Henty George Alfred

St. George for England: A Tale of Cressy and Poitiers

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Содержание

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PREFACE

My Dear Lads:

You may be told perhaps that there is no good to be obtained from tales of fighting and bloodshed – that there is no moral to be drawn from such histories. Believe it not. War has its lessons as well as Peace. You will learn from tales like this that determination and enthusiasm can accomplish marvels, that true courage is generally accompanied by magnanimity and gentleness, and that if not in itself the very highest of virtues, it is the parent of almost all the others, since but few of them can be practiced without it. The courage of our forefathers has created the greatest empire in the world around a small and in itself insignificant island; if this empire is ever lost, it will be by the cowardice of their descendants.

At no period of her history did England stand so high in the eyes of Europe as in the time whose events are recorded in this volume. A chivalrous king and an even more chivalrous prince had infected the whole people with their martial spirit, and the result was that their armies were for a time invincible, and the most astonishing successes were gained against numbers which would appear overwhelming. The victories of Cressy and Poitiers may be to some extent accounted for by superior generalship and discipline on the part of the conquerors; but this will not account for the great naval victory over the Spanish fleet off the coast of Sussex, a victory even more surprising and won against greater odds than was that gained in the same waters centuries later over the Spanish Armada. The historical facts of the story are all drawn from Froissart and other contemporary historians, as collated and compared by Mr. James in his carefully written history. They may therefore be relied upon as accurate in every important particular.

Yours sincerely,
G. A. HENTY.

CHAPTER I.
A Wayfarer

It was a bitterly cold night in the month of November, 1330. The rain was pouring heavily, when a woman, with a child in her arms, entered the little village of Southwark. She had evidently come from a distance, for her dress was travel-stained and muddy. She tottered rather than walked, and when, upon her arrival at the gateway on the southern side of London Bridge, she found that the hour was past and the gates closed for the night, she leaned against the wall with a faint groan of exhaustion and disappointment.

After remaining, as if in doubt, for some time, she feebly made her way into the village. Here were many houses of entertainment, for travelers like herself often arrived too late to enter the gates, and had to abide outside for the night. Moreover, house rent was dear within the walls of the crowded city, and many, whose business brought them to town, found it cheaper to take up their abode in the quiet hostels of Southwark rather than to stay in the more expensive inns within the walls. The lights came out brightly from many of the casements, with sounds of boisterous songs and laughter. The woman passed these without a pause. Presently she stopped before a cottage, from which a feeble light alone showed that it was tenanted.

She knocked at the door. It was opened by a pleasant-faced man of some thirty years old.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I am a wayfarer," the woman answered feebly. "Canst take me and my child in for the night?"

"You have made a mistake," the man said; "this is no inn. Further up the road there are plenty of places where you can find such accommodation as you lack."

"I have passed them," the woman said, "but all seemed full of roisterers. I am wet and weary, and my strength is nigh spent. I can pay thee, good fellow, and I pray you as a Christian to let me come in and sleep before your fire for the night. When the gates are open in the morning I will go; for I have a friend within the city who will, methinks, receive me."

The tone of voice, and the addressing of himself as good fellow, at once convinced the man that the woman before him was no common wayfarer.

"Come in," he said; "Geoffrey Ward is not a man to shut his doors in a woman's face on a night like this, nor does he need payment for such small hospitality. Come hither, Madge!" he shouted; and at his voice a woman came down from the upper chamber. "Sister," he said, "this is a wayfarer who needs shelter for the night; she is wet and weary. Do you take her up to your room and lend her some dry clothing; then make her a cup of warm posset, which she needs sorely. I will fetch an armful of fresh rushes from the shed and strew them here. I will sleep in the smithy. Quick, girl," he said sharply; "she is fainting with cold and fatigue." And as he spoke he caught the woman as she was about to fall, and laid her gently on the ground. "She is of better station than she seems," he said to his sister; "like enough some poor lady whose husband has taken part in the troubles; but that is no business of ours. Quick, Madge, and get these wet things off her; she is soaked to the skin. I will go round to the Green Dragon and will fetch a cup of warm cordial, which I warrant me will put fresh life into her."

So saying, he took down his flat cap from its peg on the wall and went out, while his sister at once proceeded to remove the drenched garments and to rub the cold hands of the guest until she recovered consciousness. When Geoffrey Ward returned, the woman was sitting in a settle by the fireside, dressed in a warm woolen garment belonging to his sister. Madge had thrown fresh wood on the fire, which was blazing brightly now. The woman drank the steaming beverage which her host brought with him. The color came faintly again into her cheeks.

"I thank you, indeed," she said, "for your kindness. Had you not taken me in I think I should have died at your door, for indeed I could go no further; and though I hold not to life, yet would I fain live until I have delivered my boy into the hands of those who will be kind to him, and this will, I trust, be to-morrow."

"Say naught about it," Geoffrey answered. "Madge and I are right glad to have been of service to you. It would be a poor world indeed if one could not give a corner of one's fireside to a fellow-creature on such a night as this, especially when that fellow-creature is a woman with a child. Poor little chap! he looks right well and sturdy, and seems to have taken no ill from his journey."

"Truly, he is well and sturdy," the mother said, looking at him proudly; "indeed. I have been almost wishing to-day that he were lighter by a few pounds, for in truth I am not used to carry him far, and his weight has sorely tried me. His name is Walter, and I trust," she added, looking at the powerful figure of her host, "that he will grow up as straight and as stalwart as yourself." The child, who was about three years old, was indeed an exceedingly fine little fellow, as he sat, in one scanty garment, in his mother's lap, gazing with round eyes at the blazing fire; and the smith thought how pretty a picture the child and mother made. She was a fair, gentle-looking girl some twenty-two years old, and it was easy enough to see now from her delicate features and soft, shapely hands that she had never been accustomed to toil.

"And now," the smith said, "I will e'en say good-night. The hour is late, and I shall be having the watch coming along to know why I keep a fire so long after the curfew. Should you be a stranger in the city, I will gladly act as your guide in the morning to the friends whom you seek, that is, should they be known to me; but if not, we shall doubtless find them without difficulty."

So saying, the smith retired to his bed of rushes in the smithy, and soon afterward the tired visitor, with her baby, lay down on the rushes in front of the fire, for in those days none of the working or artisan class used beds, which were not indeed, for centuries afterward, in usage by the common people.

In the morning Geoffrey Ward found that his guest desired to find one Giles Fletcher, a maker of bows.

"I know him well," the smith said. "There are many who do a larger business, and hold their heads higher, but Giles Fletcher is well esteemed as a good workman, whose wares can be depended upon. It is often said of him that did he take less pains he would thrive more; but he handles each bow that he makes as if he loved it, and finishes and polishes each with his own hand. Therefore he doeth not so much trade as those who are less particular with their wares, for he hath to charge a high price to be able to live. But none who have ever bought his bows have regretted the silver which they cost. Many and many a gross of arrow-heads have I sold him, and he is well-nigh as particular in their make as he is over the spring and temper of his own bows. Many a friendly wrangle have I had with him over their weight and finish, and it is not many who find fault with my handiwork, though I say it myself; and now, madam, I am at your service."

During the night the wayfarer's clothes had been dried. The cloak was of rough quality, such as might have been used by a peasant woman; but the rest, though of somber color, were of good material and fashion. Seeing that her kind entertainers would be hurt by the offer of money, the lady contented herself with thanking Madge warmly, and saying that she hoped to come across the bridge one day with Dame Fletcher; then, under the guidance of Geoffrey, who insisted on carrying the boy, she set out from the smith's cottage. They passed under the outer gate and across the bridge, which later on was covered with a double line of houses and shops, but was now a narrow structure. Over the gateway across the river, upon pikes, were a number of heads and human limbs. The lady shuddered as she looked up.

"It is an ugly sight," the smith said, "and I can see no warrant for such exposure of the dead. There are the heads of Wallace, of three of Robert Bruce's brothers, and of many other valiant Scotsmen who fought against the king's grandfather some twenty years back. But after all they

fought for their country, just as Harold and our ancestors against the Normans under William, and I think it a foul shame that men who have done no other harm should be beheaded, still less that their heads and limbs should be stuck up there gibbering at all passers-by. There are over a score of them, and every fresh trouble adds to their number; but pardon me," he said suddenly as a sob from the figure by his side called his attention from the heads on the top of the gateway, "I am rough and heedless in speech, as my sister Madge does often tell me, and it may well be that I have said something which wounded you."

"You meant no ill," the lady replied; "it was my own thoughts and troubles which drew tears from me; say not more about it, I pray you."

They passed under the gateway, with its ghastly burden, and were soon in the crowded streets of London. High overhead the houses extended, each story advancing beyond that below it until the occupiers of the attics could well-nigh shake hands across. They soon left the more crowded streets, and turning to the right, after ten minutes' walking, the smith stopped in front of a bowyer shop near Aldgate.

"This is the shop," he said, "and there is Giles Fletcher himself trying the spring and pull of one of his bows. Here I will leave you, and will one of these days return to inquire if your health has taken aught of harm by the rough buffeting of the storm of yester-even."

So saying he handed the child to its mother, and with a wave of the hand took his leave, not waiting to listen to the renewed thanks which his late guest endeavored to give him.

The shop was open in front, a projecting penthouse sheltered it from the weather; two or three bows lay upon a wide shelf in front, and several large sheaves of arrows tied together stood by the wall. A powerful man of some forty years old was standing in the middle of the shop with a bent bow in his arm, taking aim at a spot in the wall. Through an open door three men could be seen in an inner workshop cutting and shaping the wood for bows. The bowyer looked round as his visitor entered the shop, and then, with a sudden exclamation, lowered the bow.

"Hush, Giles!" the lady exclaimed; "it is I, but name no names; it were best that none knew me here."

The craftsman closed the door of communication into the inner room. "My Lady Alice," he exclaimed in a low tone, "you here, and in such a guise?"

"Surely it is I," the lady sighed, "although sometimes I am well-nigh inclined to ask myself whether it be truly I or not, or whether this be not all a dreadful dream."

"I had heard but vaguely of your troubles," Giles Fletcher said, "but hoped that the rumors were false. Ever since the Duke of Kent was executed the air has been full of rumors. Then came news of the killing of Mortimer and of the imprisonment of the king's mother, and it was said that many who were thought to be of her party had been attacked and slain, and I heard – " And there he stopped.

"You heard rightly, good Giles, it is all true. A week after the slaying of Mortimer a band of knights and men-at-arms arrived at our castle and demanded admittance in the king's name. Sir Roland refused, for he had news that many were taking up arms, but it was useless. The castle was attacked and, after three days' fighting, was taken. Roland was killed, and I was cast out with my child. Afterward they repented that they had let me go, and searched far and wide for me; but I was hidden in the cottage of a wood-cutter. They were too busy in hunting down others whom they proclaimed to be enemies of the king, as they had wrongfully said of Roland, who had but done his duty faithfully to Queen Isabella, and was assuredly no enemy of her son, although he might well be opposed to the weak and indolent king, his father. However, when the search relaxed I borrowed the cloak of the good man's wife and set out for London, whither I have traveled on foot, believing that you and Bertha would take me in and shelter me in my great need."

"Ay, that will we willingly," Giles said. "Was not Bertha your nurse? and to whom should you come if not to her? But will it please you to mount the stairs? for Bertha will not forgive me if I keep you talking down here. What a joy it will be to her to see you again!"

So saying, Giles led the way to the apartment above. There was a scream of surprise and joy from his wife, and then Giles quietly withdrew downstairs again, leaving the women to cry in each other's arms.

A few days later Geoffrey Ward entered the shop of Giles Fletcher.

"I have brought you twenty score of arrow-heads, Master Giles," he said. "They have been longer in hand than is usual with me, but I have been pressed. And how goes it with the lady whom I brought to your door last week?"

