EDGAR THE READY

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[image]

Cover art

[Illustration: "ROLAND WAS SAVAGELY ATTACKING

HIM IN HIS TURN"
(missing from book)]

Edgar the Ready

A Tale of the Third Edward's Reign

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EDGAR THE READY

CHAPTER I
A Gallant Sacrifice

"Now, lad, I will tell thee how it cometh that Sir John Chartris hath sent me down into Devon to seek thee and to bring thee back to his castle of Wolsingham. The road seemeth less rough and wild, and I can tell thee all that befell with the more comfort. I would, though, that I could have brought a spare horse. To have thee riding behind my saddle smacks of a farmer and his dame rather than of man-at-arms and fledgeling warrior."

"No matter, Matthew," replied the soldier's companion, a lad of some fourteen or fifteen summers, "our road will take us along the borders of Exmoor, and I have hopes that we may be able to snare or capture one of the ponies that run wild thereabouts."

"Perchance. Now, as thou hast already heard, 'twas at Sluys that thy father met his death–and a right gallant one it was–but of the fashion of it only rumours have reached thee.

"I must start at the beginning, and thou wilt then understand the more thoroughly. Know, then, that the French fleet mustered two hundred sail and

more, many of their ships being of a size unheard of before, while we could gather little more than half their number. Our ships were scraped together from the Five Ports and anywhere along the coast where a stray trader could be found. But I'll warrant thee the sailors of the Five Ports were little loath to lend their ships for the venture, for their rivalry with the mariners of the Norman coast is most exceeding bitter. When all that could be collected had been mustered in array, our good King Edward III filled them with his men-at-arms and archers, and we set sail.

"Not a man of the whole company was more eager to get to grips with the enemy than Edward; and when we spied, over an intervening neck of land, a forest of masts clustering in the harbour of Sluys, he was overjoyed. However, for all his eagerness, he decided to anchor at sea for the night, and 'twas in the afternoon of the following day–the anniversary of Bannockburn, mark ye–that we stood in to fight the foe.

"When they sighted us, the French sailed out a mile or so to meet us, and then anchored in four great lines across the bay and lashed their ships firmly together. We found it was a fourfold floating rampart that we had to assault, but–bah!–little enough shipman or soldier recked of that!

"Full speed we bore down on the foremost line of ships and ground into them, our archers sending a storm of shafts in advance that raked them through and through. Many of their big ships had platforms high up filled with Genoese crossbowmen, and loaded with stones to fling down upon us; but our archers poured in a fire so fierce and fast that those who survived were glad to escape to deck as best they could. Then came the turn of knights and men-at-arms, and like a mountain torrent we poured upon the decks of the Frenchmen's ships. The fighting was hard and fierce–the struggle of men who had long ached to spring at one another's throats.

"But our martial King's gallant example, and the knightly zest of his nobles, gave an eagerness to our men that soon forced the French, though they fought right well, to give back, and presently we had mastered the first line and began to burst through upon the next. 'Twas then that—- Ah! What have we here?"

At the sudden exclamation, and the equally sudden reining in of the steed, the boy, who had been entirely absorbed in his companion's narrative, glanced quickly ahead to see the cause of the interruption.

Two men, followed more leisurely by three others, had sprung into the roadway from behind a pile of rocks where they had been in hiding. They were men of wild and savage appearance, and bore weapons, which added not a little to their threatening looks. One man, whose head seemed a sheer mass of bristling red hair and beard, out of which his eyes gleamed like live coals, carried a heavy club studded with iron spikes, and this he swung to and fro as he awaited the

coming of the wayfarers.

"'Tis Red of Ordish!" whispered the lad. "He is known and dreaded for leagues around. Fly for thy life, Matthew–delay not!"

The soldier glanced eagerly to right and left. His face fell: rocks piled in rough confusion, half-hidden by bushes, lined every inch of the way on either side. It was difficult country to traverse on foot, but for horsemen it was quite impossible. There was still, however, the way they had come, and half-turning his horse, the man-at-arms glanced back along the road. Alas, for his hopes! Another group of men had emerged into the roadway a few hundred yards behind, and were moving forward to take the travellers as in a trap!

"Ha, ha, soldier," cried Red, with a hideous laugh, "thou seest thou art outwitted! Fling down thy purse and we harm thee not. 'Tis the lord of the manor, Red of Ordish to wit, who bids thee pay his toll."

"Give me thy purse, Matthew," cried the boy aloud. He then went on in an urgent whisper: "Be quick, and I will jump down and hand it to the robbers whilst thou dost ride slowly past them. They may seek more than thy purse an they find little in it. I like not their looks or the tales I have heard of them."

Slowly and unwillingly the soldier complied, and the lad flung his leg over the saddle to dismount. As he did so, however, with a quick movement he slid the contents of the purse into his hand. His movements were half-hidden by the soldier's back, and that there should be no chink of money to betray him, he held the purse closely while he secured the contents. Then he transferred the coins to his wallet, dropped to the ground, and advanced towards the red robber, purse in hand.

"We are poor wayfarers," he said in a pleading tone, as he fumbled in the purse; "will ye not take toll of two silver pennies and let us hie on our journey?"

"I will take four silver pennies, my young springald," cried Red of Ordish, striding forward and reaching out his great hand for the purse.

The lad retreated as though frightened, and again fumbled as though unable to find the coins he sought.

"Yield me the purse," cried the robber, snatching savagely at it. "Yield it me, boy, or I will clash out thy brains with this club."

Springing lightly out of the angry ruffian's reach, the boy pretended to be quite scared, dropping the purse and running after the soldier as though in a sudden access of terror.

Ignoring the boy, the leader of the robbers and one or two of his men made a mad rush for the purse. Red was first, and snatched it eagerly up; tore it open–and saw that it was empty! With a snarl like a wild beast, he sprang after the fugitive, shouting madly with inarticulate rage.

Abandoning all disguise, the lad now ran with all his speed after the soldier,

who had profited by the preoccupation of the robbers and had made his way safely past them.

"On, Matthew, on!" he cried breathlessly as he sprang into the saddle behind him, and with a shout of angry defiance, Matthew put spurs to his horse and galloped furiously away.

The convulsed face and savage cries of Red of Ordish, and the tumultuous shouts of his men as they pursued madly after, flinging stones, knives, and clubs in despairing endeavour to injure the youth who had so neatly tricked them, receded gradually into the distance until a turn of the road shut them altogether out of sight and hearing.

"Why did I listen to thee, lad?" cried Matthew presently in a tone of resentment and vexation. "Why did I not ride at them and try to cut a way through? Why didst press me to yield up my purse without a fight? Hast so soon forgotten that thou art destined to become an esquire and an aspirant to knighthood? 'Tis a bad start to a warrior's career to counsel giving way without a fight to the first coward cut-throat we meet. Coward that I was to listen—-"

"Stay, Matthew," interposed the lad; "run not on so, but examine this wallet. Perchance the fledgeling esquire is not quite so base as thou thinkest."

"What?" cried Matthew, taking the wallet and thrusting in his hand. "Did ye–why, yes, 'tis all here–truly thou art quick and bold. 'Twas well done, and I none the wiser. Thou art indeed Sir Richard Wintour's cub, and I can say nae better."

"There was little enough in it, Matthew," returned the lad. "I hope that we may have many such adventures to while away the long journey to my new home. They will keep our wits from getting rusty."

"They will indeed, lad, and I hope that Matthew the man-at-arms may show to better advantage at our next encounter. Now I will continue the story of our struggle at Sluys which the robbers interrupted in so ugly a fashion. We English, then, had overcome all resistance in the first line of the French ships and were attacking the next, when the adventure befell that touches thee so closely. The ships commanded by Sir John Chartris had again closed in and grappled, and once more we were hard at work hacking and thrusting upon the enemy's decks. Sir John had gained a footing upon the poop of the ship he had boarded, and was hewing away with right good will when, of a sudden, a gigantic Genoese dropped down upon his shoulders from the rigging. Sir John was borne to the deck, and would have been rapidly dispatched there had not thy father, Sir Richard Wintour, called upon one or two of us near by and hurried to his rescue. Our attack diverted the attention of those surrounding Sir John, and he was able to struggle to his feet.

"The Genoese still clung to his back, however, and Sir John was unable to

use his sword. To our horror, after a few moments' tottering upon the edge, both men, still clinging desperately to one another, pitched headlong over the side of the ship down into the sea in the space betwixt the prows of the grinding ships. Seeing what was coming, and knowing only too well that Sir John, clad in full armour, would sink like a stone, thy father snatched at a rope, and without a moment's hesitation sprang after him. So instant was he that he did not even stay to see that the other end of the rope was secured, and he must have left the ship before ever Sir John had touched the water. 'Twas a rash act, a gallant act, and it all but failed, for the end of the rope was free, and was just disappearing over the side when I pounced upon it.

"The strain upon it was so heavy that I almost followed. Thomelin the archer, however, also seized hold of the rope, and we two pulled and tugged. In a moment or two the strain eased somewhat, and we guessed that the big Genoese had been compelled to leave go. Then we began to draw in hand over hand until two heads appeared above the surface. They belonged to Sir John and thy father.

"Now came the heartrending part of the whole affair. A slight swell was gently heaving, and ever and anon the ships ground and clashed together. Knowing this, and fearing that we might not draw up the knights before one or other of the ships heaved inwards irresistibly, we pulled with all our might and shouted aloud for others to come to our aid. But the rush of fighting men had passed onwards, and the noise was so prodigious that we were unheard or unheeded. So we bent to the work, and soon had Sir John, who was uppermost, on a level with the decks. We had pulled him safe aboard, and were about to draw up Sir Richard, when–lad, it makes me sick to think of it–one of our own ships, falling on the swell, moved inwards and caught him by the legs against the ship on which we stood. He gave a gasp and let go his hold, but we seized him, and, the swell passing onwards, drew him aboard.

"One glance was sufficient to tell us that his hours were numbered. Notwithstanding his armour, his legs and the lower part of his body were badly crushed. He was still conscious, however, and we laid him on the deck of the enemy's ship, now all but won, and Sir John knelt over him.

"'Goodbye, Sir John!' he said faintly. 'I am gone. Leave me and renew the fight.'

"'Nay, Richard, I cannot leave thee thus,' cried Sir John, weeping. 'Dear comrade, thou hast sacrificed thy life for mine. I will stay and do what little I still may towards that debt. The battle is won without another stroke from me.'

"'I rejoice that all goes well. If thou wilt do aught for me, look to my boy Edgar. His mother died a year agone, and he is alone save for me. Place him with thy esquires, if I ask not too much.'

"'Richard, it is done. Right gladly will I.'

"'He will be landless, like his father, as thou know'st, and he must carve his way with his sword. Let him know this. Spoil him not. I think he will do well, though his mother has had his upbringing and not I.'

"'If he is half as gallant as his father he will need little help from me,' responded Sir John. 'Is there naught else I can do? Here is water Matthew hath brought.'

"Sir Richard revived a little when he had drunk, but very soon sank into a stupor from which he never regained consciousness. He seemed quite easy in his mind concerning thee, after Sir John had told him he would send me down into Devon to fetch thee as soon as an opportunity offered. He beckoned me to him and sent thee his dear love, and bade me conjure thee to strive thy hardest to be a true knight, brave in battle and chivalrous towards the weak and helpless. More he said, though his voice grew so faint at last that I could not catch all his words; but he meant thee to give all thy mind to the work of thy squirehood, to learn right well how to bear thyself knightly, and how to live a godly life. Thy father, lad, thou mayest well be proud of."

"I know, Matthew," said Edgar in a low voice. "And I know, too, that if earnest striving of mine can compass it, his memory will not be disgraced by me. It shall be my aim to live as nobly and to die as gallantly."

"Ye say well, lad. I hope thou wilt be as good as thy word. Now I will finish the story.

"Very soon we had broken through the second line of the French ships, and as at that moment more ships arrived under Sir Robert Morley, a great panic fell upon the third line, and many of their men threw themselves into the sea and there perished miserably. The fourth line, however, still remained unbroken, and fought us right gallantly until nightfall, when those that were still able to set sail made good their escape.

"Our losses were trifling; the losses of the French were tremendous. We had only two ships destroyed, while out of all the mighty French fleet but a few stragglers escaped. Their loss in men, too, they say, was no less than thirty thousand slain. 'Twill be years and years, lad, I warrant thee, before the French will again dare to oppose us on the ocean. We are now masters of the sea, and our ships can come and go as they please. Hurrah for our martial King Edward!"

"Hurrah, indeed!" cried Edgar, catching something of his enthusiasm. "But how came our men to gain so great a victory over the French? Did they not fight well?"

"Aye, they fought well enough, but they were outgeneralled. They had two leaders while we had one. And more–though I am a man-at-arms, and think most of my sort, yet can I give a meed of praise where 'tis due–'twas our archers did much to win the day. Aye, our bowmen gave the French a rude awakening–one,

too, that will be repeated as roughly yet many a day. Our men shot so hard and fast that the air was streaked with shafts, and Frenchmen and Genoese fell dead on every hand. Even the knights were hard put to it to face so pitiless a hail. I mind me old Thomelin of Pontefract, one of the most famous of our marksmen, said to me as we passed a ship in the first line, where the battle still raged: 'See yon knight in golden armour, Matthew?'

"'Aye,' said I.

"'Watch him well.'

"He drew his bow to the feather and held it motionless for a moment or two. The knight was opposing a party of English who were pouring along the deck of his ship. He swung his axe back and up, and Thomelin's bow twanged. The knight's nearest armpit sprouted feathers, his axe fell with a clang, and he rattled down after it. 'Twas thus that our archers taught even knights in full armour to fear them."

"But are not crossbowmen equally to be feared?" cried Edgar. "I have heard that their heavy bolts can crash through the armour itself."

"Mayhap; but when they have English bowmen to fight against they have little chance to show their powers. Ere ever they can loose a bolt a cloth-yard shaft hath laid them low. Our archers laugh at crossbowmen–and with good reason."

"What befell after the battle, Matthew?"

"We landed, and Edward led us to the city of Tournay. He drew his allies to his standard, and it was with a hundred thousand men that he commenced the siege. All goeth well so far, but Sir John sent me after thee before we had long encamped before its walls. And here I am, Master Edgar."

"Aye, good Matthew," replied Edgar, who appeared to be slightly ill at ease, and had turned in his saddle two or three times during the latter part of the soldier's narrative. "Now, wilt thou rein in thy steed for a moment so that we may listen? Several times I have fancied I heard the sound of horses' hoofs dully in the distance."

"What of that, lad? Red of Ordish and his band had nae horses."

"None that we could see. But in some of the tales I have heard both Red and his band were mounted. Hearken now!"

Dim and distant, but unmistakable, sounded the thud of horses' hoofs.

"Quick, Matthew, we must leave the road and hide. Our horse, carrying a double burden, must soon be overtaken. Dismount and lead thy steed in amongst those rocks and bushes and, if thou canst, compel it to lie down."

Without demur Matthew obeyed his young charge's orders, possibly because he could think of no better line of action. In a minute or two horse and riders were well hidden behind a tangle of rocks and bushes a dozen yards from

the edge of the roadway. The clatter of horses' hoofs was now very close, and in a few moments a body of wild-looking horsemen burst into view round a turn of the road.

"'Tis Red," muttered the lad at his first glimpse of the foremost man, as he shrank back yet more closely under cover.

The horsemen clattered noisily by and vanished as quickly as they had come. For the time, at any rate, the fugitives were safe.

"What now, lad?" grumbled Matthew, as he began to realize their sorry plight. "We cannot take to the road again, I trow."

"Nay; we must, I fear, clamber on as best we can across these rocks. See yon hill? The country there is clearer, so mayhap if we struggle on a little we shall find it open out before us."

For an hour the soldier and his companion scrambled along among the rocks, leading the horse between them. Then the way began to get easier until, at the end of some hours, they found themselves in fairly open country. The travelling had been very exhausting, and, well pleased to be quit of it, they mounted again and cantered gaily off until they reached cultivated land, and could see in the distance the lights of a dwelling. On a closer inspection this proved to be a large and straggling farmhouse.

"Darkness falls," quoth Matthew; "I think we will rest the night here if the good man is not unwilling."

Edgar gladly consented, and in a minute or two they were knocking at the farmhouse door. After a considerable delay and some parleying the door was opened, and they were conducted into the farmer's kitchen. Here they were served with plenty of rough but wholesome food, and were soon doing full justice to the viands. Under the influence of the good cheer, and more especially of the good man's home-brewed ale, Matthew waxed communicative, and related to the farmer with great gusto the incidents of their encounter with and escape from the redoubtable Red of Ordish.

The recital seemed to disturb the farmer greatly. He grew pale and nervous, and presently left the room, muttering that if robbers were about it would be well for him to see that his barns and stables were well secured. The action seemed so natural an one that neither Edgar nor Matthew took any notice, although the man had not returned when, an hour or two later, his wife hinted that it was time to retire for the night. Readily enough they agreed, and the woman led them up a flight of crazy stairs to a low room lighted by a single small curtain-screened window which peeped out of the thickness of the thatch. The room contained a rough bed and plenty of skin rugs, and in a very few minutes the two wayfarers

had flung themselves down and had fallen into a sound sleep.

CHAPTER II
An Ordeal of the Night

It must have been well after midnight when Edgar awoke. What had awakened him he knew not, but he felt somehow a sense of uneasiness for which he vainly tried to account. All was as still as death within the house, save only for the regular breathing of his companion, who lay close by his side.

For some moments Edgar lay without a movement, listening intently and wondering what it could be that made him feel so uneasy and even–he could not disguise it from himself–even fearful. He could hear absolutely nothing, but yet he felt a conviction steal over him that Matthew and he were not alone in the room. Who would dare to enter their room so stealthily at dead of night? And what might be their purpose?

Softly Edgar pressed his companion in the side. He stirred ever so slightly, and Edgar pressed again as meaningly as he could. He felt the soldier start and stiffen himself as though on the alert.

Waiting for no more, Edgar, who was light of touch and supple as an eel, stole softly from the bed and made for the corner of the room away from the window. He dreaded unspeakably that he might come into contact with something–he knew not what–on the way; but he reached his coign of vantage without mishap. Then he waited motionless for events to develop. Though he still heard no sound, he felt even more convinced than before that the room was occupied by other than themselves–and, by the strange feeling of fear that he could not thrust away from himself, thoroughly as he despised it, occupied by something grim and terrible.

Presently he heard a slight rustling, as though Matthew were leaving his bed, and a moment later the curtain was jerked back, admitting into the room a stream of moonlight.

Simultaneously with the pulling of the curtain three figures became visible to Edgar between him and the light. The upright figure nearest to the window was Matthew, he had no doubt, but the two other figures crouching low upon the floor he could not recognize, though the glint of steel he caught from one showed

that their presence boded ill indeed.

Silently, with a bound fierce as a tiger's, one of the men sprang upon Matthew. With a movement as quick the man-at-arms avoided the blow aimed at him and closed with his assailant. Simultaneously the other man stood up and swung a club up into the air and down behind his back as he prepared to strike down Matthew while he grappled with his foe.

With the speed of an arrow Edgar sprang forward. Seizing the club he gave it a quick, wrenching pull and tore it from the man's grasp. Then as quickly he swung it heavily down upon the assassin's head. With a groan the man sank limply to the floor.

Turning to the other combatants, Edgar saw that Matthew was holding his assailant's right hand with his left, and had wrenched his own hand free and grasped his dagger. There was a flash as the moonlight gleamed upon the bright steel, then the stroke fell heavily upon the ruffian's side. But though the blade pierced his clothing it snapped off short against his skin!

"*Bewitched! Bewitched!*" shrieked Matthew in superstitious terror, as he let go his hold and fell upon his knees. Babbling incoherently and crossing himself convulsively, he seemed oblivious of his fearful danger. Fortunately the suddenness with which he had let go his hold sent the ruffian staggering back into a corner, but like a wild cat he was back again, and in another moment the knife must have been plunged into Matthew's body had not Edgar screamed piercingly as he dashed forward.

"*Shirt of mail*, Matthew, *shirt of mail!*"

Matthew heard and understood his meaning just in time. Plunging full length upon the floor, he avoided the murderous stroke, and the man, in the darkness, pitched over him into the wall. Ere he had recovered from the shock Edgar had sprung clean upon his back.

Jabbing behind him with his knife the assassin tried to dislodge the lad, but although he received two or three flesh wounds, Edgar clung on tenaciously, and, by impeding the man's arm with one hand and gripping him by the throat with the other, did his best to hinder him, while he called repeatedly upon Matthew to renew the struggle.

It was some moments before Matthew could respond. He was still unnerved by the grim midnight attack and what he had for the moment taken to be the supernatural character of his assailant. Edgar's warning cry had enabled him to shake off some of his paralysis, but precious moments had slipped away before he was himself again. At last Edgar's cries aroused him, and he rushed in and closed with the man, who was endeavouring with the utmost desperation to rid himself of the burden upon his back. Until then the man had fought in grim silence, but now he snarled and champed like a wild beast. In one of his

twists and turns he staggered close to the little window, and for a moment the moonlight played upon his head. Though Edgar, from his position, could not see his face, one glimpse of the tangled mass of hair was sufficient. It was red.

The ruffian fought with extraordinary fierceness and power. Once Matthew succeeded in possessing himself of his knife, but almost immediately lost it, and it was not until the man was almost strangled that his resistance was overcome.

"Get me something wherewith to secure him, Edgar," gasped Matthew. "Strips of clothing–anything, lad."

Edgar sprang to the bed and fumbled among the rugs and skins for something that he could tear into strips. As he did so his ear caught a sound outside the door that could not be mistaken.

"Quick, Matthew–to the window–flee!" he cried, in an undertone that thrilled with desperate urgency. "The stairs creak beneath the tread of a dozen stealthy feet. 'Tis Red's band–away, away, or we are lost!"

At a single bound Matthew sprang halfway through the window. Another moment and he had dropped to the ground.

In his fumbles at the bedclothes Edgar's hand had come into contact with his own or Matthew's sword. The slight indefinable sound or feeling of pressure upon the door attracted his attention, and, like a streak, he drew the sword from its sheath. Then, with a single thrust, he drove it several inches through the centre of the door.

There was a screech, and the pressure instantly ceased. Simultaneously the silent approach changed into a loud and angry clamour, and a rush was made at the door, and it was kicked violently open.

But Edgar was already halfway to the window. Flinging his naked sword through in advance, he sprang lightly up and through, and dropped safely down upon the ground beneath.

Matthew was awaiting him and had already snatched up the sword, and the two, with a single thought, rushed madly round to the front of the farmhouse. Their one aim was to get their horse from the stable before the robbers were upon them.

As he rounded the side of the house, Edgar caught a glimpse of something moving in the shadow of some trees a dozen paces away. He looked again–they were horses!–and with a whoop he called to Matthew and fled to them. The horses were half-wild, and at the sudden approach reared and kicked furiously.

There was no time to sooth and pacify the beasts, for already the shouts from behind showed that the pursuit had begun, so Edgar sprang recklessly at the nearest horse, flung his leg over its back, and grasped it by the mane. Then with his dagger he cut the rope that secured it. The horse reared madly and backed in amongst its fellows, but at every opportunity Edgar cut and slashed with his

dagger at the ropes that fastened the other horses to the trees. Matthew had also succeeded in mounting, and seconded his efforts until all were freed. Then with a yell that sent the frightened troop clattering away into the darkness, Edgar and Matthew dug their heels into their horses' sides and galloped headlong after them. In a confused clump, horsemen and riderless horses careered over pasture and farmland until the farmhouse and the shouting robbers had been left far behind.

Gradually Edgar gained some sort of control over his wild mount, which had, until then, tasked all his energies to keep it from flinging him from off its back. Then he guided it to Matthew's side.

"We have covered miles, Matthew, and are safe."

"Nay, let us ride on until our steeds are exhausted. Mine is still as much master as I."

"Then let us ride together, and keep one of yon frightened animals in sight. If I can, I am going to capture a spare steed. 'Twill do to barter and replace the things we left behind in the robbers' hands."

For a couple of hours longer they rode onward. Then their horses of themselves dropped into a walk and at last stopped altogether. Matthew and Edgar had kept close to two of the riderless horses, and Edgar promptly slipped from his seat and approached them. They were too dead-beat to resist, and he was able to lead them into a thick covert close at hand. Here, after some trouble, a light fencing of branches hacked from the trees was built around them, and Matthew and Edgar could begin to think of rest. They were almost as dead-beat as the horses, and, without troubling to make themselves any sort of couch, flung themselves down amongst the bushes and slept the sleep of utter exhaustion.

CHAPTER III
The Castle of Wolsingham

Very soon after dawn Matthew and Edgar were astir again. Both felt the strain of their exertions during the preceding day and night, but neither felt that they were safe in remaining where they were. They had left behind nearly all their belongings, but in their stead they had four horses which, they hoped, would more than counterbalance the losses they had sustained.

Tearing up part of his clothing into strips, and utilizing their belts, Matthew made shift to secure the two spare horses, and, mounting again, they rode on. For some time they purposely kept away from the high roads, not knowing how far the power of Red and his band might extend. But when they believed that they were too far from his haunts for there to be anything more to fear, they took to the highway again, and made more rapid progress. The spare horses were sold later in the day without difficulty, and provided a goodly sum from which they were able to purchase fresh cloaks and weapons, and enough being left to help them on their way.

The journey was full of incidents, though none was so exciting as their encounter with the dreaded Red and his band of outlaws. In due course they arrived at Wolsingham, and Matthew resigned his charge into the hands of Geoffrey Fletcher, the Lieutenant of the Castle, in the absence of its master, Sir John Chartris. Geoffrey really ranked as an esquire, but he was a man of middle age who had failed through lack of influence and skill with the sword to obtain the honour of knighthood. He possessed little ambition, however, and was well content with his position in command of the retainers of the castle.

After a few enquiries concerning the journey thither, and a sympathetic and kindly reference to his recent bereavement, Geoffrey suggested a visit to Edgar's fellow esquires.

"They have heard that thou wert on the way to join us, and are ready indeed to see thee. The story of thy father's gallant sacrifice has disposed them and all of us greatly in thy favour. From the little Matthew hath told me of the adventures of thy journey, it seemeth that our expectations are not likely to be disappointed."

"Ye are all most kind to me," said Edgar gratefully. "I have already promised in my heart to do all in my power to serve Sir John for the memory of my father's name."

"Ye say well. Come now and I will make thee known to thy comrades. They are four–Philip Soames, Robert Duplessis, Aymery Montacute, and Roland Mortimer. They are all about thine age, for the eldest esquire hath followed his master to the wars. Doubtless thou wilt find them more to thy liking than they are to mine, for they are high-spirited youths, and accustomed to be more than a little reckless in their pranks. But such, I fear, is too often the wont of young men of noble birth and wide estates."

Shaking his head with the air of a man who had suffered much at the hands of the said esquires, Geoffrey Fletcher opened a door and ushered Edgar into a room where the four esquires and some few pages were practising feats of skill and strength, or hacking at one another with blunted swords.

The scene was a really spirited one, and Edgar felt a thrill of enthusiasm as he realized fully that he was now at last to begin in earnest to learn the trade of

arms and the usages of chivalry.

"Ha! Geoffrey, doubtless this young springald is our new comrade, Edgar Wintour?" cried Aymery Montacute, a slim, active-looking youth a little older than Edgar. "Come, we are right glad to see him, and right happy to welcome him in our midst."

Edgar bowed his thanks.

"He looketh keen," went on Aymery, speaking more to Geoffrey than to Edgar; "he looketh keen, and if I can cheer him on with a few friendly strokes with sword and buckler, let him don some gear and we will set to without more ado. At last, Geoffrey, I have succeeded in worsting Roland, and I feel so elated I could fight the world."

"But nay, Aymery, scarcely would ye wish to show off thy prowess so soon upon your new comrade? How much can he know of the sword?"

"Dissuade him not, Geoffrey," interposed Edgar hastily. "He meaneth not to be unfriendly, I am sure, and I would gladly receive a lesson at his hands. Come, comrade Aymery, teach me also how to beat friend Roland."

There was a general laugh at the hit at Roland Mortimer; and that worthy, after a momentary frown, joined in the laugh, for Edgar's smile and tone were so frank and pleasant that anger was impossible.

"Don these things and let us set to work," cried Aymery; and without the loss of a moment, Edgar drew on the leather jerkin and steel headpiece and snatched a sword and buckler from the wall. With a slight shrug of his shoulders and a smile of some amusement, Geoffrey turned on his heel and left the room. Though his charge was now left entirely to the tender mercies of his new comrades, he knew that there was no need to be anxious on his behalf, for their welcome, though rough, was not one whit the less sincere.

The instant Edgar threw out his sword with a gesture of readiness, Aymery attacked with a bound like a young deer's. So swift was his attack that, before Edgar quite knew where he was, his head was singing from a hearty blow which fell full upon his steel headpiece. Warming to the work, he did his best to make a smart return, and to pay Aymery back with something to spare. The teaching he had received, however, was in no way equal to that given to the esquires at Wolsingham Castle, and in a few moments Aymery had demonstrated this so clearly that the other's body was smarting in a half-dozen places at once.

Good-naturedly Aymery soon proposed a halt, and explained to Edgar wherein he had failed, and what were the chief faults of his style of defence.

"Ye look quick and active, but make not enough use of your powers, friend Wintour. See how I fought–never still, constantly advancing or retreating. Ye should do the same."

"I see that would be best for a light-armed contest such as this," replied

Edgar; "but seeing that knights fight in full armour in battle, with little room or power to advance or retreat, would it not be best for us to learn to stand more to our ground likewise?"

"There is some shrewdness in thy point," responded Aymery with a nod, "but pitched battles are rare, whilst there are many occasions on which a knight fights when not armed cap-à-pie. I am perhaps too prone to rely upon my activity; mayhap it were better if I sometimes fought knee to knee."

"Do you never practise in full armour?" asked Edgar. "I have never had the opportunity, but again it seemeth to me that as we enter a battle or the lists in full armour, we should make it our chiefest aim to become quite accustomed to its weight and hindrance, and to watching our foes through our vizor-slits. Why leave all that to the day of battle, as so many seem to do?"

"Ah! I cannot agree with thee there. Full armour is so irksome that we should never learn the finer strokes of fence. When thou hast felt the weight of it thou wilt the better understand."

Edgar felt unconvinced, but did not care to go on with the discussion, as his knowledge of the subject was so slight that he felt far from sure of his ground. So he turned aside and watched the efforts of some of his other comrades as they engaged in gymnastic exercises or practised with various weapons. It was a sight of absorbing interest to him, and the call to supper when it came found him still reluctant to quit the scene.

"Come, Edgar, put off thy headpiece and jerkin and join us at the board. I warrant thou wilt pronounce the cheer both good and plentiful, for Sir John hath never stinted us of our victuals. Wilt accompany me?"

"Right willingly," cried Edgar, as he threw off his gear and followed the speaker, a sturdy youth named Robert Duplessis, into the next room, where a long table literally groaned beneath the weight of huge rounds of beef and other fare and big jugs of home-brewed ale. Whilst the supper was proceeding, Edgar took an early opportunity of inviting his companion to tell him something of the castle and its inmates.

"Oh, as to the castle, thou art easily enlightened," cried Robert readily enough. "'Twas built in John's reign and, as thou hast seen, is strong enough for anything. It lieth not far from St. Albans and but twenty miles from London town. Sometimes we esquires take horse and ride into the city on pleasure bent, and a right good time we enjoy. Thou shouldst make one of our party the next time we ride thither."

"The exercises I saw just now, and the encounters with sword and axe–are they all the teaching ye get when Sir John is abroad?"

"Nay, nay, we should be sorry esquires were that so. No, twice a week Sir Percy Standish cometh to Wolsingham to give us instruction in the use of our

weapons. He doth it out of friendship for Sir John, and lucky indeed are we to have a teacher so able. It is said, however, by some of the pertest of our pages that his visits are less on Sir John's account than because of an attraction amongst his household, but I hold that the report is baseless, seeing that Sir John's elder daughter is but seventeen."

"I saw three ladies on the outer walls as I rode up to the gates of the castle," said Edgar. "Doubtless two were Sir John's daughters? Who was the third?"

"Oh, she is Sir John's ward, Beatrice d'Alençon. She is only fifteen, but is heiress to wide lands in Kent and wider lands in Guienne. She will be greatly in request among the needy nobles when she cometh of age an the prophets mistake not. Even Aymery and Roland dispute one another's claims to wear her gage, and that is why they are so zealous to worst one another in fence. Asses!–when she careth naught for either!"

Edgar smiled at the scorn with which Robert spoke. "At any rate," he said, "neither you nor I are likely to dispute the damsel with the twain. I hold such ideas to be rubbish, and far from befitting esquires aspiring to the honour of knighthood. My aim at least is single, and no maiden shall divide it."

"Ha! ha! Edgar," laughed Robert, "I should love to hear thee make that declaration in the lady's hearing."

Edgar did not care to join in the laugh, and merely shrugged his shoulders and turned the conversation into other channels. He was interested beyond all else in learning the details of his squirehood and how best he might find opportunity to advance himself in it. The other matters that apparently so interested Aymery and Roland had no charms for him.

So earnest to succeed, it did not take Edgar long to learn his duties and to make rapid headway with his knowledge of martial accomplishments. The period of the next year or two was to him a time of continuous development. Applying himself with ardour to learn all that appertained to knightly prowess, in six months he had passed several of his comrades in skill and dexterity with arms, and could compel even Aymery Montacute to put out all his strength to worst him.

It was then that he gave effect to a resolve half formed in his first talk with Aymery. His opinion at that time was that a knight or esquire should practise clothed in full armour if he desired to show himself at his best on the day of trial. As time went on and his knowledge increased, this opinion deepened into a firm conviction. His comrades, however, as Aymery had done at the first, laughed at the idea, and one or two suggested slyly that perhaps he was becoming tired of the hard knocks he was getting, now that he had worked his way into the front rank and none thought of sparing him. But Edgar cared as little for their ridicule and somewhat ungenerous suggestions as he really did for their hard knocks, and

presently appeared at their practices clad in as full a suit of gear as he possessed.

The natural result of the change was that his comrades easily worsted him, and from being almost a match for Aymery he passed down the line to Philip Soames, who stood last in order of prowess with the sword. Undismayed, however, by the fall, Edgar set himself to climb back to the position he had lost, and to become once more the equal of Aymery notwithstanding the armour which clogged and weighted his every movement.

The labour was heavy and the task most irksome. Edgar was quite determined about it, however, and slowly, bit by bit, won his way upward. One of the greatest difficulties before him was that of getting used to wearing a helmet with vizor closed, and learning to watch his man as keenly and surely through its narrow slits as with the vizor open. Accomplish the task he did, however, and had the satisfaction of knowing that the fierce shock of battle or the exciting moments of the tourney would find him on as familiar ground as in the contests of the gymnasium or the tilts in the castle courtyard. As a result of the heavy and constant exercise and the good fare, his frame expanded and his muscles thickened, and from a sturdy lad of fifteen he grew to be a stalwart youth, strong as most grown men and as hardy as one of his Viking forefathers.

After a couple of years of the teaching of Sir Percy Standish, their instructor, Edgar began to long for higher instruction, and for other opponents than his four companions and an occasional visitor from a neighbouring castle. He feared that when the time came for him to be cast into the wider circle of a camp of war, his skill, though it seemed considerable among his comrades at Wolsingham, might be dwarfed into insignificance by the higher skill of esquires from other parts of the country.

Casting about for some means of obtaining other and more varied instruction, he made enquiries during one of the visits he and his comrades sometimes paid to the city of London. He then ascertained that there existed two or three schools of arms for the training, chiefly, of the sons of merchants, but oftentimes used by knights and esquires within the city bounds. One of these was pointed out to him as of especial excellence, as it was presided over by a Picard, named Gaspard Verillac, who was much famed for his skill with weapons.

The very next day Edgar rode into London alone and called upon Verillac.

"I wish to gain some skill in arms," he said, opening the conversation with his usual directness.

Gaspard gave his youthful visitor a keen glance. "Thou hast already some skill in arms, if I mistake not," he remarked quietly.

"But a little, I fear. I desire to learn much more."

