty thousand reached the end of the pilgrimage. This fragment of an army, which had appeared before a very strongly fortified town, possessed no means of capturing the place—none of the machines of war necessary for the purpose, no provisions or munitions of any kind. Water was scarce also; and it appeared as if the remnant of the great army of Godfrey de Bouillon had arrived before Jerusalem only to perish there.

"Happily just at this time a further band of Crusaders from Genoa, who had reached Jaffa, made their appearance. They were provided with stores, and had skilled workmen capable of making the machines for the siege. On July 14, 1099, the attack was made, and after resistance gallant and desperate as the assault, the Crusaders burst into the city, massacred the whole of the defenders and inhabitants, calculated at seventy thousand in number, and so became masters of the holy sepulcher.

"The Sultan of Egypt was meanwhile advancing to the assistance of the Mohammedans of Syria; but Godfrey, with twenty thousand of his best men, advanced to meet the vast host, and scattered them as if they had been sheep. Godfrey was now chosen King of Jerusalem, and the rest of his army—save three hundred knights and two hundred soldiers, who agreed to remain with him—returned to their home. The news of the victory led other armies of Crusaders to follow the example of that of Godfrey; but as these were almost as completely without organization or leadership as those of Peter the Hermit, they suffered miserably on their way, and few indeed ever reached the Holy Land. Godfrey died in 1100, and his brother Baldwin succeeded him.

"The history of the last hundred years has been full of fresh efforts to crush the Moslem power, but hitherto it cannot be said that fortune has attended the efforts of the Christians. Had it not been indeed for the devotion of the Knights of St. John and of the Templars, two great companies formed of men who devoted their lives to the holding of the sepulcher against the infidel, our hold of the Holy Land would have been lost.

"Gradually the Saracens have wrested post after post from our hands. Edessa was taken in 1144, and the news of this event created an intense excitement. The holy St. Bernard stirred up all France, and Louis VII. himself took the vow and headed a noble army. The ways of God are not our ways, and although the army of Germany joined that of France, but little results came of this great effort.

"The Emperor Conrad, with the Germans, was attacked by the Turk Saladin of Iconium, and was defeated with a loss of sixty thousand men. The King of France, with his army, was also attacked with fury, and a large portion of his force were slaughtered. Nothing more came of this great effort, and while the first Crusade seemed to show that the men-at-arms of Europe were irresistible, the second on the contrary gave proof that the Turks were equal to the Christian knights. Gradually the Christian hold of the Holy Land was shaken. In 1187, although fighting with extraordinary bravery, the small army of Christian Knights of the Temple and of St. John were annihilated, the King of Jerusalem was made prisoner, and the Christian power was crushed. Then Saladin, who commanded the Turks, advanced against Jerusalem, and forced it to capitulate.

"Such, my boy, is the last sad news which has reached us; and no wonder that it has stirred the hearts of the monarchs of Europe, and that every effort will be again made to recapture the holy sepulcher, and to avenge our brethren who have been murdered by the infidels."

"But, Father Francis, from your story it would seem that Europe has already sacrificed an enormous number of lives to take the holy sepulcher, and that after all the fighting, when she has taken it, it is only to lose it again."

"That is so, my son; but we will trust that in future things will be better managed. The Templars and Hospitalers now number so vast a number of the best lances in Europe, and are grown to be such great powers, that we may believe that when we have again wrested the holy sepulcher from the hands of the infidels they will be able to maintain it against all assaults. Doubtless the great misfortunes which have fallen upon the Christian armies have been a punishment from heaven, because they have not gone to work in the right spirit. It is not enough to take up lance and shield, and to place a red cross upon the shoulder. Those who desire to fight the battle of the Lord must cleanse their hearts, and go forth in the spirit of pilgrims rather than knights. I mean not that they should trust wholly to spiritual weapons—for in truth the infidel is a foe not to be despised—but I mean that they should lay aside all thoughts of worldly glory and rivalry one against another."

"And think you, Father, that such is the spirit with which King Richard and the other kings and nobles now preparing to go to the Holy Land are animated?"

Father Francis hesitated.

"It is not for me, my son, to judge motives, or to speak well or ill of the instruments who have been chosen for this great work. It is of all works the most praiseworthy, most holy. It is horrible to think that the holy shrines of Jerusalem should be in the hands of men who believe not in our Redeemer; and I hold it to be the duty of every man who can bear arms, no matter what his rank or his station, to don his armor and to go forth to battle in the cause. Whether success will crown the effort, or whether God wills it otherwise, it is not for man to discuss; it is enough that the work is there, and it is our duty to do it."

"And think you, Father, that it will do good to England?"

"That do I, my son, whether we gain the Holy Land or no. Methinks that it will do good service to the nation that Saxon and Norman should fight together under the holy cross. Hitherto the races have stood far too much apart. They have seen each other's bad qualities rather than good; but methinks that when the Saxon and the Norman stand side by side on the soil of the Holy Land, and shout together for England, it must needs bind them together, and lead them to feel that they are no longer Normans and Saxons, but Englishmen. I intend to preach on the village green at Evesham next Sunday morning on this subject, and as I know you are in communication with the forest men, I would, Cuthbert, that you would persuade them to come in to hear me. You were wondering what could be found for these vagrants. They have many of them long since lost the habits of honest labor. Many of them are still serfs, although most have been freed by the good earl and the knights his followers. Some of those who would fain leave the life in the woods still cling to it because they think that it would be mean to desert their comrades, who being serfs are still bound to lurk there; but methinks that this is a great opportunity for them. They are valiant men, and the fact that they are fond of drawing an arrow at a buck does not make them one whit the worse Christians. I will do my best to move their hearts, and if they will but agree together to take the cross, they would make a goodly band of footmen to accompany the earl."

"Is the earl going?" Cuthbert asked eagerly.

"I know not for certain," said Father Francis; "but I think from what I hear from his chaplain, Father Eustace, that his mind turns in that direction."

"Then, Father, if he goes, I will go too," Cuthbert exclaimed. "He promised to take me as his page the first time he went to war."

Father Francis shook his head.

"I fear me, Cuthbert, this is far from the spirit in which we awhile ago agreed that men should go to the holy war."

Cuthbert hung his head a little.

"Ay, Father Francis, men; but I am a boy," he said, "and after all, boys are fond of adventure for adventure's sake. However, Father," he said, with a smile, "no doubt your eloquence on the green will turn me mightily to the project, for you must allow that the story you have told me this morning is not such as to create any very strong yearning in one's mind to follow the millions of men who have perished in the Holy Land."