"But sadly, Master Ward, very sadly, as I told you when I came across to thank you again in her name and my own for your kindness to her. She was but in poor plight after her journey; poor thing, she was little accustomed to such wet and hardship, and doubtless they took all the more effect because she was low in spirit and weakened with much grieving. That night she was taken with a sort of fever, hot and cold by turns, and at times off her head. Since then she has lain in a high fever and does not know even my wife; her thoughts ever go back to the storming of the castle, and she cries aloud and begs them to spare her lord's life. It is pitiful to hear her. The leech gives but small hope for her life, and in troth, Master Ward, methinks that God would deal most gently with her were he to take her. Her heart is already in her husband's grave, for she was ever of a most loving and faithful nature. Here there would be little comfort for her – she would fret that her boy would never inherit the lands of his father; and although she knows well enough that she would be always welcome here, and that Bertha would serve her as gladly and faithfully as ever she did when she was her nurse, yet she could not but greatly feel the change. She was tenderly brought up, being, as I told you last week, the only daughter of Sir Harold Broome. Her brother, who but a year ago became lord of Broomecastle at the death of his father, was one of the queen's men, and it was he, I believe, who brought Sir Roland Somers to that side. He was slain on the same night as Mortimer, and his lands, like those of Sir Roland, have been seized by the crown. The child upstairs is by right heir to both estates, seeing that his uncle died unmarried. They will doubtless be conferred upon those who have aided the young king in freeing himself from his mother's domination, for which, indeed, although I lament that Lady Alice should have suffered so sorely in the doing of it, I blame him not at all. He is a noble prince and will make us a great king, and the doings of his mother have been a shame to us all. However, I meddle not in politics. If the poor lady dies, as methinks is well-nigh certain, Bertha and I will bring up the boy as our own. I have talked it over with my wife, and so far she and I are not of one mind. I think it will be best to keep him in ignorance of his birth and lineage, since the knowledge cannot benefit him, and will but render him discontented with his lot and make him disinclined to take to my calling, in which he might otherwise earn a living and rise to be a respected citizen. But Bertha hath notions. You have not taken a wife to yourself, Master Geoffrey, or you would know that women oft have fancies which wander widely from hard facts, and she says she would have him brought up as a man-at-arms, so that he may do valiant deeds, and win back some day the title and honor of his family."

Geoffrey Ward laughed. "Trust a woman for being romantic," he said. "However, Master Fletcher, you need not for the present trouble about the child's calling, even should its mother die. At any rate, whether he follows your trade, or whether the blood in his veins leads him to take to martial deeds, the knowledge of arms may well be of use to him, and I promise you that such skill as I have I will teach him when he grows old enough to wield sword and battle-ax. As you know I may, without boasting, say that he could scarce have a better master, seeing that I have for three years carried away the prize for the best sword-player at the sports. Methinks the boy will grow up into a strong and stalwart man, for he is truly a splendid lad. As to archery, he need not go far to learn it, since your apprentice, Will Parker, last year won the prize as the best marksman in the city

bounds. Trust me, if his tastes lie that way we will between us turn him out a rare man-at-arms. But I must stand gossiping no longer; the rumors that we are likely ere long to have war with France have rarely bettered my trade. Since the wars in Scotland men's arms have rusted somewhat, and my two men are hard at work mending armor, and fitting swords to hilts, and forging pike-heads. You see I am a citizen, though I dwell outside the bounds, because house rent is cheaper and I get my charcoal without paying the city dues. So I can work somewhat lower than those in the walls, and I have good custom from many in Kent, who know that my arms are of as good temper as those turned out by any craftsman in the city."

Giles Fletcher's anticipations as to the result of his guest's illness turned out to be well founded. The fever abated, but left her prostrate in strength. For a few weeks she lingered; but she seemed to have little hold of life, and to care not whether she lived or died. So gradually she faded away.

"I know you will take care of my boy as if he were your own, Bertha," she said one day, "and you and your husband will be far better protectors for him than I should have been had I lived. Teach him to be honest and true. It were better, methinks, that he grew up thinking you his father and mother, for otherwise he may grow discontented with his lot; but this I leave with you, and you must speak or keep silent according as you see his disposition and mind. If he is content to settle down to a peaceful life here, say naught to him which would unsettle his mind; but if Walter turn out to have an adventurous disposition, then tell him as much as you think fit of his history, not encouraging him to hope to recover his father's lands and mine, for that can never be, seeing that before that time can come they would have been enjoyed for many years by others; but that he may learn to bear himself bravely and gently, as becomes one of good blood."

A few days later Lady Alice breathed her last, and at her own request was buried quietly and without pomp, as if she had been a child of the bowman, a plain stone, with the name "Dame Alice Somers," marking the grave.

The boy grew and throve until at fourteen years old there was no stronger or sturdier lad of his age within the city bounds. Giles had caused him to be taught to read and write, accomplishments which were common among the citizens, although they were until long afterward rare among the warlike barons. The greater part of his time, however, was spent in sports with lads of his own age in Moorfields beyond the walls. The war with France was now raging, and as was natural, the boys in their games imitated the doings of their elders, and mimic battles, ofttimes growing into earnest, were fought between the lads of the different wards. Walter Fletcher, as he was known among his play-fellows, had by his strength and courage won for himself the proud position of captain of the boys of the ward of Aldgate.

Geoffrey Ward had kept his word, and had already begun to give the lad lessons in the use of arms. When not engaged otherwise Walter would, almost every afternoon, cross London Bridge and would spend hours in the armorer's forge. Geoffrey's business had grown, for the war had caused a great demand for arms, and he had now six men working in the forge. As soon as the boy could handle a light tool Geoffrey allowed him to work, and although not able to wield the heavy sledge, Walter was able to do much of the finer work. Geoffrey encouraged him in this, as, in the first place, the use of the tools greatly strengthened the boy's muscles, and gave him an acquaintance with arms. Moreover, Geoffrey was still a bachelor, and he thought that the boy, whom he as well as Giles had come to love as a son, might, should he not take up the trade of war, prefer the occupation of an armorer to that of a bow maker, in which case he would take him some day as his partner in the forge. After work was over and the men had gone away Geoffrey would give the lad instructions in the use of the arms at which he had been at work, and so quick and strong was he that he rapidly acquired their use, and Geoffrey foresaw that he would one day, should his thoughts turn that way, prove a mighty man-at-arms.

It was the knowledge which he acquired from Geoffrey which had much to do with Walter's position among his comrades. The skill and strength which he had acquired in wielding the hammer, and by practice with the sword, rendered him a formidable opponent with the sticks, which formed the weapons in the mimic battles, and indeed not a few were the complaints which were brought before Giles Fletcher of bruises and hurts caused by him.

"You are too turbulent, Walter," the bowyer said one day when a haberdasher from the ward of Aldersgate came to complain that his son's head had been badly cut by a blow with a club from Walter Fletcher. "You are always getting into trouble, and are becoming the terror of other boys. Why do you not play more quietly? The feuds between the boys of different wards are becoming a serious nuisance, and many injuries have been inflicted. I hear that the matter has been mentioned in the Common Council, and that there is a talk of issuing an order that no boy not yet apprenticed to a trade shall be allowed to carry a club, and that any found doing so shall be publicly whipped."

"I don't want to be turbulent," Walter said; "but if the Aldersgate boys will defy us, what are we to do? I don't hit harder than I can help, and if Jonah Harris would leave his head unguarded I could not help hitting it."

"I tell you it won't do, Walter," Giles said. "You will be getting yourself into sore trouble. You are growing too masterful altogether, and have none of the quiet demeanor and peaceful air which becomes an honest citizen. In another six months you will be apprenticed, and then I hope we shall hear no more of these doings."

"My father is talking of apprenticing me, Master Geoffrey," Walter said that evening. "I hope that you will, as you were good enough to promise, talk with him about apprenticing me to your craft rather than to his. I should never take to the making of bows, though, indeed, I like well to use them; and Will Parker, who is teaching me, says that I show rare promise; but it would never be to my taste to stand all day sawing, and smoothing, and polishing. One bow is to me much like another, though my father holds that there are rare differences between them; but it is a nobler craft to work on iron, and next to using arms the most pleasant thing surely is to make them. One can fancy what good blows the sword will give and what hard knocks the armor will turn aside; but some day, Master Geoffrey, when I have served my time, I mean to follow the army. There is always work there for armorers to do, and sometimes at a pinch they may even get their share of fighting."

Walter did not venture to say that he would prefer to be a man-at-arms, for such a sentiment would be deemed as outrageous in the ears of a quiet city craftsman as would the proposal of the son of such a man nowadays to enlist as a soldier. The armorer smiled; he knew well enough what was in Walter's mind. It had cost Geoffrey himself a hard struggle to settle down to a craft, and he deemed it but natural that with the knightly blood flowing in Walter's veins he should long to distinguish himself in the field. He said nothing of this, however, but renewed his promise to speak to Giles Fletcher, deeming that a few years passed in his forge would be the best preparation which Walter could have for a career as a soldier.

CHAPTER II.
THE HUT IN THE MARSHES

A week later a party of knights and court gallants, riding across the fields without the walls, checked their horses to look at a struggle which was going on between two parties of boys. One, which was apparently the most powerful, had driven the other off from a heap of rubbish which had been carried without the walls. Each party had a flag attached to a stick, and the boys were armed with clubs such as those carried by the apprentice boys. Many of them carried mimic shields made of wood, and had stuffed their flat caps with wool or shavings, the better to protect their heads from blows. The smaller party had just been driven from the heap, and their leader was urging them to make another effort to regain it.

"That is a gallant-looking lad, and a sturdy, my Lord de Vaux," a boy of about ten years of age said. "He bears himself like a young knight, and he has had some hard knocks, for, see, the blood is streaming down his face. One would scarcely expect to see these varlets of the city playing so roughly."

"The citizens have proved themselves sturdy fighters before now, my prince," the other said; "they are ever independent, and hold to their rights even against the king. The contingent which the city sends to the wars bears itself as well as those of any of the barons."

"See!" the boy interrupted, "they are going to charge again. The leader has himself seized the flag and has swung his shield behind him, just as a knight might do if leading the stormers against a place of strength. Let us stop till we see the end of it."

With a shout of "Aldgate! Aldgate!" the leader of the assailants dashed forward, followed by his comrades, and with a rush reached the top of the heap.

"Well done!" the young prince exclaimed, clapping his hands. "See how he lays about him with that club of his. There, he has knocked down the leader of the defenders as if his club had been a battle-ax. Well done, young sir, well done! But his followers waver. The others are too strong for them. Stand, you cowards, rally round your leader!" And in his enthusiasm the young prince urged his horse forward to the scene of conflict.

But the assailants were mastered; few of them could gain the top of the heap, and those who did so were beaten back from it by the defenders. Heavy blows were exchanged, and blood flowed freely from many of their heads and faces, for in those days boys thought less than they do now of hard knocks, and manliness and courage were considered the first of virtues. Their leader, however, still stood his ground on the crest, though hardly pressed on all sides, and used his club both to strike and parry with a skill which aroused the warmest admiration on the part of the prince. In vain his followers attempted to come to his rescue; each time they struggled up the heap they were beaten back again by those on the crest.

"Yield thee prisoner," the assailants of their leader shouted, and the prince in his excitement echoed the cry. The lad, however, heard or heeded them not. He still kept his flag aloft in his left hand. With a sudden spring he struck down one of his opponents, plucked up their flag from the ground, and then fought his way back through his foes to the edge of the battle ground; then a heavy blow struck him on the temple, and, still holding the flags, he rolled senseless to the foot of the heap. The defenders with shouts of triumph were rushing down, when the prince urged his horse forward.

"Cease!" he said authoritatively. "Enough has been done, my young masters, and the sport is becoming a broil."

Hitherto the lads, absorbed in their strife, had paid but little heed to the party of onlookers; but at the word they at once arrested their arms, and, baring their heads, stood still in confusion.

"No harm is done," the prince said, "though your sport is of the roughest; but I fear that your leader is hurt, he moves not; lift his head from the ground." The boy was indeed still insensible. "My lords," the prince said to the knights who had now ridden up, "I fear that this boy is badly hurt; he is a gallant lad, and has the spirit of a true knight in him, citizen's son though he be. My Lord de Vaux, will you bid your squire ride at full speed to the Tower and tell Master Roger, the leech, to come here with all haste, and to bring such nostrums as may be needful for restoring the boy to life?"

The Tower was but half a mile distant, but before Master Roger arrived Walter had already recovered consciousness, and was just sitting up when the leech hurried up to the spot.

"You have arrived too late, Master Roger," the prince said; "but I doubt not that a dose of your cordials may yet be of use, for he is still dazed, and the blow he got would have cracked his skull had it been a thin one."

The leech poured some cordial from a vial into a small silver cup and held it to the boy's lips. It was potent and nigh took his breath away; but when he had drunk it he struggled to his feet, looking ashamed and confused when he saw himself the center of attention of so many knights of the court.

"What is thy name, good lad?" the prince asked.

"I am known as Walter Fletcher."

"You are a brave lad," the prince said, "and if you bear you as well as a man as you did but now, I would wish no better to ride beside me in the day of battle. Should the time ever come when you tire of the peaceable life of a citizen and wish to take service in the wars, go to the Tower and ask boldly for the Prince of Wales, and I will enroll you among my own men-at-arms, and I promise you that you shall have your share of fighting as stark as that of the assault of yon heap. Now, my lords, let us ride on; I crave your pardon for having so long detained you."