"Come into yon chamber. Take sword and engage with me for a few moments. I shall then know the more surely how much or how little thou dost

know."

Edgar obeyed, and, entering the chamber, eagerly scanned the walls, which were covered with what seemed to be the weapons of all nations. He then selected a sword of nearly the same length and weight as the sharpened weapon he bore strapped to his side. The two fenced together for a minute, and Edgar realized at once how widely his style differed from that of some at least of the world outside his own circle. Gaspard's swordplay was more free and open than he had been used to, and was perhaps rather more adapted for single combat than for pitched encounters. The point was used almost as much as the edge of the blade.

"Thou art an esquire and no burgher's son," said Gaspard as he put up his sword.

Edgar assented.

"Thy skill is already considerable and giveth promise of vastly more. I can make thee a knight of rare skill and address if thou carest to become my pupil."

"I will gladly do so," cried Edgar, who was greatly impressed by his new instructor and by the careless ease and power with which he fenced.

"Thou wilt not only practise with me but with others of my pupils; and as they are of all ranks and hie from many countries, thou wilt learn to be at home with whomsoever the tide of war may bring thee into conflict. Come now, and I will take thee into the School of Arms."

When, some two hours later, Edgar rode back to Wolsingham Castle, he felt well satisfied with the step he had taken. The prospect of adding to his prowess with the sword under the guidance of Gaspard Verillac seemed bright indeed.

CHAPTER IV
The Winning of Peter

Regularly twice a week Edgar rode into London and waged strenuous warfare with Gaspard's most promising pupils. So earnest was his purpose and so able the tuition that he made rapid progress, and presently, as he grew in strength and stature, Gaspard was hard put to it to find pupils either ready or able to oppose him.

Indeed, Gaspard soon learned to turn the visits of the young esquire to

good account. Oftentimes knights, and even nobles, desirous of obtaining a little private practice before setting out for the wars, were attracted to the school by the reputation of its founder; and on these occasions, instead of wielding the sword himself, Gaspard preferred to call Edgar in and set his pupil to work, contenting himself with administering instruction and reproof as the combat proceeded. To being made use of in this manner Edgar raised not the smallest objection. The heavier and the more desperate the encounter, the greater, he felt, was his chance of onward progress.

It was some twelve months after his visit to Gaspard's school that an adventure befell which influenced considerably Edgar's after career. It had been his habit, when he had stayed unusually late, to take a short cut to the open country through the poorer quarter at the eastward end of the city. The denizens of its narrow alleys and filthy courts were indeed a fierce and lawless crew, but Edgar, in the reliance born of his hard-won prowess with the sword, cared not one straw whether or no his way might lie through the haunts even of criminals and desperadoes. Certain it is that they never ventured to molest him.

But one day, as he was cantering along an alley just wide enough to give free passage to a mounted man, he heard, as he passed the entrance to a narrow court, a sudden burst of piercing screams. Turning his steed and clattering into the court, Edgar surprised a group of rough-looking men crowding round a lad or young man who was being most cruelly beaten by one of their number. The lad was thin and frail and half-starved looking, and his assailant was a burly ruffian of the most brutal type. The lad's screams so worked upon Edgar that, without a moment's hesitation, he urged his horse right amongst the group of men, and, by causing it to kick and plunge violently, scattered them in all directions. The lad's tormentor he treated to a heavy blow with the flat of his sword, just as he was disappearing, scowling horribly, through an open doorway close by.

Dismounting, Edgar hastily assisted the lad to rise, and then for the first time saw that he was a cripple. One of his legs was apparently somewhat shorter than the other, and the limb itself was partially withered.

"Come, lad, let me take thee to thy home," said Edgar gently. "These brutes shall molest thee no more."

"Thank you, sir," gasped the boy gratefully, as he tried to struggle to his feet. "But I have no home save this court. I fear, too, that I cannot stand."

"Tell me which is thy house. I will carry thee and lay thee on thy bed."

"This is where I live when he will let me," said the lad, indicating the house into which his assailant had disappeared. "But do not tarry here, sir, or thou wilt be attacked. Quick, I hear them calling to one another, and if thou wouldst escape alive, thou must go at once."

"Nay, lad, I cannot leave thee thus. After the rough shaking I have given

them I fear the ruffians will illtreat thee worse than before. Come, I will mount and carry thee out of this den before me."

Springing into the saddle, Edgar stooped and lifted the lad, placing him in the saddle before him. Then, sword in hand, he rode down the court straight to the entrance, where he could see men gathering armed with knives, clubs, and stones. A volley of missiles sang through the air as he approached, and, bending before the storm, Edgar charged full into the enemy. The men scattered as he bore down upon them, some dodging into doorways and others throwing themselves down flat against the walls. But as he passed, knives darted out from this side and that, and it was only with the greatest difficulty that Edgar could avoid them. Emerging into the alley he found it thick with men hurrying to the scene. The whole district seemed to have been aroused, and the instant he appeared a howl of execration went up, followed almost instantly by another and heavier volley of stones.

Setting spurs to his horse, Edgar again darted full at the crowd. The men were now too numerous to avoid him, and a dozen were flung headlong to the ground, whilst several more fell back with heads ringing from blows given sharply with the flat of the sword. Though bleeding from several cuts inflicted by the stones, Edgar had almost won through to safety when suddenly, just as he was striking at a man who had tried to hamstring his horse on his right, a ruffian on his left, more determined than his fellows, sprang close up and buried a dagger in the animal's side. The poor beast gave a convulsive spring and then sank to the ground where it lay writhing in agony. As the horse fell beneath him, Edgar took the cripple lad in his arms. It needed but a glance to tell him that his horse was doomed, and his ears told him as surely that his own life was in equal peril did he not make good his escape without an instant's loss of time.

A closed door was by him, and he kicked it open with one foot. Springing in, he closed it after him. The sound of the shrieking horde outside was momentarily deadened, but, as he rushed along the passage to the back of the house, the door flew violently open again, and a wave of sound with a note so fierce and cruel swept in that most men, even in those martial days, would have been completely unnerved.

A door led from the passage into a yard at the back of the house, and through this Edgar sped with his burden as rapidly as he could. The yard was separated from the next by a low wall, and over this he pressed, making for the door at the back of the house opposite to him. This door, however, was fast, and was too strongly made to be readily battered down; so without a moment's hesitation Edgar sprang at the single-shuttered window on the ground floor. Placing the cripple lad down for a moment, he seized a corner of the shutter with both hands, and, exerting all his strength, tore it bodily away. Flinging it to the ground

with a clatter, he again lifted the cripple lad, placed him on the sill, and leaped up after him. Not until then did he pause to glance inside the room, but now he saw that it contained four men, who had evidently been drinking and playing at cards when disturbed by the sudden wrenching of the shutter from off its hinges.

They were rough-looking men, and stared fiercely, albeit with some alarm, at the two figures perched upon the window sill.

"Who are ye?" challenged one in a rough and threatening tone. "Speak–what want ye?"

Edgar would have retreated had there been time, but already some of his pursuers were dropping over the low wall behind, shouting in fierce exultation as they saw their prey almost within their grasp. In another moment or two he would have to defend himself in the rear, whilst his front was threatened by these four men, who looked as ripe for mischief as any of the ruffians closing in behind. Desperate measures alone could save him.

Whispering to the cripple to cling to his back and so free both arms, Edgar flung his legs over the sill, sprang into the room, and dashed for the door. Two of the men drew their knives and made as though to stop him, but Edgar, who still carried his sword naked in his hand, instantly attacked them. Two rapid thrusts from his practised hand and the men fell back, shrieking and snarling, leaving him free to pass unmolested through the door and down a passage into another alley on the farther side.

Edgar's exertions in running and climbing, burdened by the cripple lad, had been so great that he felt he must at once find a refuge, even if only a temporary one, or resign himself to selling his life as dearly as he could. Eagerly he glanced up and down the alley. At one end was a blank wall, and at the other were a number of men, who raised a shout the instant they caught sight of him. In front were what appeared to be the backs of a number of solidly-built warehouses, and these, Edgar felt, could and must provide his only refuge.

The lowest windows were too high to be reached, and the doors were unusually strong, doubtless owing to the poverty of the neighbourhood. There was, however, no choice open, so Edgar again put the lad down and turned to the nearest door.

Throughout the flight the cripple lad had not spoken once, but now, noticing perhaps how his rescuer panted, and how their escape seemed as far off as ever, he found his tongue.

"Leave me behind, sir. Thou canst not escape burdened with me. Seek thine own safety. What need for both to perish?"

"I cannot leave thee, lad, once I have taken the task upon me. Fear not; while I still possess a sword I will never lose hope."

As he spoke Edgar drove the blade of his sword through the top panel of

the door, tore it out, and again and again drove it back. Then with the hilt he hammered the splintered woodwork inwards with quick sharp blows until a hole gaped the full length and breadth of the panel.

"Now, lad, thine escape at least is assured. Come; I am going to pass thee through this hole." Lifting the lad, Edgar thrust him through the cavity and lowered him gently down. And not one whit too soon, for the advance guard of the men from the end of the alley and those who had followed him through the houses was now upon the scene. Making a sudden rush at the nearest of them, Edgar wounded two and momentarily drove the rest headlong back. Then retreating as suddenly as he had advanced, he sprang to the broken door and swung himself quickly through the gap.

Inside he found himself in a dark passage, between stacks of goods piled to the ceiling. Followed by the cripple, who had awaited his coming, and who could now limp slowly along, he traversed the passage and mounted some steps to what appeared to be the inhabited part of the building. In a minute or two he came to the door of a room, inside which he could hear the sound of laughter and the clink of cups and platters. Here at least seemed hope of succour.

It was indeed high time, for the noise of axes and hammers pounding at the outer door and the yells of the savage mob outside reverberated threateningly along the passage. In a minute or two the remnants of the door must give way and allow them free ingress. Already some of the cut-throats might have ventured singly through the gap and be stealing along in the darkness.

Opening the door without ceremony, Edgar pressed eagerly in, followed by the lad. The sight which met them, fresh from the hurly-burly, seemed strange in its dissimilarity, and almost made them momentarily doubt the reality of what they had gone through. The room was comfortably furnished and brightly lit, and at a large table in its centre sat a merchant, his wife, and several daughters at supper. All rose to their feet, as with a single impulse, as Edgar, panting and blood-streaked, and with a naked and reddened sword in his hand, strode impetuously in.

"Sirrah, what is this?" cried the merchant hastily. "What dost thou in my dwelling?"

"To seek aid. We are fugitives," panted Edgar.

"From the law? Come not to me for succour, but begone!"

"Nay, we flee from bands of thieves and cut-throats. Even now they are doubtless pressing in at thy broken door. Summon aid, for our need is sore."

"What–what is it thou art saying? Bands of cut-throats entering my house! Thou hast led them upon us, and we are ruined. What defence have I against such ruffians?"

Edgar leaned upon his sword and panted. His exertions had been tremen-

dous, but a few moments' breathing space would, he knew, do much to restore him.

"They are stealing along the passage, sir. I hear them," whispered the cripple. "They are fierce and stubborn when once they are roused, and fear the Justice and his men but little. I know them well."

"Come, sir," said Edgar, lifting himself upright. "The cut-throats are even now stealing along yon passage, and—-"

Shrill cries of alarm from the merchant's wife and daughters interrupted him, and turning hastily round, Edgar saw that two or three savage-looking figures were even now actually at the door. The merchant snatched a knife from the table, and, though pale and trembling, moved towards the door, as though prepared to defend his womenfolk to the last.

With a sickening shock Edgar realized his responsibility in drawing the ruffians in pursuit of him into the home of a peaceful and innocent merchant. Though he was the one they sought, it was not to be supposed for a moment that the merchant's family would, even though he gave himself up, remain unmolested. Furious with himself, and desperate to defend the innocent from the consequences of his thoughtlessness, Edgar sprang through the doorway upon the ruffians who were gathering there.

His sword rose and fell with the rapidity and unerring precision he had learned in so many hard-fought encounters at Gaspard's school, and in the space of a few seconds three lay wounded upon the ground and the others were in full flight. More men were stealing up behind, but at the screeching of the wounded and the headlong flight of the remainder they too turned and hastily retreated. For some distance Edgar followed them up, and, by sundry thrusts at the hindmost, sent them racing down the stairs to the passage through the warehouse. Here he stopped, for the way was dark, and he could not know but that many might be lurking among the bales, ready to spring out as he passed by, and, by stabbing him in the back, render themselves masters of the merchant's dwelling.

Returning to the door of the room, Edgar beckoned to the merchant, who was engaged in calming the fears of his wife and daughters, to come outside for a moment.

"Canst not fetch aid?"

"How dare I leave my wife and daughters, young sir? At any moment thou mayst be overcome, leaving them at the mercy of these ruffians."

"Nay, if thou wilt give me a lighted lantern fixed upon a short pole, I will, I promise thee, rid thy house of these cut-throats until such time as thou canst bring help. But I cannot fight to advantage in the dark."

"Thou shalt have the lanthorn. See thou keep'st thy promise."

The lantern was brought, and bearing it high up with his left hand, and

holding his sword in his right, Edgar returned along the way he had come, searching for any trace of lurking foes. He encountered none until he had nearly reached the broken door, but here he found them gathered in force, and had to make another attack. His determined front and darting sword, however, quickly cowed the men, and after a very short struggle they gave back, and, rushing for the door, fought their way out in absolute panic.

Edgar did not trouble to follow up his advantage, but contented himself with placing his lantern where its light would shine upon the broken door, sitting down himself in a shadow and resting, while he watched and listened.

Half an hour passed away without any change. He could tell his pursuers still lurked outside, but not once did they dare to return to the attack. Then he heard cries of alarm and the sound of rapid footsteps. A moment or two later a face appeared at the broken door, and he recognized the merchant.

"Is all well within?" he called breathlessly.

"All is well," cried Edgar, coming forward.

"God be praised!" cried the merchant in a voice of deep relief. "I have brought an officer and ten men, and at the sight of us the vagabonds made off."

"'Tis well. We are safe from attack now."

"Did the ruffians molest thee?"

"Nay. And now, sir, I must make the best of my way back to my home at Castle Wolsingham without loss of time. But before I go I pray thee forgive me for the alarm I have caused thee and the ladies of thy household. Thou know'st 'twas all done in the heat and extremity of the moment, and wilt excuse my thoughtlessness."

"I cannot regret aught that has gained me the acquaintance of one so gallant," cried the merchant warmly. "Come with me, for I am sure the ladies will desire an opportunity to thank thee for themselves."

The gratitude of the merchant and his wife and daughters, now that their alarm had subsided, was very great, and they united in praising Edgar for what they termed his bravery. But Edgar laughed at them, and would have no such term applied to what he called an afternoon's useful practice with the sword. One destined to the trade of arms, he disclaimed banteringly, must regard such a brush as of no more moment than the merchant's assistants did the measuring of a bale of cloth. But the merchant's daughters would not be denied, and showed their admiration of the young esquire by pressing food and dainties upon him, and by washing and tending the cripple lad, the unhappy cause of all the disturbance.

An offer of the loan of a horse gave Edgar an excuse to be gone and to escape from irksome thanks and embarrassingly bright eyes. So as soon as they had finished tending the cripple lad, whose name they soon found out to be Peter, he bade them all goodbye, and, mounting the steed and taking Peter up behind

him, set off for Wolsingham once more.

His strange and exciting adventure had ended in the loss of a horse and the winning of a lad. How the latter was to be provided for, Edgar knew no more than he knew, when he set out in the morning, that he would return saddled with such a dependent. It was all very strange, but his mind was fully made up that he could not readily part with a lad for whom he had risked and ventured so much.

CHAPTER V
The Fracas

It was late when Edgar reached the vicinity of Wolsingham, and, preferring to obtain Geoffrey Fletcher's permission before he brought Peter into the castle, he left him for the night at the farmhouse of one of the tenants on the Wolsingham lands. He then rode on to the castle, and, learning that Geoffrey was still up, made his way to him, and related in detail all that had befallen that eventful afternoon. Geoffrey was concerned at the loss of the horse, but made little of the difficulty of the cripple lad. He could, he said, easily find employment for him among the tenantry if he found it impossible to take him into service within the castle. The latter would depend upon his inspection of the lad on the morrow. He congratulated Edgar warmly upon coming out of so serious a fracas with a whole skin, and strongly advised him, if he were still bent upon continuing his lessons with Gaspard, to choose a more public route until such time as the affair was likely to have been forgotten.

During the homeward journey, Edgar had learned from Peter all that he could tell him of his life and parents. As he had expected, the lad's parents were both dead–his mother but a few months since–and he had only been allowed shelter in the house where his parents had lived by the kindness of one of the women of the place. Her husband, however, was of another mind, and, finding that the boy could give nothing in payment, had turned him out of the house.

Again and again he had stolen back, however, and the man's wrath had increased beyond measure as he found him there time after time, until it ended in the more than usually brutal beating which Edgar was fortunately just in time to prevent becoming something worse. Of relations, Peter had none–that he knew of; and without help, sympathy, or hope he would in all probability, if he had

survived and had remained in those evil surroundings, have drifted imperceptibly into evil and vicious courses.

From this Edgar's intervention had saved him, and though as yet he did not realize all that it meant, he was deeply grateful for the timely succour.

On the morrow Edgar took Peter in to Geoffrey, and then and there he was placed in charge of the armourer, who had for some time been wanting a boy to work his bellows. With healthy surroundings, good food, and fair treatment, he soon lost much of his frail and ill-nourished appearance, and but for his infirmity would in time have passed muster with other youths of his rank and station. Indeed, even his infirmity gradually lessened, until at last his limp, though still noticeable, marred his appearance rather than his usefulness.

The recollection of the stirring scenes they had been through together always remained a bond of union between Edgar and Peter the armourer's lad, and the desire to aid and the desire to serve remained with them even after months and years had passed by. If Edgar wanted someone to go on an errand, it was Peter who was only too delighted to go; and if Peter had ever any desire beyond his work, it was always to Edgar that he came for advice or permission. If anything, the bond between them increased with the lapse of time, and it became a recognized thing in the castle that Peter was the special protégé and retainer of Edgar Wintour.

Three or four years passed without any change of note taking place in the affairs of the castle. Then its lord, Sir John Chartris, returned from the wars, and an alteration was made that had a considerable influence in the lives of more than one of its inmates. Sir John had previously paid several visits to his home but had soon departed, for he was constantly campaigning in Flanders, the south of France, or elsewhere. On this occasion he returned alone, for his esquire had recently been knighted, and had left him to take service under another banner.

As soon as the news that the office of personal esquire to Sir John was vacant became known, the excitement and rivalry between Aymery Montacute, Roland Mortimer, Robert Duplessis, Philip Soames, and Edgar became intense. That such a contingency was likely soon to arise had been known for some time, and each of them had nursed within himself the secret hope that he might be the fortunate one and follow his master to the wars. Rivalry had always existed between them, but naturally this increased tenfold at the thought that a selection must soon be made, for Sir John had so far steadily refused to take with him more than one esquire.

In prowess with weapons, both on foot and on horseback, Aymery, Roland, and Edgar were generally considered to be about equal. But this estimate was based on their performances in the castle courtyard and gymnasium, and little account, if any, was taken of the fact that Edgar always wore full armour, and,

more even than this, wore his vizor down in those encounters. His comrades, however, had become so used to meeting him in this fashion, and made so little of it beyond a few half good-humoured gibes at his supposed dislike for cuts and bruises, that they overlooked the heavy handicap under which he laboured. Edgar, however, had not forgotten it, and resolved that when a trial was made to qualify one of their number for the coveted position, he would fight unencumbered, in the hopes of being able easily to overcome all his opponents.

The lessons he had learned at Gaspard's, too, would then very largely come into play for the first time. Several of the best strokes he had there learnt and practised he never used at Wolsingham, partly because he did not wish to accentuate the rivalry that already existed by easily worsting his comrades, and partly because he had had from the first a vague idea that a knowledge of new modes of attack or defence, about which they knew nothing, might prove useful to him in the days to come.

Several times the rivalry between him and one or two of his comrades had led perilously near to an open quarrel; but Edgar so far had, by the exercise of tact and a certain amount of forbearance, generally managed to keep the peace. Twice, however, he had had high words with Aymery and Roland over the rough manner in which they had treated Peter when sending him on their errands. Even this had blown over, though it remained an understood thing that if anyone wanted to annoy Edgar it was a safe and sure plan to bully the cripple lad.

A few weeks after Sir John's return home, it leaked out that it was likely that he would take part in an expedition which was being dispatched to Guienne under the leadership of the Earl of Derby. Much was hoped for from this expedition, and it seemed certain that those fortunate ones who took part in it would be in a fair way towards winning much renown. It happened also that the greater part of the lands to which Sir John's ward, Beatrice d'Alençon, was heiress, lay not far from the probable scene of the expedition, and presently the further news transpired that Sir John contemplated taking her with him, accompanied by his elder daughter, Gertrude, with the object of seizing an early opportunity of looking into the condition of her estates.

As has already been explained, both Aymery and Roland had for years past proudly worn the gage of Beatrice, with or without her permission, and not unnaturally this news sent them nearly wild with the desire to follow Sir John as his esquire. To take part in a famous campaign beneath her very eyes would, they felt certain, be a sure means towards gaining her admiration.

From the moment this news leaked out their rivalry was fanned to boiling-point, and the quarrels between them became constant. Only Edgar's tact and self-control kept him from embroilment also; for though they knew he was no rival so far as Beatrice was concerned, for he openly scoffed at all such notions,

they both feared his swordsmanship, which might defeat their ambitions to follow Sir John to the wars. All indeed that was needed to drag him within the circle of their strife was something which would rouse his antagonism to the pitch at which theirs normally stood. An explosion would then be inevitable. Unfortunately this spark was presently supplied, and the unhappy cause of the mishap was Peter, the armourer's lad.

It happened that one day Aymery had set Peter to work to burnish up his armour, which he had carelessly left exposed to the rain after he had been going over it and fondly trying it on on the walls of the keep. Peter went to work willingly enough, but the havoc was so great that by the time he should have returned to the armourer it was only half done. Hastily completing it, in a rough-and-ready fashion, he put it back in the esquires' chamber and went on his way to the forge, intending to finish the work as soon as he was again free. Presently two or three of the pages entered the chamber, and Aymery's armour spread out on the table was the first object to attract their attention. Not knowing or caring to whom it belonged, and ripe for any sort of mischief, they proceeded to amuse themselves by kicking and throwing the pieces about the room.

Tiring of the fun, the armour was left lying where it had fallen, and remained there until Aymery and several of the esquires entered.

"He refuses, Aymery," Roland was saying as they entered. "He saith that the responsibility of looking after one esquire is enough for him, and that the others must seek other opportunity of winning their spurs–at the tourney, I think he meant."

"Didst press thy claims to accompany him?" enquired Aymery sourly.

"They need no pressing," responded Roland haughtily. "And 'tis not *thy* claims I fear."

Aymery was about to make an angry retort when he noticed the pieces of armour he so highly prized lying about the floor in all parts of the room.

"Who hath flung my armour here?" he cried, with a sudden burst of wrath. "I will trounce him finely–upon my sword, I swear it–whoever the varlet may be. Was't any of ye?" he ended fiercely, as he glared at the shamefaced pages.

The boys looked at one another uneasily, and then one more brazen than the rest replied coolly:

"Why dost not look after thy property, Aymery? Where didst leave it? Not with any of us, I'll warrant."

"Ah, I recollect! 'Twas with the armourer's boy I left it. Doubtless he still thinketh 'tis only Edgar's bidding he must do. It seemeth I must teach him another well-merited lesson. Bid him come to me at once, Maurice–be off with thee!"

The page sped off upon his errand, and the others waited, eyeing Aymery

expectantly, for they felt that something more than the chastisement of an unruly youth was in the wind. At any moment Edgar Wintour might come in, for it was nigh upon his time, and none thought that he would see Aymery flog Peter without interfering. The angry esquire spent the minute or two which elapsed before the boy's arrival in examining the pieces of armour strewn about the floor, and the inspection apparently did nothing to improve his temper.

Peter had evidently been told what was afoot, for he went straight up to Aymery immediately he entered.

"You want me, sir," he said quietly.

"Aye, varlet," cried Aymery, grasping him roughly by the collar, "dost see my armour strewn about the floor? What dost mean by it? I will break every bone in thy body, dog that thou art!" and he gave emphasis to his savage words by shaking Peter with all his strength.

"I placed them not there," cried Peter, twisting himself free. "I know nothing of it."

"Know nothing of it!" cried Aymery, still more incensed. "The work is only half done–dost know nothing of that? Knave, get thee to work at once and do it over again, or I will beat thee so thou canst not stand."

Peter hesitated a moment, for the armourer was busy, and was, he knew, awaiting his return with some impatience. Misunderstanding his reluctance to do his behest, Aymery's wrath boiled up and over, and, seizing the boy by the shoulders, he flung him across the table.

"Come, Roland, aid me administer a sound thrashing to this obstinate varlet. He thinketh 'tis only Wintour's bidding he must do, and hangeth back when we command."

Roland was only too ready, and grasped and held Peter while Aymery snatched up a couple of armour buckles and belaboured him with all his strength. There could be no doubt that Aymery was almost beside himself with rage, for the buckles tore away Peter's clothing until they reached and began to score deeply into the bare flesh–and still he went on.

At first the lad bore the beating in silence, but as the buckles began to cut into his back he commenced to scream with ever-increasing intensity.

It was in the midst of this that Edgar suddenly entered. The screams and the sight of Peter, face downwards on the table and covered with blood, smote him as a blow, and his face blanched in a way that none had ever seen before.

"Get thee gone, Wintour," cried Aymery recklessly. "This is well-merited punishment, and interfere thou shalt not."

For answer, Edgar sprang at the speaker, seized him round the waist, and flung him heavily against the wall. Then he turned fiercely upon Roland; but that worthy shrank back before his pale face and flashing eyes, and, letting go Peter,

fled to the wall and tore down a sword.

Finding himself free, Peter crawled from the table and dragged himself into the inner room, the door of which Edgar flung open while he faced and kept watch upon his furious comrades. He, too, had snatched a sword from the wall, and he now placed himself squarely in the doorway and waited. The moment Aymery had recovered his balance, he felt at his side and grasped the hilt of his sword. But Duplessis laid firm hand upon his arm and whispered an urgent warning, and Aymery was not so mad but that he was able to realize the dangerous folly of attacking Edgar with sharpened and pointed weapon. Abandoning his first impulse, he followed Roland's example, and, possessing himself of one of the blunted, pointless weapons used in their practices, instantly attacked the figure standing in the doorway of the room in which the cripple lad had taken refuge, standing with ready poise as though prepared to dispute with all present their right to pass unchallenged.

The encounter that ensued was so reckless and desperate that none present had seen the like before. Aymery at first seemed too angry to trouble about defending, and hacked at his adversary with a fierce rapidity that gave Edgar little time for other than parrying. In a minute or two, however, he managed to give Aymery so strong a thrust with his pointless weapon against his unjerkined chest that he was compelled to cease pressing in to close quarters and to pay some attention to defence.

"Smite home, Aymery," cried Roland, thinking his friend was giving back. "Smite home, or let me have my fling at the braggart!"

Stung into more reckless activity, Aymery sprang again to the attack, leaving his head for the moment unguarded. Before his own blow had fallen, the flat of Edgar's weapon caught him heavily upon the side of the head, and he fell back against the table, sick and half-fainting. Edgar had scarcely stepped back into position before Roland was savagely attacking him in his turn, secure in the possession of headpiece and jerkin, which he had cautiously donned whilst the fight with Aymery was proceeding.

"Once thou didst gibe at me for fearing the weight of my comrades' blows," laughed Edgar, as their blades ground together. "Why then this jerkin? Why then this headpiece? Methinks 'tis another that most fears the shock of blows upon skull and body."

"Bah!" cried Roland, "if thou thinkest I care for thy blows I will tear them off."

"The result will be the same," retorted Edgar. "I care neither way. Look to thy guard, or I vow thy headpiece will help thee little."

Though fighting keenly, Edgar kept an eye upon the room as well as upon his adversary. Aymery, he could see, was recovering from the blow he had re-

ceived, and in a moment might be expected to renew the fight with temper little improved by the sharpness of his punishment. Others of his comrades were whispering together, and he fancied they meditated an attack to overcome his resistance and put an end to the conflict.

Thinking it time to rid himself of Roland, for Aymery had given himself a shake and grasped his sword anew, Edgar put into effect a trick he had learned of Gaspard some years before. As their swords grated together he locked his blade in the hilt of his opponent's sword, and, with a sharp wrench, tore the weapon from his grasp. With a shout of pain, for his wrist had been severely twisted, Roland jumped swiftly back out of reach; then, recovering from his surprise, he seized another weapon from the wall and sprang to the attack once more. Aymery was now also attacking, and the two made such an onslaught that Edgar was compelled to fence as he had never fenced before.

Suddenly the door opened and Geoffrey Fletcher entered, followed by a couple of men-at-arms.

"Hold!" he cried. "Hold! Cease this brawling, or ye shall cool your heels in the guardroom."

But neither Aymery nor Roland paid any heed to his words; they were too intent upon beating down Edgar's resistance. Roland had already inflicted a severe blow upon his unprotected head, and, dizzy from the effects, Edgar had retired a pace or two into the doorway, where the two blades could play upon him less easily.

"Men-at-arms, arrest these brawlers!" cried Geoffrey sternly, and striding forward, followed by the two men, he seized Roland roughly by the shoulder and struck down his sword with his own weapon. One of the men-at-arms seized Aymery, and the other approached Edgar, who immediately flung his sword upon the floor, and, folding his arms, looked the man in the face.

"There, Matthew!" he said, as quietly as his heaving chest would allow, "take it–it has done its work so far. Then come with me and help me to take poor Peter to his bed. He is the innocent cause of all this unhappy mischief."

Matthew picked up the weapon and went and looked at Peter, who was supporting himself, half-fainting, against the wall. Then, recalled by the stern voice of Geoffrey, he whispered: "I will return and see to him, or send someone in my place."

"Men-at-arms, march the prisoners to the guard-room, and keep them close till Sir John's pleasure is known," commanded Geoffrey; and the esquires, sobered by the recollection of their folly now that the heat of the conflict was evaporating, marched unresistingly out of the chamber down the stairs to the guardroom

adjoining the castle gates.

CHAPTER VI
Sir John's Esquire

The three esquires were kept closely confined the rest of the day and all night in a cell leading out of the guardroom, watched over by a man-at-arms, to see that there was no renewal of hostilities. The interval gave them time for quiet reflection, and doubtless the first conclusion they came to was that such a fracas was hardly likely to commend any one of them to Sir John Chartris as being a suitable candidate for the position of his personal esquire, especially at a time when he was about to start for Guienne and Gascony accompanied by a portion of his household. It was obvious that he would wish for an esquire who possessed prudence as well as fighting capacity, when at any time it might be necessary to leave him in sole charge of his affairs.

To Edgar, at any rate, the thought was torture. Though he could scarcely see how he could have acted otherwise–for the rescue of Peter he never for a moment regretted–he yet felt angry with himself that he had not somehow avoided a collision at a time so critical in his career. However his comrades may have got on, he himself scarcely slept a wink all night.

It was nearly midday when a summons came to the prisoners that they were to prepare themselves for an interview with Sir John. Half an hour later Geoffrey appeared, again accompanied by a guard of men-at-arms, and the three esquires were marched across the courtyard to the council chamber of Sir John, high up in the walls of the keep. Curious eyes watched them pass by, for the news that there had been a serious fracas in the esquires' quarters had spread like wildfire through the castle. Some commiseration was expressed at their ill luck in the affair happening whilst Sir John was at the castle, and, consequently, in their having to appear before him, for he was known to be something of a martinet.

As they approached the door of Sir John's chamber it opened, and a youth stepped out. It was Peter, the armourer's assistant. Aymery and Roland looked at one another gloomily. His presence hardly augured well for them.

The first thing the three young men noticed as they were ushered into the

room was that Sir Percy Standish as well as Sir John Chartris was present. Both knights were seated at a table fronting the doorway, and Geoffrey ranged the three esquires facing them, with a man-at-arms on either flank. He then took a seat at Sir Percy's side.

"What am I to think of my esquires," began Sir John in a stern, upbraiding voice, as he fixed his steel-grey eyes upon each of the young men in turn, "what am I to think of the example they set to my men-at-arms and retainers when they brawl thus amongst themselves? How can I entrust to them the command of soldiers when they have no command over themselves and less knowledge of discipline?"

"But, Sir John—-" began Aymery hotly.

"Cease, boy!–I will hear no excuses. There can be no excuse for the men I command to fight amongst themselves. Had this breach of discipline occurred in face of the enemy I would surely have sent ye back to your homes–disgraced esquires. Now ye shall spend the rest of the day and night in the guard chamber, to meditate upon my words and your own folly; and for two weeks more the sentinel at the gate will have orders to refuse you exit. Dost understand?"

The three esquires murmured assent.

"Then, Geoffrey, remove the prisoners, and see that my commands are obeyed."

The three esquires were marched back to their cell, gloomy and cast down. Sir John's words and the sentence had sounded the death knell of all their hopes of becoming Sir John's esquire and accompanying him to the wars, and Aymery and Roland, at least, felt with bitter certainty that it was their own cruelty and overbearing conduct they had to thank for it. In their distress of mind a truce was patched up between the three esquires, and though Edgar could not yet forget the others' cruelty to poor Peter, and they could not so soon forget their heavy defeat, they tacitly agreed to let the matter rest and to be as friendly as they could.

At the end of the fortnight of confinement within the precincts of the castle Sir John sent for Edgar. Wondering what the summons might mean, coming so close upon his disgrace, Edgar made speed to obey.

"This quarrel of thine," began Sir John abruptly, though in a not unkindly tone; "I have made enquiries, and I am not disposed to make too much of thy mischance. Perhaps, even, I may think that thou didst not altogether ill to break my rules and to defend the lad. Geoffrey hath told me how it came about that thou didst save the lad at peril of thine own life, and doubtless 'twould be too hard to expect thee to hold thy peace when thy comrades were mishandling him."

Sir John paused for a moment and looked at him thoughtfully, and Edgar, thinking something required of him, murmured: "Thank you, Sir John."

"But how didst come to learn that trick with the sword that hath set thy

comrades wondering?" went on the knight in a brisker tone. "I mean that catch of thy weapon that tore Roland's from his grasp?"

"'Twas learned at Gaspard's, Sir John."

"Gaspard's? And who is Gaspard?"

"He is the founder of a school of arms in London town to which I have been going twice in every week. I thought perhaps Geoffrey had told thee that it was on the return from one of my visits to Gaspard's that I rescued Peter."

"Ha, yes! He did mention it, but I paid no heed. Didst not then feel satisfied with Sir Percy's teaching?"

"Yes, sir; but after a time I thought that I might learn more, and might obtain a knowledge of more varied forms of attack and defence, did I seek other practices."

"Thou wert right. 'Tis well not to move in too narrow a circle. I found that out, overlate, in my first battle, and for the lack I paid heavily in blood and pain. However, I learned my lessons in time. But how dost fare at Gaspard's? Art put quite in the shade?"

"He tells me," replied Edgar slowly, and flushing slightly, "that I am his most promising pupil. Oftentimes he asks me to have a bout with visitors who have heard of his school and who would try how far his instruction extends."

"Ha! That sounds vastly to thy credit. And dost win these bouts or dost lose?"

"I lose sometimes," replied Edgar evasively, wishing the knight would not press the point so far.

"I must see this Gaspard," said Sir John reflectively. "My sword hath been idle of late, and 'twould not come amiss to practise on his pupils ere I join our forces in Guienne; but, ha! at any rate I can practise on his most promising pupil. Get thy sword, Edgar, and I will test thy prowess for myself."

"Nay, sir, I beg thou wilt not; 'twere scarce seemly for esquire—-"

"Ho! ho! Thou fearest to beat me?–or dost fear to be put to the test? Nay, 'tis not the latter; I wrong thee there, I am sure. Well, never mind, lad, I have other matters to think of for the moment. I purpose to make thee my esquire. What dost think of it?"

Edgar gave a start for sheer joy.

"Think of it, Sir John? It is all I could desire in all the world. I will serve thee–I do not say well, but as well as it is in my power to do."