"Go to," said Father Francis, smiling, "thou art a pert varlet. I will do my best on Sunday to turn you to a better frame of mind."

CHAPTER V.
PREPARATIONS

Next Sunday a large number of people from some miles round were gathered on the green at Evesham, to hear Father Francis preach on the holy sepulcher. The forest men in their green jerkins mingled with the crowd, and a look of attention and seriousness was on the faces of all, for the news of the loss of the holy sepulcher had really exercised a great effect upon the minds of the people in England as elsewhere.

Those were the days of pilgrimage to holy places, when the belief in the sanctity of places and things was overwhelming, and when men believed that a journey to the holy shrines was sufficient to procure for them a pardon for all their misdeeds. The very word "infidel" in those days was full of horror, and the thought that the holy places of the Christians were in the hands of Moslems affected all Christians throughout Europe with a feeling of shame as well as of grief.

Among the crowd were many of the Norman retainers from the castle and from many of the holds around, and several knights with the ladies of their family stood a little apart from the edge of the gathering; for it was known that Father Francis would not be alone, but that he would be accompanied by a holy friar who had returned from the East, and who could tell of the cruelties which the Christians had suffered at the hands of the Saracens.

Father Francis, at ordinary times a tranquil preacher, was moved beyond himself by the theme on which he was holding forth. He did not attempt to hide from those who stood around that the task to be undertaken was one of grievous peril and trial; that disease and heat, hunger and thirst, must be dared, as well as the sword of the infidel. But he spoke of the grand nature of the work, of the humiliation to Christians, of the desecration of the shrines, and of the glory which awaited those who joined the Crusade, whether they lived or whether they died in the Holy Land.

His words had a strong effect upon the simple people who listened to him, but the feelings so aroused were as naught to the enthusiasm which greeted the address of the friar.

Meager and pale, with a worn, anxious face as one who had suffered much, the friar, holding aloft two pieces of wood from the Mount of Olives tied together in the form of a cross, harangued the crowd. His words poured forth in a fiery stream, kindling the hearts, and stirring at once the devotion and the anger of his listeners.

He told of the holy places, he spoke of the scenes of Holy Writ, which had there been enacted; and then he depicted the men who had died for them. He told of the knights and men-at-arms, each of whom proved himself again and again a match for a score of infidels. He spoke of the holy women, who, fearlessly and bravely, as the knights themselves, had borne their share in the horrors of the siege and in the terrible times which had preceded it.

He told them that this misfortune had befallen Christianity because of the lukewarmness which had come upon them.

"What profited it," he asked, "if a few knights who remained to defend the holy sepulcher were heroes? A few heroes cannot withstand an army. If Christendom after making a mighty effort to capture the holy sepulcher had not fallen away, the conquest which had been made with so vast an expenditure of blood would not have been lost. This is a work in which no mere passing fervor will avail; bravery at first, endurance afterward, are needed. Many men must determine not only to assist to wrest the holy sepulcher from the hands of the infidels, but to give their lives, so long as they might last, to retaining it. It is scarce to be expected that men with wives and families will take a view like this, indeed it is not to be desired. But there are single men, men of no ties, who can devote their whole lives, as did the Knights of the Orders of the Cross, to this great object. When their life has come to an end doubtless others will take up the banner that their hands can no longer hold. But for

life it is, indeed, that many of humble as well as of princely class must bind themselves to take and defend to death the holy sepulcher."

So, gradually raising the tone of his speech, the friar proceeded; until at length by his intense earnestness, his wild gesticulations, his impassioned words, he drew the whole of his listeners along with him; and when he ceased, a mighty shout of "To the Holy Land!" burst from his hearers.

Falling upon their knees the crowd begged of him to give them the sign of the cross, and to bestow his blessing upon their swords, and upon their efforts.

Father Francis had prepared, in contemplation of such a movement, a large number of small white crosses of cloth. These he and the friar now fastened to the shoulders of the men as they crowded up to receive it, holding their hands aloft, kissing the cross that the friar extended to them, and swearing to give their lives, if need be, to rescue the holy shrines from the infidel.

When all had received the holy symbol, Father Francis again ascended the bank from which they had addressed the crowd:

"Now go to your homes, my sons," he said. "Think of the oath that you have taken, and of the course that lies open to you when the time comes. When King Richard is prepared to start, then will you be called upon to fulfill your vows. It may be that all who have sworn may not be called upon to go. It needs that the land here should be tilled, it needs that there should be protectors for the women and children, it needs that this England of ours should flourish, and we cannot give all her sons, however willing they might be to take the cross. But the willingness which you will, I am sure, show to go if needs be, and to redeem your vows, will be sufficient. Some must go and some must stay; these are matters to be decided hereafter; for the time let us separate; you will hear when the hour for action arrives."

A fortnight later the Earl of Evesham, who had been on a long journey to London, returned with full authority to raise and organize a force as his contingent to the holy wars.

All was now bustle and activity in the castle. Father Francis informed him of the willingness of such of the forest men as he deemed fit to enlist under his banner; and the earl was much gratified at finding that the ranks of heavily-armed retainers whom he would take with him were to be swollen by the addition of so useful a contingent as that of one hundred skillful archers.

Cuthbert was not long in asking for an interview with the earl.

He had indeed great difficulty in persuading Dame Editha that he was old enough to share in the fatigues of so great an expedition, but he had Father Francis on his side; and between the influence of her confessor, and the importunities of her son, the opposition of the good lady fell to the ground.

Cuthbert was already, for his age, well trained to arms. Many of the old soldiers at the castle who had known and loved his father had been ever ready to give lessons in the use of arms to Cuthbert, who was enthusiastic in his desire to prove as good a knight as his father had been. His friends, the outlaws, had taught him the use of the bow and of the quarterstaff; and Cuthbert, strong and well-built for his age, and having little to do save to wield the sword and the bow, had attained a very considerable amount of skill with each.

He had too, which was unusual, a certain amount of book learning, although this, true to say, had not been acquired so cheerfully or willingly as the skill at arms. Father Francis had, however, taught him to read and to write—accomplishments which were at that time rare, except in the cloister. In those days if a knight had a firm seat in his saddle, a strong arm, a keen eye, and high courage, it was thought to be of little matter whether he could or could not do more than make his mark on the parchment. The whole life of the young was given to acquiring skill in arms; and unless intended for the convent, any idea of education would in the great majority of cases have been considered as preposterous.

To do Cuthbert justice, he had protested with all his might against the proposition of Father Francis to his mother to teach him some clerkly knowledge. He had yielded most unwillingly at last to her entreaties, backed as they were by the sound arguments and good sense of Father Francis.