Walter was some days before he could again cross London Bridge to inform his friend Geoffrey of the honor which had befallen him of being addressed by the Prince of Wales. During the interval he was forced to lie abed, and he was soundly rated by Master Giles for again getting into mischief. Geoffrey was far more sympathetic, and said: "Well, Walter, although I would not that Gaffer Giles heard me say so, I think you have had a piece of rare good fortune. It may be that you may never have cause to recall the young prince's promise to him; but should you some day decide to embrace the calling of arms, you could wish for nothing better than to ride behind the Prince of Wales. He is, by all accounts, of a most noble and generous disposition, and is said, young as he is, to be already highly skilled in arms. Men say that he will be a wise king and a gallant captain, such a one as a brave soldier might be proud to follow; and as the king will be sure to give him plenty of opportunities of distinguishing himself, those who ride with him may be certain of a chance of doing valorous deeds. I will go across the bridge to-morrow, and will have a talk with Master Fletcher. The sooner you are apprenticed the sooner you will be out of your time; and since Madge married eight years since I have been lonely in the house and shall be glad to have you with me."

Geoffrey Ward found his friend more ready to accede to his request that Walter should be apprenticed to him than he had expected. The bowyer, indeed, was a quiet man, and the high spirits and somewhat turbulent disposition of his young charge gave him so much uneasiness that he was not sorry the responsibility of keeping him in order should be undertaken by Geoffrey. Moreover, he could not but agree with the argument that the promise of the Prince of Wales offered a more favorable opportunity for Walter to enter upon the career of arms, and so, perhaps, some day to win his way back to rank and honors than could have been looked for. Therefore, on the following week Walter was indentured to the armorer, and, as was usual at the time, left his abode in Aldgate and took up his residence with his master. He threw himself with his whole heart into the work, and by the time he was fifteen was on the way to become a skillful craftsman. His frame and muscles

developed with labor, and he was now able to swing all save the very heaviest hammers in the shop. He had never abated in his practice at arms, and every day when work was over he and his master had a long bout together with cudgel or quarter-staff, sword or ax. Walter, of course, used light weapons, but so quick was he with them that Geoffrey Ward acknowledged that he needed to put out all his skill to hold his own with his pupil. But it was not alone with Geoffrey that Walter had an opportunity of learning the use of arms. Whenever a soldier, returned from the wars, came to have a weapon repaired by the armorer, he would be sure of an invitation to come in in the evening and take a stoup of ale, and tell of the battles and sieges he had gone through, and in the course of the evening would be asked to have a bout of arms with the young apprentice, whom Geoffrey represented as being eager to learn how to use the sword as well as how to make it.

Thus Walter became accustomed to different styles of fighting, but found that very few, indeed, of their visitors were nearly so well skilled with their arms as his master. Some of the soldiers were mortified at finding themselves unable to hold their own with a boy; others would take their reverses in good part and would come again, bringing with them some comrade known to be particularly skilled with his weapons, to try the temper of the armorer's apprentice. At the age of fifteen Walter had won the prize at the sports, both for the best cudgel play and for the best sword-and-buckler play among the apprentices, to the great disgust of many who had almost reached the age of manhood and were just out of their time.

On Sundays Walter always spent the day with Giles Fletcher and his wife, going to mass with them and walking in the fields, where, after service, the citizens much congregated. Since Walter had gone to work he had taken no part in the fights and frolics of his former comrades; he was, in fact, far too tired at the end of his day's work to have any desire to do aught but to sit and listen to the tales of the wars, of the many old soldiers who pervaded the country. Some of these men were disabled by wounds or long service, but the greater portion were idle scamps, who cared not for the hard blows and sufferings of a campaign, liking better to hang about taverns drinking, at the expense of those to whom they related fabulous tales of the gallant actions they had performed. Many, too, wandered over the country, sometimes in twos or threes, sometimes in larger bands, robbing and often murdering travelers or attacking lonely houses. When in one part or another their ill deeds became too notorious, the sheriffs would call out a posse of men and they would be hunted down like wild beasts. It was not, however, easy to catch them, for great tracts of forests still covered a large portion of the country and afforded them shelter.

In the country round London these pests were very numerous, for here, more than anywhere else, was there a chance of plunder. The swamps on the south side of the river had especially evil reputation. From Southwark to Putney stretched a marshy country over which, at high tides, the river frequently flowed. Here and there were wretched huts, difficult of access and affording good hiding-places for those pursued by justice, since searchers could be seen approaching a long way off, and escape could be made by paths across the swamp known only to the dwellers there, and where heavily armed men dared not follow. Further south, in the wild country round Westerham, where miles of heath and forest stretched away in all directions, was another noted place where the robber vagrants mustered thickly, and the Sheriff of Kent had much trouble with them.

The laws in those days were extremely severe, and death was the penalty of those caught plundering. The extreme severity of the laws, however, operated in favor of its breakers, since the sympathy of the people who had little to lose was with them, and unless caught red-handed in the act they could generally escape, since none save those who had themselves been robbed would say aught that would place the pursuers on their traces, or give testimony which would cost the life of a fellow-creature. The citizens of London were loud in their complaints against the discharged soldiers, for it was upon them that the loss mainly fell, and it was on their petitions to the king that the sheriffs of Middlesex and Hertford, Essex, Surrey, and Kent, were generally stirred up to put down the ill-doers.

Sometimes these hunts were conducted in a wholesale way, and the whole posse of a county would be called out. Then all found within its limits who had not land or visible occupation were collected. Any against whom charges could be brought home were hung without more ado, and the rest were put on board ship and sent across the sea to the army. Sometimes, when they found the country becoming too hot for them, these men would take service with some knight or noble going to the war, anxious to take with him as strong a following as might be, and not too particular as to the character of his soldiers.

Walter, being of an adventurous spirit, was sometimes wont of a summer evening, when his work was done, to wander across the marshes, taking with him his bow and arrows, and often bringing home a wild duck or two which he had shot in the pools. More than once surly men had accosted him, and had threatened to knock him on the head if they again found him wandering that way; but Walter laughed at their threats, and seeing that though but an apprentice lad, he might be able to send an arrow as straight to the mark as another, they were content to leave him alone.

One day when he was well-nigh in the heart of the swamp of Lambeth he saw a figure making his way across. The hour was already late and the night was falling, and the appearance of the man was so different from that of the usual denizens of the swamp that Walter wondered what his business there might be. Scarcely knowing why he did so, Walter threw himself down among some low brushwood and watched the approaching figure. When he came near he recognized the face, and saw, to his surprise, that it was a knight who had but the day before stopped at the armorer's shop to have two rivets put in his hauberk. He had particularly noticed him, because of the arrogant manner in which he spoke. Walter had himself put in the rivets, and had thought, as he buckled on the armor again, how unpleasant a countenance was that of its wearer. He was a tall and powerful man, and would have been handsome had not his eyes been too closely set together; his nose was narrow, and the expression of his face reminded Walter of a hawk. He had now laid aside his helmet, and his figure was covered with a long cloak.

"He is up to no good," Walter said to himself, "for what dealings could a knight honestly have with the ruffians who haunt these swamps? It is assuredly no business of mine, but it may lead to an adventure, and I have had no real fun since I left Aldgate. I will follow and see if I can get to the bottom of the mystery."

When he came close to the spot where Walter was lying the knight paused and looked round as if uncertain of his way. For four or five minutes he stood still, and then gave a shout of "Humphrey!" at the top of his voice. It was answered by a distant "Halloo!" and looking in the direction from which the answer had come, Walter saw a figure appear above some bushes some four hundred yards distant. The knight at once directed his steps in that direction, and Walter crept cautiously after him.

"A pest upon these swamps and quagmires," the knight said angrily as he neared the other. "Why didst not meet me and show me the way through, as before?"

"I thought that as you had come once you would be able to find your way hither again," the man said. "Had I thought that you would have missed it I would have come ten times as far, rather than have had my name shouted all over the country. However, there is no one to hear, did you shout thrice as loud, so no harm is done."

"I thought I saw a figure a short time since," the knight said.

The man looked round in all directions.

"I see none," he said, "and you may have been mistaken, for the light is waning fast. It were ill for any one I caught prying about here. But come in, sir knight; my hovel is not what your lordship is accustomed to, but we may as well talk there as here beneath the sky."

The two men disappeared from Walter's sight. The latter in much surprise crept forward, but until he reached the spot where he had last seen the speakers he was unable to account for their disappearance. Then he saw that the spot, although apparently a mere clump of bushes no higher

than the surrounding country, was really an elevated hummock of ground. Any one might have passed close to the bushes without suspecting that aught lay among them. In the center, however, the ground had been cut away, and a low doorway, almost hidden by the bushes, gave access into a half-subterranean hut; the roof was formed of an old boat turned bottom upward, and this had been covered with brown turf. It was an excellent place of concealment, as searchers might have passed within a foot of the bushes without suspecting that aught lay concealed within them.

"A clever hiding-place," Walter thought to himself. "No wonder the posse search these swamps in vain. This is the lowest and wettest part of the swamp, and would be but lightly searched, for none would suspect that there was a human habitation among these brown ditches and stagnant pools."

To his disappointment the lad could hear nothing of the conversation which was going on within the hut. The murmur of voices came to his ear, but no words were audible; however, he remained patiently, thinking that perhaps as they came out a word might be said which would give him a clew to the object of the mysterious interview between a knight and one who was evidently a fugitive from justice.

His patience was rewarded. In the half-hour which he waited the night had fallen, and a thick fog which was rising over the swamps rendered it difficult to discern anything at the distance of a few paces.

"You are quite sure that you can manage it?" a voice said as the two men issued from the hut.

"There is no difficulty in managing it," the other replied, "if the boat is punctual to the hour named. It will be getting dusk then, and if one boat runs into another no one need be surprised. Such accidents will happen."

"They will be here just before nightfall," the other said, "and you will know the boat by the white mantle the lady will wear. The reward will be fifty pieces of gold, of which you have received ten as earnest. You can trust me, and if the job be well done I shall take no count of the earnest-money."

"You may consider it as good as done," the other replied. "If the boat is there the matter is settled. Now I will lead you back across the swamps. I would not give much for your life if you tried to find the way alone. Who would have thought when you got me off from being hung, after that little affair at Bruges, that I should be able to make myself useful to your worship?"

"You may be sure," the knight replied, "that it was just because I foresaw that you might be useful that I opened the doors of your cell that night. It is always handy in times like these to be able to lay one's hand on a man whom you can hang if you choose to open your mouth."

"Did it not strike you, sir knight, that it might enter my mind that it would be very advisable for me to free myself from one who stands toward me in that relation?"

"Certainly it did," the knight replied; "but as I happen to be able to make it for your interest to serve me, that matter did not trouble me. I knew better than to bring money into this swamp of yours, when I might be attacked by half a dozen ruffians like yourself; and I took the precaution of informing Peter, the captain of my men-at-arms, of the spot to which I was going, bidding him, in case I came not back, to set a hue-and-cry on foot and hunt down all who might be found here, with the especial description of your worthy self."

Walter could hear no more; he had taken off his shoes and followed them at a distance, and their voices still acted as a guide to him through the swamp. But he feared to keep too close, as, although the darkness would conceal his figure, he might at any moment tread in a pool or ditch, and so betray his presence. Putting his foot each time to the ground with the greatest caution, he moved quietly after them. They spoke little more, but their heavy footsteps on the swampy ground were a sufficient guidance for him. At last these ceased suddenly. A few words were spoken, and then he heard returning steps. He drew aside a few feet and crouched down, saw a dim figure pass through the mist, and then resumed his way.

The ground was firmer now, and, replacing his shoes, he walked briskly on. As he neared the higher ground along which the road ran he heard two horsemen galloping away in the distance. He now turned his face east, and after an hour's walking he reached the armorer's.

"Why, Walter, you are late," the smith said. "The men are in bed this hour or more, and I myself can scarce keep awake. Where hast thou been, my boy?"

"I have been in the swamps and lost my way," Walter replied.

"It is a bad neighborhood, lad, and worse are the people who live there. If I had my way the whole posse should be called out, and the marshes searched from end to end, and all found there should be knocked on the head and thrown into their own ditches. There would be no fear of any honest man coming to his end thereby; but now to bed, lad. You can tell me all about it to-morrow; but we have a rare day's work before us, and the fire must be alight at daybreak."

On his way back Walter had debated with himself whether to inform his master of what had happened. He was, however, bent upon having an adventure on his own account, and it was a serious thing in those days for an apprentice lad to bring an accusation against a noble. The city would not indeed allow even an apprentice to be overridden, and although Geoffrey Ward's forge stood beyond the city walls it was yet within the liberties, the city allowing its craftsmen to open shops just outside the gates, and to enjoy the same privileges as if dwelling actually within the walls.

On the following afternoon Walter asked leave to cease work an hour earlier than usual, as he wished to go across into the city. The armorer was surprised, since this was the first time that such a thing had happened since the lad had worked for him.

"What are you up to, Walter? – some mischief, I will be bound. Go, lad; you have worked so steadily that you have well earned more than an hour's holiday should you want it."