"There are other things than fighting and riding to be done, Edgar. Thou mayst have to stay behind when I go campaigning, to look after the ladies and to see to my interests. For this I need a cool head and a devoted heart. Canst fulfil these conditions?"

"I will try so to do, Sir John."

"Very well. I appoint thee my esquire. Every morning thou wilt come to me for thy instructions. In three weeks, if the weather favours our projects, we set sail for Guienne, and in those three weeks we must have furbished up our arms, selected the men-at-arms and archers who are to accompany us, and hied us to the coast."

Edgar's joy was so great that he could scarcely collect his thoughts, but at last he managed to stammer out his thanks.

"Say no more, Edgar. Now go, and see thou keep'st the peace with thy comrades. They will be sorely disappointed, but thou hast earned thy reward and they have not. I am glad 'tis thee, Edgar Wintour, who wilt accompany me, for thy father's sake as well as for thine own. Thou know'st what he did for me? Well, he desired that thou shouldst make thy way by thine own efforts, without help from me, and so far thou hast done so indeed. Now go, and bear thyself generously towards thy less fortunate comrades."

The next two weeks were weeks of delight to Edgar. In all that appertained to the expedition to Guienne he became Sir John's lieutenant; and when, some three days before the time came to march for the coast, Sir John was called away to London to consult with the Earl of Derby, Edgar was left in sole charge of the contingent of twenty men and the ladies of the household who were to accompany them.

On the day on which it had been arranged for the march to the coast to commence Sir John had not returned. Word soon arrived, however, that he had been detained, and would make the journey direct in the train of the Earl of Derby. Edgar was to set out at once with the Wolsingham men-at-arms and ladies, and was to meet him at Dover.

Gaily the company mustered. The men-at-arms were all picked men, well armed, and in the best of spirits at the prospect of the stirring times before them. The ladies were wild with delight at the change from the dull round of their life, spent mainly behind the walls of the castle. The glitter of weapons and the gleam of armour, the bright dresses of the ladies and the glossy coats of the horses, made a pretty picture against the sombre, massive walls of the castle, and Edgar, as he slowly convinced himself that he really was, for the time at any rate, to command this little force, was dazzled at his wonderful good fortune. Looking as unconcerned as he could, however, he bade his comrades and Geoffrey a most cordial farewell, and then gave the word to march. With deafening fanfare of trumpets the cavalcade wound round the courtyard, under the frowning portcullis, and across the drawbridge to the sunny countryside. All seemed to smile in happiness to Edgar as he rode in the rear, his heart bounding with gladness and hope. Could he have looked forward a few months and become aware of the strange vicissitudes and heart-shaking adventures he would have to face in the sunny

south of France, it may be that he would have been less glad and a little more thoughtful.

CHAPTER VII
To Guienne

"What wouldst do, Sir Edgar?" enquired Beatrice d'Alençon in a tone of formality, but with a lurking air of mock respect, as Edgar, in riding towards the front of the column, passed by the steeds of the two ladies. "What wouldst do an we were to disobey thy commands? Oh, I know thou art said to be wonderful with thy sword, but though that may impress the men-at-arms, it is naught to us."

Edgar smiled and made as though to pass on without speaking.

"Answer me, sir, for I have a mind to go my own way now that we are free from Sir John and that odious Geoffrey."

"Thou wilt not disobey," replied Edgar quietly.

"Oho!–that is soon decided. Dost see yon hill, Edgar Wintour? I am tired of trotting along this dusty lane, and have made up my mind to a gallop across these fields to its summit. The view is doubtless charming. Come, Gertrude–let us see who will reach it first."

"Maiden, do no such thing," cried Edgar, quickly grasping the young girl's bridle as she turned her steed.

Quick as lightning Beatrice gave his horse a sharp cut with her whip, and the animal plunged so violently that Edgar involuntarily let go his hold.

With a ringing laugh of triumph, Beatrice urged on her steed, bounded across the low bushes which bordered the roadway, and made straight for the hill.

Stung to anger at being tricked, and still more so at sundry sly chuckles from one or two of the men-at-arms, Edgar gave instant chase and galloped furiously after. But though he did not spare his steed, the fugitive was not overtaken until she had reached the summit of the hill and had drawn rein to admire the prospect.

"'Tis fine, is it not, Edgar?" enquired the young girl, flushed and sparkling with the sharp gallop, as she pretended to admire the prospect while glancing furtively at the young esquire.

"I will not have it, Beatrice," cried Edgar, as he grasped her bridle with a grip that he did not mean to be shaken off. "What catastrophe may I not have to report to Sir John if thou goest on so wilfully?"

"Release my bridle," commanded Beatrice indignantly. "Thou wilt make me wish that Aymery or Roland were Sir John's esquire instead of thee, Edgar Wintour."

"'Twould be strange if thou didst not do so a'ready," replied Edgar calmly. "I have no claims to their flattering tongues or courtly ways. But if ever a time of stress cometh mayhap thou wilt then be the less discontented."

"Art going to lead me back to our party with hand on my bridle?" cried Beatrice haughtily, albeit with a hint of pleading in her voice.

"Nay, I will not so humiliate thee. But remember, Beatrice, ours is an expedition of war, and not a pleasure excursion. Obedience must needs be given."

"Surely thou art taking thy first command over-seriously," replied Beatrice scoffingly. "What need is there to exact obedience from Gertrude and me? We are not men-at-arms."

"This reason, Beatrice. At our last stop I was informed that the district was infested with robbers and brigands, who had become much emboldened since interest had been so centred in the war. What then if ye had become lost and had fallen into their hands?"

"I would that the robbers would capture thee, Edgar Wintour," cried Beatrice quickly, as she galloped back to Gertrude's side.

Edgar laughed, though somewhat ruefully, and followed her example.

The rest of the journey passed without incident. Oftentimes, however, Edgar found his energies taxed to the utmost to keep the spirits of his young charges within reasonable bounds. Sometimes they scoffed at him and sometimes defied him, but with the aid of a half hint that if the worst came to the worst they would have to ride behind a man-at-arms, he managed to keep them in fair order. It was with a sigh of relief, so far as they were concerned, however, that he rode into Dover town.

Sir John had arrived and was awaiting their coming at the rendezvous agreed upon. After the first greetings were over, and the ladies were as comfortably disposed of as the crowded state of the inns would allow, he led Edgar aside.

"How went the journey hither? Are the ladies well and the men-at-arms of good hap? I hope thou didst maintain a firm discipline, Edgar."

"The ladies are well and the journey passed without mishap. I had no trouble with the men, though I fear the ladies were inclined to be somewhat unruly. I hope thou art well also, Sir John?"

"Well enough, lad. We embark to-morrow, and all told the Earl of Derby

will muster a force of three thousand men. We shall land at Bayonne, and probably march on to Bordeaux. That is as much as it behoves me to tell thee of the expedition at present. There is, however, one other thing I must acquaint thee of at once, as it is closely concerned, I do greatly fear, with mine own personal safety. During this expedition, it is like enough that my life will be in constant jeopardy, not from the enemy but from one amongst my own side. The truth is, I have an enemy, and I look to thee, lad, to aid me to frustrate his evil designs."

"I will indeed do all I can, Sir John. But who is this dastard who in time of war would aim at the life of one of his own countrymen? Tell me his name, I pray thee, so that I may know him and thus be able to guard thee the more certainly."

"'Tis Sir Gervaise de Maupas. He is unknown to thee at present, but before we are through with this expedition thou art likely to know him only too well. He is a man of evil character, unless my judgment and that of some others are at fault, though he well knoweth how to ingratiate himself into the good opinion of those in authority. He hath already gained the ear of the earl, and that alone bodeth ill for me. The cause of our enmity dateth back many years, to the time when his father was dispossessed of his estates for treason and they were bestowed upon my father. He hath been trained from childhood to consider me and mine as his most bitter enemies, and he seemeth to have learned his lesson well. More than that, we have had high words on two occasions, and once we have met in single combat. He was worsted, and since then he hath lost no opportunity of revenging himself most fully.

"I have been stabbed in the back on English soil by a miscreant whose object was certainly not robbery. I was turning as he struck or I should not be here now. The man escaped, but I caught a fleeting glimpse of him, and two months later I saw talking with Sir Gervaise a man who resembled him most uncomfortably. Until now, fortunately for me, I have never been in the same quarter of the field as Sir Gervaise, but now that we are thrown together it behoves us to keep watch and ward–Hist! This is he, Edgar."

Startled by the sudden change of tone, Edgar glanced quickly in the direction in which Sir John was looking and saw a tall and somewhat gaunt knight sauntering easily towards them. He was dressed in silks in the height of fashion and made a brave show, though the expression of his strongly marked features seemed to Edgar to consort but ill with his dainty attire. As he came closer, his evil expression intensified and became so ugly and insolent a scowl that Edgar saw Sir John's hand steal involuntarily to his sword hilt. Noticing the action, Sir Gervaise's face relaxed into a smile hardly less forbidding than his frown, as he snarled:

"Never fear, thou shalt soon have opportunity an thou dost desire it."

"I do desire it, De Maupas. Thine insolence alone merits chastisement, but

besides and above all that there is a matter between us that can never be wiped away until thou hast bit the dust."

"Thou art right, Sir John. The deeds of thy grasping forbears stand between us, and one of us, I swear, shall be humiliated before many months are past."

"I speak of far viler things than those, things too of more recent date–things that, could I but prove them, would send thee hotfoot to a felon's cell."

Sir Gervaise ground his teeth as he glanced uneasily from Sir John to his esquire.

"Darest thou make such shameful allegations against me openly? Darest thou speak out boldly to the earl, or must thou, like a baseborn coward, hint darkly and secretly against mine honour?"

"Thou well knowest I can prove nothing, Sir Gervaise, until I prove it on thy body. Wilt meet me in single combat *à outrance*?"

"I will. And I swear to punish thee. The earl purposes a tourney when he doth enter Bordeaux. Then thy chance will come unless thou hast thought better of it. Ha! Ha! Perchance when the time cometh, Sir John Chartris may not be so eager to meet Sir Gervaise de Maupas face to face and lance to lance in a fight to the death?"

"Thou wilt see. At Bordeaux I will challenge thee publicly, and thou wilt be compelled to answer for thy ill deeds with lance, sword, and dagger."

With a smile which seemed to Edgar one of malicious triumph, Sir Gervaise turned on his heel and sauntered slowly away. Sir John looked after him for a minute with a frowning face which showed plainly how deeply his anger had been stirred. Then he turned to Edgar and said:

"I would not miss meeting Sir Gervaise for all I possess, Edgar. What I fear most, however, is that he may find some pretext for avoiding a conflict, so do thou make it public that at the earl's tourney Sir John Chartris will issue a challenge to Sir Gervaise de Maupas to a combat *à outrance*. Thus only, when all are agog with expectation, can we be sure that he will not disappoint us."

"I will see to it, Sir John. I will make the encounter so public that it will be hard indeed for De Maupas to find a way out with honour."

The next day the whole of the expeditionary force embarked, and sail was set for the south of France. Edgar was kept very busy, for Sir John, who was often in attendance on the Earl of Derby, left in his hands all the arrangements for the accommodation of the Wolsingham ladies and their maids on shore and afloat, the victualling of the Wolsingham men-at-arms and their horses during the voyage, and the responsibility of seeing to the general comfort and wellbeing of the whole of the party.

He carried out his many duties, however, with a thoroughness that soon earned him the respect and affection of all concerned, except perhaps of the

ladies, who may have missed the gallantries of Aymery and Roland and have found Edgar's directness not altogether to their liking. Certainly the lady Beatrice more than once rallied him severely upon a devotion to duty that scarce, she said, permitted him to smile at a merry thrust.

But Edgar lightly passed the matter off, for he was indeed far too absorbed in the coming campaign to care to take the place of either Aymery or Roland. The mention of a tourney, too, had given him much food for thought. It seemed possible that some place might be found for esquires in the proceedings, and might not he as well as his master figure in the conflicts? Full of the idea, and dreading lest he might be getting somewhat out of practice with the sword–for since he had been esquire to Sir John he had been so busy that he had had fewer opportunities for practising than formerly–Edgar set Peter to make enquiries and to find out if any men-at-arms or esquires of especial note for skill with weapons were accompanying the expedition.

After a voyage swift and pleasant, though quite devoid of incident, the fleet arrived at Bayonne, where the earl's force landed and marched along the coast to Bordeaux. Here the army encamped, and, having joined forces with the available troops of the province, mustered quite a goodly array. To Sir John's stern delight, it was not long before the Earl of Derby proposed a tournament, with the object of interesting the townspeople in the campaign and of strengthening the warlike spirit of his men in readiness for active operations. His proposals were received with general acclamation, and, a date being fixed, the arrangements proceeded with the greatest speed and enthusiasm.

From the first day of his arrival at the camp Edgar had put into operation his scheme for obtaining useful practice, and several old campaigners among both the English and Gascon forces had been induced by offers of sundry good cheer to venture a bout with the eager esquire. Most of the men he found were hardly up to their reputations, but from some he was able to glean useful knowledge of yet more varied modes of attack and defence. At the same time the practices served excellently to keep him in perfect trim and fitness.

The reward for this diligence came when it was presently announced that the tourney would open with a contest of esquires before the more serious work of the day was entered upon.

The contest of honour between Sir John Chartris and Sir Gervaise de Maupas was fixed for the afternoon, immediately after the contest between knights on foot. By general consent this encounter was regarded as the most important and interesting of the whole tourney, partly because of the well-established reputations of the two knights, but more especially because the bad blood existing between them made it certain that the encounter would be fought out to the bitter end.

Some three days before the date fixed for the tourney, Peter drew Edgar aside.

"I fear there is something afoot, Master Edgar, that bodeth ill for someone."

"Oh, and what is that, Peter?"

"There have been two men of hangdog looks haunting this end of the camp for several days. As thou know'st, I have lived in the midst of cutthroats and ruffians and know something of their ways, and methinks these men are seeking an opportunity to plunder."

"But to plunder whom?"

"Sir John, I fear. Know'st thou if he hath brought much money or valuables with him?"

"I have not heard of it, and if *I* know not I see not how others can have learned it."

"Then I must be mistaken. It is doubtless some other knight they wish to rob, for that they are after something of the sort I am wellnigh certain."

Suddenly Edgar recollected what Sir John had told him of the attempt upon his life which had, he thought, been planned by Sir Gervaise. It seemed improbable that De Maupas would again make such an attempt, especially as he would so soon have ample opportunity for revenge in the encounter in the lists. Still, it would be well that no stone should be left unturned that might affect his master's safety.

"After all, Peter, keep a close watch upon these men. Though their evil designs may not be directed against us, I would still frustrate them an we can. Keep an eye upon them without being thyself seen, and find out whether they have any friends within the camp."

"I will, sir;" and Peter limped off with the air of one setting about a task especially congenial to him.

Nothing, however, occurred in any way suspicious until the very eve of the tournament. By that time everything in connection with the arrangements had been settled, and the esquires of the English army had been rendered wild with excitement at the news that the proceedings would be opened by a mêlée between seven esquires chosen from amongst their number and a like number selected from among their Gascon allies.

Originally this spectacular encounter had been intended for knights, but, fearing that the victory of either side might lead to jealousy and hinder the harmonious working of the two branches of his army, the Earl of Derby prohibited the engagement in the form proposed, and substituted for it a general mêlée in which the members of the two competing bodies were drawn promiscuously from amongst the knights of both nations.

The projectors of the original scheme, however, unwilling to abandon their

proposal altogether, urged that the objections brought against it hardly applied to a contest amongst esquires. To this the earl assented, and it was finally arranged that in the esquires' mêlée the two sides should be drawn from amongst the English and Gascon troops respectively. The news was received with acclamation, and it soon became abundantly evident that, although the contest was one for esquires only, its unusual character had invested it with much more than the usual interest.

On the English side some thirty of the better-known esquires were quickly selected, and invited to compete among themselves for the honour of representing their nation in the coming contest. Edgar was one of those invited to compete, and, doing well in all his encounters, eventually found himself one of the seven chosen representatives of the squirehood of the English army.

Scarcely had he had time to receive the congratulations of his friends upon his good fortune, and to indulge in pleasant dreams of the stirring encounters and ultimate victory that he confidently believed awaited his side, before an event happened that drove the whole thing from his mind almost as completely as though it had never been even mooted.

It has already been observed that it was not until the very eve of the tournament that Edgar had any suspicions that aught was in any way amiss with Sir John or his affairs. He was in his tent at the time, about to retire for the night somewhat earlier than usual, in anticipation of the trying ordeal of the morrow, when someone tapped at the canvas.

"Enter," responded Edgar.

Peter entered, and from his heaving chest and anxious face Edgar saw at once that something had happened.

"What is it, Peter?" he cried quickly.

"The ladies Gertrude and Beatrice have sent me hither to enquire whether aught hath been seen of Sir John. He hath not yet returned, though he was expected long since. As thou know'st, he always sups with them at their inn in the town before he returns to the camp for the night."

"I know. So he hath not yet returned? He went for his usual ride about the countryside this afternoon, and, not seeing him more, I thought he must be in the town with the ladies. What can have occurred to keep him?"

"Dost think those evilly-disposed men have had aught to do with it, Master Edgar?"

The same thought had occurred to Edgar, but, dreading it, he had tried to put it away from him. It came back with the force of a blow when he found that the same idea had struck Peter.

"It may be so, Peter," he replied reluctantly. "I hope it may only be that he hath been detained–perchance because his horse hath cast a shoe–but I cannot

help a feeling of dread lest it be that those men have had something to do with it. Didst ever find out aught concerning them?"

"Nothing, save that one of them spoke one day to Sir Gervaise de Maupas; but as he flew into a violent rage at the man accosting him, I did not think there could be any connection between them."

"Ah!" groaned Edgar. "Then I fear the worst. I have not told thee, Peter–and heavy is my responsibility for it–that emissaries of Sir Gervaise did once attempt Sir John's life. Sir John told me in order that I might the better watch over his safety, and right badly have I done it!"

"But scarce could we have prevented this, Master Edgar. None would have thought of watching over Sir John while he was in the saddle and fully armed."

"Nay, but I might have warned him that assassins were on the lurk. But this is no time for self-reproachings. I must do all I can to repair the mischief done. Bring me a spare horse, Peter, and tell Matthew to be in the saddle and ready waiting for me outside the north gate of the town in a quarter of an hour. Late as it is, we must scour the countryside. Sir John may be lying wounded in some lonely wood, or be yet defending himself against cowardly adversaries. Quickly, Peter, for thy master's life!"

Peter limped away at the top of his speed, and Edgar quickly threw off his outer clothes and put on a light shirt of mail made of tiny links of interlaced steel, similar to that which Sir John, as a precaution against his enemy, usually wore when not in armour. The shirt of mail fitted closely, and when his doublet was donned once more no one would have guessed that so thorough a protection lay hidden beneath its folds.

Quick as he was, the lad was back with his horse as soon as he was ready, and Edgar instantly mounted and rode off into the town of Bordeaux, first bidding Peter set to work to find, if possible, some trace of the suspected men.

On arriving at the inn where the ladies Gertrude and Beatrice were staying, Edgar found them still up, anxiously awaiting news.

"He hath not yet returned, then?" he cried, as he saw their anxious faces.

"No. Surely someone hath seen him?" cried Gertrude in alarm.

"No one. But do not distress thyself so soon. I am going to sally out with Matthew to scour the countryside, and if Sir John is anywhere near, surely we shall come upon him. Doubtless he hath merely met with some trifling accident that keepeth him back for a few hours."

"Yes, Gertrude," put in Beatrice, laying her hand on her friend's arm, "thy father is too hardy and experienced a warrior and horseman easily to come to harm. I will warrant he will be back ere day dawns. Nevertheless," she went on, turning to Edgar, "thou hadst better make search as thou hast purposed, Master Wintour, unless, indeed, thou art fearful of spoiling thy chances in the mêlée

to-morrow by passing the night thus."

"I care not a fig for the mêlée, so be it I can see Sir John back safe and sound," cried Edgar hastily, considerably nettled at the smile which accompanied the last remark, and, saluting, he turned on his heel and strode from the room. Here he paused for a moment, and, retracing his steps, told the ladies it would be useless for them to wait up longer, as the gates of the city would shortly close, and no one would be able to pass either in or out before daybreak.

For some hours the night was moonlit, and Edgar and Matthew, dividing the countryside between them, scoured it for miles and miles around. Full of anxiety, for Edgar had communicated his fears to the man-at-arms, they rode hard and fast, with little regard for their own necks or the limits of the horses they bestrode, and by the time the sky clouded over so that further real progress was impossible, they had become convinced that Sir John was nowhere in the vicinity. Returning to the camp, Edgar called Peter to him.

"Well, Peter, didst find out aught?"

"Nay, sir. None hath seen the two men of late, so perchance they know naught of this matter, after all."

"That, at least, is good news, and it may well turn out that nothing serious hath happened to Sir John. Now, Peter, I am going to lie down for an hour or two. Rouse me at daybreak, for I must acquaint the ladies Gertrude and Beatrice of the poor success of my search as soon as the city gates are open."

Peter nodded and retired, and Edgar flung himself down just as he was, and almost instantly fell into a deep slumber.

It was long after sunrise when he awoke, and furious with Peter for letting him sleep so long, he hurried to the lad's tent.

"Why did ye not call me, Peter?" he cried angrily.

"All is well, Master Edgar. I have been into the town, and have told the ladies that there is no news, and that thou wert worn out with searching, and sleeping heavily. I have hopes that thou wilt make thy name in the mêlée to-day; but what chance would there be of thy doing thyself justice after wearing thyself out riding all night long?"

Too angry to bandy words with the lad, and realizing, too, that it was out of regard for him that he had disobeyed his orders, Edgar strode back to his tent, hastily washed himself, and then rode into the town. He had no good news to tell, and the ladies could not help but feel that something serious must be keeping Sir John, or he would certainly have either appeared in person or have sent someone to tell them of his detention elsewhere. It was for them a time of anxiety and perplexity, and Edgar could do little save suggest all sorts of accidents that might have kept the knight back for a few hours.

One thing besides his master's life, however, Edgar felt he had to consider,

and that was his honour. With the contest of the afternoon Sir John's honour was now closely bound up. The utmost publicity had been given to the affair, and did he not appear and answer to the challenge of Sir Gervaise de Maupas, he would be regarded on all sides as a dishonoured knight. Edgar felt this most keenly, and resolved that at all costs he would keep the secret of Sir John's disappearance from becoming known, so that if he returned at the last moment, as he might well do, idle tongues would have had no cause to wag against him.

No one besides the ladies, Matthew, and Peter knew that Sir John was missing, and all these he swore to silence. They were ready enough to agree, for none could think that so experienced a warrior as Sir John could have been overcome so easily as to disappear and leave no trace. In fact, Matthew roundly declared that an hour or so before the contest with Sir Gervaise was timed to commence would see him back, and the others fervently hoped that he might prove to be right.

CHAPTER VIII
The Lists of Bordeaux

Completely forgetting that he was one of the seven chosen to do battle for the English esquires against the best of their Gascon allies, Edgar spent the little time left of the morning in making enquiries of all who might have seen Sir John at any point during his afternoon's ride–countrymen coming in with carts laden with farm produce, the men who had kept watch during the afternoon and evening along the outer side of the camp, and any others who might possibly have some news to tell, however meagre. His enquiries were quite fruitless, however, and his fears that there might have been foul play gradually returned to him as the morning wore on. At last he returned to the camp and sent for Peter.

"Peter," he said, "I want thee now to keep close watch to see who doth visit Sir Gervaise de Maupas. I begin to feel once more that he is at the bottom of the mischief; and it hath occurred to me that if his emissaries have waylaid Sir John they will, if they have not done so already, come to him to report the result of their vile plot. Keep watch, then, and see who the men are, and if thou canst do so quietly, call Matthew and scruple not to seize them on some pretext or another. Pick a quarrel with them–anything, so long as ye lay hands on them and keep

them till I come."

Peter nodded, as though in entire approval, and limped off upon his errand, and Edgar turned to find Arthur Pomeroy, mounted and armed, waiting for him with every sign of impatience a pace or two away.

"So this is the way thou dost spend the precious moments–gibbering with stableboys and camp followers, Edgar Wintour," he cried in a voice of disgust. "'Tis but twenty minutes short of noon, and thou not in the saddle and not a piece of thine armour girded on. Hast gone daft, man, or forgotten that the onset sounds at noon?"

"I have been busy, Arthur, and could wish that thou wouldst find some other to take my place. Let the best of those who were tried and passed over take the lance in my stead–each of them was well worthy to represent our squirehood to-day."

"Tush, Edgar, talk not such nonsense! Rather would I hold back our whole band until thou wert ready, though 'twere an hour. Get on thine armour without more ado. Where is thy boy?"

"I have sent him upon an errand of great import to me. Give me a hand and I will soon be ready."

With an angry snort Arthur set spurs to his horse and galloped away through the camp like a whirlwind. In half a minute he was back, and two lads following at top speed proclaimed that he had not been idle.

"Come hither, varlets, and gird on this armour. Quickly, now, unless ye wish the Frenchmen to get the better of us."

Rapidly the pieces of armour were strapped and buckled on until Edgar stood complete, a wall of shining steel.

"Where is thy gage?"

"I have none."

"What? Hast thou no damsel to watch for thine entry into the lists?"

"Nay."

Arthur shrugged his shoulders in perplexity. "Well, every man to his taste. Where is now thy horse? Where dost stable it?"

"Straight along the lines a furlong. Let the youths bring the gear, and for the nonce I will walk to it."

It was still five minutes short of noon when Edgar mounted and, closely shepherded by Arthur Pomeroy, who seemed to fear he might yet escape, rode off to the competitors' enclosure adjoining the lists.

"Thou must know," said Arthur, "that I have agreed with the leader of the Gascon esquires that our men shall be placed facing opponents of the same relative powers. 'Twould be a poor spectacle if our best were pitted against their weakest and their strongest against our tail end; so we have, for the first onset

only, arranged that best shall meet best, and so forth. Thou art matched against Gaston Dugarde."

"I know nothing of him," replied Edgar. "Is he weak?"

"Weak! Thou wilt see. We have not thrown thee away."

Exactly how to take the reply Edgar hardly knew, but he was too full of his great trouble and too anxious to be through with the present encounter to care to enquire further. The intense eagerness with which he had looked forward to so thrilling a mêlée had gone, and he now only wished it over, that he might continue his enquiries respecting Sir John.

As they cantered into the enclosure, however, he felt his enthusiasm revive. No one could view the glittering scene unmoved, and to Edgar, who had never been to a tournament before, the scene was full of meaning and interest. The wide sweep of the lists, the towering stands at the middle, the dense masses of spectators–a large proportion of whom were soldiers–the glitter of armour, and the tramp of spirited chargers, all struck the fullest note of chivalry and warriorhood.

"Come, Arthur," cried one of the English esquires impatiently, "thou art behindhand. Guy de Parfrey hath marshalled his men, and awaits us."

"No matter, Stephen, since we are now seven. Now, comrades all, wheel into line in the order agreed upon. Forget not the rules–I would not that we scored by transgressing them. Strike home, and remember 'tis St. George for England!"

The English esquires wheeled into their places and, headed by their captain, Arthur Pomeroy, cantered gaily into the lists in single file simultaneously with their adversaries. Amidst a gay fanfare of trumpets, the two lines of steel-clad horsemen filed, saluting, before the Earl of Derby. Then, without a pause, they diverged to their own ends of the lists, each man halting his steed and turning as the line passed his own position. In a very few seconds the files of prancing horsemen became two lines of motionless figures with lances couched, facing one another watchfully.

There was but a slight pause, and then the marshals gave the signal for the onset. And loud the trumpets blared!

With a thunder of hoofs, the two walls of steel dashed swiftly inwards, as though drawn by a gigantic magnet, and met in the centre of the lists with a crash that could be heard for miles. Indeed, men passing to and fro in the city streets and alleys heard the noise, and stopped to question one another as to what it portended.

Five men–two English and three Gascons–bit the dust in that first terrific onset, and the survivors, with few thoughts for the vanquished, rode at one another fiercely, and with sword, lance, or axe, whichever was most to their user's

liking, hewed and thrust at one another with heartiest goodwill.

Edgar struck his opponent full on the shield with the point of his lance, and, to his surprise, the impact lifted his opponent out of the saddle and sent him crashing backwards to the ground. The shock must have been great, for the unfortunate esquire lay just where he had fallen, motionless, and apparently senseless. Fearing lest he might be trampled upon in the mêlée, for the dust was rising and the combatants could scarce see what was under their horses' feet, Edgar slipped quickly from his saddle, raised the fallen man, and bore him away out of the press.

His temporary withdrawal made the two forces again equal, but this equality was of very short duration, for one of the Gascons, who was known as Guilbert "Strongarm", was an esquire of great bulk and tremendous strength, and with two successive swings of his huge battleaxe smote two of the English esquires so strongly that they dropped half-fainting from their saddles.

Arthur Pomeroy, who, as captain, kept watch over what was happening to others of his force while fighting his own battle, saw that his side was in immediate peril of being vanquished offhand, and called loudly to Edgar to resume the combat.

"Mount, Edgar! Mount and aid us!"

Though he had not seen the deadly strokes that had so altered the complexion of affairs, Edgar guessed that things were going ill, and hastily handed the stricken man to pages who hovered on the outskirts of the fight. His horse had followed him, and, vaulting into the saddle, he spurred once more into the conflict.

His re-entry was somewhat unexpected to the Gascons, and, still possessing the lance that had already done such good service, he could easily have unhorsed Guilbert from the rear. But disdaining to defeat a foe so ingloriously, Edgar smartly tapped his lance upon his backplate and waited. Guilbert and one of his comrades were busily hacking at Arthur Pomeroy, who was fighting desperately and wheeling his steed continuously in his efforts to keep the twain at bay. Astounded at the buffet from the rear, Guilbert hastily turned and rode at Edgar, leaning over in his saddle and swinging his great battleaxe in readiness for a telling blow.

Dropping his lance, Edgar drew his sword and, as Guilbert came within reach and aimed a blow at him, turned his horse and avoided the stroke by a hairbreadth. The axe, meeting no resistance, swung down nearly to the ground, drawing Guilbert downward with it. Simultaneously Edgar turned in his saddle, and, reaching out, smote his adversary so shrewdly on the wrist that he was compelled to drop his axe. Ere he could draw his sword with his left hand–for his right was bruised and almost useless–Edgar had twice gently smitten him upon

headpiece and breastplate, and, acknowledging defeat, Guilbert rode sullenly out of the conflict.

Another man on either side had by this time fallen, and of the fourteen men who had entered upon the mêlée only two English and two Gascons remained.

Arthur Pomeroy was the second survivor of the English esquires, and in spite of the exertions he had made, was still in good fighting trim. Edgar had not received a scratch, and was virtually as fresh as when he started. The two Gascons, on the other hand, were both bleeding, and one appeared to be scarce fit to continue the combat.

"Come now, Edgar," cried Arthur exultingly, "one more charge and the battle is ours. St. George for England! On! on!"

Side by side the two esquires rode down upon their adversaries, who, wounded as they were, made ready to meet them right gallantly.

Suddenly the earl raised his hand.

"Desist, desist!" he cried.

At a signal from the marshals the trumpets again blared, and all knew that the conflict was at an end.

Cheering and counter-cheering had been well-nigh continuous all the time the stirring encounter had been proceeding, but at the signal for the cessation of hostilities the burst of sound threatened to rend the skies. For some minutes it continued unabated, and it was not until the earl stood up as though about to speak that the volume of sound died gradually away.

"Ye have all done right well," cried the earl warmly, "and I have no wish that ye should push matters to extremities in your friendly rivalries. Ye started equal and ye have finished equal; right nobly doth the result speak for the valour of both wings of our army. I hail it as the happiest augury for the campaign that lies before us."

Loud and hearty cheers greeted his words. His politic intervention had relaxed the tension between the English and Gascon spectators, and, with the honour of both well saved, they could cheer the well-fought fight without bitterness and without stint.

"Let the victors approach," commanded the earl, and the four esquires cantered to the stand and dismounted.

Pages assisted them to unhelm, and they were led forward by the marshal up the steps to the platform where the earl stood. It was remarked by all those near enough to observe that while the faces of the two Gascon esquires were pale and blood-streaked, and Pomeroy's was flushed with exertion, Edgar's showed no sign of the conflict whatever.

With a few words of hearty commendation, the earl presented each esquire with a jewelled dagger and a purse of gold as tokens of the esteem in which their

victorious emergence from the conflict had caused them to be held. Then they again mounted and, with heads still uncovered, made a full circuit of the lists before withdrawing to their own enclosure. Loud cheers and shouts of approval followed them, and Edgar, preoccupied as he had again become at the uncertainty of his master's fate now that the combat was over, could not help feeling a thrill of pleasure at having borne his part in upholding his country's fair renown in the domains of chivalry.

"Grammercy, my fair Edgar, thou didst almost lose us the fight," cried Arthur Pomeroy, as the two filed across to their comrades' side of the greensward. "I thought our friend the 'strong-arm' had me of a surety when thou didst call him off just in time. 'Twas a near thing betwixt victory and defeat."

"Not victory, Arthur. 'Tis an honourable draw."

"We held the winning position–that is enough for me. Come now, where art bound? Let us first go and congratulate our comrades the Gascons on the stout fight they provided us withal. Then, if they agree, perchance we may retire to the esquires' pavilion and celebrate the mêlée in a manner fitting to the occasion."

"Right willingly will I join in thy congratulations of our friends the enemy," cried Edgar; "but I must beg thee to excuse me from taking part in any celebrations. I have not time, even had I the inclination, to join thee there. I have matters on foot that claim attention without delay, and I must be off the instant I have added my meed of praise to thine."

In a few minutes the esquires of both bands were clustered together, eagerly discussing the many exciting incidents of the encounter, and Edgar was presently able to make good his exit without attracting special attention.

CHAPTER IX
The Encounter with Sir Gervaise

When Edgar reached his tent, he found that Peter had not yet returned since he had sent him off to keep watch upon all who came and went at Sir Gervaise's quarters. A meal had, however, been laid for him, probably by Matthew, so, hardly knowing what was to be his next move and feeling that he might soon need all his strength, Edgar sat down and ate a hearty dinner. Then, as Peter had still not put in an appearance, he returned to the scene of the tournament and

made his way to the stand where seats had been allotted to Sir John and his party. Somewhat to his surprise, he found both Gertrude and Beatrice in their places.

"Hath any news good or ill reached you?" he asked, as he took his place by their side.

"None," replied Beatrice quickly. "We came hither because we could not rest at the inn, and, besides, we thought that news might be most plentiful where so many people were gathered together. We feel little like enjoying the tourney, brilliant though it is, but we both were glad to see thee gain the day in thine encounters."

"I had not intended to take part," replied Edgar, "but our captain, Arthur Pomeroy, sought me out and dragged me with him to the lists. Nevertheless, while it lasted, I enjoyed it right well."

"Thy part was well done, but best of all, to my mind, was thy succouring of poor Gaston Dugarde and the chance thou didst give to the mighty Guilbert to meet thee face to face. Those deeds have been the talk of the stand–far more so than thy powers with lance and sword. The one rings of true chivalry, the other is known by a lesser name."

"Mayhap," replied Edgar, "but, even so, skill is not to be despised, for often 'tis that that makes the other possible. But 'twas not of the fight I wished to speak. I have forebodings that Sir Gervaise de Maupas knoweth something of Sir John's disappearance. I have set Peter to watch his tent and to let me know who hath called upon him this morning. He hath not yet returned, and, feeling impatient, I came to tell you and to learn if perchance you had aught of news for me."

"If thou thinkest 'tis De Maupas, wilt thou not denounce him to the earl?" cried both Gertrude and Beatrice with one voice. "Surely so dastardly a deed—-"

"Nay, nay, ladies, there is no evidence upon which I could cast such an aspersion upon the name of a knight of fair fame. 'Twould be useless, and would but put him upon his guard. Nay, I must proceed much more cautiously."

"But why should Sir Gervaise seek to do him harm in secret when he hath full chance to defeat him in the lists?" objected Beatrice.