The Earl of Evesham received Cuthbert's application very graciously.

"Certainly, Cuthbert," he said, "you shall accompany me; first, on account of my promise to you; secondly, because from the readiness you displayed both in the matter of my daughter and of the attack on Wortham, you will be a notable aid and addition to my party; thirdly, from my friendship for your father and Dame Editha."

This point being settled, Cuthbert at once assumed his new duties. There was plenty for him to do—to see that the orders of the earl were properly carried out; to bear messages to the knights who followed the earl's fortunes, at their various holds; to stand by and watch the armorers at work, and the preparation of the stores of arms and missiles which would be necessary for the expedition.

Sometimes he would go round to summon the tenants of the various farms and lands, who held from the earl, to come to the castle; and here Sir Walter would, as far as might be without oppression, beg of them to contribute largely to the expedition.

In these appeals he was in no slight way assisted by Father Francis, who pointed out loudly to the people that those who stayed behind were bound to make as much sacrifice of their worldly goods as those who went to the war might make of their lives. Life and land are alike at the service of God. Could the land be sold, it would be a good deed to sell it; but as this could not be, they should at least sell all that they could, and pledge their property if they could find lenders, in order to contribute to the needs of their lord, and the fitting out of this great enterprise.

The preparations were at last complete, and a gallant band gathered at the castle ready for starting. It consisted of some two hundred men-at-arms led by six knights, and of one hundred bowmen dressed in Lincoln green, with quilted jerkins to keep out the arrows of the enemy. All the country from around gathered to see the start. Dame Editha was there, and by her side stood the earl's little daughter. The earl himself was in armor, and beside him rode Cuthbert in the gay attire of a page.

Just at that moment, however, his face did not agree with his costume, for although he strove his best to look bright and smiling, it was a hard task to prevent the tears from filling his eyes at his departure from his mother. The good lady cried unrestrainedly, and Margaret joined in her tears. The people who had gathered round cheered lustily; the trumpets blew a gay fanfaronade, and the squire threw to the wind the earl's colors.

It was no mere pleasure trip on which they were starting, for all knew that, of the preceding Crusades, not one in ten of those who had gone so gladly forth had ever returned.

It must not be supposed that the whole of those present were animated by any strong religious feeling. No doubt there existed a desire, which was carefully fanned by the preaching of the priests and monks, to rescue the holy sepulcher from the hands of the Saracens; but a far stronger feeling was to be found in the warlike nature of the people in those days. Knights, men-at-arms, and indeed men of all ranks were full of a combative spirit. Life in the castle and hut was alike dull and monotonous, and the excitement of war and adventure was greatly looked for, both as a means of obtaining glory and booty, and for the change they afforded to the dreary monotony of life.

There is little to tell of the journey of the Earl of Evesham's band through England to Southampton, at which place they took ship and crossed to France—or rather to Normandy, for in those days Normandy was regarded, as indeed it formed, a part of England.

Cuthbert, as was natural to his age, was full of delight at all the varying scenes through which they passed. The towns were to him an especial source of wonder, for he had never visited any other than that of Worcester, to which he had once or twice been taken on occasions of high festival. Havre was in those days an important place, and being the landing-place of a great portion of the English bands, it was full of bustle and excitement. Every day ships brought in nobles and their followings.

The King of England was already in Normandy hastening the preparations, and each band, as it landed, marched down to the meeting-place on the plains of Vezelay. Already they began to experience a taste of the hardships which they were to endure.

In those days there was no regular supply train for an army, but each division or band supported itself by purchase or pillage, as the case might be, from the surrounding country.

As the English troops were marching through a friendly country, pillage was of course strictly forbidden; but while many of the leaders paid for all they had, it must be owned that among the smaller leaders were many who took anything that they required with or without payment.

The country was eaten up.

The population in those days was sparse, and the movement of so large a number of men along a certain route completely exhausted all the resources of the inhabitants; and although willing to pay for all that his men required, the Earl of Evesham had frequently to lie down on the turf supperless himself.

"If this is the case now," he said to Cuthbert, "what will it be after we have joined the French army? Methinks whatever we may do if we reach the Holy Land, that we have a fair chance of being starved before we sail."

After a long succession of marches they arrived in sight of the great camp at Vezelay. It was indeed rather a canvas town than a camp. Here were gathered nearly one hundred thousand men, a vast host at any time, but in those days far greater in proportion to the strength of the countries than at present. The tents of the leaders, nobles, and other knights and gentlemen rose in regular lines, forming streets and squares.

The great mass of troops, however, were contented to sleep in the open air; indeed the difficulties of carriage were so great that it was only the leaders who could carry with them their canvas abodes. Before each tent stood the lance and colors of its owner, and side by side in the center of the camp stood the royal pavilions of Philip of France and Richard of England, round which could be seen the gonfalons of all the nobles of Western Europe.

Nothing could be gayer than the aspect of this camp as the party rode into it. They were rather late, and the great body of the host were already assembled.

Cuthbert gazed with delight at the varied colors, the gay dresses, the martial knights, and the air of discipline and order which reigned everywhere.

This was indeed war in its most picturesque form, a form which, as far as beauty is concerned, has been altogether altered, and indeed destroyed, by modern arms.

In those days individual prowess and bravery went for everything. A handful of armored knights were a match for thousands of footmen, and battles were decided as much by the prowess and bravery of the leader and his immediate following as by that of the great mass of the army.

The earl had the day before sent on a messenger to state that he was coming, and as the party entered the camp they were met by a squire of the camp-marshal, who conducted them to the position allotted to them.

The earl's tent was soon erected, with four or five grouped around it for his knights, one being set aside for his squires and pages.

When this was done Cuthbert strolled away to look at the varied sights of the camp. A military officer in these days would be scandalized at the scenes which were going on, but the strict, hard military discipline of modern times was then absolutely unknown.

A camp was a moving town, and to it flocked the country people with their goods; smiths and armorers erected their forges; minstrels and troubadours flocked in to sing of former battles, and to raise the spirits of the soldiers by merry lays of love and war; simple countrymen and women came in to bring their presents of fowls or cakes to their friends in camp; knights rode to and fro on their gayly caparisoned horses through the crowd; the newly-raised levies, in many cases composed of woodmen and peasants who had not in the course of their lives wandered a league from their birthplaces, gaped in unaffected wonder at the sights around them; while last, but by no means least, the maidens and good wives of the neighborhood, fond then as now of brave men and gay dresses, thronged the streets of the camp, and joined in, and were the cause of, merry laughter and jest.