Walter crossed the bridge, and seeking out four or five of his old companions, begged them to bring their bows and clubs and rejoin him at the stairs by London Bridge. To their laughing inquiries whether he meant to go a-shooting of fish, he told them to ask no questions until they joined him. As soon as work was over the boys gathered at the steps, where Walter had already engaged a boat. There were some mocking inquiries from the watermen standing about as to where they were going shooting. Walter answered with some light chaff, and, two of the party taking oars, they started up the river.

"Now I will tell you what we are bent on," Walter said. "From some words I overheard I believe that some of the ruffians over in the marshes are this evening going to make an attack upon a boat with a lady in it coming down the river. We will be on the spot, and can give them a reception such as they do not expect."

"Do you know who the lady is, Walter?"

"I have not the least idea. I only caught a few words, and may be wrong; still it will do no harm should I be mistaken."

The tide was running down strongly, for there had been a good deal of rain during the preceding week, and all night it had poured heavily. It was fine now, but the stream was running down thick and turbid, and it needed all the boys' efforts to force the wherry against it. They rowed by turns; all were fairly expert at the exercise, for in those days the Thames was at once the great highway and playground of London. To the wharves below the bridge ships brought the rich merchandise of Italy and the Low Countries; while from above, the grain needed for the wants of the great city was floated down in barges from the west.

Passing the Temple, the boys rowed along by the green banks and fields as far as Westminster, which at that time was almost a rival of the city, for here were the abbey and great monastery; here were the king's palace and court, and the houses of many of his nobles. Then they went along by the low shores of Millbank, keeping a sharp lookout for boats going down with the stream. It was already getting dark, for Walter had not allowed for the strength of the stream, and he was full of anxiety lest he should arrive too late.

CHAPTER III.
A THWARTED PLOT

A boat was rowing rapidly down the stream. It had passed the village of Chelsea, and the men were doing their best to reach their destination at Westminster before nightfall. Two men were rowing; in the stern sat a lady with a girl of about eleven years old. A woman, evidently a servant, sat beside the lady, while behind, steering the boat, was an elderly retainer.

"It is getting dark," the lady said; "I would that my Cousin James had not detained us so long at Richmond, and then after all he was unable to accompany us. I like not being out on the river so late."

"No, indeed, my lady," the woman replied; "I have heard tell lately much of the doings of the river pirates. They say that boats are often picked up, stove in and broken, and that none know what had become of their occupants, and that bodies, gashed and hewn, are often found floating in the river."

"How horrible," the girl said; "your tale makes me shiver, Martha; I would you had said nothing about it till we were on land again."

"Do not be afraid, Edith," the lady said cheerfully; "we shall soon be safe at Westminster."

There were now only two or three boats to be seen on the river. They were nearing the end of their journey now, and the great pile of the abbey could be seen through the darkness. A boat with several men in it was seen rowing across the river toward the Lambeth side. It was awkwardly managed.

"Look out!" the steersman of the boat coming down stream shouted; "you will run into us if you don't mind."

An order was given in the other boat, the men strained to their oars, and in an instant the boat ran with a crash into the side of the other, cutting it down to the water's edge. For a minute there was a wild scene of confusion; the women shrieked, the watermen shouted, and, thinking that it was an accident, strove, as the boat sank from under them, to climb into that which had run them down. They were speedily undeceived. One was sunk by a heavy blow with an oar, the other was stabbed with a dagger, while the assailants struck fiercely at the old man and the women.

At this moment, however, a third boat made its appearance on the scene, its occupants uttering loud shouts. As they rowed toward the spot their approach was heralded by a shower of arrows. Two of the ruffians were struck – one fell over mortally wounded, the other sank down into the boat.

"Row, men, row," their leader shouted, "or we shall all be taken."

Again seizing their oars, the rowers started at full speed toward the Lambeth shore. The arrows of their pursuers still fell among them, two more of their number being wounded before they reached the opposite shore. The pursuit was not continued, the new-comers ceasing to row at the spot where the catastrophe had taken place. Walter stood up in the boat and looked round. A floating oar, a stretcher, and a sheep-skin which had served as a cushion alone floated.

Suddenly there was a choking cry heard a few yards down stream, and Walter leaped into the river. A few strokes took him to the side of the girl, and he found, on throwing his arm around her, that she was still clasped in her mother's arms. Seizing them both, Walter shouted to his comrades. They had already turned the boat's head and in a minute were alongside.

It was a difficult task to get the mother and child on board, as the girl refused to loose her hold. It was, however, accomplished, and the child sat still and quiet by Walter's side, while his comrades endeavored to stanch the blood which was flowing from a severe wound in her mother's head. When they had bound it up they rubbed her hands, and by the time they had reached the

steps at Westminster the lady opened her eyes. For a moment she looked bewildered, and then, on glancing round, she gave a low cry of delight at seeing her child sitting by Walter's side.

On reaching the steps the boys handed her over to the care of the watermen there, who soon procured a litter and carried her, she being still too weak to walk, to the dwelling of the Earl of Talbot, where she said she was expected. The apprentices rowed back to London Bridge, elated at the success of their enterprise, but regretting much that they had arrived too late to hinder the outrage, or to prevent the escape of its perpetrators.

Walter on his return home related the whole circumstance to his master.

"I would you had told me, Walter," the latter said, "since we might have taken precautions which would have prevented this foul deed from taking place. However, I can understand your wanting to accomplish the adventure without my aid; but we must think now what had best be said and done. As the lady belongs to the court, there is sure to be a fine pother about the matter, and you and all who were there will be examined touching your share of the adventure, and how you came to be upon the spot. The others will, of course, say that they were there under your direction; and we had best think how much of your story you had better tell."

"Why should I not tell it all?" Walter asked indignantly.

"You should never tell a lie, Walter; but in days like these it is safer sometimes not to tell more than is necessary. It is a good rule in life, my boy, to make no more enemies than may be needful. This knight, who is doubtless a great villain, has maybe powerful friends, and it is as well, if it can be avoided, that you should not embroil yourself with these. Many a man has been knocked on the head or stabbed on a dark night, because he could not keep his tongue from wagging. 'Least said, the sooner mended,' is a good proverb; but I will think it over to-night, and tell you in the morning."

When they met again in the workshop the armorer said: "Clean yourself up after breakfast, Walter, and put on your best clothes. I will go with you before the mayor, and then you shall tell him your story. There is sure to be a stir about it before the day is done. As we walk thither we can settle how much of your story it is good to tell."

On their way over the bridge Geoffrey told Walter that he thought he had better tell the whole story exactly as it had occurred, concealing only the fact that he had recognized the knight's face. "You had best, too," he said, "mention naught about the white cloak. If we can catch the man of the hut in the swamp, likely enough the rack will wring from him the name of his employer, and in that case, if you are brought up as a witness against him you will of course say that you recognize his face; but 'tis better that the accusation should not come from you. No great weight would be given to the word of a 'prentice boy as against that of a noble. It is as bad for earthen pots to knock against brass ones as it is for a yeoman in a leathern jerkin to stand up against a knight in full armor."

"But unless the lady knows her enemy she may fall again into his snares."

"I have thought of that," Geoffrey said, "and we will take measures to prevent it."

"But how can we prevent it?" Walter asked, surprised.

"We must find out who this knight may be, which should, methinks, not be difficult. Then we will send to him a message that his share in this night's work is known to several, and that if any harm should ever again be attempted against the lady or her daughter, he shall be denounced before King Edward himself as the author of the wrong. I trust, however, that we may capture the man of the swamp, and that the truth may be wrung from him."

By this time they had arrived at the guildhall, and making their way into the court, Geoffrey demanded private speech with the lord mayor.

"Can you not say in open court what is your business?" the lord mayor asked.

"I fear that if I did it would defeat the ends of justice."

Retiring with the chief magistrate into an inner room, Geoffrey desired Walter to tell his story. This he did, ending by saying that he regretted much that he had not at once told his master what he had heard; but that, although he deemed evil was intended, he did not know that murder was

meant, and thought it but concerned the carrying off of some damsel, and that this he had intended, by the aid of his comrades, to prevent.

"You have done well, Master Walter, since that be your name," the magistrate said. "That you might have done better is true, for had you acted otherwise you might have prevented murder from being done. Still one cannot expect old heads upon young shoulders. Give me the names of those who were with you, for I shall doubtless receive a message from Westminster this morning to know if I have heard aught of the affair. In the mean time we must take steps to secure these pirates of the marsh. The ground is across the river, and lies out of my jurisdiction."

"It is for that reason," Geoffrey said, "that I wished that the story should be told to you privately, since the men concerned might well have sent a friend to the court to hear if aught was said which might endanger them."

"I will give you a letter to a magistrate of Surrey, and he will dispatch some constables under your guidance to catch these rascals. I fear there have been many murders performed by them lately besides that in question, and you will be doing a good service to the citizens by aiding in the capture of these men."

"I will go willingly," the smith assented.

"I will at once send off a messenger on horseback," the lord mayor said, after a moment's thought. "It will be quicker. I will tell the justice that if he will come to the meeting of the roads on Kensington Common, at seven this evening, you will be there with your apprentice to act as a guide."

"I will," the armorer said, "and will bring with me two or three of my men who are used to hard blows, for, to tell you the truth, I have no great belief in the valor of constables, and we may meet with a stout resistance."

"So be it," the lord mayor said; "and luck be with you, for these men are the scourges of the river."

That evening the armorer shut up his shop sooner than usual, and accompanied by Walter and four of his workmen, all carrying stout oaken cudgels, with hand-axes in their girdles, started along the lonely road to Kensington. Half an hour after their arrival the magistrate, with ten men, rode up. He was well pleased at the sight of the reënforcement which awaited him, for the river pirates might be expected to make a desperate resistance. Geoffrey advised a halt for a time until it should be well-nigh dark, as the marauders might have spies set to give notice should strangers enter the marsh.

They started before it was quite dark, as Walter doubted whether he should be able to lead them straight to the hut after the night had completely fallen. He felt, however, tolerably sure of his locality, for he had noticed that two trees grew on the edge of the swamp just at the spot where he had left it. He had no difficulty in finding these, and at once led the way. The horses of the magistrate and his followers were left in charge of three of their number.

"You are sure you are going right?" the magistrate said to Walter. "The marsh seems to stretch everywhere, and we might well fall into a quagmire, which would swallow us all up."

"I am sure of my way," Walter answered; "see, yonder clump of bushes, which you can just observe above the marsh, a quarter of a mile away, is the spot where the house of their leader is situated."

With strict injunctions that not a word was to be spoken until the bush was surrounded, and that all were to step noiselessly and with caution, the party moved forward. It was now nearly dark, and as they approached the hut, sounds of laughter and revelry were heard.

"They are celebrating their success in a carouse," Geoffrey said. "We shall catch them nicely in a trap."

When they came close a man who was sitting just at the low mouth of the hut suddenly sprang to his feet and shouted, "Who goes there?" He had apparently been placed as sentry, but

had joined in the potations going on inside, and had forgotten to look round from time to time to see that none were approaching.

At his challenge the whole party rushed forward, and as they reached the hut the men from within came scrambling out, sword in hand. For two or three minutes there was a sharp fight, and had the constables been alone they would have been defeated, for they were outnumbered and the pirates were desperate.

The heavy clubs of the armorers decided the fight. One or two of the band alone succeeded in breaking through, the rest were knocked down and bound; not, however, until several severe wounds had been inflicted on their assailants.

When the fray was over, it was found that nine prisoners had been captured. Some of these were stunned by the blows which the smiths had dealt them, and two or three were badly wounded; all were more or less injured in the struggle. When they recovered their senses they were made to get on their feet, and with their hands tied securely behind them, were marched between a double line of their captors off the marsh.

"Thanks for your services," the justice said when they had gained the place where they had left their horses. "Nine of my men shall tie each one of these rascals to their stirrups by halters round their necks, and we will give them a smart run into Richmond, where we will lodge them in the jail. Tomorrow is Sunday; on Monday they will be brought before me, and I shall want the evidence of Master Walter Fletcher and of those who were in the boat with him as to what took place on the river. Methinks the evidence on that score, and the resistance which they offered us this evening, will be sufficient to put a halter round their necks; but from what I have heard by the letter which the lord mayor sent me, there are others higher in rank concerned in the affair; doubtless we shall find means to make these ruffians speak."

Accordingly, at the justice's orders, halters were placed round the necks of the prisoners, the other ends being attached to the saddles, and the party set off at a pace which taxed to the utmost the strength of the wounded men. Geoffrey and his party returned in high spirits to Southwark.

On the Monday Walter went over to Richmond, accompanied by the armorers and by the lads who had been in the boat with him. The nine ruffians, strongly guarded, were brought up in the justice room. Walter first gave his evidence, and related how he had overheard a portion of the conversation which led him to believe that an attack would be made upon the boat coming down the river.