"But could he defeat him? And even if he did, would Sir John's honour have received so foul a blow as when he fails to answer to Sir Gervaise's challenge? No, the thing is planned to ruin Sir John's honour, and right well do I fear it will do so."

"He will come," cried Gertrude in desperation. "He will strain every nerve to be in his place at the appointed time. Still will I look for him."

"I too hope–but surely, Edgar Wintour, there is something to be done!" cried Beatrice impetuously. "Thou canst act well and strongly in the lists–art lost when the real need comes outside? Thou art Sir John's esquire–appointed in

the face of all thy comrades–and he looks to thee for aid. Prove thy title. Once thou didst boast that when a time of stress came upon us thou wouldst show thy worth."

"I have done all that man could do," cried Edgar, flushing deeply at the bitter rebuke.

"Sir John must be found," cried Beatrice, giving a reckless stamp of her little foot.

Deeply mortified and not a little angry, Edgar bowed low, retired from the stand, and strode wrathfully back to his tent. His way took him not far from Sir Gervaise's quarters, and as he went it occurred to him that he might pass by and see what he could of Peter. As he drew near he saw that Sir Gervaise stood at the door already half-armed, for the hour of his encounter approached apace; and Edgar looked steadily at him to discern, if possible, some sign of consciousness of villainy in his strongly-marked features. Their eyes met, and Sir Gervaise beckoned him to approach.

"See that thy master is ready and well equipped," he said, with a smile that maddened Edgar, "for I will humble his proud spirit this day–mark well my words."

Gulping back the torrent of speech that rushed to his lips, Edgar turned and hurried on his way. In the second that he had met Sir Gervaise eye to eye, a half-formed idea had hardened and tempered into a firm resolve. Sir John's life should be saved and Sir John's honour should not be lost.

Peter was awaiting him at his tent, his face aflame with eagerness and excitement.

"Sir," he cried breathlessly, "one of the men we suspected rode in from the country but a half-hour agone and had speech with Sir Gervaise. I lay down at the tent door as though sleeping in the sun, but could hear naught. When the man came out, however, he was clinking money in his hand and smiling."

"Didst follow him?"

"I did; and I have learned both his name and his haunts."

"Good! Say no more now, Peter, but call Matthew, for other and starker work lieth before us."

In a moment Matthew appeared.

"Saddle Sir John's best charger, 'Furore', and fetch it hither," cried Edgar. "Then bring out its armour and trappings, and make it ready for the lists."

"Ha," cried Matthew joyously, "then thou hast news of Sir John!" and he hurried off to do the esquire's bidding.

"Now, Peter," cried Edgar, flinging off his outer garments, "aid me to don Sir John's armour–quickly, lad, on thy life!"

"But Sir John—-"

"*I* am Sir John this day. See thou sayest no more to anyone save Matthew. Sir John's honour must be saved, and saved it shall be if my utmost efforts can compass it. With vizor down, who shall know that the well-known horse and coat-armour hold not the knight, and that the shield that beareth his blazonings is borne by another?"

Speechless with amazement, Peter strapped and buckled with might and main, and Edgar was almost ready when Matthew entered for the horse's trappings.

When he saw who it was that was donning Sir John's armour, he gave a gasp of astonishment. Then gathering from Edgar's set face the full significance of the proceeding, his own took on a grim smile as, without a word, he seized the horse's gear and hurried from the tent.

"Wilt take thine own weapons?" enquired Peter presently.

"Nay. I will take Sir John's and give no loophole to suspicion. Their weight is little more than mine, and I feel strung to a pitch that would make them feel light were they twice the weight."

"And for gage? Wilt wear the lady Gertrude's colours?"

"Nay. I fear I cannot do that, or she will be sure 'tis Sir John. I will wear none, as in the mêlée. See now if 'Furore' be ready."

The horse was ready, and, carefully closing his vizor, Edgar stepped outside and vaulted into the saddle. Shield and lance were handed up to him, and after testing his charger's gear to see that all was fast, he prepared to start. Sir John's armour was somewhat heavier than his own, but he was so accustomed to wearing armour in his practices and so tense with excitement and determination that he scarcely noticed it.

Edgar was now nineteen, and well grown and well developed. Though Sir John was a man of more weighty build, he was no broader and but a fraction taller. The armour, therefore, fitted the esquire well, and, mounted upon "Furore" and with vizor closed, scarce his most intimate friend would have known him from his master. The horse was a splendid animal, far better than Edgar's, and bore the weight of armour and rider with ease and spirit.

It was now the hour for the encounter with Sir Gervaise, and in the distance Edgar could hear the trumpets of the heralds announcing the combat. He could picture De Maupas riding majestically into the lists, confident of adding to his prestige by a victory by default against so well-known an antagonist as Sir John Chartris. How he would make his steed curvet and prance before the populace, as he rode round the lists waiting in vain for his foe to answer to the challenge!

A second time the trumpets of the heralds rang out, and, setting spurs to his horse, Edgar rode straight for the enclosure. "Furore" seemed to enter fully into the spirit of the enterprise, and it was at a swinging gallop that Edgar dashed

suddenly into the lists.

A roar of applause arose from the whole circle of the spectators, who were just beginning to wonder where Sir John Chartris might be. Without a pause, Edgar rode to the earl's stand and saluted. Then he paced on down to his own end of the lists, saluting the Wolsingham ladies as he passed them by.

"He hath come!" cried Gertrude, tense with excitement, the instant horse and man appeared in the lists.

Beatrice followed her gaze, and for one instant joyfully agreed. Then she began to doubt.

"Nay, nay, Gertrude, this cannot be Sir John. Where are thy colours?"

"He hath had no time—-"

"But Sir John is waxing on in years, and rideth heavily in his saddle. This man rideth with an ease and spring as though younger and of a lighter make. Hush–cry not out–'tis Edgar Wintour, of a certainty! 'Tis to this that I have goaded him on!"

"But why should—-?"

"To save Sir John's honour. Didst not feel as though even death were better than his dishonour a moment agone when the heralds cried his name in vain? Hurrah–I could cry aloud to think that that vile Sir Gervaise will not gain a bloodless victory! But yet–after all–surely he cannot fail to conquer one who is but an esquire?"

Gertrude answered not, and both maidens sat still and held their breaths as the stirring scenes passed before their gaze.

It was observed by more than one that on the sudden entry of his antagonist Sir Gervaise showed signs of excitement. He seemed agitated and shook–with gusts of anger, those who noticed it supposed–and for some moments his charger reared and backed unmanageably, as though sharing his master's fierce emotions.

After a moment or two, however, the knight regained control over his steed, and with cruel jabs of the spur urged him back into position. The charger had been celebrated in the past for its unusual power and strength, and to this fact the reputation of Sir Gervaise was in a great measure due. It had now, however, passed its prime, and De Maupas could no longer count upon its excellence giving him the advantage of his competitors.

Edgar had profited by the moments occupied by Sir Gervaise in regaining the mastery over his steed, and had settled down quietly into position. His thoughts had flown back to the sacrifice his father had made to save Sir John at Sluys, and he resolved that he would be as ready as his father to lay down his life, if necessary, in this his own moment of call. Firmly grasping his lance, he fixed his eyes warily upon his adversary through his vizor slits. Horse and man seemed as steady and immovable as a rock, in striking contrast to Sir Gervaise,

who fidgeted with his weapons and seemed impatient during the trying pause before the onset sounded: "*Laissez aller*".

With the speed of arrows the steel-clad warriors crashed together in the middle of the lists. Each man aimed his lance at the centre of his opponent's shield, and both struck fair and true. The impact hurled the chargers violently back upon their haunches and forced their riders backwards to the limit of endurance, while their stout ash lances were bent and split from end to end! De Maupas, for the moment, kept his seat successfully, but his horse, pawing the air and snorting frantically, struggled in vain to regain its balance, and presently rolled over ignominiously upon the ground. Edgar, on the other hand, though the shock had been just as severe, managed, by dint of voice and spur, to aid his steed's recovery, and in a few seconds it was on its feet, with its rider ready for the foe.

Disentangling himself from his horse's trappings, Sir Gervaise drew sword, and, furious at his undignified mischance, sprang towards his adversary, thirsting to retrieve his fallen fortunes.

[image]

"SIR GERVAISE SPRANG TOWARDS HIS ADVERSARY, THIRSTING
TO RETRIEVE HIS FALLEN FORTUNES"

Disdaining to meet him at any advantage, Edgar flung away the fragments of his lance, seized Sir John's heavy battleaxe, and slipped lightly from the saddle. Scarce had he faced Sir Gervaise when the furious knight was upon him with sword up-raised. Knowing that his battleaxe was almost useless for defence, Edgar heeded not the blow, but, half-turning, swung his own heavy weapon sideways at his opponent's head. The knight's blow fell first with a stroke that bit deep into Edgar's casque, but before De Maupas could spring back out of reach, the axe stroke smote him on the side of his helmet with a weight and momentum that sent him crashing headlong to the ground.

A dull roar of applause arose from the whole circle of the lists.

Dropping his axe, Edgar snatched his dagger from his belt and sprang towards the fallen man. Kneeling upon his chest he cried aloud:

"Yield thee vanquished, Sir Gervaise de Maupas!" Then in a low voice, but in tones thrilling with resolve, he went on, "*Tell me where Sir John if, or thy life is forfeit!*"

There was no response.

"Desist, Sir John," cried one of the marshals of the lists, hurriedly approaching, "he is stunned, if not dead. Thou art acknowledged victor–retire while we see to the stricken man."

Heavy with disappointment at being thwarted at the moment when he hoped all might be won, Edgar mechanically mounted and rode slowly round the lists. The air still rang with the plaudits of the spectators, and, as he passed along, loud cries reached him, some, wishing to do him the more honour, calling upon him to unhelm.

Fearing that his refusal at least to lower his vizor might cause some adverse comment, Edgar dropped it an inch or so and left it, hoping that it might be thought that the blow his headpiece had received had damaged the hinges of his vizor. With a final salute, first to the earl and then to the Wolsingham ladies, he rode dully from the lists. The cheers of the spectators fell on deaf ears, for though he had defeated Sir Gervaise and upheld Sir John's honour, he felt that he was still as far as ever from solving the mystery of his master's disappearance.

As he reached the door of his tent, Matthew and Peter came running up, their faces wreathed with smiles at their young master's victory.

"Aid me to strip off this armour," cried Edgar, the moment he had entered the tent, "and remember that Sir John is gone–gone upon the visit to Faucigny Castle, in the lands of the lady Beatrice, that he has had all along in mind. He gained the earl's permission some time since, as he told me himself. Thus at least we gain some precious days in which to continue our enquiries."

"Pardon, Master Edgar," cried Peter, suddenly stopping, "with thy permission I will hie me to Sir Gervaise's tent. It may well be that this is a time when it might advantage us to keep close watch upon those about him."

"Go, Peter. His esquire will be bringing him back in a few minutes. He is but stunned. Listen for what thou canst hear. Who knows but that a few chance words may tell us all?"

Waiting for no more, Peter sped off upon his errand, and when, a half-hour later, Sir Gervaise was carried into his tent, he was snugly ensconced beneath a pile of horse's trappings at the very door.

CHAPTER X
News of Sir John

The dusk of evening was falling as Sir Gervaise raised himself from the couch upon which he had been restlessly tossing ever since he had been carried in. His head was swathed in bandages, and the light of the single lamp showed a face pale beneath its sunburn, in which a pair of fierce black eyes burned with an unnatural brightness.

"I have waited in suspense long enough," he muttered to himself. Then, in a louder key, he called to his esquire who was in attendance upon him.

"Arnaud, I have business that I must transact this night. Fetch me hither, then, the varlet James Baulch, and then betake thyself to thy tent. Stay, first fill up my cup, for my head still throbs consumedly from the blow that trickster Chartris gave me."

The esquire obeyed, and in a minute the wounded knight was alone. Freed from the restraint of his esquire's presence, Sir Gervaise groaned aloud with the pain of his bruised and swollen head, and muttered savagely to himself what sounded like threats and imprecations against his successful foe and also the varlet James, who seemed somehow to have incurred his especial displeasure.

Presently the man arrived escorted by the esquire, who seemed to look somewhat askance at his charge. He glanced significantly at his master as he was about to leave the tent, and, interpreting the look, the knight cried as he scowled savagely at the man: "Yes, Arnaud, remain outside within call. I may require thy services."

Arnaud bowed and retired, and the knight, raising himself, not without difficulty, into a sitting posture and placing a dagger ready to his hand, beckoned the man to approach.

"So thou hast played me false, James Baulch, murderer and vagabond?" he cried in a voice thick with rage. "Thou, whom I have but to lift a finger to consign to the gibbet–thou hast dared to lie to me."

The man cowered before the knight's pallid face and gleaming eyes. "There is some mistake," he stammered, "I—-"

"Aye–thou art right," cried the knight savagely, "'tis the mistake I made when, with a trumped-up tale, I snatched thee from the sheriff's men. I had better have let thee hang and moulder–but 'tis not yet too late. The arm of the law is strong and swift even in Gascony, and on the word of a knight thy shrift—-"

"My lord! My lord!" cried the man, grovelling in terror on the floor. "I swear there is some mistake. With mine own eyes at dawn this morning I saw Sir John, bound and helpless, lying at the bottom of a wagon. I rode straight hither, and he who fought with thee must be some other. My lord, it must be so."

"Bah! Scoundrel! That is but a tale–another lie–to save thy wretched neck from the gallows."

"It is not–it is not!" almost shrieked the man. "Didst not mark–but thou

wert senseless–has not, then, thine esquire told thee that he who fought as Sir John did not drop his vizor even when he saluted the earl?"

"Say'st thou so?" cried the knight, startled. "Strange!" he went on, muttering to himself. "I seemed to feel a difference as he entered the lists. Both horse and man seemed doubly full of fire, while Sir John always rode heavily."

"Yes, yes," cried the man eagerly. "It was noticed by others. I heard two men say that Sir John was riding lighter in the saddle than he used to."

"Can this be the explanation?" went on De Maupas, still speaking half to himself. "I never thought of such a daring ruse being played upon me. Who can the man be? Doubtless one of Sir John's friends–but who? 'Twill be the worse for him an I find out the truth," he ended darkly, clenching his teeth with suppressed rage.

"Give me leave to find out the knight's name, my lord," interrupted Baulch in an eager voice.

Sir Gervaise for a minute or two made no reply, but gazed at his accomplice with so gloomy and menacing a look that the man literally shook with fear.

"Very well, Baulch," he said sternly after a pause, "thy neck may rest at peace on thy shoulders for a space, while thou art finding out who it was that masqueraded as Sir John. Find out, I say, find out! Dare to bungle a second time, and the gallows that gape for thee shall have thee fast!"

With trembling lips the man hastily promised to find out the truth.

Nodding carelessly, Sir Gervaise went on to talk of other matters. There could be no doubt that his confidence in the ascendancy he had obtained over the man was not misjudged. The man was obviously under a spell, mastered by a hidden terror so great that all else was completely swallowed up.

* * * * *

It was noon the following day when the man again made his appearance and requested Arnaud to tell Sir Gervaise that James Baulch craved a few minutes' further speech. Arnaud complied, though from the expression of his face it might have been inferred that the desire to kick the man was the feeling uppermost in his mind.

"Well, Baulch?" growled the knight, who still reclined upon a couch, and whose temper seemed in no way improved by his night's rest. "Hast news to tell? If not 'twill be the worse for thee."

"I have news, my lord–strange news. Whether 'twill please thee or not, I cannot say, but—-"

"Peace, knave! Tell thy news and madden me not with thy thoughts of what pleases me."

"'Twas Edgar Wintour fought with thee in the lists," blurted out the man hurriedly. "I have heard words let fall that make the matter clear."

"Edgar Wintour–and who is Edgar Wintour?" cried the knight with savage impatience.

"He is Sir John's esquire."

The look that came into the knight's face made Baulch regret the success of his enquiries. De Maupas gasped, grew even paler than before, and clutched convulsively at the couch on which he lay. Then a sudden passion seemed to galvanize him into activity and he rose to his feet almost with a bound.

"What!" he thundered. "Dare ye tell me that—-?"

But his strength was unequal to the effort, and clutching at his bandages with both hands, as though his head were about to split in twain, he sank slowly and painfully back upon the couch.

"A pretty debt I owe the boy if thy tale is true," he muttered at last in a changed voice. "Art sure of thy facts?"

"Sure, my lord. I saw him mounted upon Sir John's charger early this morning, and the way he rode made me think at once of the spring and fire of thine adversary yesterday. Then I heard some words let drop by one Matthew, a man-at-arms of Sir John, and I knew 'twas so."

"So that was what was in his mind when he gave me that strange look yesterday," muttered De Maupas to himself. "It was on my lips to demand an explanation. Would I had done so! I might have forced the quarrel then and there with the advantage on my side, mailed and ready for a conflict as I was."

"Canst not let the good earl know of the trick he played?" said the man presently. "Surely he would punish him for daring so to dupe the marshals of the lists?"

"Be silent, fool! Dost think I want all the world to know that I, a knight, was beaten by an unfledged esquire? See to it that no word of it is breathed by thee."

For some time Sir Gervaise remained silent, staring viciously at the ground the while. The expression on his face was not good to see, and it might have been as well had Edgar Wintour been there to see it.

"Baulch," said the knight at last, "Baulch, I gave thee money for Sir John Chartris–alive. I offer thee double the sum for this Edgar Wintour–dead. Dost understand?"

The tone of the knight's voice was low and measured, but the expression of his face was so deadly that the blackest rage would have seemed less implacable. Baulch seemed to have no great stomach for the task put to him, but one furtive look at the knight's face was sufficient, and he answered hastily:

"I understand, my lord."

"Then begone."

* * * * *

"Couldst hear no more than that, Peter? Nothing save a few words of angry reproach against the man when De Maupas's voice rang highest?"

"No, sir. I could get no nearer, for De Maupas's esquire, Arnaud, paced to and fro outside, doubtless by his master's orders. Most of the time the two spake only of the tournament, though once I feel sure they talked of Sir John, but they dropped their voices and only formless words reached my ears."

"Ah! Then I fear it behoves us to find out," cried Edgar in a decided tone. "We cannot afford to go on like this, Peter. The Wolsingham ladies are becoming most anxious, and if we cannot soon get news, we must acquaint the earl of the truth and implore his aid, though I fear it will bring us little comfort. Ye say ye know where this man Baulch lives?"

"Yes, he lives at a low inn in the lowest and most rascally quarter of the town."

"Good! 'Tis the better for our purpose. At nightfall, Peter, I must visit this inn, and see what stratagem or the sword will accomplish. Tell me how I may find it, and then be off and get me some peasant's clothing, old and soiled with use, and have it ready an hour or two before the gates are closed."

At the time appointed Peter produced a bundle of clothing, and Edgar was soon well disguised as a young countryman on a visit to the town to make his purchases. The clothing was somewhat malodorous, but as this added considerably to the realistic effect, Edgar recked little of that. His own sword was far too well made and well finished to be taken, so Peter obtained for him the least pretentious amongst those carried by Sir John's men-at-arms. This was buckled on in an awkward and clumsy manner, so as to give as unwarlike an air to a warlike weapon as possible.

Foreseeing the possibility of a fight in a locality of such unsavoury reputation, Edgar took the precaution to don his light flexible shirt of steel mail before putting on the peasant's garments, and to have a dagger concealed beneath his clothes ready to hand in case of an attack too sudden and at too close quarters to allow him to draw his sword.

It was a few minutes short of the hour at which the gates of the city closed when, as a peasant, he rapped loudly at the door of a low-lying, rambling, single-story structure overlooking the river Garonne. The street was in complete darkness, save for the dim light emitted through the shuttered windows of one or two of the hovels and crazy dwellings which huddled together along each side of the narrow roadway.

After a short delay the door opened, and one of the most villainous-looking men Edgar had ever set eyes on made his appearance.

"What seek ye?" he enquired, peering suspiciously first at the newcomer and then over his shoulder, as though to find out whether he was alone.

"Some of thy good cheer, landlord. I was seeking another inn which a neighbour of mine speaks well of, but lost my way, and a man I chanced upon by good hap outside sent me to thee. Give me sup of thy best; I have money and can pay," and Edgar, assuming an air of pride and importance, flaunted a handful of coins under the man's eyes.

"Thou shalt have it, noble sir," cried the landlord, with a leer which was meant to encourage his guest, and he led the way into a long room, bare of furniture save for a couple of tables and some rough benches. The room was fairly lofty, but numbers of smoked hams and other objects hanging from the rafters made it appear low and gloomy. Half a dozen men, amongst whom Edgar was quick to discern James Baulch, lounged upon the benches drinking and dicing.

Edgar took stock of his surroundings as the landlord led him to the end of the room farthest from the other occupants, and, fetching a chair from a side room and carefully placing it in position at the table, invited his guest to take a seat.

In a few minutes some food, rough and unpalatable, was brought, and Edgar made shift to eat it, as though with a good appetite. Then he leaned back in his chair, and, half-shutting his eyes, pretended to be nearly asleep. He hoped that most of the men would soon leave, and that he might have an opportunity of accosting Baulch alone or of following him to his room, wherever that might be.

Presently he missed one of the men, and shortly after the others broke into a rough drinking song. Edgar then realized, with something of a shock, that instead of being the pursuer he was now the pursued. It was not the mere withdrawal of one of the men that made him think this, but the quiet, stealthy manner in which the man must have left, and the way in which the other men began their song simultaneously, as though at a signal. It almost seemed that the song was intended to cloak something, perhaps the arrival of a further band of ruffians. Edgar began to regret that he had exhibited his money so freely–or could it be that Baulch had seen through his disguise?

A slight rustling noise close to him attracted his attention, and giving up the pretence of being nearly asleep, he opened his eyes wide and looked warily about him. The men had stopped their song, and were gazing in his direction with an air of covert expectation. Something was going on–that much was clear as noonday. Another slight rustle, and Edgar looked quickly above him into the blackness beyond the hams and other objects hanging from the rafters. He was just in time to catch a glimpse of something as it dropped down over his head. It

was a rope!

Before he had time to spring to his feet and fling it off his shoulders, it was drawn tightly round his neck with a quick jerk, and he was lifted almost off his feet. The peril was extreme, and realizing in a flash that only the most desperate exertions could save him, Edgar grasped the rope above the slip knot with his left hand, while with his right he drew his dagger and reached up to cut the rope, straining on tiptoe to get a purchase.

Suddenly a trapdoor, upon which his chair had evidently been placed, gave way beneath his feet, and the whole of his weight fell upon his left arm. Choking, half-strangled, with eyes starting from his head, Edgar strove to cut the rope with his dagger. One stroke, feeble from his straining position and reeling brain–a second stroke–then a third, into which all his remaining strength was put–and like a stone he fell half-fainting through the trapdoor into a cellar below.

For a moment or two he was unable to move. Half-strangled and half-dazed by the dread attack and sudden fall, he was in so helpless a condition that he could not have lifted a hand to save his life. The noise of footsteps on the stone stairs leading to the cellar and the harsh grating of a key in the lock roused him a little, however, and he feebly extricated himself from the legs of the chair upon which he had fallen. Scarcely had he done so before two men, one of whom bore a torch, ran hurriedly in and rushed at him with knives upraised. The man bearing the light Edgar recognized as James Baulch.

Against their attack Edgar at first could defend himself but feebly. His hand still clutched the dagger with which he had severed the rope, but before he was in a condition to use it he had received several body thrusts that would have dispatched him outright had it not been for the shirt of steel mail he wore beneath his clothing.

Every moment, however, his strength came back, and, watching his chance, presently he parried a blow from Baulch's companion, and brought the hilt of his own dagger down upon the ruffian's head with all his strength. The man dropped prone in his tracks amid a yell of wrath from the men in the room above, who were eagerly peering down at the conflict from the opening in the floor.

Feeling that his chance had come, Edgar sprang fiercely upon Baulch and flung him to the floor, the torch spinning from his hand to the other end of the cellar. Kneeling upon the man's chest and placing his dagger at his throat, Edgar cried sternly:

"Tell me where is Sir John Chartris, or thou shall die."

The man gasped with amazement and fear, and cried hastily: "At Ruthènes."

"Where is this Ruthènes?" cried Edgar quickly.

But the man seemed already to have repented that he had told so much, and with an effort made shift to grasp the hand that held the threatening dagger.

Doubtless he had seen the faces of his four friends above disappear from the trap, and had heard the scurry of their feet as they rushed across the room and made for the stairs. It could be but a matter of seconds before they were on the scene. Edgar, too, had heard the scurry of feet, and realized at once that he could get no more information before it would be too late. Wrenching himself free from Baulch's grasp and springing to his feet, he seized the chair and placed it upright beneath the trapdoor.

The instant he was free Baulch scrambled to his feet, and, emboldened by the approach of help–for the others' footsteps now sounded loudly upon the stairs–rushed at Edgar with a yell, and tried to prevent him mounting upon the chair.

"We will have thee yet, Edgar Wintour," he cried exultingly.

Edgar had flung away his dagger, but at this attack he turned and shot out his arm with all his strength. The blow caught the man full in the face, and felled him headlong.

The first of the men, leaping down the stairs, burst into the cellar just as Edgar, seizing the edge of the floor above with his hands, sprang off the chair, head and shoulders, into the room overhead. Flinging up his right leg and making another effort, he lifted himself until he stood upright upon the floor.

For the moment the room was empty, but the men below, mad with rage at being again tricked, were already in pursuit, shouting like wild beasts, and there was no time to be lost. Without an instant's delay, therefore, Edgar sprang to the window, flung aside the shutters, and looked eagerly out. As he expected, the gleam of water met his gaze, and, placing one hand upon the sill, he sprang headlong out and vanished into the waters of the Garonne.

CHAPTER XI
In Pursuit

An hour later a weary-looking, soaked figure knocked loudly and insistently at the door of the inn which sheltered the ladies Gertrude and Beatrice. It was Edgar, exhausted by a long swim in sodden garments and shirt of mail, which had well nigh dragged him to the bottom of the river. After a short parley the landlord admitted him, and, seeing his sorry condition, proceeded to light a fire to dry his

wet garments, and good-naturedly lent him others until they were ready for use.

"Dost wish me to tell Sir John's ladies that thou art come?" he asked presently.

"Nay, I will spend the night before this fire, and speak to them early in the morning. Tell me when ye hear them stirring."

Long before Edgar awoke in the morning Peter had arrived, anxious to know if anything had been heard of his master. Seeing him asleep, and hearing of the exhausted condition in which he had arrived, he sat down patiently to wait until he should awake.

"Hast learned aught?" he cried as soon as Edgar opened his eyes.

"Aye, though what 'tis worth I know not;" and Edgar related the incidents of the attack and escape the night before. "Baulch said that Sir John was at Ruthènes, or a place that sounded much like it. Whatever that name may be worth to us, it would seem that Sir John is at least still alive."

"Ruthènes!" echoed Peter thoughtfully. "Methinks I have heard a word that sounded like that before. Yes, I have it; it was a word spoken more than once by De Maupas to that rascal Baulch. I could not catch it fully, but now I know the word, I feel sure it was that they were repeating."

"Then we are on the right track," cried Edgar joyfully. "Now we must find where Ruthènes is. Call mine host."

The landlord was called and asked if he knew of a place called Ruthènes. After a moment's thought he announced that he had heard of it as a castle of evil reputation situated on the lower slopes of the Pyrenees many leagues distant. It belonged to a knight named Eustace de Brin, who appeared to be better known amongst the country folk and peasantry as Black Eustace. Exactly why he should have earned so terrible a name, however, the landlord was unable to say.

Satisfied that Baulch had not lied to him, Edgar desired the landlord to send someone to arouse the ladies, and to tell them that Sir John's esquire begged a few minutes' audience with them upon a matter of great importance. Then he turned to Peter and instructed him to return to the camp, to saddle Sir John's two best horses, and to make all ready for a long journey. On his way through the town he was to obtain more countrymen's clothes of a better cut and quality than his last purchase–such, indeed, as might be worn by small traders travelling on business from one part of the country to another.

Very shortly both the ladies appeared, eager to know why Edgar had come to them so early in the day, and guessing that he must have news to tell.

In a few brief sentences Edgar described the scene at the inn, and the means by which he had extracted one single word from Baulch, which, he hoped, contained the key to Sir John's whereabouts. Then he announced that he had made up his mind to set out forthwith for Castle Ruthènes, accompanied only by Peter,

and to do all in his power to deliver Sir John from his captors.

"But will not this Eustace offer him to ransom?" cried Beatrice. "We will gladly pay a ransom, however great, so long as we can get him safely back."

"I much misdoubt me whether Sir John would consent to a ransom being paid to dishonourable captors," replied Edgar. "'Tis not as though he had been captured in fair fight. Besides, would De Maupas consider himself avenged by a share in a ransom, for, of course, he must be in league with this Black Eustace?"

"I know not," cried Beatrice, stamping her foot in vexation. "But what seek ye to do? How can ye two carry Sir John away by force from a stronghold such as Castle Ruthènes seems to be?"

"By stratagem, backed by force if need be. There is naught else to be done. The earl is not yet ready to move, and even if he were, he could not move for months into so remote a part of the enemy's country as the district in which Ruthènes lies."

"Well, then, go, Edgar. Gertrude and I will pray for thy success even more heartily than in the combat with De Maupas. But trust not to thy sword too much. Ye hotheaded esquires think far too much of prowess in arms."

"I thank thee, maiden. I will try to remember thy counsels," replied Edgar, with a slight smile.

"But what are we to tell those who enquire for my father?" cried Gertrude.

"That is already settled. A day or two before he disappeared Sir John obtained leave from the earl to visit the lands of the lady Beatrice in Faucigny. Many called to congratulate him on his defeat of De Maupas, but hearing that he had left, supposed that he had already gone thence. I think it would be best if the lady Beatrice went to Faucigny for a time, and that thou didst return to Wolsingham."

"Nay, I shall not return home until I know what hath befallen my father," cried Gertrude decidedly. "Beatrice may please herself whether she visits her tenants at Faucigny, but I remain here. If the earl moves forward in thy absence the men-at-arms must go, but Matthew I shall keep with me."

A few more words and Edgar bade the ladies adieu, bidding them be of good cheer for the news he had brought showed that at any rate Sir John was alive. A rescue would, he trusted, only be a matter of time. Though the ladies were unable to accept so hopeful a statement, yet they felt a real thrill of hope. The dash and daring of the young esquire in the lists outside Bordeaux, the determination displayed by him in his onslaught upon the miscreant Baulch in the riverside inn, and the not less striking success which had attended both ventures gave them a ground for hoping at which they would have laughed a week ago.

Two hours later Edgar left the camp, accompanied by Peter, and took the road which led in the direction of Ruthènes. Both were dressed as small traders, though it must be confessed that their mounts were vastly superior to the steeds

such men usually bestrode. Both carried sword and dagger, and Edgar wore beneath his outer garments the light shirt of steel mail which had already done him such good service. Permission to leave had readily been granted to him on the understanding that he was *en route* to rejoin Sir John Chartris.

Before he left, Edgar called Matthew and gave him strict instructions to keep vigilant watch and ward over the Wolsingham ladies, and especially to see that neither went abroad unaccompanied by a proper escort. His fears for them, however, largely vanished when Matthew told him that De Maupas had recovered sufficiently to leave the camp for a destination which he had been unable to discover. The man Baulch appeared to have been left behind.

After a three-days' journey over rough roads, oftentimes mere tracks, Edgar and Peter reached a village in the vicinity of the castle of Ruthènes. Their arrival created something of a stir, for the village and district were so remote from the trade routes and highways that strangers were hardly ever seen. Somewhat disturbed that they were not able, as they wished, to pass unnoticed about their business, Edgar enquired whether the village boasted an inn. It did not, but the house which performed the nearest approach to that office was pointed out to him, and they made their way there and dismounted. A target for curiosity, and also, apparently, for barely concealed hostility, the two sat down to the poor hospitality the place afforded, feeling that the difficulties before them were greater even than they had anticipated.

It was evening when they arrived, and they had scarcely been there half an hour before no less a personage than the village priest called, ostensibly as a chance visitor, but really, as Edgar shrewdly suspected, to examine the two strangers, and to ascertain, if possible, what their visit portended.

"Ye are strangers here," remarked the priest, as he brought a mess of soup to the table at which Edgar and Peter were seated, and sat down himself.

Edgar assented and went on with his meal, though he kept a watchful eye upon the priest. The man was past middle age, tall and well built to all appearances, and had a kindly and pleasant, though careworn, face. Kindly as he looked, Edgar felt anxious to keep the real object of his visit there a secret from this man more than any other, for of all those in the village it was most probable that the local priest was on friendliest terms with the lord of the soil at Castle Ruthènes.

"Doubtless 'tis to visit the castle, and not us poor villagers, that ye are come," said the priest quietly, after a few minutes' pause.

"Nay, we know not Sir Eustace, and though we should like to see so fine a castle before we pass on, we shall not seek his hospitality."

"Are ye for us or against us?" asked the priest suddenly, fixing a pair of steady grey eyes upon Edgar.

"I know not what ye mean," said Edgar uncomfortably.

"I mean, are ye for the downtrodden and oppressed, or do ye uphold those who grind and ill-use the weak and helpless?"

"Certainly not the latter," cried Edgar quickly.

"Then join thyself to us, and make thyself famous in aiding a noble cause," cried the priest, his face flushing and his eyes sparkling like those of a zealot.

"What is this cause of which ye speak?" asked Edgar warily.

"It is to deliver these downtrodden folk amongst whom it is my sad lot to work. Have ye not heard of the ill fame of this Black Eustace, as he is called–and rightly called? Tell me that ye are not of his party–but I am sure ye are not, otherwise I would not have spoken so plainly."

"I am not. 'Tis but three days since I heard his name for the first time."

"Ah! then ye know not that he is the scourge of all this land, and doth kill and burn and flay without let or hindrance? He hath powerful friends, and never a thing is done when he ill-uses the poor ignorant folk who inhabit the land he calls his own. I have seen things with my own eyes that call aloud to heaven for vengeance, and yet the time cometh not."

"The country folk would then like to be rid of Sir Eustace?"

"Aye, they would like to rid themselves of him if only it were possible to poor and ill-armed men. Woe to me, a priest, that I should have to uphold the meeting of violence by violence! but I have tried to find another way and failed. I have been told that such a state as exists here exists in many other parts of France. If that be so, terrible things will be witnessed in the years to come.[1#] I cannot believe, however, that things can be so bad elsewhere as they are here, for whereas we are poor and ignorant, in other places the people are rich and powerful, and can resist oppression in many ways."

[#] The priest was right. In the rising of the "Jacquerie", which took place a few years later, dreadful scenes of violence and bloodshed were witnessed.

"Undoubtedly," murmured Edgar, nodding his head in agreement.

"But what we most lack is leaders," went on the priest in a still more earnest tone. "There is no one here, save myself, who stands out from the herd of poor miserable folk, and without leaders men with no knowledge of warfare are doubly useless. We want leaders," he reiterated in a meaning tone, fixing his eyes upon Edgar in a way that made that young man feel most uncomfortable.

"Yes, yes," replied Edgar in a soothing tone. "Doubtless the leaders ye need will be forthcoming when the time comes."

"The time has come, but the leaders are absent," cried the priest; and he was apparently about to say more when he stopped suddenly, as though with a great effort, and stared frowningly at the table.

Devoutly hoping that the priest had done and would spare them any further confidences, Edgar turned towards Peter and began to talk upon other topics. In

a minute or two, however, the priest raised his head and went on:

"But what are ye here for? Ye say ye are not visitors to the castle. Yet art thou, sir, if I am not mistaken, a man trained to war, and your steeds tell the same tale. What else can there be in this remote spot that would attract thee save the castle? Thy patois is strange and unfamiliar to me, for I have travelled little; but undoubtedly thou hast journeyed here from afar."

Edgar smiled. His knowledge of the French tongue had been for the most part acquired at Wolsingham, where several had a good knowledge of it. On to this, however, had been grafted, since his arrival, a strong Gascon flavour that more than possibly assorted somewhat ill with his previous acquirements.

The priest was waiting for a reply, and Edgar quickly made up his mind to confide in him the true reason for his presence there. It was practically certain that did he not do so the priest would have him watched, and that, he felt, would be disastrous.