Here and there, a little apart from the main stream of traffic, the minstrels would take up their position, and playing a gay air, the soldier lads and lasses would fall to and foot it merrily to the strains. Sometimes there would be a break in the gayety, and loud shouts, and perhaps fierce oaths, would rise. Then the maidens would fly like startled fawns, and men hasten to the spot; though the quarrel might be purely a private one, yet should it happen between the retainers of two nobles, the friends of each would be sure to strike in, and serious frays would arise before the marshal of the camp with his posse could arrive to interfere. Sometimes, indeed, these quarrels became so serious and desperate that alliances were broken up and great intentions frustrated by the quarrels of the soldiery.

Here and there, on elevated platforms, or even on the top of a pile of tubs, were friars occupied in haranguing the soldiers, and in inspiring them with enthusiasm for the cause upon which they were embarked. The conduct of their listeners showed easily enough the motives which had brought them to war. Some stood with clasped hands and eager eyes, listening to the exhortations of the priests, and ready, as might be seen from their earnest gaze, to suffer martyrdom in the cause. More, however, stood indifferently round, or, after listening to a few words, walked on with a laugh or a scoff; indeed, preaching had already done all that lay in its power. All those who could be moved by exhortations of this kind were there, and upon the rest the discourses and sermons were thrown away.

Several times in the course of his stroll round the camp Cuthbert observed the beginnings of quarrels, which were in each case only checked by the intervention of some knight or other person in authority coming past, and he observed that these in every instance occurred between men of the English and those of the French army.

Between the Saxon contingent of King Richard's army and the French soldiers there could indeed be no quarrel, for the Saxons understood no word of their language; but with the Normans the case was different, for the Norman-French, which was spoken by all the nobles and their retainers in Britain, was as nearly as possible the same as that in use in France.

It seemed, however, to Cuthbert, watching narrowly what was going on, that there existed by no means a good feeling between the men of the different armies; and he thought that this divergence so early in the campaign boded but little good for the final success of the expedition.

When he returned to the tent the earl questioned him as to what he had seen, and Cuthbert frankly acknowledged that it appeared to him that the feeling between the men of the two armies was not good.

"I have been," the earl said, "to the royal camp, and from what I hear, Cuthbert, methinks that there is reason for what you say. King Richard is the most loyal and gallant of kings, but he is haughty and hasty in speech. The Normans, too, have been somewhat accustomed to conquer our neighbors, and it may well be that the chivalry of France love us not. However, it must be hoped that this feeling will die away, and that we shall emulate each other only in our deeds on the battlefield."

CHAPTER VI.
THE LISTS

The third day after the arrival of the Earl of Evesham there was a great banquet given by the King of France to King Richard and his principal nobles.

Among those present was the Earl of Evesham, and Cuthbert as his page followed him to the great tent where the banquet was prepared.

Here, at the top of the tent, on a raised daïs, sat the King of France, surrounded by his courtiers. The Earl of Evesham, having been conducted by the herald to the daïs, paid his compliments to the king, and was saluted by him with many flattering words.

The sound of a trumpet was heard, and Richard of England, accompanied by his principal nobles, entered.

It was the first time that Cuthbert had seen the king.

Richard was a man of splendid stature and of enormous strength. His appearance was in some respects rather Saxon than Norman, for his hair was light and his complexion clear and bright. He wore the mustache and pointed beard at that time in fashion; and although his expression was generally that of frankness and good humor, there might be observed in his quick motions and piercing glances signs of the hasty temper and unbridled passion which went far to wreck the success of the enterprise upon which he was embarked.

Richard possessed most of the qualities which make a man a great king and render him the idol of his subjects, especially in a time of semi-civilization, when personal prowess is placed at the summit of all human virtues. In all his dominions there was not one man who in personal conflict was a match for his king.

Except during his fits of passion, King Richard was generous, forgiving, and royal in his moods. He was incapable of bearing malice. Although haughty of his dignity, he was entirely free from any personal pride, and while he would maintain to the death every right and privilege against another monarch, he could laugh and joke with the humblest of his subjects on terms of hearty good fellowship. He was impatient of contradiction, eager to carry out whatever he had determined upon; and nothing enraged him so much as hesitation or procrastination. The delays which were experienced in the course of the Crusade angered him more than all the opposition offered by the Saracens, or than the hardships through which the Christian host had to pass.

At a flourish of trumpets all took their seats at dinner, their places being marked for them by a herald, whose duty it was to regulate nicely the various ranks and dignities.

The Earl of Evesham was placed next to a noble of Brabant. Cuthbert took his place behind his lord and served him with wines and meats, the Brabant being attended by a tall youth, who was indeed on the verge of manhood.

As the dinner went on the buzz of conversation became fast and furious. In those days men drank deep, and quarrels often arose over the cups. From the time that the dinner began Cuthbert noticed that the manner of Sir de Jacquelin Barras, Count of Brabant, was rude and offensive.

It might be that he was accustomed to live alone with his retainers, and that his manners were rude and coarse to all. It might be that he had a special hostility to the English. At any rate, his remarks were calculated to fire the anger of the earl.

He began the conversation by wondering how a Norman baron could live in a country like England, inhabited by a race but little above pigs.

The earl at once fired up at this, for the Normans were now beginning to feel themselves English, and to resent attacks upon a people for whom their grandfathers had entertained contempt.

He angrily repelled the attack upon them by the Brabant knight, and asserted at once that the Saxons were every bit as civilized, and in some respects superior to the Normans or French.

The ill-feeling thus began at starting clearly waxed stronger as dinner went on. The Brabant knight drank deeply, and although his talk was not clearly directed against the English, yet he continued to throw out innuendos and side attacks, and to talk with a vague boastfulness, which greatly irritated Sir Walter.

Presently, as Cuthbert was about to serve his master with a cup of wine, the tall page pushed suddenly against him, spilling a portion of the wine over his dress.

"What a clumsy child!" he said scoffingly.

"You are a rough and ill-mannered loon," Cuthbert said angrily. "Were you in any other presence I would chastise you as you deserve."

The tall page burst into a mocking laugh.

"Chastise me!" he said. "Why, I could put you in my pocket for a little hop-of-my-thumb as you are."

"I think," said Sir Jacquelin—for the boys' voices both rose loud—to the earl, "you had better send that brat home and order him to be whipped."

"Sir count," said the earl, "your manners are insolent, and were we not engaged upon a Crusade, it would please me much to give you a lesson on that score."

Higher and higher the dispute rose, until some angry word caught the ear of the king.

Amid the general buzz of voices King Philip rose, and speaking a word to King Richard, moved from the table, thus giving the sign for the breaking up of the feast.