"Can you identify either of the prisoners as being the man whom you saw at the door of the hut?"

"No," Walter said. "When I first saw him I was too far off to make out his face. When he left the hut it was dark."

"Should you know the other man, the one who was addressed as sir knight, if you saw him again?"

"I should," Walter replied. He then gave an account of the attack upon the boat, but said that in the suddenness of the affair and the growing darkness he noticed none of the figures distinctly enough to recognize them again. Two or three of the other apprentices gave similar testimony as to the attack.

A gentleman then presented himself, and gave his name as Sir William de Hertford. He said that he had come at the request of the Lady Alice Vernon, who was still suffering from the effects of the wound and immersion. She had requested him to say that at some future occasion she would appear to testify, but that in the confusion and suddenness of the attack she had noticed no faces in the boat which assailed them, and could identify none concerned in the affair.

The justice who had headed the attack on the hut then gave his evidence as to that affair, the armorer also relating the incidents of the conflict.

"The prisoners will be committed for trial," the justice said. "At present there is no actual proof that any of them were concerned in this murderous outrage beyond the fact that they were taken in the place where it was planned. The suspicion is strong that some at least were engaged in it. Upon the persons of all of them were valuable daggers, chains, and other ornaments, which could not have been come by honestly, and I doubt not that they form part of the gang which has so long been a terror to peaceful travelers alike by the road and river, and it may be that some who have been robbed will be able to identify the articles taken upon them. They are committed for trial: firstly, as having been concerned in the attack upon Dame Alice Vernon; secondly, as being notorious ill-livers and robbers; thirdly, as having resisted lawful arrest by the king's officers. The greatest criminal in the affair is not at present before me, but it may be that from such information as Dame Vernon may be able to furnish, and from such confessions as justice will be able to wring from the prisoners, he will at the trial stand beside his fellows."

Walter returned to town with his companions. On reaching the armorer's they found a retainer of the Earl of Talbot awaiting them, with the message that the Lady Alice Vernon wished the attendance of Walter Fletcher, whose name she had learned from the lord mayor as that of the lad to whom she and her daughter owed their lives, at noon on the following day, at the residence of the Earl of Talbot.

"That is the worst of an adventure," Walter said crossly, after the retainer had departed. "One can't have a bit of excitement without being sent for, and thanked, and stared at. I would rather fight the best swordsman in the city than have to go down to the mansion of Earl Talbot with my cap in my hand."

Geoffrey laughed. "You must indeed have your cap in your hand, Walter; but you need not bear yourself in that spirit. The 'prentice of a London citizen may have just as much honest pride and independence as the proudest earl at Westminster; but carry not independence too far. Remember that if you yourself had received a great service you would be hurt if the donor refused to receive your thanks; and it would be churlish indeed were you to put on sullen looks, or to refuse to accept any present which the lady whose life you have saved may make you. It is strange, indeed, that it should be Dame Vernon, whose husband, Sir Jasper Vernon, received the fiefs of Westerham and Hyde."

"Why should it be curious that it is she?" Walter asked.

"Oh!" Geoffrey said rather confusedly. "I was not thinking – that is – I mean that it is curious because Bertha Fletcher was for years a dependent on the family of Sir Roland Somers, who was killed in the troubles when the king took the reins of government in his hands, and his lands, being forfeit, were given to Sir Jasper Vernon, who aided the king in that affair."

"I wish you would tell me about that," Walter said. "How was it that there was any trouble as to King Edward having kingly authority?"

"It happened in this way," Geoffrey said. "King Edward II., his father, was a weak prince, governed wholly by favorites and unable to hold in check the turbulent barons. His queen, Isabella of France, sister of the French king, a haughty and ambitious woman, determined to snatch the reins of power from the indolent hands of her husband, and after a visit to her brother she returned with an army from Hainault in order to dethrone him. She was accompanied by her eldest son, and after a short struggle the king was dethroned. He had but few friends, and men thought that under the young Edward, who had already given promise of virtue and wisdom, some order might be introduced into the realm. He was crowned Edward III., thus, at the early age of fifteen, usurping the throne of his father. The real power, however, remained with Isabella, who was president of the council of regency, and who, in her turn, was governed by her favorite Mortimer. England soon found that the change which had been made was far from beneficial. The government was by turns weak and oppressive. The employment of foreign troops was regarded with the greatest hostility

by the people, and the insolence of Mortimer alienated the great barons. Finally, the murder of the dethroned king excited throughout the kingdom a feeling of horror and loathing against the queen.

"All this feeling, however, was confined to her, Edward, who was but a puppet in her hands, being regarded with affection and pity. Soon after his succession the young king was married to our queen, Philippa of Hainault, who is as good as she is beautiful, and who is loved from one end of the kingdom to the other. I can tell you, the city was a sight to see when she entered with the king. Such pageants and rejoicing were never known. They were so young, he not yet sixteen and she but fourteen, and yet to bear on their shoulders the weight of the state. A braver-looking lad and a fairer girl mine eyes never looked on. It was soon after this that the events arose which led to the war with France, but this is too long a tale for me to tell you now. The Prince of Wales was born on the 15th of June, 1330, two years after the royal marriage.

"So far the king had acquiesced quietly in the authority of his mother, but he now paid a visit to France, and doubtless the barons around him there took advantage of his absence from her tutelage to shake her influence over his mind; and at the same time a rising took place at home against her authority. This was suppressed, and the Earl of Kent, the king's uncle, was arrested and executed by Isabella. This act of severity against his uncle no doubt hastened the prince's determination to shake off the authority of his haughty mother and to assume the reins of government himself. The matter, however, was not easy to accomplish. Mortimer having the whole of the royal revenue at his disposal, had attached to himself by ties of interest a large number of barons, and had in his pay nearly two hundred knights and a large body of men-at-arms. Thus it was no easy matter to arrest him. It was determined that the deed should be done at the meeting of the parliament at Nottingham. Here Mortimer appeared with Isabella in royal pomp. They took up their abode at the castle, while the king and other members of the royal family were obliged to content themselves with an inferior place of residence.

"The gates of the castle were locked at sunset, and the keys brought by the constable, Sir William Eland, and handed to the queen herself. This knight was a loyal and gallant gentleman, and regarded Mortimer with no affection, and when he received the king's commands to assist the barons charged to arrest him he at once agreed to do so. He was aware of the existence of a subterranean communication leading from the interior of the castle to the outer country, and by this, on the night of the 19th of October, 1330, he led nine resolute knights – the Lords Montague, Suffolk, Stafford, Molins, and Clinton, with three brothers of the name of Bohun, and Sir John Nevil – into the heart of the castle. Mortimer was found surrounded by a number of his friends. On the sudden entry of the knights known to be hostile to Mortimer his friends drew their swords, and a short but desperate fight took place. Many were wounded, and Sir Hugh Turpleton and Richard Monmouth were slain. Mortimer was carried to London, and was tried and condemned by parliament, and executed for felony and treason. Several of his followers were executed, and others were attacked in their strongholds and killed; among these was Sir Roland Somers.

"Queen Isabella was confined in Castle Risings, where she still remains a prisoner. Such, Walter, were the troubles which occurred when King Edward first took up the reins of power in this realm; and now, let's to supper, for I can tell you that my walk to Kingston has given me a marvelous appetite. We have three or four hours' work yet before we go to bed, for that Milan harness was promised for the morrow, and the repairs are too delicate for me to intrust it to the men. It is good to assist the law, but this work of attending as a witness makes a grievous break in the time of a busy man. It is a pity, Walter, that your mind is so set on soldiering, for you would have made a marvelous good craftsman. However, I reckon that after you have seen a few years of fighting in France, and have got some of your wild blood let out, you will be glad enough to settle down here with me; as you know, our profits are good and work plentiful; and did I choose I might hold mine head higher than I do among the citizens; and you, if you join me, may well aspire to

a place in the common council, ay, and even to an alderman's gown, in which case I may yet be addressing you as the very worshipful my lord mayor."

"Pooh!" Walter laughed; "a fig for your lord mayors! I would a thousand times rather be a simple squire in the following of our young prince."

CHAPTER IV.
A KNIGHT'S CHAIN

The following morning Walter put on the sober russet dress which he wore on Sundays and holidays, for gay colors were not allowed to the apprentices, and set out for Westminster. Although he endeavored to assume an air of carelessness and ease as he approached the dwelling of Earl Talbot, he was very far from feeling comfortable, and wished in his heart that his master had accompanied him on his errand. Half a dozen men-at-arms were standing on the steps of the mansion, who looked with haughty surprise at the young apprentice.

"Dame Alice Vernon has sent to express her desire to have speech with me," he said quietly, "and I would fain know if she can receive me."

"Here, Dikon," one of the men cried to another within the hall. "This is the lad you were sent to fetch yesterday. I wondered much who the city apprentice was who, with such an assured air, marched up to the door; but if what thou sayest be true, that he saved the life of Dame Vernon and her little daughter, he must be a brave lad, and would be more in place among men and soldiers than in serving wares behind the counter of a fat city tradesman."

"I serve behind no counter," Walter said indignantly. "I am an armorer, and mayhap can use arms as well as make them."

There was a laugh among the men at the boy's sturdy self-assertion, and then the man named Dikon said:

"Come along, lad. I will take you to Dame Vernon at once. She is expecting you; and, my faith, it would not be safe to leave you standing here long, for I see you would shortly be engaged in splitting the weasands of my comrades."

There was another roar of laughter from the men, and Walter, somewhat abashed, followed his conductor into the house. Leading him through the hall and along several corridors, whose spaciousness and splendor quite overpowered the young apprentice, he handed him over to a waiting-woman, who ushered him into an apartment where Dame Vernon was reclining on a couch. Her little daughter was sitting upon a low stool beside her, and upon seeing Walter she leaped to her feet, clapping her hands.

"Oh! mother, this is the boy that rescued us out of the river."

The lady looked with some surprise at the lad. She had but a faint remembrance of the events which occurred between the time when she received a blow from the sword of one of her assailants and that when she found herself on a couch in the abode of her kinsman; and when she had been told that she had been saved by a city apprentice, she had pictured to herself a lad of a very different kind to him who now stood before her.

Walter was now nearly sixteen years old. His frame was very powerful and firmly knit. His dark-brown hair was cut short, but, being somewhat longer than was ordinary with the apprentices, fell with a slight wave back on his forehead. His bearing was respectful, and at the same time independent. There was none of that confusion which might be expected on the part of a lad from the city in the presence of a lady of rank. His dark, heavy eyebrows, resolute mouth, and square chin gave an expression of sternness to his face, which was belied by the merry expression of his eyes and the bright smile when he was spoken to.

"I have to thank you, young sir," she said, holding out her hand, which Walter, after the custom of the time, raised to his lips, bending upon one knee as he did so, "for the lives of myself and my daughter, which would surely have been lost had you not jumped over to save us."

"I am glad that I arrived in time to be of aid," Walter said frankly; "but indeed I am rather to be blamed than praised, for had I, when I heard the plotting against the safety of the boat, told

my master of it, as I should have done, instead of taking the adventure upon mine own shoulders, doubtless a boat would have been sent up in time to prevent the attack from taking place. Therefore, instead of being praised for having arrived a little too late, I should be rated for not having come there in time."

Dame Vernon smiled.

"Although you may continue to insist that you are to blame, this does not alter the fact that you have saved our lives. Is there any way in which I can be useful to you? Are you discontented with your state? for, in truth, you look as if Nature had intended you for a gallant soldier rather than a city craftsman. Earl Talbot, who is my uncle, would, I am sure, receive you into his following should you so choose it, and I would gladly pay for the canceling of your indentures."

"I thank you, indeed, lady, for your kind offices," Walter said earnestly; "for the present I am well content to remain at my craft, which is that of an armorer, until, at any rate, I have gained such manly strength and vigor as would fit me for a man-at-arms, and my good master, Geoffrey Ward, will, without payment received, let me go when I ask that grace of him."

"Edith, go and look from the window at the boats passing along the river; and now," she went on as the girl had obeyed her orders, "I would fain ask you more about the interview you overheard in the marshes. Sir William de Hertford told me of the evidence that you had given before the justice. It is passing strange that he who incited the other to the deed should have been by him termed 'Sir Knight.' Maybe it was merely a nickname among his fellows."

"Before I speak, lady," Walter said quietly, "I would fain know whether you wish to be assured of the truth. Sometimes, they say, it is wiser to remain in ignorance; at other times forewarned is forearmed. Frankly, I did not tell all I know before the court, deeming that peradventure you might wish to see me, and that I could then tell the whole to your private ear, should you wish to know it, and you could then bid me either keep silence or proclaim all I knew when the trial of these evil-doers comes on."

"You seem to me to be wise beyond your years, young sir," the lady said.

"The wisdom is not mine, lady, but my master's. I took counsel with him, and acted as he advised me."