"Yes," he said, "I have travelled here from afar. Like you, I am at enmity with those who shelter behind the walls of Castle Ruthènes, and, like you, I seek to outmanoeuvre them. They hold prisoner one whom I must rescue at all costs." Then Edgar went on to describe briefly what had happened to Sir John, and how he had come to believe that he had been carried away to Ruthènes.

The priest listened attentively to the end. "Then your interests are identical with ours," he said in a voice which rang with triumph. "Why should ye not throw in your lot with us and aid us to fling down yon frowning battlements? Your knight shall thus be saved and my poor downtrodden folk delivered from the oppressor. Ye are trained to war, to the siege of castles, and to the command of men: take command of my people jointly with me. 'Tis a righteous cause–unhesitatingly I proclaim it."

Moved in spite of himself by the priest's deep earnestness and sincerity, Edgar for some moments could find no words with which to reply. He had heard many tales of the misery and degradation of the poorer classes of France, and their truth had been brought home by the sights that had met his gaze on the long journey thither. There could be little doubt that that unhappy condition was due in a very large measure to unjust extortion and oppression by the ruling classes. But his first duty was to Sir John.

"I fear it cannot be," he said presently. "I must accomplish the rescue of my master at once, or I may find it too late. Then, when I have delivered him, I shall be at his disposal, and can therefore make no promise of aid to thee. Your folk, if I mistake not, are not yet ready for the rising ye project. They are not organized, they have not been taught to obey any given set of signals, and they have no belief in one another. There must be weeks of patient work ere they can be led to attack a fortalice defended by trained and resolute men. Nay, victory cannot

be snatched by a rising on the spur of the moment. There must be much work of patient preparation."

There was a long pause. Then the priest, his face full of trouble, rose from the bench on which he had been sitting, and began feverishly to pace the room.

"It is so," he said. "I feel it, though I am impatient to get to grips with the evildoers. I must begin at once, though when we are ready we shall still lack leaders. But mayhap ye will have failed to succour your knight, and will be glad to fall back upon our aid. Who knows?"

"Who knows, indeed? But I hope and believe not. If I have not rescued my master by then, I fear it will be because I am either dead or captured. But canst tell me aught of this castle? Is it strong? Doth it consist of a single donjon, or hath it outer walls?"

"It is an ancient castle, the origin of which is buried in the obscurity of the past. It hath a central donjon and also outer walls, most of it and all the stronger parts being built in its later days in imitation of the castles built by the Northmen in other parts of France. 'Tis strong, I know, for I have studied it with intent to discover its weakest spots."

"Hast discovered aught? I would fain learn, Sir Priest, any points that would help me in my quest. In return I will joyfully impart to you such knowledge as may come to me in my enterprise."

"I fear it hath no weak spots worthy of the name. Nothing save hard fighting can win yon fortalice, unless, as has of late been the case, the garrison wax careless from long inaction and freedom from alarums."

"Stratagem might effect its capture. It is on stratagem that I rely most for my own venture. But I would now fain bid thee good night, Sir Priest, and thank thee for thy kindly information. Perchance we shall meet again. Come, Peter!"

"Good night, Sir Squire! May ye prosper and win your way both in and out of the blood-stained lair of Black Eustace! God speed!"

CHAPTER XII
Castle Ruthènes

Early on the following day Edgar, accompanied by Peter, reconnoitred Castle Ruthènes from the shelter of the thick woods which stretched to within less than

a hundred yards of its walls. In the light of his knowledge of the castles of the time, Edgar could study the stronghold with a real appreciation of its strong and weak points. Its chief characteristic was a square central donjon, apparently of great age, which towered high above the outer walls. These were somewhat low, though of a very massive build, and appeared to belong to a later date than the donjon, having probably been thrown out as an additional screen against a surprise attack.

About the walls ran a moat, fairly wide and apparently deep, formed by a stream from the mountains being dammed back and looped, so as to complete the circumference of the walls. The castle stood in a hollow, and the moat ran sluggishly at a level with the surrounding land, which was boggy and springy, as though the water often overflowed and covered it inches deep. The place seemed to reek with moisture, the walls being mossgrown and discoloured; while the thick woods, encroaching closely upon the narrow patch of grassy plain, seemed to add to the forbidding, cheerless air of the gloomy fortalice.

The outer walls were pierced in one spot only, and that was at the main gateway. Here the moat was spanned by a drawbridge of modern appearance, but Edgar could see no traces of a portcullis, its place being taken by heavy oaken gates faced with plates of iron.

Struck by the gloomy, unhealthy look of the castle, Edgar could not help exclaiming in a voice of deep concern:

"I hope, Peter, they have treated Sir John well. The dungeons of such castles usually lie deep below the level of the moat. If they have immured him in one of those I fear for him. Sir John's health hath suffered much from his many campaigns."

"I hope not, Master Edgar. But we must hasten the more to release him, though how 'tis to be done I know not."

"We, or I, might perhaps gain entrance in disguise, though that would mean a daylight entry, and we should be under observation, and could hardly hope to effect much. Besides, since the simple old priest so quickly penetrated our disguise, I have lost faith in our abilities in that direction–our tongue, I fear, betrayeth us all too quickly."

Peter nodded in agreement.

"Come, let us make the full circuit of the walls, Peter, keeping well within the shadow of the woods. So far, I can see no way in save by scaling the walls themselves."

"By a ladder?" queried Peter.

"Nay, a ladder would betray us, if not before we entered, certainly at dawn the following morning. Nay, but a rope and grapnel in patient hands should win an entrance."

"A rope and grapnel!" cried Peter. "A rope we can doubtless obtain from someone among the country folk, but where may we obtain a grapnel?"

"We can improvise one. A sword wrapped in cloths might be well lodged in the spaces betwixt those blocks on the summit of the wall–thy steel scabbard, Peter, with the rope tied to its middle, flung up and properly lodged, would easily take the weight of one of us. Ha, 'tis easy after all!"

"But could we fling scabbard and rope to the summit of the wall from the distance of the edge of the moat?"

"'Twill certainly be a long throw. Is there no place where a bank at the bottom of the wall will give us a footing? Look closely, Peter, and see if thou canst discern such a bank anywhere. If we can see none we must, when the time comes, swim the whole circle of the walls and feel for one. A footing in mud and water will serve our turn."

"I see something, Master Edgar. See–where that clump of reeds shows a foot above the water against the walls–the bottom must be near the surface there."

"Maybe–unless there be but soft mud. Look again, Peter–we must, if we can, find a place where we can swing our rope full freely."

Before the circuit of the walls had been completed, a place had been found where a low bank lay between the moat and the foot of the wall. This was hailed with satisfaction as a step in the direction of scaling the outer defences of the castle, and during the remainder of the day Edgar and Peter sat down to watch all that went on, and particularly what sentries were posted and how far their observation extended.

Ere the day was out they had made up their minds that a good watch was kept, and that the slackness referred to by the priest had either never existed or had recently, from one cause or another, been entirely removed. Two men-at-arms were always upon the walls, keeping watch from opposite angles, from which the whole extent of the outer defences could be easily surveyed. Another man was posted at the gateway, to operate the drawbridge and to keep a look-out upon all who came to claim admittance. These sentries, too, were not only present, but appeared to be watchful and alert to all that went forward. Depressed at the evidence of the keen watch kept, but elated at finding a bank from which the rope and grapnel might be cast with some chance of success, Edgar and Peter returned to the poor dwelling at which they had obtained temporary shelter, there to await the time when their first attempt should be made.

As on the evening before, the priest appeared and supped with them, more for company's sake on this occasion, it seemed, than with any desire to keep watch upon them and their movements. Feeling a good deal of confidence in the kindly, careworn face with the steady grey eyes, Edgar told the priest what they had learned and how he proposed to effect an entrance. The news that the

garrison was keeping a careful watch seemed to fill the priest with surprise and some concern.

"Can it be that they have heard of your arrival?" he said. "And yet if that were so 'twould not be the posting of extra guards that I should expect, but the sally of a score of their blood-stained men-at-arms, who would pour into this village in an iron stream as they have done so often before. Ye would have been routed out, and within five minutes the branches of the nearest tree would have groaned beneath your weight. That is what has been before. Why, then, have they posted sentinels? Nothing else hath occurred save the arrival at the castle of a man who must indeed be of some consequence, seeing that he was accompanied by an escort of two men-at-arms."

"When did this man arrive?" asked Edgar quickly.

"On the morning of the day of your arrival–that is, yesterday."

"Canst describe him to me?"

"I did not see the man, and those who reported it to me, as all do the most trifling events, said that they could see little of him, as his head was swathed in bandages."

"It is he," murmured Edgar half to himself.

"Who? Whom dost mean? Dost know the man?" cried the priest sharply.

"I fear so. I think it must be this evil knight of whom I have told thee. The blow with which I worsted him in the lists at Bordeaux was severe, and I know that his head had to be much bandaged. Then before I left I learned that he had already gone. 'Tis he of a surety. He hath followed his victim."

"Can he know that thou art here?"

"I think not; but one cannot be sure, and he will guess that I would not remain idle."

"Then it is this knight, this enemy of thine, who hath caused the watch to be doubled. 'Twill be the harder for thee to find a way in by thy stratagem. Hast brought a rope with thee?"

"No. I must make enquiries and obtain one."

"I will do so for thee. Thou wilt only arouse suspicion and make folk talk. Leave it to me, Sir Squire."

Edgar thanked the priest warmly, and stipulated that it should be both light and strong. Then they went on to talk of other things, and the priest told Edgar stories of his work amongst the poor peasantry. Some were humoursome, others bright stories illustrating the homely virtues of the folk and their generosity one to another; but the greater part were tales of cruelty and oppression, which made Edgar's blood boil–tales of men tortured into revealing where their little store of worldly wealth, laid by with much self-denial, had been hidden away; and tales of men done to death for their "obstinacy", when they had no store whose

whereabouts they could reveal to satisfy their relentless persecutors. It all seemed almost incredible to Edgar, until he recollected the stories he had heard handed down of the deeds done in his own land but a century or two before.

It was three days before Edgar obtained a rope that he thought gave him the least hope of success in the venture he had in hand. The good priest did all in his power, and scarce a rope in the neighbourhood but was brought in and tried. But the ropes that the peasants possessed were rough and heavy and in no way suited to Edgar's purpose. In despair, at last he saddled his steed and rode away to the nearest town and purchased one there, returning by a forced march the same day.

That same night Peter and he, accompanied by the priest, made their way into the woods surrounding Castle Ruthènes. By a stroke of good fortune the night was a favourable one. Heavy clouds shrouded the light of the moon, and made even the biggest objects loom black and indistinct. A watcher on the walls would need the sharpest eyes to see a figure at the foot, and with the comforting feeling that all was so far going in their favour the two young men took leave of the priest at the edge of the wood and stole across the narrow strip of sward.

"God be with thee!" the priest had whispered, and with a pressure of the hand that Edgar now knew to be the hand of a friend, he had bade them adieu.

The point at which they left the woods was, they knew, in a line with that part of the moat where the low bank rose at the foot of the wall, and as soon as they reached the edge of the water, both slipped noiselessly in and swam gently towards the castle walls.

Both were good swimmers, even Peter, in spite of his infirmity, having long since learned to keep himself afloat without difficulty. Edgar carried the line and the improvised grapnel, which had been well swathed in cloths to ensure its falling dully wherever it struck. He also, wore his shirt of mail and his sword. The weight was considerable, but he was too practised a swimmer for that to trouble him for a few dozen yards, and he had a decided objection to being quite defenceless when he had gained entry into the enemy's quarters.

The water struck chill. Heavy weeds that appeared almost to choke the stream clung to their legs and impeded their progress. They could see nothing save a wall of blackness that rose before them forbiddingly. All seemed to be as silent as the tomb.

They were slow in making the passage, as their one desire was to make no sound, but presently they reached the side. Touching bottom in several feet of mud, they slowly raised themselves out of the water and began to crawl up the bank.

Suddenly they were startled beyond measure by a tremendous screech and flutter which arose from right under their very noses. In their amazement and

alarm they sprang back a couple of feet into deep water with a splash, and then saw, or rather heard, a flock of frightened ducks rise with a whirr and cackle from the bank and fly above their heads round the angle of the castle walls.

Deeply chagrined, the two young men crawled from the moat upon the bank and lay there listening intently. Such a mischance they had never dreamed of, and it seemed more than possible that it might have alarmed one of the guards and brought him to the spot to learn the cause of the birds' alarm. With deepest annoyance Edgar upbraided himself for not observing that a flock of half-wild ducks belonging to the castle had made a home on the bank he had counted upon in his plans.

For half an hour the two lay in the mud and water without stirring, listening with all their ears and gazing up at the outline of the top of the walls, which they could discern dimly against the sky. But the peering figures of the sentinels that they half-expected to appear never came.

"All is well after all, I think, Peter," said Edgar at last. "That was a bad start indeed, and had I not thought Sir John's need a most urgent one, I should have been tempted to try another night. But as 'tis, if any have marked the flutter and scare they have doubtless thought them due to winged enemies of the wild fowl, and not to those with intent to disturb the peace of the castle. Now let us try the powers of the line and grapnel we obtained after so much time and trouble. 'Twould be hard indeed to find them fail us now."

The outer walls were comparatively low, little more than twenty feet or so in height, and the throw of the grapnel was not a very difficult one. But it proved exceedingly difficult to obtain a lodgment with it. Time after time it was thrown with success well over the wall, but the darkness of the night forced them to fling it at random, and as soon as a strain was put upon it, down it fell again.

At last, however, it held fast even when the weight of both was tried upon it, and, overjoyed, Edgar instantly began to haul himself up hand over hand until he reached the top. Here he rested arms and shoulders on the wall while he paused a moment to listen. All was quiet, however, and drawing himself right up he signalled to Peter with the rope that all was clear for him to ascend in his turn.

In a few minutes both were safely on the wall, crouching in the deepest shadows they could find. The first stage of their enterprise had been successfully accomplished, and though cold and wet and shivering as with the ague, they felt elated that they were well on the way to the accomplishment of their formidable task.

"Draw up and coil the rope, Peter. We must take it with us, for doubtless we shall need it 'gainst our return."

Peter silently obeyed.

"Now follow me quietly, lad," and Edgar led the way softly along the wall, keeping well in the shadow, until they reached a narrow flight of stone steps that led down to the castle courtyard. Against them loomed the deep shadow of a corner turret, and, thinking that this might possibly be a likely place for a man-at-arms to be stationed on the watch, Edgar paused and listened intently.

"Forward, Peter," he whispered; "Black Eustace and his men are asleep, I verily believe."

"Black Eustace never sleeps," echoed a rough voice from the blackness of the turret, and a dark form sprang suddenly upon Edgar and nearly brought him to the ground. Other figures followed, and in a twinkling Edgar and Peter were struggling in the grip of half a dozen men.

"Slay them not–at present," commanded the deep voice of the man who had first spoken. "Bring torches and bind them well. Then shall we see who hath dared to set foot upon the walls of the castle of Eustace de Brin–Black Eustace, one of the knaves called me, did he? We shall see. Mayhap he will be right."

It was but a spring from the walls to safety, and Edgar struggled fiercely to fling off his many assailants. A desperate effort freed his right arm, and a heavy blow rid him of one of them for a time. But he was no nearer even temporary freedom, for one of the men had clutched him firmly round the waist from behind with one hand while with the other he seized him by the hair and dragged his head forcibly back. Slowly but surely, notwithstanding his most frantic efforts, Edgar found his head dragged relentlessly back until his neck seemed on the point of snapping beneath the cruel strain. To struggle on was hopeless, and, weak from his exertions and with his senses nearly gone, Edgar allowed his arms to be drawn behind his back and there secured without further resistance.

Torches were brought. One was thrust close to Edgar's face–so close that his hair was singed and his cheek scorched–and a man peered searchingly at him.

[image]

"A TORCH WAS THRUST CLOSE TO EDGAR'S FACE"

"I know not the varlet," he growled, and Edgar recognized the voice of the man who had first spoken and who had admitted himself to be Eustace de Brin. "He seemeth not to belong to these dogs of peasants who would dearly love to bite the hand of their master an they got the chance. Here, camarade, perchance this is one of the hounds thou hast feared might be on thy track."

A man who had held aloof from the struggle came forward at the call, and Edgar, whose head had now been released from its intolerable strain, had no

difficulty in recognizing, in spite of his bandages, the fierce eyes and harsh visage of Sir Gervaise de Maupas. The recognition was mutual, for with a shout of astonishment and savage joy, the knight cried:

"It is! It is! This is none other than that braggart esquire of whom I told thee, Eustace."

"What! The boy who gave thee that clout in the lists that nearly sent thee where thou art so eagerly awaited?" cried De Brin with a loud laugh.

"Nay, Eustace," cried De Maupas, giving the speaker no very friendly look. "He is the boy who played me a base trick that by an unfortunate mischance I could not frustrate. But he will play me no more. Give him to me, Eustace, as an earnest of the goodwill thou hast so often spoken of, but of which I have seen little enough solid evidence; as some slight return, too, for the many profitable ventures I have put thee in the way of."

"Well, well, we will talk more of that anon, camarade Gervaise. The disposal of the boy's body is nothing to me, so long as he is punished for his insolent daring in scaling the walls of my castle; but first I must know how we stand in this business. D'ye know the other man?"

Peter was next examined. "Yes," growled the knight, "this dog is one of the plotters. He is somewhat of a cripple–Baulch hath told me of him–but is not too crippled to give us trouble. Guard him well, Eustace, or thou wilt regret it."

"Ha! ha! ha! friend Gervaise, thou wilt, when thou know'st me better, find that I have a shorter way than that with those who might inconvenience me did they but get the chance."

The words were spoken with meaning, and De Maupas looked doubtfully at the speaker, as though neither liking nor understanding what he meant. "If thou meanest to imply—-" he began at length.

"Lead on, men," cried Eustace de Brin, taking no notice of his friend. "Conduct the prisoners to the strongest cell beneath the donjon and see them fast. Duprez, thou wilt have to answer for them–so guard them well."

Down the stone steps Edgar and Peter were marched until they reached the courtyard. Here several of the men-at-arms left them, and, escorted only by Duprez and one other, they skirted the massive walls of the donjon until they came to a small low door. Through this door they were hurried, and found themselves in what seemed to be a vast system of underground passages and vaults which must have dated back to the remoter days of the first beginnings of the castle. Some of the vaults were below the donjon, while others seemed to burrow beneath the flagstones of the courtyard.

By the light of a single torch they were conducted along a passage whose gloomy arched walls echoed back the sound of their footsteps with a sullen insistence that seemed to make them contract yet more closely upon the unhappy

prisoners. Presently they reached an ancient, monastic-looking cell, which they judged to be one of those situated beneath the courtyard. Into this they were roughly thrust. The torch was stuck into an iron ring above the doorway, and by its light Duprez and his assistant proceeded to release the arms of their prisoners from their bonds, and to load them afresh with heavy iron shackles which had been hanging ready for use from a hook upon the wall. The chamber was dank and heavy with moisture, and the shackles were thickly coated with rust, wet and smeary to the touch.

"Thou wilt find these safe enough for all their looks," growled Duprez, as he shackled Edgar's right arm to his left leg and his left arm to his right leg, so that he could barely stand upright. "These shackles have held secure captives as strong as thou–aye, and men of noble and knightly birth. Not once in my time has their grip relaxed until death claimed their victims. Sir Eustace said I would have to answer for thee–I object not to that, ha! ha!"

"'Tis a poor thing to make merry at thy prisoners' expense," replied Edgar shortly.

Duprez stared at him as though scarcely comprehending his meaning. Probably the sentiment was foreign to him. Then he turned to Peter and trussed him in similar fashion, growling half to himself:

"Cripple though thou art, 'twill be as well to shackle thee. After all, 'tis an honour to treat thee as a man of sound limbs, so let that thought comfort thee 'gainst thy pleasant stay in the dungeons of Ruthènes. Come, Rolfe, pick up their swords and daggers, and let us be off to our beds. Long enough have we spent over this business."

Sardonically bidding them good night, Duprez and his man left the chamber, carrying with them the torch and the weapons they had taken from their prisoners. The door clanged heavily to behind them, and Edgar and Peter were left in total darkness to think over their most perilous situation, and to wonder for how much of it they had to thank their old foe, Sir Gervaise de Maupas.

CHAPTER XIII
Prisoners

Worn out and dispirited, Edgar and Peter sank to the floor and lay there mo-

tionless. Their sudden capture, after so successful a beginning, was a stunning blow, and though neither was easily discouraged, they needed time and thought to recover from it.

After a time they grew drowsy, and presently forgot their troubles in sleep. When they awoke they judged it to be broad daylight. Their cell was still in semi-darkness, the only light that entered coming from a grating high up at the summit of the arched stone roof. This grating, Edgar calculated from his recollection of the trend of the passages they had traversed, was on a level with the flagstones of the courtyard.

The priest had told Edgar something of the history of the castle, and from the appearance of the cell he came to the conclusion that the network of underground dungeons and passages belonged to its more ancient days, and had been left intact when it had been partially pulled down and rebuilt. The conclusion brought him little additional hope, for the walls were massively built of stone, and seemed to have been but slightly affected by the lapse of time.

"Canst think of any plan, Peter, by which we may effect our escape?" asked Edgar, when he had carefully weighed all the chances in his own mind.

"Nay, unless we can reach up to the grating by standing on one another's shoulders."

"With these shackles? I fear there is little hope there, unless we can first rid ourselves of these irons."

"Yes, we must knock off our shackles first. As thou know'st, Master Edgar, I was an armourer's assistant, and know something of chains and rivets. If there be any weak spots I can find them, and shall know how to deal with them. Had they left us but a dagger it would not have been long, I'll warrant thee, before we moved our limbs in freedom."

"Yes, yes; but it must be done without a dagger. And before we start we must have some plan by which to escape when our shackles are off. 'Twould be useless to remove them only to be discovered by Duprez on his next visit. They would be replaced by a stronger pair, and our plight would be hopeless indeed. We must have a plan first. What doth the door offer? Let us examine it carefully."

Both moved eagerly to the door. As they did so their chains clanked hideously, making a sound that seemed to strike into their hearts with dread, bringing irresistibly home to them their desperate position.

"Of a truth, it would be worth much to be rid of these shameful bonds alone," cried Edgar passionately. "Nevertheless, we must not think of it until we have our plans ready formed to our hands, Peter. Ha! 'Tis as I feared. This door belongeth not to the age when these walls were built. It is of far later make, and seems prodigiously strong–shake it and feel its weight, Peter."

Peter did so, and then stood back and gave a despondent shake of the head.

"Had they left us a piece of metal, however small, Master Edgar, we might in time have scraped a hole through the door around the lock and so opened it. But they have left nothing with me. Art sure they have left thee nothing?"

"They have left me nothing, Peter. They have taken my purse and all it contains, so that not even a coin remains for such a task. But stay–they have not touched my shirt of mail. Perchance we might do something with a few of its links, small as they are."

"Let us try–but hush, Master Edgar, someone approaches. I hear footsteps in the passage outside."

Both held their peace, and then, at a gesture from Edgar, sat down again on the stones in an attitude of dejection. A key grated in the lock of the door, and with much creaking and groaning the door was opened. Two men were outside–Duprez and another man, a stranger to Edgar. One bore an armful of rugs and the other some rough cakes and a pitcher, probably containing water.

"Thy bedding," grunted Duprez surlily. "Here, Guilbert, fling it in yon corner. Thou art lucky," he went on, turning to Edgar, "to get as much."

"Lucky indeed," replied Edgar in a tone of weary indifference; "but can thine other prisoner spare the rugs?"

"Aye, they belong not–But what know ye–why talk ye of another prisoner?" cried Duprez savagely, as he began to suspect that he had told too much.

"Oh, nothing! Surely one might guess ye had other prisoners in so large a castle. Is this our food, friend Duprez? They do not intend to starve us at any rate. Doubtless we may expect a meal twice or thrice in the day?"

"Ye may expect me when ye see me," cried the man harshly. "Ye would like me to tell ye all, I make no doubt. Get ye to your food, and cease to bandy words with me, or it may chance you will lose all appetite."

"Hast ever found thy prisoners kept their appetites in such noisome and dismal dungeons as these?" cried Edgar indignantly. "Didst thou take away the desire to eat, doubtless 'twould but do the work this cell will do as surely in a few short weeks."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Duprez with great zest. "Thou art a sharp fellow. 'Tis very true. My customers soon lose appetite, and finding they do not appreciate my trouble in bringing them their food, sometimes I forget it for a day or two. Ha! ha! It saves a lot of trouble in the end, and Sir Eustace makes no bones."

"Begone! callous brute that ye are," cried Edgar, jumping to his feet in a burst of involuntary indignation. "Kill us outright an ye be a man."

Duprez's merriment instantly vanished, and was succeeded by a burst of passion that he made no attempt to hold in check. "Silence, knave!" he cried savagely, as he struck Edgar violently on the mouth with his clenched fist. He then gave the pitcher his man had brought a vicious kick that dashed it into

fragments, and, turning on his heel, sullenly left the cell.

* * * * *

As soon as they had eaten the cakes still left to them, Edgar and Peter began to ponder means of escape. The shirt of mail was tried, and several links obtained after much labour, but they were so small and so unsuited to the purpose the two had dimly in view that after a few minutes' trial the idea was given up in disgust. Even if it escaped detection, an attempt by such means would have taken so long as to be almost hopeless of success.

During the remainder of the day Duprez never came near the prisoners. Doubtless he had counted upon his destruction of the pitcher inflicting much suffering upon them. But happily the water had splashed upon the oaten cakes, and had wetted them so thoroughly that they had rather helped to assuage the pangs of thirst than added to them.

As near as the pair could judge, it was late on the afternoon of the second day when they again heard footsteps outside the door. Their first thought was that Duprez and his man were returning at last; but as the footsteps came nearer they gathered that only one person was approaching, and that probably that someone was more lightly shod than either of their jailers. The door opened, and to their astonishment Sir Gervaise de Maupas entered.

At the sight of him Edgar involuntarily sprang to his feet, dominated for the moment by feelings of anger and excitement.

De Maupas raised his hand and calmly waved him back. "It seems thou art surprised to see me," he said easily. "Thou wilt, I think, be more so when thou hast learned somewhat of mine errand and found how magnanimous I can be."

With an effort, Edgar mastered his indignation and simply nodded his head as though waiting to hear more before accepting such a statement. The knight spoke with quiet confidence. Most of his bandages were now gone, and he seemed himself again and sure that the errand on which he had come would end as he desired.

"What ye have learned of me," he went on, pacing slowly up and down the narrow limits of the cell, "doubtless ye have learned from Sir John. Well, know this, that Sir John is the lifelong enemy of me and mine, and the fault of it lies not with me but with him. Aught that he hath told ye to my disadvantage is therefore not to be relied upon, for he hateth me and maligns me for his own base purposes. He is no true knight, and ye are mistaken in espousing his cause. I have told you the truth, so that ye may know that ye are honourably released from all allegiance to him."

"But if thou art the true knight thou sayest, how comes it that thou art

staying as a friend in the castle of this Eustace de Brin, a knight of ill reputation and one of the enemies of our country?"

De Maupas frowned and momentarily checked his stride. "That is a long story," he said. "I am here out of no alliance with the enemies of our country; rather indeed to further its interests, for I am gaining much useful knowledge. But thou art indeed right when thou sayest the owner of this grim castle is a man of ill reputation. The scenes these cells have beheld would appal the stoutest heart could they be unfolded. Beware, then, that thou sharest not the fate of thy predecessors. Sir Eustace, I know, is deeply enraged with thee. He says thou art the first man to dare enter his castle without his permission, and he purposes to slay thee. Knowing thee for a fellow countryman, I intervened, and with such influence as I possess begged him to allow me to offer thee a hope of life–life in the open air and sunshine, not cooped within the narrow limits of a cell that must sooner or later drive thee mad. Say then, dost desire to accept my offer?"

"What is this offer?" asked Edgar shortly. "We are ready enough to leave this cell, as thou canst well imagine. But we must carry our honour unsullied with us."

"I will watch over thine honour as I would over mine own," cried De Maupas emphatically. Then, not noticing the half-smile his declaration had conjured up, he went on, "Ye may have heard that I claim to be the rightful owner of the estates now held by Sir John Chartris? Mine they are, and I hold that he is keeping me out of them by nothing less than trickery and fraud. I have vowed to meet trickery by trickery, fraud by fraud, and I have, as ye know, captured Sir John and am holding him to ransom. My price for his release is an acknowledgment of my better claim to the estates. What could be more reasonable? Unfortunately, for himself as well as for me, he is proving obstinate. He will not yield his ill-gotten lands, and in my good nature, desiring not to do him hurt, I have cast about and found a way out of the difficulty. He shall keep the lands, but must assist me to the best of his power to win compensation in another direction. That is most fair, is it not, young sir? You see, I am trusting you fully, well knowing the justice of my cause."

"Yes, yes," replied Edgar quickly, "but what is this compensation?" The knight's tone and bearing were so smooth and peaceable, and he seemed in so reasonable a frame of mind, that Edgar's opinion of him, well grounded though it was, was almost shaken.

"'Tis simply this. I am deeply enamoured of his ward, Beatrice d'Alençon, and would fain win her hand in marriage. All I ask are his good offices and influence to aid my suit. Could I be more magnanimous towards one whom I regard as a lifelong foe?"

Utterly astounded at the extraordinary change of front, for a moment Edgar

could but gape. Then he recovered himself and asked quickly, "But thou know'st not the lady D'Alençon. Thou hast, to my knowledge, spoken not one word to her. How then canst say thou art enamoured of her?"

"How could I approach her? My enmity with Sir John was so great that I should but have exposed myself to humiliation had I tried to make her closer acquaintance. As it was, I was forced to worship from afar."

"De Maupas, thou art twice her age and more, and I find it hard indeed to believe thy story. Her lands are wide, and in their breadth alone I fear thy love has found its birth."

"It is not so, Edgar Wintour. I have a real fancy for the maid, though I would not deny that her lands are of importance in my eyes. But I am a knight of birth; one too, who, if he had his rights, would own lands as wide and rich as hers. Therefore it seemeth to me that I am a fitting match for Beatrice d'Alençon. But enough of explanations. I am about to make the offer to Sir John, and to thee I make an offer no less generous. Aid me in persuading Sir John and after, and ye shall both go free. Refuse, and ye must rot in this loathsome dungeon–rot or go mad: one or other is as certain in the course of a few weeks as it is certain that Gervaise de Maupas stands before thee."

Our hero was undoubtedly staggered at the offer so skilfully held out as an honourable exchange for Sir John's life and the claims De Maupas had long laid to his estates. Sir John's life was all important in Edgar's eyes, and could a means be found by which it might be honourably saved the loss of the estates of either ward or guardian weighed with him but little by comparison. The offer of De Maupas was therefore not one to be dismissed without consideration. He therefore took refuge in silence, while he tried to wrest any hidden motives for the offer there might be from the network of clever words in which he half-feared De Maupas had shrouded his real plans.

There could be no doubt that Sir John had refused to purchase his life at the expense of his estates and the rights of his successors. That much was clear from De Maupas's presence in the cell that moment. Foiled in his first move, and unwilling to take Sir John's life while some profit might be made of it, he had bethought him of a plan by which he might purchase his rights and influence over his ward, the lady Beatrice. Her lands were even wider and richer than her guardian's, and the wily plotter had hit upon a way of obtaining them that would, he knew, pass muster readily enough as knightly and honourable.

The story of his passion for her was doubtless trumped up for the occasion, to give an air of romance and honourable dealing to what was little more than barefaced robbery. Nevertheless, it was a story that would be widely believed, though that Beatrice must and always would loathe the man, Edgar felt not the slightest doubt.

It was more than probable, too, that De Maupas had already broached his plan to Sir John, and, meeting with a rebuff, had bethought him of Edgar and hoped to obtain his aid in persuading his master. The more Edgar thought over the scheme, however, and the more he stripped it of its trappings of pretended love and romance, the more he felt it to be every whit as shameful as the first plan by which De Maupas had sought to obtain the Wolsingham lands by threats and violence.

"What is to be your answer to my generous offer, young sir?" said De Maupas at length. He still paced slowly to and fro the length of the cell, and his bearing was as easy and confident as ever. Edgar, however, had been not unheedful of the quick furtive glances he had cast at him every now and again as he turned in his stride.

"I will have no part in this matter, De Maupas," Edgar replied quickly. "I trust thee not, and much of thy story I cannot believe. More than that, I am not ready to purchase my life at another's expense."

"It is Sir John's life, too, that thou art casting away like a fool," cried De Maupas angrily.

"Sir John hath, I doubt not, already told thee that he prefers death to dishonour. I, his esquire, say the same, on both his account and my own."

A malignant look flamed up on the knight's face, and Edgar knew that he had judged his plans and motives aright.

"Death thou certainly shalt have, boy–I have sworn it long since," cried De Maupas furiously, placing his hand on his dagger as though he longed to carry his threat into instant execution. "But if thou think'st to obtain an honourable death with thy blood coursing warmly through thy veins, thou wilt be mistaken. Slowly, inch by inch, in silence and despair, shalt thou die–not with the plaudits of thousands ringing in thine ears as when, like a mad fool, thou didst brave my lifelong anger. Bah! I shall yet see thee blench and, cringing at my feet, beg for thy life and a glimpse of open air and sky. I can tell thee that the past has shown that these monkish walls have a secret of their own for crushing wills stronger far than thine."

As he spoke the last few words the knight eyed Edgar with a gaze so stern and menacing that it seemed as though he hoped by its very intensity to cow him into submission.

"Never will I cringe to thee, Gervaise de Maupas," cried Edgar hotly, returning him look for look.

"We shall see," growled De Maupas savagely, as he turned sharply on his

heel and left the cell, jerking the door to with a dull crash behind him.

CHAPTER XIV
A Desperate Venture

As soon as the excitement caused by the sudden appearance of De Maupas had begun to subside, Edgar recollected something that he had heard while the interview was proceeding, but which he had then no time to dwell upon. This was a strange sound, muffled and indistinct as though coming from a distance, which, having no opportunity for listening attentively, he had been unable to define. It might have been, he now thought, the cry of an animal or even of some human being in distress.

"Didst hear what sounded like distant cries while the door stood open, Peter?"

"I did, Master Edgar. They sounded strange and unearthly and I could make nothing of them. I heard the like when Duprez brought us food yesterday, but took no heed."

"Ah! Can it be that they are torturing Sir John to compel him to yield compliance with their infamous projects?" exclaimed Edgar, beginning to pace restlessly up and down the cell as well as his shackles would permit. "De Maupas and this Black Eustace are, I verily believe, capable of deeds every whit as base and pitiless."

"Thinkest thou so?" cried Peter excitedly. "Then let us spring upon our jailers and, if need be, perish in an effort to save our master from so fearful a fate."

"Truly it is intolerable that we should remain supine here," replied Edgar in a voice vibrating with emotion, "but to attack our jailers, shackled as we are, would mean, I fear, but certain defeat. Would I could think of some way–but, yes, I have 't! Dost see yon bracket above the door?"

"Aye, sir, what wouldst do? Tear it down and use it as a weapon?"

"Nay, it looks to be embedded so deeply in the masonry that 'twould need weeks of work to loosen it. My thought was that could I climb upon it I might, at his next entry, spring upon Duprez all unawares. My weight and the shock of it might well rid us of him for the time and leave us two, shackled and without

weapons, to face one man armed. Joyfully will we not accept the odds?"

"Aye, to that," cried Peter eagerly. "The plan soundeth well if the bracket will hold thy weight, and thou canst reach up to get upon it all cumbered with thine irons."

"Let us try, Peter. Stand close against the door and let me climb upon thy shoulders. Though I cannot move my hands higher than my waist, I think I can yet make shift to clamber up."

The bracket above the door on to which Edgar was endeavouring to climb consisted of a thick bar of iron with a socket, into which Duprez had thrust the torch when he had first entered the cell with his prisoners. It was thickly crusted with rust, but was so massive that it seemed likely enough that it would more than bear Edgar's weight.