Immediately afterward a page touched the earl and Sir Jacquelin upon the shoulder, and told them that the kings desired to speak with them in the tent of the King of France.

The two nobles strode through the crowd, regarding each other with eyes much like those of two dogs eager to fly at each other's throat.

"My lords, my lords," said King Philip when they entered, "this is against all law and reason. For shame, to be brawling at my table. I would not say aught openly, but methinks it is early indeed for the knights and nobles engaged in a common work to fall to words."

"Your majesty," said the Earl of Evesham, "I regret deeply what has happened. But it seemed from the time we sat down to the meal that this lord sought to pass a quarrel upon me, and I now beseech your majesty that you will permit us to settle our differences in the lists."

King Richard gave a sound of assent, but the King of France shook his head gravely.

"Do you forget," he said, "the mission upon which you are assembled here? Has not every knight and noble in these armies taken a solemn oath to put aside private quarrels and feuds until the holy sepulcher is taken? Shall we at this very going off show that the oath is a mere form of words? Shall we show before the face of Christendom that the knights of the cross are unable to avoid flying at each other's throats, even while on their way to wrest the holy sepulcher from the infidel? No, sirs, you must lay aside your feuds, and must promise me and my good brother here that you will keep the peace between you until this war is over. Whose fault it was that the quarrel began I know not. It may be that my Lord of Brabant was discourteous. It may be that the earl here was too hot. But whichever it be, it matters not."

"The quarrel, sire," said Sir Jacquelin, "arose from a dispute between our pages, who were nigh coming to blows in your majesty's presence. I desired the earl to chide the insolence of his varlet, and instead of so doing he met my remarks with scorn."

"Pooh, pooh," said King Richard, "there are plenty of grounds for quarrel without two nobles interfering in the squabbles of boys. Let them fight; it will harm no one. By the bye, your Majesty," he said, turning to the King of France with a laugh, "if the masters may not fight, there is no reason in the world why the varlets should not. We are sorely dull for want of amusement. Let us have a list to-morrow, and let the pages fight it out for the honor of their masters and their nations."

"It were scarce worth while to have the lists set for two boys to fight," said the King of France.

"Oh, we need not have regular lists," said King Richard. "Leave that matter in my hands. I warrant you that if the cockerels are well plucked, they will make us sport. What say you, gentlemen?"

The Brabant noble at once assented, answering that he was sure that his page would be glad to enter the lists; and the earl gave a similar assent, for he had not noticed how great was the discrepancy between the size of the future combatants.

"That is agreed, then," said King Richard joyously. "I will have a piece of ground marked out on the edge of the camp to-morrow morning. It shall be kept by my men-at-arms, and there shall be a raised place for King Philip and myself, who will be the judges of the conflict. Will they fight on foot or on horse?"

"On foot, on foot," said the King of France. "It would be a pity that knightly exercises should be brought to scorn by any failure on their part on horseback. On foot at least it will be a fair struggle."

"What arms shall they use?" the Brabant knight asked.

"Oh, swords and battle-axes, of course," said King Richard with a laugh.

"Before you go," King Philip said, "you must shake hands, and swear to let the quarrel between you drop, at least until after our return. If you still wish to shed each other's blood, I shall offer no hindrance thereto."

The earl and Count Jacquelin touched each other's hands in obedience to the order, went out of the tent together, and strode off without a word in different directions.

"My dear lad," the Earl of Evesham said on entering his tent where his page was waiting him, "this is a serious business. The kings have ordered this little count and myself to put aside our differences till after the Crusade, in accordance with our oath. But as you have in no wise pledged yourself in the same fashion, and as their majesties feel somewhat dull while waiting here, it is determined that the quarrel between the count and me, and between you and the count's page, shall be settled by a fight between you two in the presence of the kings."

"Well, sir," Cuthbert said, "I am glad that it should be, seeing the varlet insulted me without any cause, and purposely upset the cup over me."

"What is he like?" the earl asked. "Dost think that you are a fair match?"

"I doubt not that we are fair match enough," Cuthbert said. "As you know, sir, I have been well trained to arms of all kinds, both by my father and by the men-at-arms at the castle, and could hold my own against any of your men with light weapons, and have then no fear that this gawky loon, twenty years old though he seems to be, will bring disgrace upon me or discredit upon my nation."

"If thou thinkest so," the earl said, "the matter can go on. But had it been otherwise I would have gone to the king and protested that the advantage of age was so great that it would be murder to place you in the lists together."

"There is," Cuthbert said, "at most no greater difference between us than between a strong man and a weak one, and these, in the ordeal of battle, have to meet in the lists. Indeed I doubt if the difference is so great, for if he be a foot taller than I, methinks that round the shoulders I should have the advantage of him."

"Send hither my armorer," the earl said; "we must choose a proper suit for you. I fear that mine would be of little use; but doubtless there are some smaller suits among my friends."

"The simpler and lighter the better," Cuthbert said. "I'd rather have a light coat of mail and a steel cap than heavy armor and a helmet which would press me down, and a visor through which I could scarce see. The lighter the better, for after all if my sword cannot keep my head, sooner or later the armor would fail to do so too."

The armorer speedily arrived, and the knights and followers of the earl being called in and the case stated, there was soon found a coat of fine linked mail, which fitted Cuthbert well. As to the steel cap there was no difficulty whatever.

"You must have a plume at least," the earl said, and took some feathers from his own casque and fastened them in. "Will you want a light sword and battle-ax?"

"No," Cuthbert said, "my arms are pretty well used to those of the men-at-arms. I could wield my father's sword, and that was a heavy one."

The lightest of the earl's weapons were chosen, and it was agreed that all was now ready for the conflict to-morrow.

In the morning there was a slight bustle in the camp.

The news that a fight was to take place between an English and a Brabant page, by the permission of the kings of England and France, that their majesties were to be present, and that all was to be conducted on regular rules, caused a stir of excitement and novelty in the camp.

Nowhere is life duller than among a large body of men kept together for any time under canvas, and the thought of a combat of this novel kind excited general interest.

In a meadow at a short distance from the camp a body of King Richard's men-at-arms marked off an oval space of about an acre. Upon one side of this a tent was pitched for the kings, and a small tent was placed at each end for the combatants. Round the inclosure the men-at-arms formed the ring, and behind them a dense body of spectators gathered, a place being set aside for nobles, and others of gentle blood.

At the hour fixed the kings of England and France arrived together. King Richard was evidently in a state of high good humor, for he preferred the clash of arms and the sight of combat to any other pleasure.