"I would fain know all," the lady said. "I have already strange suspicions of one from whom assuredly I looked not for such evil designs. It will grieve me to be convinced that the suspicions are well founded; but it will be better to know the truth than to remain in a state of doubt."

"The person, then, was a knight, for I had seen him before when he came in knightly harness into my master's shop to have two rivets put into his hauberk. I liked not his face then, and should have remembered it anywhere. I knew him at once when I saw him. He was a dark-faced knight, handsome, and yet with features which reminded me of a hawk."

Dame Vernon gave a little exclamation, which assured the lad that she recognized the description.

"You may partly know, lady, whether it is he whom you suppose, for he said that he would detain your boat so that it should not come along until dark, and, moreover, he told them that they would know the boat since you would be wrapped in a white mantle."

The lady sat for some time with her face hidden in her hands.

"It is as I feared," she said at last, "and it grieves me to the heart to think that one who, although not so nearly related in blood, I regarded as a brother, should have betrayed me to death. My mind is troubled indeed, and I know not what course I shall take, whether to reveal this dreadful secret or to conceal it."

"I may say, madam," Walter said earnestly, "that should you wish the matter to remain a secret, you may rely upon it that I will tell no more at the trial than I revealed yesterday; but I would remind you that there is a danger that the leader of yon ruffians, who is probably alone acquainted with the name of his employer, may, under the influence of the torture, reveal it."

"That fear is for the present past, since a messenger arrived from Kingston but a few minutes since, saying that yester even, under the threat of torture, the prisoners had pointed out the one among their number who was their chief. This morning, however, it was found that the warder who had charge of them had been bribed; he was missing from his post, and the door of the cell wherein the principal villain had been immured, apart from the others, was opened, and he had escaped."

"Then," Walter said, "it is now open to you to speak or be silent as you will. You will pardon my forwardness if I say that my master, in talking the matter over with me, suggested that this evil knight might be scared from attempting any future enterprise against you were he informed that it was known to several persons that he was the author of this outrage, and that if any further attempts were at any time made against you, the proofs of his crime would be laid before the king."

"Thanks, good lad," the lady said, "for your suggestion. Should I decide to keep the matter secret, I will myself send him a message to that effect, in such guise that he would not know whence it comes. And now, I would fain reward you for what you have done for us; and," she went on, seeing a flush suddenly mount upon the lad's face as he made a half-step backward, "before I saw you, had thought of offering you a purse of gold, which, although it would but poorly reward your services, would yet have proved useful to you when the time came for you to start as a craftsman on your own account; but now that I have seen you, I feel that although there are few who think themselves demeaned by accepting gifts of money in reward for services, you would rather my gratitude took some other form. It can only do that of offering you such good services that I can render with Earl Talbot, should you ever choose the profession of arms; and in the mean time, as a memento of the lives you have saved, you will, I am sure, not refuse this chain," and she took a very handsome one of gold from her neck, "the more so since it was the gift of her majesty, our gracious queen, to myself. She will, I am sure, acquit me of parting with her gift when I tell her that I transferred it to one who had saved the lives of myself and my daughter, and who was too proud to accept other acknowledgment."

Coloring deeply, and with tears in his eyes at the kindness and thoughtful consideration of the lady, Walter knelt on one knee before her, and she placed round his neck the long gold chain which she had been wearing.

"It is a knight's chain," the lady said, smiling, "and was part of the spoil gained by King Edward from the French. Maybe," she added kindly, "it will be worn by a knight again. Stranger things have happened, you know."

Walter flushed again with pleasure.

"Maybe, lady," he said modestly, "even apprentices have their dreams, and men-at-arms may always hope, by deeds of valor, to attain a knight's spurs even though they may not be of noble blood or have served as page and squire to a baron; but whether as a 'prentice or soldier, I hope I shall never do discredit to your gift."

"Edith, come here," Dame Vernon said, "I have done talking now. And what are you going to give this brave knight of ours who saved us from drowning?"

The girl looked thoughtfully at Walter. "I don't think you would care for presents," she said; "and you look as if a sword or a horse would suit you better than a girl's gift. And yet I should like to give you something, such as ladies give their knights who have done brave deeds for them. It must be something quite my own, and you must take it as a keepsake. What shall it be, mamma?"

"Give him the bracelet which your cousin gave you last week," her mother said; "I would rather that you did not keep it, and I know you are not very fond of him."

"I can't bear him," the girl said earnestly, "and I wish he would not kiss me; he always looks as if he were going to bite, and I will gladly give his bracelet to this brave boy."

"Very well, Edith, fetch the bracelet from that coffer in the corner."

The girl went to the coffer and brought out the little bracelet; then she approached Walter.

"You must go down on your knee," she said; "true knights always do that to receive their lady's gifts. Now hold out your hand. There," she went on in a pretty imperious way, "take this gage as a reward of your valor, and act ever as a true knight in the service of your lady."

Bending down she dropped a kiss upon Walter's glowing cheek, and then, half-frightened at her own temerity, ran back to her mother's side.

"And now," Dame Vernon went on, "will you thank your five comrades for their service in the matter, and give them each two gold pieces to spend as they will?"

"He is a noble lad," Dame Vernon had said to herself when Walter had taken his leave. "Would he had been the son of one of the nobles of the court! It might have been then, if he had distinguished himself in war, as he would surely do, that the king might have assigned Edith to him. As her lord and guardian he is certain to give her hand as a reward for valor in the field, and it may well be to a man with whom she would be less happy than with this 'prentice lad; but there, I need not be troubling myself about a matter which is five or six years distant yet. Still, the thought that Edith is a ward of the crown, and that her hand must go where the king wills, often troubles me. However, I have a good friend in the queen, who will, I know, exert what influence she has in getting me a good husband for my child. But even for myself I have some fears, since the king hinted, when last he saw me, that it was time I looked out for another mate, for that the vassals of Westerham and Hyde needed a lord to lead them in the field. However, I hope that my answer that they were always at his service under the leading of my Cousin James will suffice for him. Now, what am I to do in that matter? Who would have thought that he so coveted my lands that he would have slain me and Edith to possess himself of them? His own lands are thrice as broad as mine, though men say that he has dipped deeply into them and owes much money to the Jews. He is powerful and has many friends, and although Earl Talbot would stand by me, yet the unsupported word of an apprentice boy were but poor evidence on which to charge a powerful baron of such a crime as this. It were best, methinks, to say naught about it, but to bury the thought in my own heart. Nevertheless, I will not fail to take the precaution which the lad advised, and to let Sir James know that there are some who have knowledge of his handiwork. I hear he crosses the seas to-morrow to join the army, and it may be long ere he return. I shall have plenty of time to consider how I had best shape my conduct toward him on his return; but assuredly he shall never be friendly with me again or frighten Edith with his kisses."

"Well, Walter, has it been such a dreadful business as you expected?" the armorer asked the lad when he reëntered the shop. "The great folks have not eaten you, at any rate."

"It has not been dreadful," Walter replied with a smile, "though I own that it was not pleasant when I first arrived at the great mansion; but the lady put me quite at my ease, and she talked to me for some time, and finally she bestowed on me this chain, which our lady, the queen, had herself given her."

"It is a knight's chain and a heavy one," Geoffrey said, examining it, "of Genoese work, I reckon, and worth a large sum. It will buy you harness when you go to the wars."

"I would rather fight in the thickest *mêlée* in a cloth doublet," Walter said indignantly, "than part with a single link of it."

"I did but jest, Walter," Geoffrey said, laughing; "but as you will not sell it, and you cannot wear it, you had best give it me to put aside in my strong coffer until you get of knightly rank."

"Lady Vernon said," the lad replied, "that she hoped one day it might again belong to a knight; and if I live," he added firmly, "it shall."

"Oh! she has been putting these ideas into your head; nice notions truly for a London apprentice! I shall be laying a complaint before the lord mayor against Dame Vernon, for unsettling the mind of my apprentice and setting him above his work. And the little lady, what said she? Did she give you her colors and bid you wear them at a tourney?"

Walter colored hotly.

"Ah! I have touched you," laughed the armorer; "come now, out with the truth. My lad," he added more gravely, "there is no shame in it; you know that I have always encouraged your wishes to be a soldier, and have done my best to render you as good a one as any who draws sword 'neath the king's banner, and assuredly I would not have taken all these pains with you did I think that you were always to wear an iron cap and trail a pike. I too, lad, hope some day to see you a valiant knight, and have reasons that you wot not of for my belief that it will be so. No man rises to rank and fame any the less quickly because he thinks that bright eyes will grow brighter at his success."

"But, Geoffrey, you are talking surely at random. The Lady Edith Vernon is but a child; a very beautiful child," he added reverently, "and such that when she grows up the bravest knight in England might be proud to win. What folly for me, the son of a city bowyer, and as yet but an apprentice, to raise mine eyes so high!"

"The higher one looks the higher one goes," the armorer said sententiously. "You aspire some day to become a knight, you may well aspire also to win the hand of Mistress Edith Vernon. She is five years younger than yourself, and you will be twenty-two when she is seventeen. You have time to make your way yet, and I tell you, though why it matters not, that I would rather you set your heart on winning Mistress Edith Vernon than any other heiress of broad lands in merry England. You have saved her life, and so have made the first step and a long one. Be ever brave, gentle, and honorable, and, I tell you, you need not despair; and now, lad, we have already lost too much time in talking; let us to our work."

That evening Walter recalled to Geoffrey his promise to tell him the causes which had involved England in so long and bloody a war with France.

"It is a tangled skein," Geoffrey said, "and you must follow me carefully. First, with a piece of chalk I will draw upon the wall the pedigree of the royal line of France from Philip downward, and then you will see how it is that our King Edward and Philip of Valois came to be rival claimants to the throne of France.

"Now, you see that our King Edward is nephew of Charles le Bel, the last King of France, while Philip of Valois is only nephew of Philip le Bel, the father of Charles. Edward is consequently in the direct line, and had Isabella been a man instead of a woman his right to the throne would be unquestionable. In France, however, there is a law, called the Salic law, which excludes females from the throne; but it is maintained by many learned in the law, that although a female is held to be incompetent to reign because from her sex she cannot lead her armies to battle, yet she no way forfeits otherwise her rights, and that her son is therefore the heir to the throne. If this contention, which is held by all English jurists, and by many in France also, be well founded, Edward is the rightful King of France. Philip of Valois contends that the Salic law not only bars a female from ascending the throne, but also destroys all her rights, and that the succession goes not to her sons, but to the next heir male; in which case, of course, Philip is rightful king. It is not for me to say which view is the right one, but certainly the great majority of those who have been consulted have decided that, according to ancient law and usage, the right lies with Edward. But in these matters 'right is not always might.' Had Isabella married a French noble instead of an English king it is probable that her son's claims to the throne would have been allowed without dispute, but her son is King of England, and the French nobles prefer being ruled by one of themselves to becoming united with England under one king.

"At the time of the death of the last king, Edward was still but a boy under the tuition of his mother, Philip was a man, and upon the spot, therefore he was able to win support by his presence and promises, and so it came that the peers of France declared Philip of Valois to be their rightful monarch. Here in England, at a parliament held at Northampton, the rights of Edward were discussed and asserted, and the Bishops of Worcester and Coventry were dispatched to Paris to protest against the validity of Philip's nomination. As, however, the country was not in a position to enforce the claim of their young king by arms, Philip became firmly seated as King of France,

and having shown great energy in at once marching against and repressing the people of Flanders, who were in a state of rebellion against their count, one of the feudatories of the French crown, the nobles were well satisfied with their choice, and no question as to his right was ever henceforth raised in France. As soon as the rebellion in Flanders was crushed, Philip summoned the King of England to do homage for Aquitaine, Ponthieu, and Montreuil, fiefs held absolutely from the crown of France. Such a proceeding placed Edward and his council in a great embarrassment. In case of a refusal the whole of the possessions of the crown in France might be declared forfeited and be seized, while England was in no condition to defend them; on the other hand, the fact of doing homage to Philip of Valois would be a sort of recognition of his right to the throne he had assumed. Had Edward then held the reins of power in his hands, there can be little doubt that he would at once have refused, and would have called out the whole strength of England to enforce his claim. The influence of Isabella and Mortimer was, however, all-powerful, and it was agreed that Edward should do homage as a public act, making a private reservation in secret to his own councilors, taking exception to the right of Philip.

"Edward crossed to France and journeyed to Amiens, where Philip with a brilliant court awaited him, and on the appointed day they appeared together in the cathedral. Here Edward, under certain protestations, did homage for his French estates, leaving certain terms and questions open for the consideration of his council. For some time the matter remained in this shape; but honest men cannot but admit that King Edward did, by his action at the time, acknowledge Philip to be King of France, and that he became his vassal for his estates there; but, as has happened scores of times before, and will no doubt happen scores of times again, vassals, when they become powerful enough, throw off their allegiance to their feudal superiors, and so the time came to King Edward.