After a few minutes' clambering he managed to perch himself upon the bar, and by resting his back flat against the wall, could hold himself steady in his difficult position. Did Duprez and his man enter while he was in that position, it seemed easy to leap upon one of them and to bear him to the ground with crushing force.

"It offers good hopes of freedom, Peter!" exclaimed Edgar exultingly as he clambered with difficulty down from his dizzy position. "If we can overcome our two jailers, we shall be able to don their cloaks and issue forth freely. Did we only dare wait for darkness, we should, I doubt not, be able to reach the walls with little chance of discovery."

"They have taken our ropes," observed Peter.

"A plunge from the walls into the moat will not come amiss if Sir John be not injured. We can flounder out and be hidden in the woods ere ever the drawbridge can be lowered. What is it, Peter? Hast heard something?"

"Yes, yes, I think I can hear footsteps in the distance outside. Quickly, Master Edgar–wilt thou not clamber up above the door and be ready?"

Hastily Edgar prepared to climb, but before he was halfway up he heard sounds that brought him leaping to the ground. Placing his ear to one of the cracks of the door, he listened with agonized attention. Again in the distance he could hear the strange wails and screams which he had heard before.

"Listen, Peter, and tell me what ye think."

Peter obeyed. "I can make no more of it than before," he remarked after a pause. "The sounds seem like nothing that I—-But hark! I can hear the sound of footsteps coming and going. We shall have Duprez here anon."

But the two prisoners were left undisturbed. The noise of footsteps died away, and with it the strange sounds that had so puzzled and alarmed Edgar–nay, alarmed him still, for he could not help connecting the sounds with Sir John, and feared that his ruthless enemies might be torturing or tormenting him into

acquiescence in their plans. The more he thought of it the more he felt that such might be the case, and the more impatient he became to escape and hasten to his master's aid.

"Come, Peter," he cried at last, "we shall do little more by taking thought. At the next visit of Duprez we must try conclusions. Aid me to practise mounting rapidly to the bracket, so that when we next hear footsteps I may be prepared for action without loss of time."

For half an hour Edgar practised until he could clamber up and get ready with great rapidity. Night had by that time fallen, and as it seemed unlikely that Duprez would visit them again that day, they gathered the rugs together and disposed themselves to sleep.

Scarcely had they dozed off, however, when they were awakened by the sound of footsteps close at hand and by the glint of a light beneath the door. The moment of their opportunity had come! Duprez was doubtless at the door.

With feverish impatience, Edgar hastened to the door and began to clamber up to his station. His movements were cramped and impeded by his shackles and the absolute necessity that no clanking of chains should warn their jailers that the prisoners were up and doing. Ere he had fully gained his coign of vantage the key was grating in the lock, and Peter had barely time to scuttle back to the farthest corner of the cell and to crouch down among the rugs, feigning sleep, before the door began to swing back upon its hinges.

"Come, ye proud varlets, ye are honoured tonight. Sir Eustace desires speech with you. Ha, ha! Much comfort to you 'twill be, I'll warrant."

As he spoke Duprez strode into the cell, followed by another man who carried a torch, which he raised above his head to catch a glimpse of the prisoners.

With a sudden spring, Edgar flung himself down upon the torchbearer, landing full upon him and crushing him to the ground with stunning force. The torch spun from his hand into a corner, and lay there spluttering in the damp, shedding a feeble, fitful light upon the scene. With a loud shout of alarm, Duprez grasped his sword by the hilt and strove to pluck it from its sheath. Before he could do so, however, Edgar had sprung upon him from the rear, whilst Peter seized him round the legs from the front. Down he went headlong, struggling furiously and shouting for aid, until Edgar grasped him by the throat and choked the sound with a grip of iron. Meanwhile the man who had borne the torch lay without a movement. His forehead had struck the flagstones with a force that had rendered him unconscious.

"Tear me some strips from yon rugs," cried Edgar in a minute or two, when Duprez, half-choked and fully mastered, had begun to relax his struggles. "Take this dagger–quick!"

Peter drew the dagger from its sheath, and in a few seconds had slit off

some strips of hide from the rough sheepskin rugs. With these Edgar bound Duprez's arms securely behind his back. The other man was then trussed in similar fashion, though, so far, he had shown no sign of returning consciousness.

"Peter," continued Edgar with breathless energy as soon as their jailers were secure, "place the torch upright against the wall and bend all thine energies to ridding thyself and me of our shackles. We have two swords and a dagger. That should be sufficient for an armourer's assistant. Get quickly to work, or it will be too late. Be silent if thou canst."

He then turned to Duprez.

"Dost wish to live, scoundrel?" he said sternly. "Thou knowest as certainly as we do that our lives are forfeit if taken–dost then think we are likely to spare thee? What dost bid for thy life?"

"What want ye?" gasped Duprez, whose face was livid and full of fear as the wild shackled figure stooped over him, grasping a dagger snatched from the belt of the other man.

"A few words–no more. But they may spell life to thee."

"Ask."

"Where is Sir John Chartris?"

"The other prisoner–the man who came a week agone?"

"Yes, a man of knightly bearing, aged some forty years."

"He is in this donjon, in a room near Sir Eustace. He was in one of these cells but a few hours since."

"What! Was his, then, the voice we heard? You have tortured him, inhuman monsters!" and Edgar, in his anger, thrust the point of the dagger so close to Duprez's neck that the man winced with fear.

"Nay, nay, good sir, we have tortured him not. He contracted a fever two days after he came, and is wild with delirium. Sir Eustace feared to lose him if he kept him in these dungeons, and had him taken to a room halfway up the keep."

"Ah! Tell me how I may reach this room."

Sullenly the man obeyed.

"These keys at thy belt. Which is the key of Sir John's room?"

Again the man gave the information desired, and Edgar, satisfied that he had obtained all that he required, stripped him of his cloak and then gagged him effectively with pieces torn from the rugs. In his elation he could have shouted for joy. Sir John was ill, but if all went well before another hour had gone he would at least be free.

By this time Peter had rid himself of one of his shackles and the other was nearly shorn through. The shackles, though thick and heavy, were soft and rusty, and were an easy problem to an armourer's assistant in possession of well-tempered swords and a dagger. In a few more minutes he was free to at-

tack Edgar's bonds in their turn. Soon he also could stretch his limbs in freedom.

"Well done, Peter! Now strip that man of his cloak and put it on. Gird on sword and dagger, roll up the rugs, and let us be off. Sir Eustace is awaiting us, and unless we act at once our chance will be lost for ever."

"'Tis so, Master Edgar. We have indeed little time to lose. If Sir Eustace waxeth impatient, he may send other men to look for the first."

"Yes, 'tis unfortunate that it was to fetch us to Sir Eustace that Duprez came; but that cannot be helped, and at least 'tis night, and the greater part of the castle inmates will be asleep. In these cloaks we shall be able to pass along unmolested, if so be we can avoid Black Eustace whilst bringing out Sir John."

Taking up the torch, Edgar left the grim cell, closely followed by Peter, and shut the door behind him. They were free for the moment–free until Sir Eustace grew impatient at the tardy return of his messengers and set out to enquire the reason.

As rapidly as possible the two young men traversed the ghostly underground passages and ascended a narrow winding staircase of stone towards the room in which Duprez had said Sir John was now lodged. It was found without difficulty, for, to their horror, as they neared the spot they heard the selfsame cries that had so startled them before. It seemed that Duprez had spoken truly, and as he reached the door it was with a trembling hand that Edgar thrust the key into the lock.

The room was in darkness, but by the light of the torch held on high he saw Sir John. He was alone, but on a table near by were food and drink, which seemed to have been placed there not long since. The knight lay on a couch fully clothed, and was staring straight up at the ceiling, tossing his arms and shouting. At the noise of Edgar's entry and the light of the torch, he ceased for a moment, and, lifting his head, stared at the newcomers with eyes that seemed to search without the power of thought. Then his head fell back, and he resumed his wild shouting and tossing.

"Thou shalt see, false knight–think'st to bend to thy will a true knight of England? Infamous proposals! Worthy Gervaise de Maupas and grim Eustace of Ruthènes! The earl shall know–at last I tell thee–the time will come."

"Sir John, Sir John," cried Edgar breathlessly, "we are come to set thee free! Canst bear to be lifted, my lord?"

"Hark, I hear the tramp of men! From the woods and mountains–they come–black knight of Ruthènes. They come to avenge–dreadful deeds. Full reparation shall they exact—-"

"Be silent, I beseech thee, Sir John!" cried Edgar in desperation, as he realized how fearfully difficult would be the task of conveying the sick knight from out the castle did he persist in his wild cries. Then he placed his arm round him

soothingly and tried to still his restless tossings, talking quietly to him the while. "See, now, Sir John, we are going to take thee to the lady Gertrude. She shall tend thee. Keep thee still and all shall be well. Talk not so, dear Sir John, but rest thy head on my shoulder. Soon shall we be out of this fearsome castle and breathe freely the open air of heaven." Then in an urgent whisper he went on: "Come, Peter, there is not an instant to be lost. He is quieting. Wrap those rugs around him and take him gently by the legs. I will bear his head and shoulders."

For the moment the knight's cries sank into indistinct murmurs. He seemed to feel that friends at last were around him, and to be content to resign himself quietly into their hands.

"Whither shall I lead?" whispered Peter, as he opened the door and prepared to issue forth.

"Boldly down the stairs, which should be at the end of the passage. They lead to the main door into the courtyard. If any see us 'twill be Duprez and his man conveying the sick prisoner to another chamber. If any seek to know more we must silence them, and then on."

"Dare we ascend the walls with Sir John in such sore plight, Master Edgar?"

"Nay, 'tis to the drawbridge we must go. We cannot lower a sick man from the walls into the castle moat. We must surprise the sentinel at the gates, and lower away before the alarm is sounded. If only Sir John will keep as quiet as he is now, we may count upon taking the guard unawares. He will doubtless be facing outwards to the foe, and not inwards to the silent courtyard."

Leaving their torch behind them, the two young men crept slowly and silently along the passage with their burden. Halfway along they turned a corner and came full upon a door which stood half-open close by. Light streamed forth, and inside they could hear the regular thud of ironclad heels as a man paced slowly up and down.

Somehow the sound seemed to excite the sick knight they were bearing beyond endurance. Springing suddenly half out of their arms, he cried with tremendous energy:

"To-morrow–in the lists–shalt thou answer for thy crimes, Gervaise de Maupas. At the point of lance or sword–will I prove thy baseness. *Laissez aller*! On! on! Good steed–stout lance–do thy devoir. Hah! De Maupas, thou art down–yield thee—-"

"What have we here?" came in a voice of thunder from the room, and the door was flung wide open by a hand rough and strong. In the doorway, standing out clearly against the light, appeared the short, thick figure of Eustace de Brin, clad from head to foot in dull black armour.

"Back, Peter, back!" whispered Edgar in a voice of desperation. "Carry Sir John, and return the way we came. I must defend the rear against this wolf of

Ruthènes. Be rapid, on thy life and ours!"

Relinquishing his share of the burden to his companion, Edgar drew his sword and prepared to defend himself against the attack he knew must come from Sir Eustace. For a moment, however, the latter could see nothing save shadowy figures hovering in the gloom. Sir John had again fallen silent, as though exhausted by his furious outburst.

"Is that thee, Duprez? Art come at last, ye tardy rascal? And what was yon shouting? It sounded like the voice of the mad knight, Chartris. Speak, man! hast lost thy voice?"

Receiving no answer, the speaker, with an angry threat, plunged back into his room, and, plucking a torch from the wall, sprang out into the passage, sword in hand.

Edgar instantly attacked him. Aiming at the torch held on high, he severed it in twain at the first blow. The lighted end dropped down upon the black knight's chest, and from thence to the floor in front of him. Lunging forward to the attack once more, Edgar set his foot upon it and plunged the passage in total darkness, while his sword rattled vengefully against Sir Eustace's harness.

With a cry of impotent fury Sir Eustace sprang back into the room he had left. In the light of the falling torch he had recognized in his adversary the esquire whom he had imprisoned and for whom he was even at that moment impatiently waiting. He had come, indeed, but scarcely in the manner he had expected.

"Thou art mine still!" he shouted madly over his shoulder. "Dearly shalt thou pay for thine insolence!"

Freed for the moment, Edgar turned and sped down the passage as fast as the pitchy darkness would allow. But before he had caught up Peter the quick sharp clang of the alarm bell of the castle rang out with insistent clangour upon the stillness of the night. Instantly shouts and cries arose from all sides as the Ruthènes household and garrison sprang excitedly from their beds. Sir Eustace had lost no time in summoning the castle to arms, and to all appearances Edgar and his companions were caught in the iron jaws of a trap.

"We are lost, Master Edgar," cried Peter despairingly, as Edgar caught him up at the head of the winding staircase which, led downward to the dungeons they had left. "The alarm is sounded, and 'tis impossible that we can escape in face of the castle garrison."

"Courage, Peter!" cried Edgar. "Let me aid thee with Sir John. There is still a slender thread of hope left to us, and we must follow it."

"But why to our dungeons? Dost desire only to sell our lives as dearly as possible?"

"Nay, Peter. Dost not remember that just before we parted from the priest he spoke of a legend among his folk which told of the existence of an underground

passage leading from out the castle? As we came from our dungeon a while since, didst not note the flight of stone steps that plunged yet deeper into the bowels of the earth? Our only chance is that the legend is true, and I feel a mighty hope that 'tis so. Onward, lad, onward!"

"But surely there will be gates to either end which we must pass?"

"We have Duprez's keys, and by God's will they will open all doors. Press on! Already I hear the tramp of men along the passages above. See, 'tis the glint of torches in the distance. We are but a minute ahead of despair."

As he spoke they reached level ground at the foot of the winding stairs, and at the entrance to the passage which led into the labyrinth of dungeons. Feeling about, Edgar found the stone steps which he had noticed as he passed, and which at the time had made him wonder momentarily whither they could lead, yet deeper into the earth. Groping and stumbling, the two lads found their way to the bottom with their burden. As they had half-expected, they found farther progress barred by a massive iron-studded door.

Groping down the side, Edgar found a keyhole and inserted a key. It did not fit. Another and another he tried with feverish impatience. The sound of voices and approaching footsteps every moment grew in volume. The search party was already at the foot of the winding staircase, and entering the passage to the dungeons. The light of the torches they carried grew until Edgar could dimly make out the outline of the door which alone, for the moment, stood between them and safety.

Another key–and with a sigh of relief Edgar felt it sink into the lock. A turn with all his strength, and the rusty wards slowly and gratingly yielded. At the very moment when the pursuers reached the head of the stairs above them the door slowly opened, letting out a waft of dank, earthy air that even in their extremity gave them pause. Pitchy foul blackness stretched before them, but behind were the savage retainers of the black knight of Ruthènes.

Suddenly a torch was flung down the narrow flight of steps. Doubtless someone among the searchers above had heard a noise, or suspected that the darkness below perhaps hid the fugitives they sought. The torch fell upon the bottom steps and blazed up, revealing as with the light of day the three crouching figures. There was a wild, irregular shout of surprise and exultation from the men above.

[Illustration: THE TORCH FELL UPON THE BOTTOM STEPS,

REVEALING THE THREE CROUCHING FIGURES. (missing from book)]

"Onward with Sir John, Peter!" cried Edgar, as he once more turned back, sword in hand, to hold the rear. As he did so a sudden thought struck him. Darting forward, he snatched up the blazing torch, sprang back through the doorway, and, dropping his sword, heaved at the door with all his strength. With a dull thud it swung to, shutting out all sight of their pursuers and deadening to a murmur the shout of fury that went up as Sir Eustace and his men saw further pursuit for the time hopelessly blocked.

"Back to the drawbridge!" cried Sir Eustace, almost beside himself with rage. "Pounce upon them as they emerge at the other end." Then, realizing that the secret of the underground passage would be at an end did the garrison sally out indiscriminately, he gulped down his anger, and commanded: "Nay, watch yon door lest the rascals return. Sir Gervaise, and you, Duprez, and Manton, follow me across the drawbridge!"

* * * * *

By the light of the captured torch, Edgar and Peter made rapid progress along the underground passage. The air was so foul and noisome that even the torch burned dim, but their lives were in such jeopardy that they had no thought but to press on. The passage was cut straight through the earth, and was lined with stone. It seemed of great age. Big clumps of fungi studded the walls, and water stood in pools at their feet. Though in reality but a few minutes, it seemed an age before they reached another door, which they guessed marked the farther end of the tunnel. Once through this they doubted not that they would be safely out of the castle.

Edgar rapidly tried the keys until he found the one to fit. Again the lock turned, though slowly and unwillingly, as though it had been years since any had passed that way, and through the door they staggered, gasping. The air was comparatively fresh on the other side, and above their heads, in a tiny patch, they could see the stars. Holding up the torch, Edgar saw a row of ladder-like steps leading straight upwards. By the side of the steps a heavy iron chain hung down. Sending Peter up in advance, Edgar took Sir John, laid him over his shoulder, and grasping the chain with both hands, clambered painfully up. As he reached the top of what seemed like a wooden chimney, he heard a dull rattle and roar in the

distance.

"'Tis the drawbridge, Peter," he cried. "Where are we now?"

"At the top of the trunk of a hollow tree, Master Edgar. We are in the woods."

"Hold Sir John while I clamber down. Then lower him down to me, and, if I cannot reach him, let him drop. There is no time to think of a better plan."

Ere their pursuers had reached the edge of the woods Sir John had been safely lowered into Edgar's arms, and Peter, in his turn, had successfully clambered down. Bearing their burden between them, the two lads moved quietly away among the trees. Fortunately for them, Sir John had fallen quite silent and lay inert, as though in his weak state the foul air of the tunnel had overcome him. Their escape was effected just in time, for their pursuers were only a few yards away, their presence betrayed by their angry mutterings.

"Surround the tree!" they heard Sir Eustace order. "They can scarcely be out so soon, bearing a sick man. Keep in the shadow of the undergrowth, and fall upon them unawares. They are still ours to crush, how and when we will."

Filled with a thankfulness too great for words at having safely escaped from a dreadful fate, Edgar and Peter moved softly away until they could feel that they were safe. Then they sank upon the ground, overcome by an exhaustion that their imminent peril had not allowed them to heed until safety was assured.

CHAPTER XV
Ill News at Bordeaux

After half an hour's rest Edgar judged it time to make a move. It was clearly dangerous to keep Sir John in the chill night air longer than was absolutely necessary, well wrapped up though he was. The village was little more than half a mile away, and towards this the two lads made their way through the woods, with many a stumble in the darkness. Just as they were beginning to think that they had mistaken the direction in which it lay, they suddenly came upon it.

"Shall we make for the innhouse?" enquired Peter.

"Nay, let us first seek the priest. It may be that Sir Eustace will think that we have come from the village and will return there. He may send in a messenger or a body of men to intercept us. Let us first seek advice of the priest. I know his

house; it lieth on the outskirts, to the south."

Struggling on for a few more minutes, the two lads found themselves at last at the priest's house. It was in darkness, but presently, in response to cautious knocks, a light appeared, and the door was unbolted and opened.

"Who seeks Father Armand at this late hour?" he asked.

"The two strangers. We are back from Ruthènes and seek thine aid. We have rescued the prisoner, but he is sick and sorely needs attention."

"What! Escaped from Ruthènes?" cried the priest, as he stepped quickly outside the house and laid his hand on Edgar's arm. "Warmly do I felicitate you, for verily ye are the first that ever did so. And hast rescued the prisoner ye sought? Marvel of marvels! But if that is so 'tis dangerous for you to stay here a minute longer. When Sir Eustace finds you have escaped he will lose little time in riding in and searching this village through and through. Come–I will accompany you–ye must return to the woods awhile until ye can ride away in safety."

"Thank you, good father! But the knight is sick, and I fear 'twill be bad indeed for him to lie abroad in the woods."

"The night is dry, and there is no alternative, unless ye wish him to be dragged back to Ruthènes. Come–demur not, for ye will, I hope, be off at daybreak. Your horses are safe, for I have had them sent away to a secret place in the woods, knowing well that were they found at the inn-house nothing could save them."

Warmly Edgar thanked the priest for his kindness.

"Thank me not, Sir Squire. I am always most ready to aid the enemies of the castle; and besides, I still nourish hopes that ye may throw in your lot with us. Come, now, let us get away into the woods while there is time."

Following the priest's lead, Edgar and Peter bore Sir John back within the shelter of the woods. A comfortable litter was then constructed from two of the rugs stretched across young saplings, and the march began towards the secret place where the horses had been sent. After an hour's slow travelling the party came to a steep cliff in a spur of the mountains where a landslip appeared to have hollowed out a shallow cave. The dying embers of a fire still glowed in the entrance, and as the party approached, a man sprang to his feet, knife in hand.

"Peace, brother!" said the priest quietly. "Where hast stabled the horses?"

"Yonder," replied the man, pointing to another similar cave a few yards away.

"'Tis well," responded the priest. Then turning to Edgar he explained: "This place is often used as a refuge by the villagers when they fear interference. It is fairly close at hand, and provides a temporary shelter for man and beast."

"It will serve us well until we can obtain a wagon in which to carry Sir John

to Bordeaux," replied Edgar. "If he can be moved, I am most anxious to start at once. Doubtless thou wilt know someone who has a horse and cart to lend or sell?"

"Yes, I can obtain you what you want. But sit ye down by the fire and sup. Jules here will give us of his store so far as it will go, and meanwhile I will attend to your sick knight. I have some knowledge of herbs and simples, and often have to tend the sick in body as well as the diseased in mind."

Fresh wood was thrown upon the fire, and by its light the party made themselves and Sir John comfortable. Barely half an hour had elapsed since they reached the cave when the man Jules held up a warning finger.

"Hark!" he said.

All stopped and listened intently. In the distance, borne clearly on the still air, could be heard a noise as of shouts and cries. It came from the direction of the village.

"My people!" cried the priest in a voice of anguish. "My people again being harried by the hirelings of the castle! I must go to them. Scant respect do they give me indeed, but what I can do I must do. Farewell, young sir!"

With hasty tread he strode off into the woods, leaving Edgar most uncomfortable and perplexed, and sorely tempted to follow him. It was clear that the raid upon the village was due to his escape from the castle, and the thought that innocent men and women were suffering for his success was most distressing. The priest, too, in his eagerness to protect his flock and in his hatred of the tyrants might well be betrayed into a zeal that would bring down upon him the more active hostility of the garrison. Edgar shuddered to think what might then happen.

For some time the cries continued unabated, and then they gradually died away until all was still once more. Feeling the tension somewhat relaxed, Edgar and Peter, after seeing that Sir John was as comfortable as it was possible to make him, threw themselves down and slept until daybreak.

Soon after they had risen and had made a few preparations for breakfast, the priest strode quickly up. Edgar could see that something was wrong by his quick irregular tread and by the way in which his hood was drawn well forward over his face. He came to a pause as he reached the cave, and after replying with a gesture of the hand to Edgar's salutations, remained standing for some minutes in silence, as though in deep and anxious thought.

"I hope there hath been no bloodshed," said Edgar earnestly, when the silence of the priest had become almost insupportable.

"There hath been little actual bloodshed," replied the priest in a hollow voice; "merely a repetition of the scenes of violence and cruelty that I have had to witness for years past, but which I was hoping were gone for good. I am in doubt.

I know not whether to raise the banner of revolt without delay or to wait, as ye counselled, until our forces have some sort of organization. I now incline to begin the fight at once, for I fear that the spirit of my people will be broken beyond redemption if such cruelties are allowed to go on much longer unchecked."

Wearily he seated himself on the ground, unconsciously throwing back his hood and revealing a livid weal which ran across his face from one side to the other.

"They have ill-used thee," cried Edgar, with a burst of indignation. "The cowards have struck thee with their whips–and I am to blame. 'Tis on my account that they have ridden into the village and done violence to thy poor folk."

"My hurt is nothing," replied the priest, contemptuously waving his hand as though to thrust the idea aside. "'Tis true it is the first time I have received actual violence at their hands, but I care nothing for that. But my poor people have not, I fear, my hope in the future, and upon them the stripes fall with a deadly sting that toucheth me not. You say you fear 'tis on your account that these things have been done. Regard it not. Perchance 'tis the spark that setteth alight the fire to make us free. I would though, Sir Squire, that thou wouldst throw in thy lot with us, for 'tis a heavy thing for a priest, untutored in the art of war, to lead the people he loveth to what may be defeat and destruction. If thou dost feel thy responsibility for the night's violence–fling thy sword into the balance, and thou wilt have paid back thy debt in full."

"My hands are tied," replied Edgar, shaking his head. "My master there hath first claim upon my services, and until he hath been put in a place of safety I dare think of naught else."

"I will see to his welfare in a place of safety," exclaimed the priest. "Higher up the mountains I know several such places, and, tended by one or two of our folk, he will mend rapidly and well."

"Nay, I must take him back to his kinsfolk," replied Edgar decidedly. "Even then 'tis doubtful whether he will give me permission to ride back hither to engage in a private war on the side of a people at war with my countrymen. With all my heart I desire thy success and the deliverance of thy people, good father, but my duty is elsewhere. Press me not, I beg, but let me on."

The priest inclined his head. "Be it so," he said sadly. "Thou art still a friend though thou canst not, or wilt not, stand shoulder to shoulder with me in the conflict. Thou shall return as quickly as my help can compass it. We will not talk more of this matter; but let me see to thy master. A happy man is he to have won such unswerving loyalty."

With a touch as light and gentle as that of a woman, the priest tended the sick knight. His mind yet wandered, but he seemed to be easier than when Edgar and Peter had first entered his chamber in the donjon of Ruthènes. By some

subtle means he seemed to know that he was now in friendly hands, and had grown more restful and contented.

For two days Edgar remained at the cave watching over Sir John. At the end of that time the priest pronounced the knight well enough to travel, and within a few hours a horse and cart were ready waiting in the road at the point nearest to the mountain refuge.

Sir John was placed upon the litter, gently carried to the cart, and there comfortably ensconced on a thick bed of dry leaves covered with a rug. Then with a most cordial farewell to Father Armand, Edgar mounted the cart and drove away. Peter rode alongside on one of their chargers, their second having been left behind as payment for the horse and cart. After six days' travelling by slow and easy stages they entered the gates of the city of Bordeaux.

During the first two days of the return journey, Sir John's mind still wandered. On the third day, however, to Edgar's great delight, he awoke with his mind clear and lucid, although he was still very weak and feeble. He said nothing more than a bare half-dozen words of greeting all that day, but seemed content to lie there and let his eyes wander from the lads' faces to cart and tree and sky, as though well satisfied to be where he was. The following day he showed more animation, and talked about the villages and scenery through which they passed. He said no word of Ruthènes, however, and appeared to wish to avoid the subject as if it were a painful one that he was anxious to put away from him as long as possible.

The day before the party reached Bordeaux, on Edgar mentioning that he hoped they would arrive in time to join the ladies just before they sat down to their midday meal, Sir John seemed to come to a sudden decision within himself. Struggling into a half-sitting posture upon his bed of leaves and rugs, he said in a firm and steady voice: "Edgar, I wish you now to tell me all–how you came to be at Ruthènes and how I came to be released. I have some fears that the story will bring me no credit, but I desire thee to tell me everything."

Although Edgar did not quite know what Sir John meant by his last remark, he took no notice, but told the whole story from the time of his setting out with Peter up to the last desperate dash to safety through the underground passage.

When he had finished, Sir John gave so deep a sigh of relief that Edgar could not help looking at him with some astonishment.

"Thou art surprised at my relief, lad," observed Sir John, with a faint smile. "Well, then, thou shalt know how it is my mind feels so relieved that I could almost shout for joy. Ever since I was able to think connectedly, I have had at the back of my mind the fear that away there in Ruthènes I had given way to the tortures and threats of De Maupas and Eustace de Brin–given way, and passed my knightly word to further their base schemes at the expense of my successors or

of the lady Beatrice. How else could I account for my freedom save by supposing that I had played the dastard, and had been handed over to thee in payment of the debt and to complete the bond? Now ye tell me that I have been rescued and that my honour is still my own. Canst now understand my relief, Edgar? 'Tis more difficult for me to understand how thou couldst have rescued me. It seems marvellous to one who for days tramped frantically up and down his cell like a caged beast, impotent to find a way of escape."

"Talk not nor think of that, Sir John, or thou wilt retard thy recovery. We, too, felt the dread spell of those fearful dungeons, but we were two, and could support one another's drooping spirits."

There was a pause for a few minutes, and then Sir John said suddenly: "What of the tournament, Edgar? What thought they of me when I appeared not? Did they think I blenched from the combat?"

"Nay, nay, Sir John–not one," evasively replied Edgar, who rather shrank from the recital of his masquerade as Sir John. It seemed so likely that the knight might resent the liberty, undertaken in his interest though it had been.

"He will have gained nothing by the trick," said Sir John, half to himself, in a despondent tone. "I will see to it that the earl doth know of his baseness, and I doubt if he will dare again to cross my path. Better will it be for him to stay at Ruthènes, where he is in safety among companions as base as himself."

"I could wish that thou wouldst tell me how they made thee prisoner, Sir John," said Edgar, anxious to change the subject. "Thou wert wounded, I know, for when the priest tended thee he found that great gash in thy thigh."

"Aye. Nicely was I tricked. I was riding at my ease along a narrow lane when an old woman stopped me and asked an alms. As I stooped, two men, with swords drawn, sprang out upon me from the shelter of some bushes near by. I was quick enough to be ready for their onslaught, but as I slashed at them, my horse sank suddenly to the ground–hamstrung by a third man whose approach I had not seen. As I fell, I received a swordthrust in the thigh, and before I could rise I was seized by so many hands that all resistance was futile. I was bound hand and foot, conveyed to a farmer's wagon in waiting close by, and flung unceremoniously into it. Two men mounted, and we drove on for days, whither I knew not, until we reached yon gloomy castle. Then came De Maupas's offer and my refusal. What befell after that thou know'st better than I, for what with my wound, my rage against De Maupas, and the dreadful gloom and dampness of my cell, I fell sick and my senses left me. It all seems like an evil dream. Were it not for my weakness and this cart, I should look to wake up at Wolsingham or Bordeaux once again."

In due course the wagon and its occupants arrived at the inn where the ladies Gertrude and Beatrice had made their temporary home. Gaily Edgar hailed

the good man, for their troubles seemed to be at an end. Sir John was back again and, though still weak and feeble, had been rapidly on the mend ever since he had been taken from the castle.

"The ladies Chartris and D'Alençon, landlord! Tell them the knight Sir John is back," cried Edgar, springing down from his seat on the wagon and aiding Peter to lift Sir John down and carry him into the inn.

"Ah! sir—-" cried the landlord. Then he stopped and stared uncomfortably from Edgar to Sir John and back again.

"What is it, man?" cried Sir John, with sudden apprehension. "Doth aught ail them? Which is it? Speak!"

"Oh, my lord, 'tis not the lady Gertrude–she is above. 'Tis the lady Beatrice."

"Ah! But what has chanced? Canst not speak? Is she dead?"

"Nay, nay–she is not dead. She hath been carried off by robbers or outlaws–none knoweth by whom. The lady Gertrude is in despair. We have done all we could to find where she hath been taken, but without avail."

"Woe, woe!" cried the knight, sinking back on the couch on which he had been placed. "Enemies seem to encompass me and mine. She was placed in my charge and I have failed in my duty. Why didst leave the ladies all unguarded, Edgar, to come to my aid? That was not well thought of. I cannot value my rescue if it hath been obtained at the expense of my ward's life and honour."

"I gave the ladies into Matthew's charge, Sir John," replied Edgar brokenly. "How could I think aught would befall? Reproach me not, I beg of thee, for I feel I cannot forgive myself–and yet, could I let thee perish without a blow struck?"

"Let it pass, Edgar. 'Twas in my despair that I reproached thee. It was not just. 'Tis Matthew who shall feel the weight of my displeasure. Landlord, fetch down the lady Gertrude, for we must know all and see if there be aught that can still be done."

In a minute or two Gertrude appeared, wild with joy at hearing that her father had at last returned. "Father, Father, how glad I am that thou hast come back!" she cried, throwing herself on her knees and winding her arms about him in joyous rapture. Then, seeing how thin and weak and ill he looked, her gladness gave place to anxiety and concern. "Thou must come back with me to England," she said persuasively, "and let me nurse thee back to health and strength. Thou hast done enough for a little while. How I wish poor Beatrice were here to welcome thee and share my gladness!"

"Tell us of the dreadful event," said Sir John, after the first greetings were over. "We must consider what is best to be done. Tell us everything."

The story was short enough. It appeared that the day after Edgar's departure, Beatrice, knowing that he could not be back for a week or more, suddenly determined that she would pay the expected visit to her castle home at Faucigny.

Her maid accompanied her, and, at Gertrude's desire, she took Matthew and another of the Wolsingham men-at-arms as an escort, the forward move of the English forces not having yet begun. Three leagues beyond Bordeaux, whilst passing through a small wood, the party was suddenly ambushed by four men.

The man-at-arms was struck down before he could lift a hand in his defence, and on Matthew fell the whole brunt of the attack. He made a splendid defence but was eventually overcome and, covered with wounds, left for dead upon the field. What then happened to the lady Beatrice and her maid no one knew. Fortunately, Matthew was discovered by passing peasants a few hours later and was carried to a hovel a mile or two away. Here he was tended until the arrival of a search party which had been sent out the instant the riderless horse of the man-at-arms galloped back into the camp with blood upon saddle and flank.

As soon as he could speak Matthew was eagerly questioned, but was able to tell them little. He could not say what had become of the lady Beatrice. He only knew that one of the ruffians had held her horse by the bridle whilst the other three occupied themselves in overpowering all resistance. Of their assailants all he could tell was that he was certain that he had seen one of them before. This man, too, appeared to be their leader, and he fancied that he must be a man he had once or twice seen lurking about the camp.

At this piece of news Edgar and Peter exchanged glances full of anxious significance.

"Did he ever describe the man, Mistress Gertrude?" asked Edgar.

"Yes. He said he was a tall and sparely built man with an evil-looking face. Nobody else about the camp, however, seemeth to know the man, and although we have made enquiries far and wide, we have found no clue save at a village many miles away to the south-east. Here an old man and a boy said that, while working in the fields, four men and two women, all on horseback, rode past them across country, as though purposely avoiding the roads. That hath been all that we could discover, and it is little enough, even if the two women with the band were indeed those we sought."

"The missing clues I think we can supply, Sir John," said Edgar, "though I greatly fear they will in no wise lessen our apprehensions."

"Ye know, then, this man that Matthew had seen before?"

"Yes, he is a man we believe to be in league with thine enemy, Sir Gervaise de Maupas."

"Ah!–that man again!" cried Sir John, starting to his feet in indignation. His strength, however, was unequal to the effort, and he sank back again immediately with his hand pressed against his thigh.

"What is it, Father, what is it?" cried Gertrude anxiously.

"Only my wound, child. It is far from healed, and I must put no strain upon it for a while. But go on, Edgar. We must think out what is to be done. We must act quickly if we are to act at all."

"I told thee, sir, the offer De Maupas made to me in exchange for thy life and mine? It was, thou wilt remember, my support in persuading thee to agree to his marriage with thy ward–her lands being taken in exchange for his claims to thine. The capture of the lady Beatrice is, I see clearly, but one more link in the infamous plan. With her safely in his clutches, he doubtless thought he would be in a still stronger position to dictate his terms. Moreover, if we consented, he could make certain that we should never be able to repudiate the promise as having been made under compulsion, by calling in a priest and having the ceremony performed offhand. A right deadly plan it hath been, and it hath all but succeeded–even now it may succeed, for with the lady Beatrice in his hands he is almost as strong as with us all."

"Then ye think Beatrice hath been taken to Ruthènes?" said Sir John, after a long and painful pause.

"Yes, I am sure of it. She must have arrived there soon after we escaped."

"'Tis dire news. How dreadful that place is none of us would like to admit to any but ourselves! What, then, will it be to a maid? Edgar, thou didst accomplish the impossible in rescuing me–canst do anything to rescue the maid? Be sure that they will be doubly on the alert this time."

"I am ready and more than ready to try, Sir John."

"I would send to the earl and implore his aid, did I think it likely that he would help me. But he hath his hands full and would not care to send a force into a spot so remote as Ruthènes. No, I fear 'tis on ourselves alone that we must depend."