The King of France, on the other hand, looked grave. He was a far wiser and more politic king than Richard; and although he had consented to the sudden proposal, yet he felt in his heart that the contest was a foolish one, and that it might create bad feeling among the men of the two nationalities whichever way it went. He had reserved to himself the right of throwing down the baton when the combat was to cease, and he determined to avail himself of this right to put a stop to the conflict before either party was likely to sustain any deadly injury.

When the monarchs had taken their places the trumpeters sounded their trumpets, and the two combatants advanced on foot from their ends of the lists. A murmur of surprise and dissatisfaction broke from the crowd. "My Lord of Evesham," the king said angrily to the earl, who with Count Jacquelin was standing by the royal party, "thou shouldst have said that the difference between the two was too great to allow the combat to be possible. The Frenchman appears to be big enough to take your page under his arm and walk off with him."

The difference was indeed very striking. The French champion was arrayed in a full suit of knightly armor—of course without the gold spurs which were the distinguishing mark of that rank—and with his helmet and lofty plume of feathers he appeared to tower above Cuthbert, who, in his close-fitting steel cap and link armor seemed a very dwarf by the side of a giant.

"It is not size, sire, but muscle and pluck will win in a combat like this. Your majesty need not be afraid that my page will disgrace me. He is of my blood, though the kinship is not close. He is of mixed Saxon and Norman strain, and will, believe me, do no discredit to either."

The king's brow cleared, for in truth he was very proud of his English nationality, and would have been sorely vexed to see the discomfiture of an English champion, even though that champion were a boy.

"Brother Philip," he said, turning to the king, "I will wager my gold chain against yours on yonder stripling."

"Methinks that it were robbery to take your wager," the King of France said. "The difference between their bulk is disproportionate. However, I will not balk your wish. My chain against yours."

The rule of the fight was that they were to commence with swords, but that either could, if he chose, use his battle-ax.

The fight need scarcely be described at length, for the advantage was all one way. Cuthbert was fully a match in strength for his antagonist, although standing nigh a foot shorter. Constant exercise, however, had hardened his muscles into something like steel, while the teaching that he had received had embraced all what was then known of the use of arms.

Science in those days there was but little of; it was a case rather of hard, heavy hitting, than of what we now call swordsmanship.

With the sword Cuthbert gained but slight advantage over his adversary, whose superior height enabled him to rain blows down upon the lad, which he was with difficulty enabled to guard; but when the first paroxysm of his adversary's attack had passed he took to the offensive, and drove his opponent back step by step. With his sword, however, he was unable to cut through the armor of the Frenchman, but in the course of the encounter, guarding a severe blow aimed at him, his sword was struck from his hand, and he then, seizing his ax, made such play with it that his foe dropped his own sword and took to the same weapon.

In this the superior height and weight of his opponent gave him even a greater advantage than with the sword, and Cuthbert knowing this, used his utmost dexterity and speed to avoid the sweeping blows showered upon him. He himself had been enabled to strike one or two sweeping strokes, always aiming at the same place, the juncture of the visor with the helmet. At last the Frenchman struck him so heavy a blow that it beat down his guard and struck his steel cap from his head, bringing him to the knee. In an instant he was up, and before his foe could be again on guard, he whirled his ax round with all its force, and bringing it just at the point of the visor which he had already weakened with repeated blows, the edge of the ax stove clean through the armor, and the page was struck senseless to the ground.

A great shout broke from the English portion of the soldiery as Cuthbert leaned over his prostrate foe, and receiving no answer to the question "Do you yield?" rose to his feet, and signified to the squire who had kept near that his opponent was insensible.

King Richard ordered the pursuivant to lead Cuthbert to the royal inclosure.

"Thou art a brave lad and a lusty," the king said, "and hast borne thee in the fight as well as many a knight would have done. Wert thou older, I would myself dub thee knight; and I doubt not that the occasion will yet come when thou wilt do as good deeds upon the bodies of the Saracens as thou hast upon that long-shanked opponent of thine. Here is a gold chain; take it as a proof that the King of England holds that you have sustained well the honor of his country; and mark me, if at any time you require a boon, bring or send me that chain, and thou shalt have it freely. Sir Walter," he said, turning to the earl, "in this lad thou hast a worthy champion, and I trust me that thou wilt give him every chance of distinguishing himself. So soon as thou thinkest him fit for the knightly rank I myself will administer the accolade."

CHAPTER VII.
REVENGE

After his interview with the king Cuthbert was led to his tent amid the hearty plaudits of the English troops.

His own comrades flocked round him; the men of the greenwood, headed by Cnut, were especially jubilant over his victory.

"Who would have thought," said the tall forester, "that the lad who but a short time ago was a child should now have sustained the honor of the country? We feel proud of you, Cuthbert; and trust us some day or other to follow wherever you may lead, and to do some deed which will attain for you honor and glory, and show that the men of Evesham are as doughty as any under King Richard's rule."

"You must be wary, Cuthbert," the earl said to him that evening. "Believe me that you and I have made a foe, who, although he may not have the power, has certainly the will to injure us to the death. I marked the eye of Count Jacquelin during the fight, and again when you were led up to the king. There was hatred and fury in his eye. The page too, I hear, is his own nephew, and he will be the laughing-stock of the French camp at having been conquered by one so much younger than himself. It will be well to keep upon your guard, and not to go out at night unattended. Keep Cnut near you; he is faithful as a watch-dog, and would give his life, I am sure, for you. I will myself be also upon my guard, for it was after all my quarrel, and the fury of this fierce knight will vent itself upon both of us if the opportunity should come. I hear but a poor account of him among his confréres. They say he is one of those disgraces to the name of knight who are but a mixture of robber and soldier; that he harries all the lands in his neighborhood; and that he has now only joined the Crusade to avoid the vengeance which the cries of the oppressed people had invoked from his liege lord. I am told indeed that the choice was given him to be outlawed, or to join the Crusades with all the strength he could raise. Naturally he adopted the latter alternative; but he has the instincts of the robber still, and will do us an evil turn, if he have the chance."

Two days later the great army broke up its camp and marched south. After a week's journeying they encamped near a town, and halted there two or three days in order to collect provisions for the next advance; for the supplies which they could obtain in the country districts were wholly insufficient for so great a host of men. Here the armies were to separate, the French marching to Genoa, the English to Marseilles, the town at which they were to take ship.

One evening the earl sent Cuthbert with a message to another English lord, staying in the town at the palace of the bishop, who was a friend of his.

Cnut accompanied Cuthbert, for he now made a point of seldom letting him out of his sight. It was light when they reached the bishop's palace, but here they were delayed for some time, and night had fallen when they sallied out.