"After the death of Mortimer and the imprisonment of Isabella, the king gave rein to his taste for military sports. Tournaments were held at Dartford and other places, one in Westcheape. What a sight was that, to be sure! For three days the king, with fourteen of his knights, held the list against all comers, and in the sight of the citizens and the ladies of the court jousted with knights who came hither from all parts of Europe. I was there each day, and the sight was a grand one, though England was well-nigh thrown into mourning by an accident which took place. The gallery in which the queen and her attendants were viewing the sports had been badly erected, and in the height of the contests it gave way. The queen and her ladies were in great peril, being thrown from a considerable height, and a number of persons were severely injured. The king, who was furious at the danger to which the queen had been exposed, would have hung upon the spot the master workman whose negligence had caused the accident, but the queen went on her knees before him and begged his life of the king. The love of Edward for warlike exercises caused England to be regarded as the most chivalrous court in Europe, and the frequent tournaments aroused to the utmost the spirits of the people and prepared them for the war with France. But of the events of that war I will tell you some other night. It is time now for us to betake us to our beds."

CHAPTER V.
THE CITY GAMES

The next evening the armorer, at Walter's request, continued his narrative.

"Soon after the tournament we began to fight again with Scotland. For some years we had had peace with that country, and under the regency a marriage was made between David, King of Scotland, son of Robert the Bruce, with the Princess Joan, sister to our king, and a four years' truce was agreed to."

"But why should we always be fighting with Scotland?" Walter asked.

"That is more than I can tell you, Walter. We were peaceful enough with them until the days of Edward I.; but he set up some claim to the throne of Scotland, the rights of which neither I nor any one else, so far as I know, have ever been able to make out. The fact was he was strong, and thought that he could conquer Scotland. The quarrels between her nobles – most of them were allied by blood with our own and held possessions in both kingdoms – gave Edward an excuse to interfere. Scotland was conquered easily enough, but it was a hard task to hold it. Sir William Wallace kept the country in a turmoil for many years, being joined by all the common people. He inflicted one heavy defeat upon us at Stirling, but receiving no support from the nobles he was defeated at Falkirk, and some years afterward was captured and executed here. His head you may see any day over London Bridge. As he fought only for his country and had ever refused allegiance to our king, it seems to me that his fate was a cruel one. Then, when all appeared quiet, Robert Bruce raised Scotland again and was crowned king. There was war for many years, but at last, at Bannockburn, he inflicted such a defeat upon us as we have never had before. After that there were skirmishes and excursions, but Edward II. was a weak prince, and it seemed that the marriage of David and the Princess Joan would bring about a permanent peace between the two countries; but it was not to be so.

"Many of the English nobles held claims by marriage or grants upon lands in Scotland. They had, of course, been driven from these when the English were turned out by Bruce. By the terms of the marriage treaty in 1328 it was agreed that they should be reinstated. It was a foolish clause, because it was plain that the King of Scotland could not take these lands again from the Scotch nobles who had possession of them, many of them being well-nigh as powerful as himself. At this time Edward Baliol, son of the great rival of Robert Bruce, was in England. He still claimed the throne of Scotland as his right. Round him gathered a number of the English nobles who claimed lands in Scotland. The king offered no hindrance to the gathering of this force, for I doubt not that he was glad to see dissension in Scotland, which might give him some such pretext for interference as that which Edward I. had seized to possess himself of that country. At first Baliol was successful and was crowned at Scone, but he was presently defeated and driven out of Scotland. The Scots now made an eruption across the frontier as a retaliation for Edward's having permitted Baliol to gather a force here for his war against Bruce. King Edward was on the point of starting for Ireland, and he at once hastened north. He defeated the Scots at Halidon Hill, captured Berwick, and placed Baliol upon the throne. Bruce fled to France, where he was supported and encouraged by the French king.

"The ill-feeling between Edward and Philip of Valois had gone on increasing ever since the former had been compelled to take the oath of allegiance to the latter, but outwardly the guise of friendship was kept up, and negotiations went on between the two courts for a marriage between the little Prince of Wales and Joanna, daughter of the French king.

"The aid which Philip gave to Bruce increased the bad feeling, and Edward retaliated for Philip's patronage of Bruce by receiving with the greatest honor and courtesy Robert of Artois, a great feudatory of France, who had been banished by King Philip. For a time, although both

countries were preparing for war, peace was not broken, as Edward's hands were full in Scotland, where Baliol having bestowed immense possessions upon the English nobles who had assisted him, the country again rose in favor of Bruce. During the three years that followed King Edward was obliged several times to go to Scotland to support Baliol, who held the crown as his feudal vassal. He was always successful in the field, but directly his army recrossed the frontier the Scotch rose again. In 1330 a new crusade was preached, and in October of that year King Philip solemnly received the cross and collected an immense army nominally for the recovery of Jerusalem. Whether his intentions were honest or not I cannot say, but certainly King Edward considered that Philip's real aim in creating so great an army was to attack England. Whether this was so or not would need a wiser head than mine, Walter, to tell. Certainly Philip of Valois invited Edward to coöperate with him in the crusade. The king in reply stated his belief that the preparations were intended for war in Europe rather than in Asia; but that if the King of France would agree to conclude a firm league of amity between the two countries, to restore the castles and towns of Aquitaine, whose surrender had been frequently promised, but never carried out, and would bind himself by oath to give no assistance, direct or indirect, to Scotland, he would join him in his war for the delivery of the Holy Land.

"I must say that King Edward's demands were reasonable, for it was clear that he could not march away from England with his whole force and leave Baliol unsupported against the assaults of his Scotch enemies, aided by France. Philip was willing to accede to the first two conditions; but in regard to the third positively declined treating until David Bruce should be restored to the throne of his father. Now, had the French king openly supported Bruce from the first, none could have said that his conduct in befriending a dethroned monarch was aught but noble and generous; but he had all along answered Edward's complaints of the aid afforded by Frenchmen to the Bruce by denials that he himself supported him; and this declaration in his favor now certainly seemed to show that he had at last determined openly to throw off the veil, and that his great army was really collected against England. Robert of Artois craftily seized a moment when the king's indignation against Philip was at the highest. At a great banquet held by King Edward, at which all his warlike nobles were present, Robert entered, preceded by two noble maidens carrying a heron, which, as you know, Walter, is considered the most cowardly of birds. Then in loud tones he called upon the knights present each to swear on the bird to perform some deed of chivalrous daring. First he presented it to King Edward himself, giving him to understand that he regarded him but as little braver than the heron for resigning without a blow the fair heritage of France.

"The moment was well chosen, for Edward was smarting under the answer he had just received from Philip. He at once rose and took an oath to enter France in arms; to wait there a month in order to give Philip time to offer him battle, and to accept the combat, even should the French outnumber him ten to one. Every knight present followed the example of the king, and so the war with France, which had been for years a mere question of time, was at last suddenly decided upon. You yourself, Walter, can remember the preparations which were made throughout England: men were enrolled and arms prepared. We armorers were busy night and day, and every man felt that his own honor, as well as that of the country, was concerned in winning for King Edward the heritage of which he had been unlawfully robbed by the King of France.

"On the 17th of March, 1337, at the parliament at Westminster, the king created the little prince, then seven years of age, Duke of Cornwall; and the prince immediately, in exercise of his new dignity, bestowed upon twenty of the most distinguished aspirants the honor of knighthood. Immense supplies were voted by the parliaments held at Nottingham, Westminster, and Northampton. Half the wool shorn in the summer following was granted to the king, with a variety of other taxes, customs, and duties. The revenues of all the foreign priories in England, a hundred and ten in number, were appropriated to the crown. Provisions of bacon, wheat, and oats were granted, and the king pawned his own jewels, and even the crown itself, to hire soldiers and

purchase him allies on the Continent. So great did the scarcity of money become in the country that all goods fell to less than half their value. Thus a vast army was raised, and with this King Edward prepared to try his strength with France.

"Philip on his part was making great preparations. While Edward had purchased the assistance of many of the German nobles Philip raised large armaments in the maritime states of Italy. Spain also contributed a number of naval adventurers, and squadrons were fitted out by his vassals on the sea-coasts of Normandy, Brittany, and Picardy. King Edward had crossed over into Belgium, and after vast delays in consequence of the slowness of the German allies, at last prepared to enter France at the end of September, 1339. Such, my lad, is the story, as far as I know, of the beginning of that war with France which is now raging, and whose events you know as well as I do, seeing that they are all of late occurrence. So far, although the English have had the best of it, and have sorely mauled the French both in the north and south, we have not gained any such advantages as would lead to a belief that there is any likelihood of an early termination, or that King Edward will succeed for a long time in winning back his inheritance of the throne of France.

"There is no doubt that the war weighs heavily upon the people at large. The taxes are doubled, and the drain of men is heavy. We armorers, of course, have a busy time of it, and all trades which have to do with the furnishing of an army flourish exceedingly. Moreover, men of metal and valor have an opportunity of showing what they are composed of, and England rings with the tales of martial deeds. There are some, Walter, who think that peace is the greatest of blessings, and in some ways, lad, they are no doubt right; but there are many compensations in war. It brings out the noble qualities; it raises men to think that valor and fortitude and endurance and honor are qualities which are something above the mere huckstering desire for getting money, and for ignoble ease and comfort. Some day it may be that the world will change, and that war may become a thing of the past; but to my mind, boy, I doubt whether men will be any happier or better for it. The priests, no doubt, would tell you otherwise; but then you see I am an armorer, and so perhaps am hardly a fair judge on the matter, seeing that without wars my craft would come to an end."

Walter remained in thought for some time. "It seems to me, Master Geoffrey, that while wars may suit strong and courageous men, women would rejoice were such things to be at an end."

"Women suffer most from wars, no doubt," Geoffrey said, "and yet do you mark that they are more stirred by deeds of valor and chivalry than are we men; that they are ever ready to bestow their love upon those who have won honor and glory in war, even although the next battle may leave them widows. This has been always somewhat of a marvel to me; but I suppose that it is human nature, and that admiration for deeds of valor and bravery is ingrained in the heart of man, and will continue until such times come that the desire for wealth, which is ever on the increase, has so seized all men that they will look with distaste upon everything which can interfere with the making of money, and will regard the man who amasses gold by trading as a higher type than he who does valiant deeds in battle."

"Surely that can never be," Walter said indignantly.

"There is no saying," the armorer answered; "at any rate, Walter, it will matter little to you or to me, for many generations must pass before such a state of things can come about."

Two days later Walter, who had been across into the city, returned in a state of excitement.

"What do you think, Geoffrey? The king, with the Prince of Wales and all his court, are coming to the games next month. They say that the king himself will adjudge the prizes, and there is to be a grand assault-at-arms between ten of the 'prentices with a captain, and an equal number of sons of nobles and knights."

"That will be rare," Geoffrey Ward exclaimed; "but there will be some broken limbs, and maybe worse. These assaults-at-arms seldom end without two or three being killed. However, you youngsters will not hit as hard as trained knights; and if the armor be good, no great damage should be done."

"Do you think that I shall be one of the ten?" Walter asked anxiously.

"Just as if you did not know you would," Geoffrey replied, laughing. "Did you not win the prize for sword-play last year? and twelve months have added much to the strength of your arm, to say nothing of your skill with weapons. If you win this year again – and it will be strange if you do not – you are like enough to be chosen captain. You will have tough fighting, I can tell you, for all these young aspirants to knighthood will do their best to show themselves off before the king and queen. The fight is not to take place on horseback, I hope; for if so, it will be settled as soon as it begins."

"No, it is to be on foot; and the king himself is to give orders as to the fighting."

"You had best get out that helmet and coat of mail of yours," Geoffrey said. "I warrant me that there will be none of finer make or truer metal in the tourney, seeing that I made them specially for you. They are light, and yet strong enough to withstand a blow from the strongest arm. I tried them hard, and will warrant them proof, but you had best see to the rivets and fastenings. They had a rough handling last year, and you have not worn them since. There are some other pieces that I must put in hand at once, seeing that in such a *mêlée* you must be covered from head to foot."

For the next week nothing was talked of in London but the approaching sports, and the workmen were already engaged in the erection of the lists and pavilions in the fields between the walls and Westminster. It was reported that the king would add valuable prizes to those given to the winners by the city, that there would be jousting on horseback by the sons of the court nobles, and that the young Prince of Wales would himself ride.

The king had once before taken part in the city sports, and with ten of the citizens had held his own against an equal number of knights. This was at the commencement of his reign; but the accident to the queen's stand had so angered him that he had not again been present at the sports, and his reappearance now was considered to be an act of approval of the efforts which the city had made to aid him in the war, and as an introduction of the young prince to the citizens.