"I will go, Sir John. I will take Peter and fresh horses. Where we have penetrated once we can penetrate again. Besides, this time we know the secret way into the castle, and may avoid the untimely capture into which we blundered so badly last time."

"Be cautious and not too sanguine. The guards will be doubled, thou mayst be sure. When canst start? Forgive me for sending thee away so soon after bringing me into safety, but it is dreadful to me to think of Beatrice immured in some lonely chamber of yon blood-stained fortalice."

"I can start at once, Sir John. All I want is a little money, some food for the journey, and another mount."

"Thou shalt have all thou canst want. Gertrude, give the lad money from my own purse. Food and another horse thou canst get, Edgar, as thou art passing through the camp. Delay not, lad, for I am on fire with impatience to know that something is being done. I would that I were strong enough to go."

”Farewell then, Sir John! I hope that when we return thou wilt be well and strong again, and ready to join in the earl’s advance.”

Edgar hurriedly withdrew, and leaving Peter to dispose of the horse and cart and to follow as soon as he could, he mounted their one charger and rode out of the city into the camp to the lines of the Wolsingham contingent. Calling one of the men-at-arms, he instructed him to saddle and make ready another of Sir John’s chargers and to prepare a store of food while he occupied himself in selecting his best weapons and a spare suit of mail. This suit he did not wear, but had it packed up with a few pieces of mail for Peter in two portions, one of which was to be borne on either horse. By the time his preparations were complete, Peter had joined him, and without any further delay the two mounted and rode out of the camp upon the road to Ruthènes once more.

CHAPTER XVI
A New Quest

”Now, dear Father,” cried Gertrude, as soon as Edgar had left, ”now that thou art in my charge I must bid thee to bed. All is done that can be done, and thou canst rest content.”

”All is done for the moment, and I will indeed obey thee, my Gertrude. But I have yet to make my peace with the earl. I must dispatch a missive to Sir James d’Arcy, one of the marshals of the tournament. To him I can explain how ’twas I failed, like a poltroon, to answer to the challenge of Sir Gervaise de Maupas. When he seeth my condition and heareth my tale, I have hopes that he will believe me.”

”Hath not Edgar then—-?” began Gertrude, opening her eyes in amaze.

”Hath not Edgar what; maiden? Is anything wrong?” cried Sir John, a sudden look of apprehension coming into his face. ”Surely the earl hath not made proclamation of my disgrace because of my non-appearance in the lists? Tell me quickly!”

”Nay, nay, Father, ’tis far from that. Indeed there is no need to trouble Sir James or the earl. Thine honour is safe. Edgar should have told thee all and not left it to me.”

”Gertrude,” cried Sir John, with a touch of sternness, ”there is some mystery

here. Tell me what it may mean. Delay not, girl."

Without more ado Gertrude related to her father the events that followed the first discovery of his disappearance–how, as the hours passed by, they had grown convinced that De Maupas in some way had had him removed with the object of disgracing him by his failure to appear in the lists, and how at last Edgar, to save his honour, had determined to personate him.

"What!" interrupted Sir John at this point. "Personate me! But surely not in the combat in the lists?"

"Yes, yes, in the lists. 'Twas to save thine honour, and to punish Sir Gervaise."

"'Twas a bold thought," murmured Sir John in wonderment. "But how could he hope for aught but defeat against such a lance as De Maupas? And yet he seemeth to have come to no great harm."

"He did not, Father. The first onset was terrific, but neither gained much advantage, though Sir Gervaise's steed lost its balance and rolled over. But in the encounter on foot Edgar handled Sir Gervaise most roughly, and with a single axe-blow felled him senseless to the ground."

"What! He won?" cried Sir John in utter astonishment. "You tell me he won? Truly never have I heard the like since the days of the paladins of old. Ah, it must be to his extraordinary earnestness to learn that he oweth so great a victory. His hard schooling at Gaspard's and his constant practice elsewhere–ho! ho! De Maupas was well repaid, and that right quickly, for his black treachery."

"None know the truth but ourselves," Gertrude went on. "Everyone believed that Sir John Chartris left the camp immediately after the encounter to pay the visit to Faucigny for which he had a few days before obtained the earl's permission. All is well, Father, and thou canst take up the threads where they fell when thou wert stolen away."

"Not so, my child," said Sir John thoughtfully. "I cannot allow laurels undeserved to be bestowed upon me so freely. I must let the earl know the truth. Think not that I am the less indebted to Edgar for his daring and successful championing of my cause. Had De Maupas been allowed to win his bloodless victory, a dark cloud of disgrace and suspicion would have gathered about my poor name, and hard to disperse should I have found it. A few might have believed my tale, but the greater part would have continued to shake their heads dubiously whenever my name was mentioned. As it is, I can tell the earl the story of my capture at the same time that I tell him 'twas not I that appeared in the lists. All will thus be well. Scarce a soul but will then believe the tale."

"Edgar will surely be sorry. He will think thou art flinging away the fruits of his victory."

"Nay, he will understand, for 'twould be what he would do himself were he

in my place. Sorrow not for him, for he will be the gainer. The earl will love the tale, even though 'twill make him pull a wry face to think how he and they all were fooled. My hopes rise, Gertrude. Urged on by such daring and energy as this, truly we may well look to Edgar to bring back our Beatrice. May God speed him!"

"May God keep him out of the hands of De Maupas!" replied Gertrude feelingly; and Sir John echoed her words with deepest emphasis.

* * * * *

Riding to the limit of the endurance of their horses, Edgar and Peter made rapid progress, and were soon back again in the neighbourhood of Ruthènes. This time they did not ride directly into the village, but, when within a mile or so, led their horses into a thick covert and tied them to a tree. They then set off on foot for the castle, keeping well away from the village.

"Tread silently, Peter, and keep a vigilant watch. I would not that any saw us, especially of those belonging to the castle."

As soon as they came within sight of the castle Edgar gave the signal to stop, and, keeping well out of sight of watchers on the wall, the two young men reconnoitred it eagerly.

"There are more sentinels than ever," said Edgar, after a long and earnest scrutiny. "I feared as much. Well, let us now work round to the tree which masks the entrance to the underground passage. If that way is still open to us, all is well."

"But surely they will have found the keys we left behind in the last scramble up the steps cut within the tree trunk?" asked Peter. "They will have locked the doors, and we shall be barred out."

"Doubtless, but I care not for that so long as there is no watcher posted at the doors. With patience we can win a way through the stoutest barriers. But if a sentinel is there, our hope of a silent entry is gone."

Presently Edgar stopped and looked about him in some perplexity. "'Twas near here, was it not, Peter, that the great tree spread its branches? Nevertheless, I can see nothing of it."

"Yes, 'twas certainly near here, Master Edgar. Yon clump of undergrowth–was it not through that we made our way out of sight and reach of Black Eustace and De Maupas?"

"I fear they have cut down the tree and carried it away," said Edgar forebodingly. "Search for the scar in the ground–ah, here 'tis, carefully covered with leaves and twigs, to show no sign."

The two young men gazed down at the smooth patch of loose earth in silent

consternation. It was on the continued existence of the secret passage that they had built most of their hopes, for in all their discussions they had agreed that it would be almost an impossibility for them to make their way over the walls and into the castle a second time. Their first attempt had ended in capture, and it was not likely that a second, with the garrison on the alert, would be any more successful.

"They have filled up the passage," cried Peter despondently. "What hope is there now to find a way into the castle? Would that we had wings!"

"This is a heavy blow," said Edgar slowly. "I can think of no way in at present. But we have always one thing to fall back on, so lose not hope so soon, lad."

Peter looked up quickly. "Mean you to—-"

"Yes, to throw in our lot with the priest. If we cannot win our way in by strategy we must fall back on force of arms. But before the die is cast for an assault upon the castle, let me think if there is no other means possible."

For half an hour Edgar paced up and down the tiny glade formed by the removal of the great tree whose hollow trunk had been so cunningly made use of by the builders of the castle. From every point of view he conned over in his mind the defences of the castle, and wrestled with the problem of circumventing them. But he could think of no way that offered any real hope of success, save by waiting and watching for some special opportunity. This, however, was out of the question, for the thought of the delicate and high-spirited Beatrice d'Alençon confined in a castle whose gloom had weighed heavily upon the spirits even of men inured to war and hardship was simply intolerable.

"Come, Peter," Edgar cried at last in the brisk voice of one who has made up his mind, "come; I see no way in but by the sword, and while that castle holdeth Sir Gervaise de Maupas little do I regret it. Let us now seek Father Armand, and place ourselves by his side."

Peter gave a suppressed cheer, and followed with an eagerness that showed that the prospect of an assault upon the castle appealed to him not one whit less than it did to his master.

As soon as they had found their horses the two young men mounted and rode quietly into the village. At the house which served as an inn they stopped, and, calling the landlord, enquired for Father Armand.

"He is away from the village," replied the man, eyeing them narrowly. "What want ye the good father for?"

"We desire a few words with him," replied Edgar. "It is most important. Canst not fetch him or take us to him?"

The man shook his head.

"Perchance he is at the cave," suggested Edgar quietly. "If so, we will go

ourselves, for he hath told us the way."

The man's attitude changed at once. "Yes, sir, he is at the cave. I did not know he had told thee all. I will go with thee and lead thy horses. It will not be well to leave them in the village–thou know'st why," he added, again eyeing Edgar narrowly.

Edgar nodded and accepted the man's offer to accompany them, though he guessed it was made more with a view to keeping them under observation than to assisting them. The man's attitude indicated plainly that the priest had been as good as his word, and that the banner of revolt, if it had not already been raised, was at least being nailed ready to the staff.

At the cave they came upon a scene of animation. Yards of bush had been cleared away, and in the open space scores of men were at work drilling or furbishing up their arms. The drilling was of a most crude and primitive nature, and would have appeared ludicrous to Edgar under other circumstances. But he was too well aware of the cruelty and oppression under which these men had groaned for so many years to smile at the poor figure they cut in a soldier's eyes.

Moreover, he knew that nothing but the determination born of despair could have brought them to the pitch of assaulting a strong and well-garrisoned castle, unequipped as they were with any of the engines of war. For a moment or two he could not see Father Armand, but presently he espied him, with hood flung back and gown tucked up, explaining and demonstrating to some of the more stupid of his levies what they were expected to do when he gave certain orders. The moment he saw Edgar and Peter he left his work and ran quickly forward to meet them.

"Sir Squire," he cried eagerly, "doth thy return mean that thou art—-?"

"Yes, yes, Father," cried Edgar, grasping the hands which the priest extended to him, and pressing them warmly. The sight of the kindly face, with its lines that told of care and sorrow, stirred him strangely. How gallant was the old man thus to take up the sword in what must have seemed almost a forlorn hope to one unused to any sort of warfare but that of the spirit! "Yes, Father, we have come to throw in our lot with you. For weal or woe, we are members of your band."

"Not members–leaders," cried the priest impetuously. "We sadly lack skill and knowledge, and of these I know ye possess as much as, if not more than, our ancient enemy. Come, let me tell my people the brave news. It will cheer their hearts, for, though they have answered to my call willingly and eagerly, it is more the willingness of men to go to death rather than remain in soul-destroying bondage than that of men marching forward with the expectation of victory."

Calling to the assembled bands, the priest bade them form in two lines in something approaching military formation. Then he told them the story of Edgar's and Peter's first coming, and how they had, single-handed, made entry

into the castle and, in spite of capture and alarums, succeeded in bringing away him whom they had set out to rescue.

Though Edgar could not follow the whole of the priest's patois, he could see that the story was well and graphically told, and that it made a deep impression on the listeners. Then the priest went on to tell of how he had made request to the two strangers to stop and assist them in their undertakings, and how, in loyalty to their sick master, they had reluctantly refused. Finally he told them that they had now returned and placed themselves at his disposal in their righteous war for freedom.

A roar of applause rose as the priest paused for a moment and placed his hand on Edgar's shoulder.

"They have knowledge of war, and must lead us," he went on. "This man I appoint to lead us in the field. He shall be co-equal with me. I shall command, except when we move forward to battle, when Sir Squire will take the lead, and I shall fight by his side."

There was another roar of enthusiastic applause, and the men broke ranks and crowded eagerly about the newcomers. Seeing that something seemed to be expected of him, Edgar sprang upon the back of his horse and held up his hand. The spirit of the priest and his men and their just cause had so stirred him that he forgot for the moment that he was a simple esquire with little experience of warfare and small claims to ability to lead an attack upon a powerful castle. He only knew that he was ready to do whatever was asked of him–to lead or to follow, he cared not which, so that he might aid a plucky people struggling to be free.

In a few words, simple and slow, from his imperfect knowledge of the local dialect, he told them that victory could never be theirs unless all were ready to give prompt obedience to their leaders, to work hard, to fight to the death, and to think, not of plunder, but only of victory and justice. The speech was well received, and Edgar dropped back to the ground with the feeling that, though he and his men might be beaten, it would be from lack of skill rather than from lack of courage and determination.

"Shall we move to the attack at once?" cried the priest, his eyes flashing with eagerness. "Our numbers are almost complete–one hundred and fifty all told."

"Nay, good Father, let us hold council of war. Nothing will be lost by waiting an hour or so."

"Come, then, let us to the cave and hold council forthwith. Our men are full of eagerness now, and I would that thou couldst see thy way to an attack at once."

Moving to the entrance of the cave the priest, Edgar, and Peter took counsel

together.

"What food have ye collected to feed this great host of thy people, Father Armand?" asked Edgar quietly. He could see that the priest was over-excited, and wished to bring him back to cooler thoughts as well as to find out exactly how matters lay with his new command.

"But little, I fear," replied the priest. "We are so poor that food and money can only be gathered in the smallest quantities. Any man that hath more than his starving fellows is soon relieved of his surplus by the arch-robbers of the castle."

"Men cannot fight well with half-starved bodies," responded Edgar, shaking his head. "Nevertheless we must do the best we can with the means at our disposal. How are the enemy off for food? How often do they receive fresh supplies? I should dearly love to begin the campaign by capturing the wagons bringing to them their ill-gotten stores."

"I know not when the next falls due, but always of late they have sent mounted men-at-arms to escort the wagons to the castle. Several armed guards, too, accompany their cattle when they are driven forth and back to pasture every morning."

"Ha! Where pasture they the cattle?"

"At a field a short way along the road in the opposite direction to the village."

"Those cattle must be captured, Father. 'Twill be a blow to the enemy, and at the same time provide us with food for our starving levies."

Many more questions Edgar asked, until he had a full grasp of the situation and could help to plan for the great attack. Presently from their discussions a plan emerged and took shape, and when the council of war broke up a definite course of action, which seemed to give the priest, at any rate, full satisfaction, had been decided upon.

The drilling was resumed, this time under Edgar's direction, and arms were again inspected under the experienced eye of the armourer's assistant. It soon became generally understood that the morrow was to witness the opening of the attack, and the men went about their tasks with a zest and eagerness that had been absent an hour or two before. With scarce a moment's intermission the preparations continued till night came and a semblance of peace fell upon the warlike scene.

CHAPTER XVII

The Opening of the Attack

"Let every man understand that silence is of far more importance than speed," said Edgar to the priest the following morning, as the latter put himself at the head of a body of forty men carrying spades in addition to their weapons. "If you do your work thoroughly and silently Peter and I will see that you are not disturbed."

"The work shall be done, and done well," responded the priest cheerfully. "See thou, Sir Squire, to thy part. To thee the conflict–and let it be victory, for defeat at the outset will be hard indeed to bear."

"Father," responded Edgar quietly, "I have told thee why I have come again and why I must enter yon castle. With such responsibility resting on my shoulders, am I likely to submit to failure while there is a chance of victory? Can I return to my master alive and unsuccessful?"

The priest grasped Edgar by the hand and wrung it warmly. "For thee as well as for me it is victory or the grave," he said simply. Then he gave the word to his men and the band marched steadily away.

Peter's band followed next. It numbered only about thirty strong, but was composed of the younger and more alert-looking men. Lastly came the largest body, commanded by Edgar. This was clearly composed of the toughest fighting material among the peasantry, and appeared to be intended to bear the brunt of any fighting that might ensue.

While the men were on the move, spies came and reported that the cattle belonging to the castle had, as usual, been driven to their pasture, escorted by a body of ten mounted men-at-arms.

"The guard waxes stronger every day," said the priest meaningly. "They must, I fear, have an inkling of what is afoot."

Edgar nodded. "It may only be an inkling," he said.

The three bodies of men presently arrived at the road which led from the castle gates through the thick woods for about four hundred yards before it branched in two, the one track leading to the village and the other to the fields in which the castle cattle grazed. A few paces from the point where the roads separated a halt was made, and the priest's contingent flung down their weapons and grasped their spades. A section of the roadway was pointed out to them, and, using the utmost caution, that no sound might penetrate to the castle, the men began to dig with a suppressed energy which told how much their hearts were in their work.

Satisfied that they understood the need for silence and could be relied upon,

Edgar dispatched Peter and his band along the road for a hundred yards or so in the direction of the castle. Their office was to intercept and capture all who came that way, and, at all costs, to prevent their return to the castle with news of what was proceeding.

Edgar then gave the word to his own men and marched them off upon the road taken by the cattle and their escort. A few hundred yards from the field in which the animals were pastured he called a halt, and posted the men in the woods on either side of the track, ready to ambush the men-at-arms on their return to the castle.

Free for the moment, he made his way to the edge of the woods overlooking the field, and stood for some time watching the escort of men-at-arms. In the ordinary way one of their number would have been set to watch while the others flung themselves down to rest or to dice away their time. Instead of that, however, they had gathered together in a group, and appeared to be eagerly discussing some matter of absorbing interest. It seemed only too clear that by some means the castle had gained an inkling of what was going on, and equally clear that the difficulties and dangers of the peasants' task had been increased fourfold.

The morning wore on until the time for the return of the cattle arrived. They were collected and, preceded by two men, were driven back along the road by which they had come, the rest of the guard following behind.

Suddenly and without warning a shrill whistle sounded. A rush of men from the undergrowth on each side of the road instantly followed. The men-at-arms forming the escort were not unready, but they were spread out two deep, and the attackers were among them before they could gather thickly in defence. A wild and confused struggle ensued. Edgar's own dash forward brought him into contact with two soldiers, the farther one of whom instantly snatched a horn from his belt and placed it to his lips. Guessing that the man was about to signal for assistance, Edgar charged impetuously, cut down the man nearest to him, and sprang upon the one sounding the alarm.

The action, swift as it was, came too late, and for some moments the note of the horn resounded unchecked high above the din of the conflict. Without pausing in his attack Edgar listened eagerly for a reply, and in a few seconds caught the answering note of a horn wound long and full. The sound came from the direction of the castle, and, as it ceased, in its place he seemed to hear the deeper note of a loud cheer of encouragement.

The encouragement came too late, however, for by that time all resistance was at an end. Seven of the men-at-arms had been cut down, and the remainder overwhelmed and forced to surrender.

"Re-form into rank, men–onward!" cried Edgar, and without waiting to count the cost of the victory, the band was rapidly marched back the way it had

come, six men being left behind to guard the prisoners and to take charge of the captured cattle.

"Hark!" suddenly cried one of the men, raising his hand in the air.

The harsh, unmistakable rattle of the chains of the castle drawbridge could plainly be heard, followed in a few seconds by the hollow, distant beat of horses' hoofs upon the planking, as though a troop of horsemen was spurring vigorously across.

"Follow me," cried Edgar, breaking into a run, and at top speed the men sped down the track towards the place where a few hours before they had left the band commanded by the priest hard at work.

Rounding a bend they came in full sight of the spot, but before them the roadway stretched, to all appearances, as firm and unbroken as ever. Could their comrades have failed them? Not a soul was in sight until, in the distance, a strong body of men-at-arms, headed by two knights clad in full armour, appeared galloping rapidly towards them. At the sight of the loose body of armed peasantry in front of them the knights and their following sent up a savage cheer of exultation, and, setting spurs to their horses, thundered furiously down upon the others.

At the grim, heart-shaking spectacle, Edgar felt his men involuntarily check their speed.

"Rally, men, and charge the tyrants!" he cried loudly, and, echoing his words, his men recovered their nerve and pressed along after him.

Rapidly the two forces closed in upon one another until but a few yards of the roadway separated them. Sir Eustace, who, with De Maupas, headed the castle garrison, had even levelled his lance full at Edgar's breast, when all of a sudden the very ground seemed to open beneath his feet! There was a rending crash as a framework of branches, covered with straw and earth, concealing a pit dug in the roadway, gave beneath his weight and sent him crashing headlong into the chasm. De Maupas and many of the men-at-arms behind, unable to stop their furious advance, fell headlong after him until the yawning pit was choked with a mass of struggling men and horses.

"Charge home!" cried Edgar, and with a wild cheer he and his men sprang upon the struggling mass and towards the files spurring to their aid. Another and more desperate combat began. From both sides and the rear sprang the men of the priest's and Peter's bands, as they issued forth from their leafy screens and attacked the astounded garrison.

Edgar's first object was to keep the men-at-arms still in the saddle from rescuing the two knights struggling in the pit. Desperately he fought, but the men-at-arms as desperately charged forward, and with all their weight and impetus swept him and his men violently back. The two knights, clad in full armour,

were little hurt by their heavy fall, and in a few minutes they were successfully extricated from the struggling mass and helped upon spare horses. Then with loud cries of encouragement to one another, the men-at-arms re-formed in a solid body and began to forge their way slowly and irresistibly back to the castle.

Time after time Edgar flung himself into their ranks, attended by such of his men as dared to follow, and strove to break up their formation and keep them from winning their way back to shelter. But though his vastly superior sword-play enabled him easily to vanquish individuals, a surge forward of several men each time flung him roughly backwards, and at last the survivors of the garrison reached the edge of the wood, and were able to gallop unchecked across the sward to the castle drawbridge. The bridge was still down, and the battered remnant filed sullenly and silently back into the castle courtyard. The gates crashed to behind them, and with many jolts and jars the drawbridge was drawn up, interposing the still waters of the moat between them and their exulting foes.

CHAPTER XVIII
The Plight of Beatrice

It was known that the garrison of the castle numbered some fifty men all told, exclusive of the two knights. In the attack on the cattle guard ten men had been accounted for, and in the battle about the pit seventeen had been killed outright or had fallen into the hands of their enemies. The garrison was thus reduced to less than half its former strength. Confident that there was now no likelihood of a sally of a body of mounted men which might prove disastrous on the open ground about the castle, Edgar re-formed his men and led them in a solid body out of the woods towards the castle gates. After so decisive a victory it seemed well to try to overawe the garrison by a demonstration of strength, in the hope that some of their number might sue for terms.

Horns were blown, and, after a few minutes' interval, two figures appeared on the outer walls above the gates. They were Sir Eustace de Brin and Sir Gervaise de Maupas.

Sir Eustace appeared almost beside himself with rage and humiliation. Shaking his mailed fist at the men ranged in rank upon the green sward below, he shouted furiously:

"Brood of vipers–who commands?"

Edgar looked at the priest, who motioned him to reply.

"Father Armand and I, Edgar Wintour, esquire of Wolsingham, command."

"And bitterly shall ye rue the day ye lifted hand against Eustace de Brin. Think ye to overcome me? Think ye I have no friends who will send hosts of men-at-arms to trample you into the mud whence ye came?"

"Sir Eustace de Brin," replied Edgar calmly, "think well over thy situation. No word will we allow to reach the outer world from this castle, and the men-at-arms of which thou speakest will never come to thine aid."

"Ha! Thy cleverness, Sir Squire, is already outmatched. Hours ago a messenger left this castle to seek aid."

"He is our prisoner, Sir Eustace."

"Dog!" cried the knight violently, "I tell thee that my friends will soon miss my visits and send to enquire the reason. Withdraw from before this castle, and I will then see how lenient I can be even to braggart rebels such as ye."

"The Earl of Derby is advancing into the lands of the King of France, and all the men-at-arms that can be spared will be sorely needed to rally to his standard. None of thy friends will think of aught but the enemy of France in this time of trouble. Thine is a sad plight, Sir Eustace, and thou wouldst do well to recognize it."

Gulping down his rage with an effort, the knight replied in a calmer tone:

"What meanest thou? What wantest thou? Speak!"

"We want thy surrender—-"

"What! Darest thou suggest that Eustace de Brin surrender his castle of Ruthènes to a rabble of rebel vassals? Base and renegade esquire–one who warrest against those of his own station on behalf of dogs of rebels–I tell thee thou knowest not our strength nor how far the arm of chivalry can reach. Withdraw from the ranks of these peasants, or it will most surely reach thee."

"Chivalry will ne'er support thee when it knows of thy black crimes, Eustace de Brin," replied Edgar, altogether unmoved. "It is I who represent chivalry this day, for, as thou shouldst know, it is the proud boast of chivalry to take the part of the weak and oppressed. But it is not of this that I wished to speak. We demand thy surrender and that of the ladies so basely torn from their friends by the false knight who stands by thy side. Surrender is the only course that can save the lives of the soldiers of the garrison, and the only course that will give thee a chance to plead thy case before thy countrymen. Sir Gervaise de Maupas, too, will have at least an opportunity of answering a charge of treachery before the English earl. Persist in thy refusal and thou art lost, for once the blood of this people thou hast oppressed is inflamed against thee, neither Father Armand nor I may be able to restrain them."

"Bah! These walls laugh thee and thy rabble to scorn. Do thy worst, Master Squire. Here is our first greeting."

[image]

"'BAH! THESE WALLS LAUGH THEE AND THY RABBLE TO SCORN!'"

As he spoke, the knight raised his arm as a signal, and a number of men, who had evidently been secretly preparing all the time the parley had been proceeding, crowded to the walls. In their hands they bore stones and rocks, which they instantly began to rain violently down upon the men on the ground beneath.

"Back–out of range," cried Edgar, immediately he saw the men-at-arms appear, and amid the hurtling missiles the men rushed to the shelter of the edge of the woods. A reply to the fusillade was not at once possible, as, like the garrison, scarcely any of the peasants were able to use the bow with any degree of success. To return the fire with stones would be wellnigh useless, as the height of the walls would rob the missiles of all their power and momentum.

"We cannot assault the castle yet?" said the priest to Edgar enquiringly. "There must be preparations?"

"Yes; we can do nothing until we have filled in a portion of the moat. Didst not tell me once that the moat is a stream dammed back below the castle?"

"Yes, that is so."

"Then I would that a few men be sent to break down the dam at once. That will aid us famously in our onslaught upon the moat. A half-empty moat will be a good step forward."

"It will indeed. I will see to it, Sir Squire."

"Are any of thy folk skilled in carpentry or woodfelling? If so, let them get to work cutting down trees and preparing timber without delay, for I like not that our men should be unable to reply to the showers of missiles from the walls."

"What wouldst do then?"

"I would build mangonels. I saw many in the camp outside Bordeaux, and had a fancy to see how they were put together. I think we can construct them with success. They will hurl rocks that will blister the walls even of yon fortress, and if they fall into the courtyard may do dire execution."

"The men shall be found," cried the priest exultingly. "Our cause advances. I believe that Heaven will give us the victory."

* * * * *

So well arranged and so swift had been the capture of Beatrice d'Alençon that her defenders had been stricken down and all was over before she had fully grasped that they were attacked. It was not indeed until she had ridden for some distance with one of her captors on either side that she realized that she and her maid were prisoners in the hands of unknown men, who seemed, from the purposeful way in which they rode, to have a definite and well-planned object in view. To escape was her first impulse, but a grip of iron fell upon the bridle the instant she attempted to turn her horse's head.

"What meaneth this?" she cried out at last in indignation and distress. "Where are you taking me, and with what purpose?"

A stolid silence, broken only by the trampling of the steeds, met her cry.

More alarmed still, if possible, by the silence of her captors, Beatrice dragged desperately at her bridle and made her horse plunge violently.

With a savage word one of the men (it was Baulch) tore the bridle roughly from her grasp. "Be still!" he cried. "Play me that trick again and thou shalt ride in front of my saddle. Ha, ha! Perchance that will suit thee better, maiden?" he added with a leer.

"Ruffian," cried Beatrice with a shudder of disgust, "ruffian, what meaneth this shameful assault upon my retainers, and why drag ye me thus away from all my friends? Answer me."

"Remain still or not a word wilt thou get," growled the man who had before spoken. "We are taking thee to a friend of thy guardian. Ha, ha!–a friend who hath watched over his welfare right carefully of late, and one, too, who knoweth thee well, and who desireth to know thee better. Ha, ha, ha!"

So hateful to Beatrice was the man's coarse laugh and evil look that she preferred to remain silent rather than provoke another sally. Without further resistance or attempt to find out whither she was going, she allowed herself to be led across country for mile after mile. Her maid, weeping hysterically, rode behind in charge of another of the ruffians, and even the consolation of closer intercourse was for some time denied them.

To Beatrice's surprise, and even more to her utter consternation, the strange journey went on, not for hours but for days, and it was not until some five days after her capture that the party reached what she guessed to be their destination. This was a castle of so grim and gloomy an appearance that the sight of it made her heart sink with terror and apprehension. What fate might not be in store for her in a place so remote and in a prison looking so strong and ruthless?

"Is this, then, the vile prison-house to which thou hast been leading me?" she cried to Baulch, as she drew rein in front of the drawbridge and looked wildly about her for some possible way of escape from her captors.

"It is, lady. Lead on," responded Baulch grimly, as he forced her horse on

to the drawbridge and led it across into the castle courtyard. "This is thy new home. My advice to thee is to make the best of it."

Dismounting, Beatrice and her maid were led to the door of the central donjon and up the stone staircase to a chamber almost on a level with the outer walls. The door was flung open, and they were roughly bidden to enter. They did so, feeling that it was useless to resist, and feeling, too, that at any rate matters would now soon come to a head and end their pitiable state of uncertainty and suspense. Immediately the door was clanged to and bolted behind them.

The room in which they found themselves was small and sparsely furnished, but was not uninviting. The number of rich rugs which plentifully bestrewed the floors seemed to indicate that at least an attempt had been made to give an air of something approaching comfort to a room otherwise plain and bare. This fact might have reassured them somewhat had it not indicated the far more terrifying fact that they had been expected. Who he might be, and what his purpose, that had stretched out so long and powerful an arm as to drag them to this remote and lonely spot, Beatrice could not even hazard a guess. Nevertheless, in spite of the mystery and terrifying uncertainty in which she found herself, she strove to keep a brave heart, as much for the sake of her maid–to whom she was much attached–as for her own.

About an hour after their arrival, footsteps were heard approaching the chamber. They came to a stop at the door, and a moment later a man entered.

It was Sir Gervaise de Maupas.

At the sight of this man, whom she both knew and dreaded, Beatrice involuntarily sprang up from the couch on which she had been reclining.

"Thou!" she cried, in a voice in which anger, scorn, and fear all had a place.

"Yea, lady, who else should it be?" replied De Maupas in a soft voice, as he bowed with the utmost gallantry and advanced into the centre of the room. "Who else would risk his all–name, career, and life–out of love for thee? None but Sir Gervaise de Maupas, knight of England, I do venture to assert."

As he spoke, De Maupas drew himself up with dignity. He was clad in a richly inlaid suit of armour, over which a splendid cloak had been carelessly flung. But for the hawk-like and cruel expression of his thin face, he would have looked a goodly and martial sight enough.

"Love for me? What dost mean, sir?" cried Beatrice roundly, though for all her boldness her limbs trembled beneath her.

"Most assuredly. I have long worshipped thee in secret. It is only my unhappy enmity with thy guardian that hath prevented me from approaching thee, and hath forced me to resort to this expedient to enable me to proffer thee my love. As doubtless thou know'st, I am a knight of good lineage, and one whose lands, if thy guardian granted my rightful claims, would be both wide and rich."

"Thy love hath no attractions for me, Sir Gervaise de Maupas," cried Beatrice, with difficulty restraining a desire to sink back upon the couch. "I believe thee to be nothing less than a traitor. What hast done with Sir John? I believe thee to be at the bottom of his disappearance."

For a moment De Maupas appeared startled. But after a moment's pause in indecision he replied calmly: "I do not wish to deny it, lady. 'Twas indeed I who arranged his capture. But 'tis said that all is fair in love and war, and to love for thee and war towards Sir John I must ascribe the deed."

"Where is he?" cried Beatrice breathlessly.

"He is here."

"In this castle?"

"In this castle, lady."

There was a momentary pause. Beatrice's lips trembled so that they would scarcely frame her words. Then she resolutely mastered her emotion and asked:

"How is it named?"

De Maupas hesitated for a moment. Then he shrugged his shoulders and went on: "I see no harm in letting thee know. This castle is called Ruthènes."

"*Oh!*"

The tone of the interjection was so singular that De Maupas stared at Beatrice in astonishment. She had turned slightly aside, and was looking not at him but at the door.

"The name seemeth familiar," he said coolly. "Perchance Sir John's hot-headed esquire, Edgar Wintour, hath mentioned it to thee?"

As he spoke De Maupas toyed with the sword girded at his side, and, with a sickening shock, Beatrice recognized the weapon. It was Edgar's! He, too, must then be a prisoner!

"I see thou dost recognize the weapon," said De Maupas grimly, as he noticed with secret satisfaction how the blood had left her face and how she had to bite her lips to subdue their trembling.

"Is he then also a prisoner in this castle?" she asked after a pause, during which she managed to regain a semblance of composure.

"Yes," replied De Maupas, without a blush. "He and that limping youth of his are both fast in the dungeons of Ruthènes. I fear they will never see the light unless—-" He stopped and shook his head forebodingly. Then he walked slowly to the window, and stood gazing out as though lost in thought.

Beatrice waited for some minutes for De Maupas to finish, but he seemed to have forgotten her existence.

"What dost intend to do with Sir John and his esquire?" she asked presently in a pleading voice. "Surely thou wouldst not do harm to thine own countrymen?"

"That question, lady, is not so much for me as for the owner of this castle to answer," replied De Maupas with an air of regret. "Hark! He is at the door; we will enquire his intentions concerning his prisoners."

The door opened and Sir Eustace de Brin entered. He was clad from head to foot in black armour, without any sort of relief or ornament whatever, and the effect was grim and forbidding to the last degree. If the two poor captives had needed anything further to destroy their last hopes, the sight of this grim-visaged, black-bearded, and black-mailed knight would have supplied it. Indeed, at the sight of him Jeanette screamed aloud and Beatrice sank down upon the couch and covered her face with her hands.

Turning towards the maid, De Brin gave her so fierce a look that she was reduced to instant silence. Then he turned to De Maupas and asked:

"Doubtless the lady Beatrice gladly welcometh thy suit, friend De Maupas?"

"Not exactly, Sir Eustace. She was, however, asking after Sir John and his esquire as thou wert entering. She would wish to know what thou dost intend concerning them."

"Their fate? Spies and enemies of my beloved France? They must die," replied De Brin instantly.

"Would nothing move thee from thy purpose?" asked De Maupas persuadingly. "If what I desire cometh to pass, their fate will become of some moment to me. Wouldst then, for our friendship's sake, allow me to intercede for their lives?"

De Brin slowly paced the length of the room and back again.

"Eustace de Brin never turned a deaf ear to the pleading of a friend," he said in a quieter tone. "For our friendship's sake, then, if thou dost intercede for their lives' on behalf of thy wife I will listen. If 'tis for aught else I will not move one single hair's breadth from my purpose."

"Hearest thou, Beatrice? Wilt thou—-?"

De Maupas stopped and looked enquiringly at his formidable companion. De Brin had given a sudden start, and appeared to be gazing at the window with an intent expression on his face.

Roused by De Maupas's sudden silence, Beatrice lifted her face from her hands and looked at the two men. Both were listening intently, and she caught a sound as of the winding of a distant horn. It ceased as though broken off short, and the two men looked significantly at one another.

"Didst hear?" said De Maupas laconically.

"Yes–an attack," growled De Brin, grinding his teeth with fury. "So much the worse for the attackers. Come–to horse, De Maupas; we have tarried with this obstinate girl too long already;" and with a dark look at Beatrice, De Brin hurried from the room, followed closely by his companion. The moment they

were gone Beatrice rushed to the window and peered eagerly out. The trampling of steeds on the flagstones of the courtyard, the winding of horns, and the shouting and cheering of the men-at-arms indicated that the garrison were about to issue forth in force. Clearly something had occurred to alarm the inmates of the castle seriously. What could it be? Think as she would, Beatrice could find no satisfactory answer.