The town was already quiet, for the inhabitants cared not to show themselves in the streets now that such a large army of fierce men were in the neighborhood.

The orders indeed of the monarchs were stringent, but discipline there was but little of, and the soldiery in those days regarded peaceful citizens as fair game; hence, when they came from the palace the streets of the city were already hushed and quiet, for the orders of the king had been peremptory that no men-at-arms, or others except those on duty, were to be away from their camp after nightfall. This order had been absolutely necessary, so many were the complaints brought in by country peasants and farmers of the doings of bands of soldiers.

Cnut and Cuthbert proceeded along the streets unmolested for some distance. Occasionally a solitary passer-by, with hooded cape, hurried past. The moon was half full, and her light was welcome

indeed, for in those days the streets were unlighted, and the pavement so bad that passage through the streets after dark was a matter of difficulty, and even of danger.

Here and there before some roadside shrine a lamp dimly burned; before these they paused, and, as good Catholics, Cnut and Cuthbert crossed themselves. Just as they had passed one of these wayside shrines, a sudden shout was heard, and a party of eight or ten men sprang out from a side street and fell upon them.

Cnut and Cuthbert drew their swords and laid about them heartily, but their assailants were too strong. Cnut was stricken to the ground, and Cuthbert, seeing that defense was hopeless, took to his heels and ran for his life. He was already wounded, but happily not so severely as in any way to disable him.

Seeing that it was speed, and speed alone, which now could save him, he flung aside his belt and scabbard as he ran, and with rapid steps flew along the streets, not knowing whither he went, and striving only to keep ahead of his pursuers. They, more incumbered by arms and armor, were unable to keep up with the flying footsteps of a lad clothed in the light attire of a page; but Cuthbert felt that the blood running from his wound was weakening him fast, and that unless he could gain some refuge his course must speedily come to an end. Happily he saw at some little distance ahead of him a man standing by a door. Just as he arrived the door opened, and a glow of light from within fell on the road, showing that the person entering was a monk.

Without a moment's hesitation Cuthbert rushed through the door, shouting "Sanctuary!" and sank almost fainting on the ground.

The monks, accustomed to wild pursuits and scenes of outrage in those warlike days, hastily closed the door, barring it securely. In a moment there was a rush of men against it from without.

One of the monks opened a lattice above the door.

"What mean you," he said, "by this outrage? Know ye not that this is the Monastery of St. John, and that it is sacrilege to lay a hand of violence even against its postern? Begone," he said, "or we'll lodge a complaint before the king."

The assailants, nothing daunted, continued to batter at the door; but at this moment the monks, aroused from their beds, hastened to the spot, and seizing bill and sword—for in those days even monks were obliged at times to depend upon carnal weapons—they opened the door, and flung themselves upon the assailants with such force that the latter, surprised and discomfited, were forced to make a hasty retreat.

The doors were then again barred, and Cuthbert was carried up to a cell in the building, where the leech of the monastery speedily examined his wound, and pronounced that although his life was not in danger by it, he was greatly weakened by the loss of blood, that the wound was a serious one and that it would be some time before the patient would recover.

It was two days before Cuthbert was sufficiently restored to be able to speak. His first question to the monk was as to his whereabouts, and how long he had been there. Upon being answered, he entreated that a messenger might be dispatched to the camp of the Earl of Evesham, to beg that a litter might be sent for him, and to inquire what had become of Cnut, whom he had last seen stricken down.

The monk replied, "My son, I grieve to tell you that your request cannot be complied with. The army moved away yesternoon, and is now some twenty-five miles distant. There is nothing for you but patience, and when restored you can follow the army, and rejoin your master before he embarks at Marseilles. But how is it that a lad so young as you can have incurred the enmity of those who sought your life? For it is clear from the pertinacity with which they urged their attack that their object was not plunder, of which indeed they would get but little from you, but to take your life."

Cuthbert recounted the circumstances which had led to the feud of the Count of Brabant against him, for he doubted not that this truculent knight was at the bottom of the attack.

"After what has happened," the monk said, "you will need have caution when you leave here. The place where you have taken refuge is known to them, and should this wild noble persist in his

desire for vengeance against you, he will doubtless leave some of his ruffians to watch the monastery. We will keep a lookout, and note if any strangers are to be seen near the gates; if we find that it is so, we shall consider what is best to be done. We could of course appeal to the mayor for protection against them, and could even have the strangers ejected from the town or cast into prison; but it is not likely that we should succeed in capturing more than the fellow who may be placed on the lookout, and the danger would be in no wise lessened to yourself. But there is time to talk over this matter before you leave. It will be another fortnight at least before you will be able to pursue your journey."

Cuthbert gained strength more rapidly than the monk had expected. He was generously fed, and this and his good constitution soon enabled him to recover from the loss of blood; and at the end of five days he expressed his hope that he could on the following day pursue his journey. The monk who attended him shook his head.

"Thou mightst, under ordinary circumstances, quit us to-morrow, for thou art well enough to take part in the ordinary pursuits of a page; but to journey is a different thing. You may have all sorts of hardships to endure; you may have even to trust for your life to your speed and endurance; and it would be madness for you to go until your strength is fully established. I regret to tell you that we have ascertained beyond a doubt that the monastery is closely watched. We have sent some of the acolytes out, dressed in the garbs of monks, and attended by one of our elder brethren; and in, each case, a monk who followed at a distance of fifty yards was able to perceive that they were watched. The town is full of rough men, the hangers-on of the army; some, indeed, are followers of laggard knights, but the greater portion are men who merely pursue the army with a view to gain by its necessities, to buy plunder from the soldiers, and to rob, and, if necessary, to murder should there be a hope of obtaining gold. Among these men your enemies would have little difficulty in recruiting any number, and no appeal that we could make to the mayor would protect you from them when you have left the walls. We must trust to our ingenuity in smuggling you out. After that, it is upon your own strength and shrewdness that you must rely for an escape from any snares that may be laid for you. You will see, then, that at least another three or four days are needed before you can set forth. Your countrymen are so far away that a matter of a few days will make but little difference. They will in any case be delayed for a long time at Marseilles before they embark; and whether you leave now or a month hence, you would be equally in time to join them before their embarkation—that is, supposing that you make your way through the snares which beset you."

Cuthbert saw the justice of the reasoning, and it was another week before he announced himself as feeling absolutely restored to strength again, and capable of bearing as much exertion as he could have done before his attack.