When the day arrived there was a general flocking out of the citizens to the lists. The scene was a picturesque one; the weather was bright and warm; the fields were green; and Westminster, as well as London, sent out large numbers to the scene. The citizens were all in their best; their garments were for the most part of sober colors – russet, murrey, brown, and gray. Some, indeed, of the younger and wealthier merchants adopted somewhat of the fashion of the court, wearing their shoes long and pointed and their garments parti-colored. The line of division was down the center of the body one leg, arm, and half the body would be blue, the other half russet or brown. The ladies' dresses were similarly divided. Mingling with the citizens, as they strolled to and fro upon the sward, were the courtiers. These wore the brightest colors, and their shoes were so long that the points were looped up to the knees with little gold chains to enable them to walk. The ladies wore head-dresses of prodigious height, culminating in two points; and from these fell, sweeping to the ground, streamers of silk or lighter material. Cloths of gold and silver, rich furs, silks, and velvets were worn both by men and women.

None who saw the nobles of the court walking in garments so tight that they could scarce move, with their long parti-colored hose, their silk hoods buttoned under the chin, their hair braided down their back, would have thought that these were the most warlike and courageous of knights, men whose personal prowess and gallantry were the admiration of Europe. Their hair was generally cut close upon the forehead, and the beard was suffered to grow, but was kept trimmed a moderate length. Many of the ladies had the coat of arms of their family embroidered upon their dresses, giving them the appearance of heralds' tabards. Almost all wore gold or silver girdles, with embroidered pouches, and small daggers.

Thus the appearance of the crowd who moved about among the fields near the lists was varied and brilliant indeed. Their demeanor was quiet, for the London merchants deemed a grave demeanor to belong to their calling and the younger men and apprentices restrained their spirits in

the presence of their superiors. For their special amusement, and in order, perhaps, to keep them from jostling too freely against the court gallants and ladies, the city authorities had appointed popular sports such as pleased the rougher classes; and bull-baiting, cock-fighting, wrestling for a ram, pitching the bar, and hand-ball, were held in a field some distance away. Here a large portion of the artisans and apprentices amused themselves until the hour when the king and queen were to arrive at their pavilion and the contests were to commence.

Presently a sound of trumpets was heard, and the royal procession was seen moving up from Westminster. Then the minor sports were abandoned; the crowd gathered round the large fenced-in space, and those who, by virtue of rank or position in the city, had places in the various stands, took their places there.

There was a flourish of trumpets as the king and queen appeared in front of their pavilion, accompanied by the Prince of Wales and many of the nobles of the court, and a shout of welcome arose from the crowd. The shooting at a mark at once began. The preliminary trials had been shot off upon the preceding day, and the six chosen bowmen now took their places.

Walter had not entered for the prizes at archery. He had on previous years shot well; but since he had fully determined to become a man-at-arms he had given up archery, for which, indeed, his work at the forge and his exercises at arms when the fires were out left him but little time. The contest was a close one, and when it was over the winner was led by the city marshal to the royal pavilion, where the queen bestowed upon him a silver arrow, and the king added a purse of money. Then there were several combats with quarter-staff and broadsword between men who had served among the contingents sent by the city to aid the king in his wars. Some good sword-play was shown and many stout blows exchanged, two or three men were badly hurt, and the king and all present were mightily pleased with the stoutness with which they fought.

The apprentices then came forward to compete for the prizes for sword-play. They wore light iron caps and shirts of thickly quilted leather, and fought with blunted swords, for the city fathers deemed wisely that with these weapons they could equally show their skill, and that with sharpened swords not only would severe wounds be given, but bad blood would be created between the apprentices of the various wards. Each ward sent its champion to the contest, and as these fought in pairs, loud was the shouting which rose from their comrades at each blow given or warded, and even the older citizens joined sometimes in the shouting and took a warm interest in the champions of their respective wards.

The iron caps had stout cheek-pieces which defended the sides of the face and neck, for even a blunted sword can deliver a terrible blow if it fall upon the naked flesh. It took a long time to get through the combats; the pairs were drawn by lot and fought until the king decided which was the superior. Some were speedily beaten; at other times the contests were long and severe. It was generally thought by the apprentices that the final contest lay between Walter Fletcher of Aldgate and Ralph Smith of Ludgate. The former was allowed to be superior in the use of his weapon, but the latter was also skillful, was two years older, and greatly superior in strength. He had not taken part in the contest in the preceding year, as he had been laid up with a hurt in his hand which he had got in his employment as a smith, and the lads of Ludgate were confident that he would turn the tables upon the champion of the eastern ward. Both had defeated with ease the various opponents whom they had met, but it chanced that they had not drawn together until the last round, when they remained alone to struggle for the first and second prizes.

The interest in the struggle had increased with each round, and wagers were freely laid upon the result. According to custom the two champions had laid aside their leathern shirts and had donned mail armor, for it was considered that the crowning contest between the two picked young swordsmen of the city would be a severe one, and greater protection to the limbs was needed.

Before taking their places they were led up to the royal pavilion, where they were closely inspected by the king and his nobles.

"You are sure that this man is still an apprentice?" the king asked the lord mayor, who was seated next to him; "he has the appearance of a man-at-arms, and a stout one too; the other is a likely stripling, and is, as I have seen, marvelously dexterous with his sword, but he is but a boy while the other is a grown man."

"He is an apprentice, my liege, although his time will be up in a few days, while the other has yet three years to serve, but he works for an armorer, and is famed through the city, boy as he is, for his skill with weapons."

After a few words to each, exhorting them to do their best in the sight of the queen and her ladies, the king dismissed them.

"I know the young one now!" the Prince of Wales said, clapping his hands as the apprentices turned away to take their places. "My Lord Talbot, I will wager a gold chain with you upon the smaller of the two."

"I will take your wager," the noble answered; "but I am by no means sure that I shall win it, for I have watched your champion closely, and the downright blows which he struck would seem to show that he has the muscle and strength of a man, though still but a boy."

The event justified the Prince of Wales' confidence; at the commencement of the struggle Ralph Smith tried to beat down his opponent by sheer strength as he had done his prior opponents, but to his surprise he found that all his efforts could not break down his opponent's guard. Walter indeed did not appear to take advantage of his superior lightness and activity, but to prefer to prove that in strength as well as skill he was equal to his antagonist. In the latter respect there was no comparison, for as soon as the smith began to relax his rain of blows Walter took the offensive and with a sweeping blow, given with all his strength, broke down his opponent's guard and smote him with such force upon his steel cap that, blunted as the sword was, it clove through the iron, and stretched the smith senseless on the ground. A loud shout broke from the assemblage. The marshal came up to Walter, and removing his helmet, led him to the royal pavilion, while Ralph was carried to a tent near, where a leech attended to his wound.

CHAPTER VI.
THE MELEE

"You have won your prize stoutly and well, sir 'prentice," the king said. "I should not have deemed it possible that one of your age could have smitten such a blow, and right glad should I be of a few hundred lads of your mettle to follow me against the French. What is your calling?"

"I am an armorer, my liege," Walter answered.

"An you are as good at mending armor as you are at marring it," the king said, "you will be a rare craftsman one of these days. 'Tis a rare pity so promising a swordsman should be lost to our army. Wouldst like to change your calling, boy, and take to that of arms?"

"It is my hope to do so, sir," Walter answered modestly, "and his grace the Prince of Wales has already promised me that I shall some day ride behind him to the wars."

"Ah! Edward," the king ejaculated, "how is this? Have you been already enlisting a troop for the wars?"

"No, sir," the young prince replied, "but one day, now some four years since, when I was riding with my Lord Talbot and others in the fields near the Tower, I did see this lad lead his play-fellows to the assault of an earthen castle held by others, and he fought so well and gallantly that assuredly no knight could have done better, until he was at last stricken senseless, and when he recovered I told him that should he choose to be a man-at-arms I would enlist him in my following to the wars."

The king laughed.

"I deemed not that the lads of the city indulged in such rough sports; but I wonder not, seeing that the contingent which my good city of London furnishes me is ever one of the best in my army. We shall see the lad at work again to-morrow and will then talk more of it. Now let us bestow upon him the prize that he has so well earned."

Walter bent on one knee, and the queen handed to him a sword of the best Spanish steel, which was the prize given by the city to the victor. The king handed him a heavy purse of gold pieces, saying:

"This may aid in purchasing your freedom."

Walter bowed deeply and murmured some words of thanks, and was then led off by the marshal. After this many of the young nobles of the court jousted on horseback, ran at the ring, and performed other feats of knightly exercise to the great pleasure of the multitude. The marshal on leading Walter away said to him, "You will be captain of the city band to-morrow, and I must therefore tell you what the king purports. He has prepared a surprise for the citizens, and the present show will be different to anything ever before seen in London. Both to show them somewhat of the sieges which are taking place on the borders of France and the Low Countries, in which Sir Walter Manny and many other gallant knights have so greatly distinguished themselves, and as an exercise for the young nobles he has determined that there shall be a castle erected. It will be built of wood, with battlements and towers, with a moat outside. As soon as the lists are over a large number of workmen will commence its erection; the pieces are all sawn and prepared. There will be machines, ladders, and other appliances. The ten champions on either side will fight as knights; you will have a hundred apprentices as men-at-arms, and the court party will have an equal number of young esquires. You, as winner of to-day's tourney, will have the choice of defense or attack. I should advise you to take the defense, since it is easier and requires less knowledge of war, and many of the other party have accompanied their fathers and masters in the field and have seen real sieges carried out."

"Can you show me a plan of the castle," Walter said, "if it be not contrary to the rules, in order that I may think over to-night the plan of fighting to-morrow?"

"Here it is," the marshal said. "You see the walls are two hundred feet long and twelve feet in height, with a tower at the end and one over the gateway in the center six feet high. There is a drawbridge defended by an outwork of palisades six feet high. The moat will be a dry one, seeing that we have no means of filling it with water, but it will be supposed to be full, and must be crossed on planks or bridges. Two small towers on wheels will be provided, which may be run up to the edge of the moat, and will be as high as the top of the towers."

"Surely they cannot make all this before morning?" Walter said.

"They will do so," the marshal replied. "The castle has been put together in the king's court-yard, and the pieces are all numbered. Two hundred carpenters will labor all night at it, besides a party of laborers for the digging of the moat. It will be a rare show, and will delight both the citizens and the ladies of the court, for such a thing has never before been attempted. But the king grudges not the expense which it will cost him, seeing that spectacles of this kind do much to arouse the warlike spirit of the people. Here is a list of the various implements which will be provided, only it is understood that the mangonels and arblasts will not be provided with missiles, seeing that many would assuredly be killed by them. They will be employed, however, to show the nature of the work, and parties of men-at-arms will be told off to serve them. Cross-bows and arrows will be used, but the weapons will be blunted. You will see that there are ladders, planks for making bridges, long hooks for hauling men down from the wall, beams for battering down the gate, axes for cutting down the palisades, and all other weapons. The ten who will serve under you as knights have already been nominated, and the city will furnish them with full armor. For the others, the apprentices of each ward will choose sufficient representatives to make up the hundred who will fight as men-at-arms; these will wear steel caps and breast-pieces, with leather jerkins, and vizors to protect their faces, for even a blunted arrow or a wooden quarrel might well kill if it struck true."

On leaving the marshal Walter joined Giles Fletcher and Geoffrey Ward, who warmly congratulated him upon his success. He informed them of the spectacle which the king had prepared for the amusement of the citizens on the morrow.

"In faith," Geoffrey said, "the idea is a good one, and promises rare sport, but it will be rough, and we may expect many broken limbs, for it will be no joke to be thrown down with a ladder from a wall even twelve feet high, and there will be the depth of the moat besides."

"That will only be two feet," Walter said, "for so it is marked on the plan."

"And which do you mean to take, Walter, the attack or the defense? Methinks the king has erred somewhat in making the forces equal, for assuredly the besiegers should outnumber the besieged by fully three to one to give them a fair chance of success."

"I shall take the assault," Walter answered; "there is more to be done that way than in the defense. When we get home, Geoffrey, we will look at the plans, and see what may be the best manner of assault."

Upon examining the plan that evening they found that the wall was continued at an angle at either end for a distance of some twenty feet back so as to give a postern gate behind each of the corner towers through which a sortie might be made. Geoffrey and Walter talked the matter over, and together contrived a plan of operation for the following day.

"You will have one great advantage," Geoffrey said. "The apprentices are all accustomed to the use of the bow, while the young nobles will know but little of that weapon; therefore your shooting will be far straighter and truer, and even a blunt-headed arrow drawn from the shoulder will hit so smart a blow that those on the wall will have difficulty in withstanding them."

After the talk was ended Walter again crossed London Bridge, and made his way to Ludgate, where he found his late antagonist, whose head had been plastered up and was little the worse for the conflict.

"There is no ill-will between us, I hope," Walter said, holding out his hand.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.