A long consultation was held with the prior and a monk who had acted as his leech, as to the best plan of getting Cuthbert beyond the walls of the city. Many schemes were proposed and rejected. Every monk who ventured beyond the walls had been closely scrutinized, and one or two of short stature had even been jostled in the streets, so as to throw back their hoods and expose a sight of their faces. It was clear, then, that it would be dangerous to trust to a disguise. Cuthbert proposed that he should leave at night, trusting solely to their directions as to the turnings he should take to bring him to the city walls, and that, taking a rope, he should there let himself down, and make the best of his way forward. This, however, the monks would not consent to, assuring him that the watch was so strictly kept round the monastery that he would inevitably be seen.

"No," the prior said, "the method, whatever it is, must be as open as possible; and though I cannot at this moment hit upon a plan, I will think it over to-night, and putting my ideas with those of Father Jerome here, and the sacristan, who has a shrewd head, it will be hard if we cannot between us contrive some plan to evade the watch of those robber villains who beset the convent."

The next morning, when the prior came in to see Cuthbert, the latter said: "Good father, I have determined not to endeavor to make off in disguise. I doubt not that your wit could contrive some means by which I should get clear of the walls without observation from the scouts of this villain

noble. But once in the country, I should have neither horse nor armor, and should have hard work indeed to make my way down through France, even though none of my enemies were on my track. I will therefore, if it please you, go down boldly to the mayor and claim a protection and escort. If he will but grant me a few men-at-arms for one day's ride from the town, I can choose my own route, and riding out in mail, can then take my chance of finding my way down to Marseilles."

"I will go down with you, my son," the prior said, "to the mayor. Two of my monks shall accompany us; and assuredly no insult will be offered to you in the street thus accompanied." Shortly afterward Cuthbert started as arranged, and soon arrived at the house of the mayor, Sir John de Cahors.

Upon the prior making known to this knight whom he had brought with him the mayor exclaimed:

"*Peste!* young gentleman; you have caused us no small trouble and concern. We have had ridings to and fro concerning you, and furious messages from your fiery king. When in the morning a tall, stalwart knave dressed in green was found, slashed about in various places, lying on the pavement, the townsmen, not knowing who he was, but finding that he still breathed, carried him to the English camp, and he was claimed as a follower of the Earl of Evesham. There was great wrath and anger over this; and an hour later the earl himself came down and stated that his page was missing, and that there was reason to believe that he had been foully murdered, as he had accompanied the man found wounded. Fortunately the bulk of the armies had marched away at early dawn, and the earl had only remained behind in consequence of the absence of his followers. I assured the angry Englishman that I would have a thorough search made in the town; and although in no way satisfied, he rode off after his king with all his force, carrying with him the long-limbed man whom we had picked up. Two days after a message came back from King Richard himself, saying that unless this missing page were discovered, or if, he being killed, his murderers were not brought to justice and punished, he would assuredly on his return from the Holy Land burn the town over our ears. Your king is not a man who minces matters. However, threatened men live long, especially when the person who threatens is starting for a journey, from which, as like as not, he may never return. However, I have had diligent search made for you. All the houses of bad repute have been examined and their inhabitants questioned. But there are so many camp-followers and other rabble at present in the town that a hundred men might disappear without our being able to obtain a clew. I doubted not indeed that your body had been thrown in the river, and that we should never hear more of you. I am right glad that you have been restored; not indeed from any fear of the threats of the king your master, but because, from what the Earl of Evesham said, you were a lad likely to come to great fame and honor. The earl left in my charge your horse, and the armor which he said you wore at a tournament lately, in case we should hear aught of you."

Cuthbert gave an exclamation of pleasure. His purse contained but a few pieces of silver, and being without arms except for his short dagger, or means of locomotion, the difficulties of the journey down to Marseilles had sorely puzzled him. But with his good horse between his knees, and his suit of Milan armor on his back, he thought that he might make his way through any dangers which threatened him.

The prior now told the knight that circumstances had occurred which showed that it was known to the assailants of Cuthbert that he had taken refuge in the convent, over which a strict watch had been kept by Cuthbert's enemies.

"If I could find the varlets I would hang them over the gates of the town," the knight said wrathfully. "But as at the present moment there are nearly as many rogues as honest men in the place it would be a wholesale hanging indeed to insure getting hold of the right people. Moreover, it is not probable that another attempt upon his life will be made inside our walls; and doubtless the main body of this gang are somewhere without, intending to assault him when he continues his journey, and they have left but a spy or two here to inform them as to his movements. I will give you any aid

in my power, young sir. The army is by this time nigh Marseilles, and, sooth to say, I have no body of men-at-arms whom I could send as your escort for so long a distance. I have but a small body here, and they are needed, and sorely, too, to keep order within the walls."

"I thought, sir," Cuthbert said, "that if you could lend me a party of say four men-at-arms to ride with me for the first day I could then trust to myself, especially if you could procure me one honest man to act as guide and companion. Doubtless they suppose that I should travel by the main road south; but by going the first day's journey either east or west, and then striking some southward road, I should get a fair start of them, throw all their plans out, and perchance reach Marseilles without interruption."

The knight willingly agreed to furnish four men-at-arms, and a trustworthy guide who would at least take him as far south as Avignon.

"I will," he said, "tell the men-at-arms off to-night. They shall be at the western gate at daybreak, with the pass permitting them to ride through. The guide shall be at the convent door half an hour earlier. I will send up to-night your armor and horse. Here is a purse which the Earl of Evesham also left for your use. Is there aught else I can do for you?"

"Nothing, sir," Cuthbert said; "and if I regain the army in safety I shall have pleasure in reporting to King Richard how kindly and courteously you have treated me."

The arrangements were carried out.

An hour before daybreak Cuthbert was aroused, donned his armor and steel casque, drank a flask of wine, and ate a manchet of bread which the prior himself brought him, and then, with a cordial adieu to the kind monks, issued forth.

The guide had just reached the gate, and together they trotted down the narrow streets to the west gate of the city, where four men-at-arms were awaiting them.

The gates were at once opened, and Cuthbert and his little troop sallied forth.

CHAPTER VIII.
THE ATTACK

All day they rode with their faces west, and before nightfall had made a journey of over forty miles. Then bestowing a largess upon the men-at-arms, Cuthbert dismissed them, and took up his abode at a hostelry, his guide looking to the two horses.

Cuthbert was pleased with the appearance of the man who had been placed at his disposal. He was a young fellow of twenty-two or twenty-three, with an honest face. He was, he told Cuthbert, the son of a small farmer near Avignon; but having a fancy for trade, he had been apprenticed to a master smith. Having served his apprenticeship, he found that he had mistaken his vocation, and intended to return to the paternal vineyards.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.