CHAPTER XIX
The Assault

"The dam is down!" cried Father Armand excitedly, rejoining Edgar in the woods opposite the castle gateway as the latter was superintending the construction of two great mangonels. "The dam is down and the water is rushing away like a mill sluice."

"'Tis well," replied Edgar; "in an hour or so the moat will be half-empty, and we can begin to make ready for the first assault."

"So soon?" enquired the priest in surprise.

"Yes, good Father. I am on fire with impatience. While the lady Beatrice d'Alençon is held in yon fortalice how can I be aught else? Think not that I shall endanger our cause by my hastiness. The garrison hath had a rude shock this day, and if we can deliver another before they have had time to recover, the advantage is all on our side."

"Say on, then, Sir Squire. Thy counsel hath been good hitherto, and I am most ready to listen. What is next to be done?"

"Set all the men but those at the mangonels to work cutting great bundles of undergrowth. Let the women and children also help, and let the faggots be cut at some little distance, so that the thickness of the woods here, which is our protection against a sortie, be not destroyed. The bundles of undergrowth we must use to fill up the moat and give us a foothold for the assault upon the gates and walls."

"Yes, yes; I thought that would be the next move."

"Then I want thee to strip a wagon of its strongest pair of wheels. Leave them on the axle. Then fell a tall young tree, with trunk about the thickness of a man's thigh. Lop off all its branches and cap the end with iron. Then lay it

across the axle and lash it there. Running easily on its wheels, and thrust by a score of men, the tree will make a battering-ram that will, I promise thee, reduce the drawbridge and gates of Castle Ruthènes to splinters within the space of a few minutes."

"Ha! but will not the wheels of thy ram sink into the filled-in moat and there stick fast?"

"Nay; make the ram so long that ere the wheels shall reach the edge of the moat the battering end will reach drawbridge and gates. I tell thee, good Father, we shall get to grips beneath yon frowning gateway before many hours are past. Have thy men the spirit for a conflict, stark and grim, waged with trained men in a narrow space where numbers are of little avail?"

"I will answer for them, Sir Squire," replied the priest quickly. "They have no training, but they have desperation, and that will carry them on."

"Aye, I think so too. And now let us to work, and make ready as quickly as we can."

All the remainder of the day the preparation for the assault upon the castle went on with untiring energy. In the depths of the woods the women and children of the village and district laboured at a work to which they were well accustomed, cutting down young saplings and undergrowth and carrying them to a point in the roadway near the castle gates, where men bound them firmly into great bundles.

Close by, a few yards from either side of the roadway, at the very edge of the wood, and masked only by a thin screen of bushes, men were hard at work constructing mangonels under Edgar's supervision. At another point a gang of men were making ready the great ram on wheels which was expected to do such execution, and at still another a number were constructing ladders which were intended to be placed against the walls to draw off some of the garrison from the fight about the gates. Even after nightfall the work was continued, and none thought of rest until the preparations were complete.

The first streaks of dawn had scarcely appeared in the sky before the men were aroused from their slumbers and marshalled for the beginning of the assault. Eagerly they answered to the call. The first fight had been won, and every man was impatient to begin the main and final attack upon the stronghold which harboured the last of their lifelong foes.

Suddenly, at a signal from Edgar, streams of men bearing huge bundles of faggots issued from the woods at a point nearest the castle gateway, and advanced rapidly towards the moat. Loud cries of alarm sounded from the walls, followed by a hurried call to arms. Undeterred by these signs of resistance, the lines of men hastened to the half-empty moat, flung their burdens in, and sped rapidly back for more. In a moment or two the walls were lined with men-at-arms, and missiles

began to whistle through the air downwards upon the scurrying men below. But the bundles of undergrowth held up in front were a full protection to the men, and it was only when returning that the missiles could take effect. Naturally, however, the return journey was made at top speed by the unencumbered men, and comparatively few were hit, and these for the most part were but slightly injured.

Scarcely had the garrison had time to warm to their work before, to their utter astonishment, a loud whirring noise was heard, and a great rock came singing upwards with a momentum that sent it over walls and donjon into the woods on the other side of the castle. Ere they had recovered from their amazement another rock, better aimed, swept a man bodily off the walls and plunged heavily against the upper part of the keep.

In sudden consternation, not knowing how many engines there might be casting the great stones, the garrison fled under cover, and left their opponents free to do their work as they listed. Finding, however, that there were only two engines, the men-at-arms presently ventured back and resumed their task. Forced to take refuge ever and anon from the great stones cast upwards, their own missiles lost much of their power, and the work of the attackers went on wellnigh unchecked.

After little more than an hour's work the moat, for a hundred yards on either side of the gates, was filled and piled up to a height of three or four feet.

To allow the garrison breathing space was no part of Edgar's policy, and with scarce a pause he ordered his men to get ready for the assault. He and Peter had donned full armour, as it had been arranged that they should lead the attack upon the gateway as soon as bridge and gates were down. The priest was to direct the attack upon the walls, and try to call off as many of the garrison as possible from the deadlier conflict beneath the gateway.

The battering-ram was wheeled out, and twenty of the strongest peasants, covered by a line of men on either side bearing big wooden shields, advanced, cheering loudly, to the attack.

Again there was a shout of alarm from the garrison at the sight of this new danger, and after a few minutes' commotion the master of the castle, Sir Eustace, appeared on the walls above the gate. He was clad in full armour, and, recklessly exposing himself to the fire of the mangonels, strove to encourage his retainers by himself taking the lead in hurling great stones at the bearers of the ram. His example was followed, and with shouts of encouragement to one another the defenders crowded to the ramparts and recommenced the fusillade with the greatest energy. A perfect rain of stones and rocks descended upon the men driving the ram, and for a moment the advance was checked.

"Hang not back, men," cried Edgar with energy. "Press forward the more

quickly and our task will be the sooner ended. Forward!"

With a shout the line of men bent to their work, and the great tree rolled forward with terrific weight and momentum. The ram was well aimed, and with a mighty crash struck the raised drawbridge full in the centre and split it from top to bottom.

"Back a dozen yards and then press to the attack again," cried Edgar, and the tree, moving with comparative ease upon the big wheels, swung back and was urged forward once more. Again the ram struck the drawbridge, widening the cracks and bending its timbers back towards the great gates behind. Six times the ram was swung before the last remnants of the bridge gave way before its onslaught, leaving naught but a pile of splintered boards and a few pieces of woodwork dangling from the chains on either side of the gateway.

The attack had not been without its penalties. Eight men had fallen crushed and bruised beneath the stones flung with such furious energy by the defenders. Their places had been instantly taken by fresh men, for the blood of the peasants was now up, and none recked of the danger so long as the attack went on unchecked.

"Now for the gates, men!" cried Edgar cheerily, as they prepared to swing forward for the seventh time. The fusillade from the walls had now slackened, for the imminence of an attack upon the gates had compelled the defenders to withdraw half the men from the ramparts and to station them in the courtyard ready for the moment when the gates had been battered down. No one, not even the defenders, believed that the gates were capable of withstanding the onslaughts of the deadly weapon devised by the attackers.

Missing the grim figure of De Brin from the walls, Edgar hoped, with no little satisfaction, that they would soon meet hand to hand beneath the gateway. So far all had gone as he had anticipated. Every surprise had been sprung by the attackers, but, to his sorrow, he had yet to find that the defenders had one or two things left to them that he had not taken full account of. So uniform had been his success thus far that it seemed that but one more effort need be made, and the castle would be won.

Four times, with four tremendous crashes, the ram was swung against the iron-plated gates, and still they held. The fifth time they gave, and fell inwards so suddenly and completely that the ram rolled forward almost unchecked until the wheels sank to the axles in the mud and brushwood of the filled-in moat.

Loudly the horns were wound, and every man of the peasants' force rushed to do his appointed work. The men commanded by Father Armand advanced in little clusters from a dozen points and planted great ladders in position against the walls. Led by the priest in person, they began to mount with every sign of determination. Again the move was evidently unexpected by the garrison, for

the few men now left upon the walls shouted loudly to their comrades for aid. A number answered to the call, and set about repelling the attack with the utmost desperation. Some essayed to lever out with their halberds the ladders weighted with their loads of climbing men, and strove to cast them bodily backwards. Others occupied themselves in casting down great stones in the hope of smashing the ladders or sweeping their occupants downwards to destruction.

The ladder by which the priest was himself mounting was one of the first singled out for attention. Ere he had reached the top and could lift a hand to interfere, two men who had been savagely thrusting at it with all their might succeeded in lifting it outward a couple of feet. Unable to thrust it farther, they gave it a savage side jerk and let go. Down it fell with a crash, bringing with it another ladder just reared a yard or two away.

Fortunately most of the men fell upon the brushwood, and were more shaken than hurt. The priest himself, nothing daunted, again sprang to the attack with a fresh ladder, and with varying fortunes the fight went on. Once or twice a footing was gained upon the walls, but every time a combined rush by the defenders flung the attackers backwards before the footing could be made good.

Beneath the gateway the conflict was even more fierce and deadly. The instant the gates were down Edgar and Peter had sprung forward, followed by the best and strongest fighters among the peasantry. They were met by the most heavily armed of the men-at-arms among the garrison, and were opposed with fierce determination. The defenders knew only too well how their merciless cruelties had inflamed the countryside against them, and feared that if the castle were won their own chances of mercy were slight indeed. Thus they bent to their work with the fierce stubbornness born of despair.

Of De Maupas or De Brin Edgar could catch no glimpse, and though he called their names aloud as he fought, and challenged them to meet him hand to hand, there was no response. Concluding at last that they must be directing operations from the walls, our hero devoted all his energies to overcoming the resistance of the defenders at the gate and winning a way through to the courtyard. Once a footing could be obtained inside, the continued defence of the walls would be useless.

Inch by inch, foot by foot, Edgar and his band fought their way onward. Most of the execution was done by his own and Peter's sword, for the peasantry had neither the skill nor the weapons to oppose the men-at-arms with much success in a hand-to-hand combat. The front of the fighting beneath the gates was a narrow one, and the peasants could fight only man to man, and were unable to bring their superior numbers into play. In spite of this disadvantage, however, the defenders were driven back slowly and surely, until Edgar felt that the moment

for the final effort had come.

"On, on! Strike home!" he cried loudly, and at the call his men gave a surge forward that gained a couple of yards and brought them almost through the gateway into the courtyard.

Suddenly a shrill whistle sounded, and, as though by a prearranged signal, the defenders disengaged themselves from the conflict and fled at the top of their speed down the courtyard and round an angle of the donjon.

With loud shouts of exultation, the peasants surged unchecked through the gateway and began to advance along the courtyard in pursuit of their beaten foes. Scarcely, however, had they taken a dozen steps when there came a terrible interruption. From the roof of the keep fell showers of molten lead! In streams and showers, burning, blinding, and scorching, the fearful liquid fell, and the shouts of joy were turned into screams of dreadful agony. With one thought but to escape the fearful hail, the men who had won their way with such dauntless courage into the courtyard turned and flung themselves madly back into the gateway, struggling and fighting with those still pouring in. Their flight was assisted by more showers of the metal, flung in burning streams upon those massed in the gateway, until, with one accord, the victorious body of peasantry turned tail in utter panic and fled headlong back across the moat to the cover of the woods.

At this moment the thunder of horses' hoofs was heard, and round the angle of the courtyard swept a body of armour-clad horsemen. Eustace de Brin, De Maupas, and wellnigh a dozen men-at-arms clad in full armour, in a line stretching from wall to wall, bore down upon the already fleeing men like a living wall of steel. Edgar and Peter alone, shoulder to shoulder, stood fast–not because their courage was more unquenchable than that of their followers, but because their mail had enabled them to endure the burning showers better. The charge of the horsemen swept them headlong against the walls of the keep.

Peter received a stunning blow upon the helmet, and, dizzy and sick, was forced to cling to the wall to save himself from falling. Wielding a battleaxe he had snatched from a stricken man-at-arms, Edgar beat off those who assailed him, and the horsemen, unable to stop their impetuous charge, swept heavily onwards past him. Some thundered through the gateway hot upon the track of the fleeing peasants, whilst others, after careering a dozen yards along the courtyard, checked their steeds and prepared to charge back again upon the only two of their enemies yet remaining on their feet within the four walls of the castle.

To Edgar all seemed lost. The peasants were in hopeless flight, and the way to safety through the castle gates was barred by the horsemen already spurring through. De Maupas was one of the horsemen who had refrained from following up the fleeing peasantry, and seeing the hopeless plight of the young esquire, he

gave a cry of savage joy and shouted to his companions to spur down upon him and beat him into the dust.

To rush for the gateway, and to strive to escape that way, meant being caught in the rear by the charging horsemen. This was obvious, and, with the speed of thought, Edgar seized upon another opening so bold and desperate that it appeared the counsel of sheer despair.

"Quick, Peter!" he cried in sentences short and sharp, like the jab of a sword. "To the donjon–we must take refuge there! Rouse thyself, or we are sped!"

Shaking off his dizziness as best he could, Peter tottered towards the open door of the keep a yard or two away. It was guarded by two men-at-arms, but Edgar had already attacked them with the energy born of despair and of the ruin of all his plans. Swinging his axe with a strength that crushed down all his opposition, he clove his way through the doorway, seized the great iron-plated door, and, as Peter sprang through, flung it violently to behind him.

"A hand here, Peter, if thou canst!" he cried rapidly, indicating a number of great blocks of stone piled against the wall to halfway up the stairs. Dropping his axe and seizing one with both hands, he swung it against the door. Another and another followed, until in a few seconds the strength of the door was doubled and trebled by the weight of a solid mass of great stones piled behind.

Peter was now almost himself again, and seeing that entry by the main gateway was effectually barred for a time, cried excitedly:

"But what of the door from the courtyard to the dungeons, Master Edgar? Will they not enter there? If 'tis only to sell our lives dearly that thou hast fought thy way in here, let us climb upwards and defend ourselves upon the summit of the keep."

"'Tis not that alone, Peter, that made me dash in hither instead of meeting De Maupas and settling our account once and for all. 'Tis more because I saw a glimmer of hope, remote but clear. As for the other door, 'twill be fast locked, and what jailer would carry his keys to the battle? Nay, we have a few minutes' respite–let us use it well. Upward, Peter, upward! 'Tis the lady Beatrice we must next seek and succour if we can."

So saying, Edgar took the lead and sprang quickly up the stairs. He knew where to look, for while in the very midst of the mêlée raging about the outer gates he had caught a glimpse of a hand, small and white, stretched out in mute

appeal from a little window high up in the walls of the mighty donjon.

CHAPTER XX
The Last Hope

"Hark!" cried Beatrice, springing from the couch on which she had passed her second night at Ruthènes. "Hark, Jeannette, the call to arms is once more sounding! Dawn is breaking, and some deadly conflict is, I feel sure, about to begin outside."

From all sides indeed the blare of trumpets and the shouts of the men-at-arms, as they roused themselves from their slumbers and hastened excitedly to obey the call, resounded through the air. To one accustomed to the routine of castles it was clear that something of tremendous moment was happening, and hurrying to the little window of their chamber, Beatrice strove to catch a glimpse of what was afoot.

The thickness of the walls, however, was so great that, strain as she would, she could see no more than a few feet of the courtyard about the gates, and here, save for a few men-at-arms passing to and fro, nothing unusual was going on. Upward upon the outer walls, however, men were clustering more thickly, and in a moment or two they began to busy themselves in hurling down stones upon some enemy beyond. It was evident that the castle was attacked. But De Maupas had said that Edgar Wintour was a captive: who, then, could be the enemy? Suddenly there was a tremendous thud against the walls a few yards above her head, and splinters of stone flew in all directions.

"Oh, the castle is being battered down!" cried Jeannette in alarm.

"Yes; that must have been a great stone cast by a mangonel or catapult, Jeannette. 'Twill go hard with us if one strikes here. 'Tis fortunate our window is not above the level of the outer walls."

"Hist, mistress–someone is at the door!"

It was true someone was at the door–someone, too, who appeared on secrecy bent, for the approach had been made without a sound and the key was being turned with the greatest caution. At last the door swung open and De Maupas entered.

He appeared to be labouring under great excitement, for his bearing was

nervous and his looks were disordered.

"Maiden," he cried, speaking rapidly, "I must have thine answer to my proposal. Wilt thou become my bride and save the lives of Sir John and his esquire? Choose quickly, for we are attacked by a cruel and infuriated peasantry, who will spare neither age nor sex. At any moment they may break through our defences, for the castle is but half-manned and the peasants are fighting like men possessed. If thou wilt consent I am able to convey you all to safety outside the castle by a secret way. Decide quickly, or it will be too late.

"But wouldst desert thy friend?" cried Beatrice with cool disdain. "Perchance this is some new ruse to obtain my consent to a proposal I abhor. This castle is strong–why shouldst thou be so anxious to leave it?"

"Lady, 'tis no ruse. Your peril is great, for as I have said, though the castle is strong the garrison is weak. More than half our men did we lose in a skirmish outside the walls but yesterday.

"This is brave news thou art telling me, Sir Gervaise," cried Beatrice, whose serene bearing was in such contrast to the agitation of De Maupas that their situations appeared to have been reversed. "These peasants will not make war upon the tyrant's prisoners. They will accept as friends the victims of their oppressor."

"Think not so, lady," cried De Maupas vehemently. "Thou know'st not this rabble. They hate those of gentle blood with so deadly a hatred that all inside these walls who are not of themselves they will destroy. Sir John and Edgar Wintour will perish beneath the burning ruins, if they have not been dragged out of their cells and slain before the work of the torch begins."

For a moment Beatrice covered her face with her hands, as though the thought appalled her. Then she answered bravely:

"I prefer the mercies of the revolted peasantry to thine, Sir Gervaise. As for Sir John and his esquire, I refuse to believe that the rage of the peasants will extend even to the poor creatures buried alive in the castle dungeons. Besides—-"

Beatrice stopped suddenly, for loud insistent shouts for De Maupas rang within the donjon and outside in the castle courtyard.

"'Tis De Brin calling me," cried De Maupas savagely, as he rushed hastily to the door. "Think not that thou wilt escape me," he added vengefully over his shoulder as he left the chamber. "If the worst comes to the worst I will bear thee hence by force."

A cry from Jeannette, who had gone to the window while her mistress had been parleying with De Maupas, brought back Beatrice's attention to the conflict being waged outside.

"The gates are down, Mistress Beatrice!" the maid cried in a voice shrill with excitement. "See, the defenders are gathering thickly in the breach."

Beatrice craned her neck to see, just in time to catch the first glimpse of the

great rush of the peasantry which followed closely upon the battering-in of the gates. A confused medley of fiercely-fighting men was all she could make out for some minutes, but presently, as the defenders were driven back inch by inch towards the courtyard, two figures began to stand out from the press, and she recognized with a thrill of astonishment and joy–Edgar Wintour and his servant, Peter! De Maupas had lied–and they were alive and free! Then might not Sir John also—-?

The fight at the gates was growing in intensity, and all her thoughts became concentrated on the exciting scene. Would they win a way through? Beatrice was a knight's daughter and could gauge a warrior's powers at a glance. She could see that the real strength of the attack lay in Edgar and Peter alone, and that the ill-armed peasantry, brave though they were, could make little impression on the mail-clad and well-disciplined men-at-arms.

Nevertheless she felt, with a certainty that surprised her, that victory would at last reward the attackers and that the castle would be won. She seemed to feel that one who could play such a part as Edgar Wintour in the lists of Bordeaux was not born to be defeated here. But see!–the attackers were gathering for a last leap forward–Edgar had raised his battle cry–Hurrah! the defenders were fleeing headlong down the courtyard, and the castle was won—-

Ere Beatrice could cry aloud in the joy of victory, a sudden fearful change swept over the scene. From the roof of the donjon, somewhere above her head, a burning hail of molten lead swept down, and the cries of victory were quenched and smothered in a louder burst of screams and wails. So dreadful were the anguished cries of many of the poor creatures, scorched and withered by the burning blast, that Beatrice, completely unnerved, cowered down upon the floor and wept.

Jeannette replaced her at the lattice and, with many ejaculations of disappointment, told of the charge of the armour-clad horsemen and the defeat and destruction of the broken remnants of the gallant peasants. Of Edgar and Peter she could see nothing. Knowing how loath they would be to flee, Beatrice felt, with a crushing sense of sorrow and disappointment, that even if they had escaped the showers of molten lead they must of a certainty have been overwhelmed and slain by the charging horsemen.

She was aroused from her prostration by another cry from Jeannette, who had turned from the window and was hearkening, not to the clangour outside, but to a noise that had attracted her attention within the donjon.

"It must be De Maupas," she cried excitedly. "I hear footsteps–doubtless it is De Maupas returning to press his suit now that the peasants are destroyed?"

Beatrice jumped quickly to her feet. Her prostration had vanished, and she faced the door with her eyes flashing and her little hands clenched. Jeannette

could see that something had roused her beyond measure.

"Let not De Maupas approach me after slaying my poor friends!" she cried, stamping her foot with anger. "Refuse him admittance–tell him I abhor him and will not see him."

Jeannette fled to do her bidding. As she reached the door, however, it suddenly opened and a man strode hastily in, brushing aside the hand which the maid put out to detain him. It was Edgar Wintour.

At the sight of him Beatrice gave a gasp and looked as though she were about to fall. Edgar darted instantly to her side and took her gently by the arms. "Come, Beatrice," he cried, with breathless rapidity. "Our cause is lost, but if thou wilt trust thyself to me I will strive yet to save thee. The hope is indeed faint, but at the worst if I fail they can but compel me to surrender thee again."

**[Illustration: "'COME, BEATRICE, I WILL STRIVE YET TO SAVE THEE.'"
(missing from book)**

"I would come," replied Beatrice vehemently, "though there had been no hope. But how canst dream of escape when the courtyard is held by the enemy?"

"Because a few days since a secret way led from out this donjon beneath courtyard and moat into the shelter of the woods. If 'tis not destroyed we may yet escape thence."

"It is not destroyed," cried Beatrice triumphantly. "'Tis but an hour since De Maupas besought me to let him bear me to safety through it."

"Then we shall yet escape," cried Edgar joyously. "Come–no more delay, for even now Black Eustace and his men are thundering at the gate. Onward, Peter–bring Jeannette, for we must be gone."

He sprang to the door and, taking Beatrice by the hand, hurried her along the passages towards the stone staircase by which he had escaped with Sir John but a few days before. As they passed the main stairway leading to the gate, the sound of axe and hammer strokes reverberating upwards made him pause.

"The door is giving way," he cried anxiously. "I fear they will be hotfoot upon our track in a few moments." Raising his voice he bade Peter hasten and hurried his companion on downwards to the vaults below. Scarcely had they reached them when there was a sudden crash from above, followed by a roar of savage cheers.

At the dread sound, Jeannette gave a scream of terror and almost collapsed.

"Hush!" cried Edgar sharply. "Dost wish to bring them upon us? Be silent as the tomb, or we are lost."

In another moment they reached the level of the dungeons and were within sight of the flight of steps leading downwards to the door of the underground passage. Most anxiously Edgar gazed before him into the gloom. It might well be that a guard had been posted.

No sign of a guard was to be seen, but a barricade of some sort appeared to have been erected at the head of the stairs. Could it be that the way was blocked after all? Running quickly to the spot, Edgar saw that what he had taken to be a barricade was a pile of great blocks of stone, similar to those heaped about the staircase, no doubt placed ready to fling down and block the way of an enemy advancing through the underground passage. The steps themselves were clear, and with a deep sigh of relief Edgar turned to his companions and once more bade them hasten.

There was of a truth no time to lose. The cheers from above had died away, but the more ominous rattle and clank of armed and mail-clad men advancing down the winding staircase was to be heard in its place. It was clear that De Brin or De Maupas had guessed that Edgar's object in taking refuge in the keep had been to escape by the underground passage, and that they were seeking him first in that direction. A bare half-minute would see them upon the scene.

"Canst not hew down the door?" cried Peter, as Edgar hesitated for a moment.

"Take my axe and give me thy sword," replied Edgar curtly. "Do thou hew it down while I defend the passage against our pursuers. Thou shalt save time. On, Peter, on!"

Peter seized the axe, sprang down the steps, and without an instant's pause attacked the door. After the first blow he gave a startled exclamation.

"What is it?" cried Edgar, turning as he was about to advance towards the enemy now almost at the foot of the stone stairway.

"The door is open!" cried Peter in an awed tone. "I fear a trap!"

"Either 'tis a trap or there is a sentinel stationed at the farther end," cried Edgar. "But we cannot now draw back. Onward, lad, and win a way through. Maidens, I beseech ye heed not the darkness but descend and follow closely upon Peter."

Peter moved onwards into the gloomy cavern, followed by the shrinking maidens, while Edgar stayed where he was, leaning quietly against the blocks of stone. For all his easy posture, the half darkness of the underground passage hid a face grown pale and anxious, for the peril in which the party now stood was extreme. It was not the advance of the body of men, who, carrying torches and headed by Sir Eustace de Brin in person, were now bearing rapidly down

upon him, that filled him with anxiety. These he was prepared to oppose with the utmost desperation. It was the thought that sentinels might be posted at the farther end of the tunnel, and that Peter might be unable to cleave a way to freedom with his charges, that made his heart sink with a sickening feeling of dread.

CHAPTER XXI
Through the Darkness

Meanwhile events were moving with equal rapidity above-ground. The charge of Sir Eustace and his men-at-arms across the filled-in moat had completely dispersed the last of the peasants still remaining in the open. The priest had done his best to rally his men and to resist the horsemen, but his followers were infected by the panic which had seized upon those who had been engaged in storming the gates, and would not stand. He himself was wounded and must have been slain had not several of the more courageous of his band seized him and dragged him into the woods by force.

Once in the thickets the peasants were safe, and, realizing the folly of pursuing them with so small a force as he had at his disposal, De Brin contented himself with leading his men against the peasants still working at the mangonels. These fled hastily at his approach, and his men promptly proceeded to heap faggots around the machines. A light was procured, and, amid the cheers of the men-at-arms, the flames shot up until the engines were in the midst of a huge bonfire.

At this moment De Maupas spurred rapidly from out the castle and sought De Brin. His vizor was raised, and on his face was a look of savage joy. "Ho, there, Eustace!" he cried. "Their leader, this Edgar Wintour, hath taken refuge in the donjon. Doubtless he hopeth to escape through the underground passage. Quick, close this end, and he will be snugly trapped!"

"Ha, ha!" laughed De Brin. "If 'tis so, then he hath saved us much trouble, and mayhap provided us with some rare sport. Do thou, De Maupas, remain here, and see that he receiveth a warm reception if he seeketh to emerge this end. I, for my part, will see that his hot blood runs chilly in his veins before we have done with him. Ha, ha! But first we must seal him up completely within the cavern."

With a look of cruel anticipation upon his face that might of itself have

chilled Edgar's blood had he been there to see it, Black Eustace spurred back through the gates and took charge of the men already engaged in hewing down the door of the donjon. As soon as the door showed signs of weakening, he drew aside two of the men and sent them on an errand that took them outside the walls.

Here the men looked about them for some moments before seizing upon one of the big ladders constructed by the peasants. The uprights were thick and strong, and one of these was knocked away from the crosspieces and the end carefully pointed. For what purpose these preparations were made was not apparent, but, from the haste with which the men completed their work, it seemed that they had at least some connection with the plight of the two fugitives in the castle donjon.

De Maupas had for some moments gazed thoughtfully around him before he set about his part of the task of destroying the fugitives. His eyes fell upon the great bonfire which now marked the spot whence the mangonels had discharged their deadly missiles, and with a grim smile he directed the men about him to pick up some of the big bundles of brushwood that had been left over when the filling-in of the moat had been accomplished. Then he led the way to the tiny glade where the tree with the hollow trunk had stood when Edgar had escaped with Sir John a short time before. Pointing to a certain spot in the ground, he directed his men to fling down their bundles and scoop away the earth. A large flagstone was soon disclosed, and on its being lifted a black pit, down which led a flight of steep stone steps, yawned before them. Kneeling, De Maupas called:

"Bruyard! Ho, there! Bruyard!"

After a moment's pause, a muffled voice replied:

"Who calleth?"

"De Maupas. Come hither!"

The noise of the opening and shutting of a door next ascended to the ears of the men above, and presently a man-at-arms appeared. He climbed the steep steps in leisurely fashion, and then stood blinking in the sunlight.

"What is it ye want, Sir Knight?" he asked surlily.

"Hast locked the door?" asked De Maupas impatiently.

"Nay, I have not. What need, if the enemy is driven off?"

"No matter," replied De Maupas shortly. "Come, men, pile your faggots about these steps, and hasten back for more. We will make a merry blaze, for I expect visitors from yon dismal depths. Pile the faggots high, and let us see if they will escape by the secret way a second time."

With a roar of savage enjoyment the men hastened to obey. They now saw the object of the move, and with many a joke to one another they hauled great bundles of wood to the fatal spot with every sign of gusto.

A brand was brought from the blazing mangonels, and the pile ignited. It blazed up and burned fiercely. Heavier and thicker pieces of wood were then flung on until the exit from the tunnel was ringed about with a veritable wall of fire. Satisfied that any man who attempted to plunge through such a furnace must perish miserably, De Maupas strolled up and down, awaiting with some impatience the news that the fugitives had indeed taken refuge in the tunnel, and that De Brin had succeeded in sealing up the castle end.

As he paced the greensward he noticed the two men who had been sent upon an errand by De Brin. They were just then busily engaged in sharpening the end of a long thick pole which they had obtained.

"What is this?" asked De Maupas. "Who set ye on to this, and for what purpose?"

"De Brin," replied one of the men laconically, giving his thumb a jerk in the direction of the castle gates. Then he indicated the moat, and ejaculated: "Cold water."

De Maupas stared at the man for a moment in some perplexity. Then the truth dawned upon him, and he went off into a fit of laughter.

"Ha, ha! Now I see what De Brin meant. Chill his hot blood–ha, ha! But even he knoweth not the final reception we have prepared for his uninvited guests. Ha, ha, ha!"

* * * * *

"Yield thyself!" cried De Brin, bearing down upon Edgar as he stood, sword in hand, at the head of the stairs leading to the underground tunnel. "Yield thyself, for thou art trapped!"

"I will yield myself when thou hast vanquished me, De Brin," replied Edgar, fencing vigorously as their blades clashed together. "How hast thou trapped me?"

"Thou seekest to escape through the passage, as once before. Know then that the farther end is guarded by thine enemy, De Maupas, and a dozen men. Thy friend, the priest, and all his flock are in full flight, and all is lost."

Edgar could not but believe. He had hoped that his pursuers would ransack the donjon for him before coming to the conclusion that he had flown to the tunnel for refuge. But unfortunately for him they had guessed that he would make for the passage, and had sealed it up. And with him were the two maidens.

The responsibility of their charge was crushing. Had there been only Peter he would, with a light heart enough, have dashed for the farther end in an attempt to break through, though to be unsuccessful was death. But his heart almost failed him when he thought of the terrible situation of the ladies. In his preoccupation he gave ground before De Brin's onslaught, and in a minute or

two was driven back to the head of the flight of steps. Here he stood his ground for a few moments, and then, after feinting fiercely and compelling De Brin to give back, sprang down the steps to the open door below.

At this moment a man-at-arms pressed through the body of men about their leader, and whispered a few words in the knight's ear.

The effect was electrical.

"Ho, there! Edgar Wintour!" cried De Brin furiously. "Madman that thou art, they tell me that thou hast carried away the lady Beatrice and her maid with thee. 'Tis to certain death thou art dragging them. Yield them up, fool! There is escape neither for them nor for thee."

"If thou wilt promise to let them ride hence in peace, I will yield them up," replied Edgar quickly.

"Bah!" cried De Brin. "Thou hast yet to learn how completely thou art trapped. Let this teach thee!"

As he spoke the black knight set his weight against one of the huge blocks of stone piled by the head of the flight of steps. It moved, and bounded down the slope with tremendous weight and force. Luckily for Edgar it struck the massive doorpost, and did not come full into the doorway, or he must have been struck down and perhaps killed outright. Dreading lest such a mass of stone should bound along the tunnel and perhaps reach the ladies, our hero whipped the door to and put his weight against it.

Somewhat to Edgar's surprise, De Brin made no attempt to force the door, but instead ordered his men to hurl down upon it the piled-up blocks of stone. For some minutes a perfect avalanche of these rolled and bounded down upon the door, and every minute Edgar feared that it would be burst open. In the hope of adding a little to its strength he kept his weight against it, though the shock of each stone jarred him to the bone. At last the well formed by the steps began to be filled, and the jar and shock lessened until but a slight tremor followed as the rocks were still flung down. Soon the work was complete, and the castle end of the passage was blocked by a mass of stone that it would take hours' work by a score of men to clear away.

There was no more to be done there, and with a heavy heart Edgar left the door, and made his way along the tunnel. In the far distance a light had sprung up, and he guessed that Peter had managed to obtain a spark and had lit one of the torches they had been careful to snatch from the wall before they left the upper room.

"What was that dreadful noise?" asked Beatrice anxiously, as Edgar joined them. "It echoed along the passage until we thought giants indeed must be battering at the door."

"Nay, 'tis worse even than that, Beatrice," replied Edgar solemnly. "They

have hurled down stones and walled us in."

"Well, is not that good news? They cannot pursue, and if we hasten we shall escape before they can cut off our retreat. Peter telleth me that we are almost through this dreadful passage."

"They have already cut off our retreat, Beatrice," replied Edgar. "Like a fool, I have brought thee into nothing but a trap. De Brin taunted me that the farther end was guarded, and I fear 'tis true. I had hoped that ye would all have been out long ere this. What hath delayed thee, Peter? The little chance that once we had hath, I fear, gone for ever.

"We came upon some obstruction in the passage, Master Edgar," replied Peter earnestly, "and I dared not go on with the ladies in the darkness, not knowing what pitfalls might lie in wait for us. I stopped to light a torch, and my flint and steel work none too fast in this damp and dismal dungeon. But here is the door, and I see no sentinel."

"Was yon great chest the obstruction? Didst open it?"

"Nay, I would not stop. Shall I go batter it in?"

"Nay, let us press on and test the strength of the guard about this end. Perchance, after all, when the good priest heareth the sound of a conflict, he may bring down some of his men and make an attack. We might then break through. Come, hew down that door."

"How stifling is this passage, Edgar!" cried Beatrice appealingly. "The heat is becoming dreadful. Whence cometh it?"

"I cannot understand it," replied Edgar, whose face, in spite of his brave words of hope, had grown grey and pinched. "No such heat was here when last we– But see!–what is that light that glinteth beneath the door? Give me the axe, Peter! Something is going on beyond that barrier that giveth me fears I never felt before."

Swinging the axe with feverish impatience, he smote the lock with tremendous force. The door instantly flew open, and a glare of light and a wave of hot air burst in upon them, blinding and scorching them so fiercely that, with one impulse, they fled backwards a dozen paces into the shelter or the passage.

"What is this–dreadful fate–thou hast brought us into, Edgar?" cried Beatrice in gasps, as Jeannette sank to the ground by her side in a deep swoon. "Are we, then, to be choked and scorched alive?"

"Reproach me not, Beatrice," replied Edgar in a tremulous voice, almost unmanned by the terrible plight into which he had unwittingly brought the two maidens. "I told thee the hope of escape was faint, but I never dreamed that such a fearful end might be in store for us."

"Forgive me, Edgar," cried Beatrice impulsively, placing her hand gently on the young esquires arm. "I was overhasty in my alarm. I am a warrior's daughter,

and I will not play the coward again."

"'Tis nothing. Myself I shall not forgive," muttered Edgar. In his prostration he had sunk back against the wall, his arms resting on the haft of his great axe and his head bowed down upon them. For a few minutes he was silent with the silence of despair. Then he resolutely roused himself from his stupor. "Come," he said, "we are in no immediate danger here, except it be from stifling. Let us retreat back beneath the moat. It will be cooler there."

Headed by Peter with the torch, the little party threaded its way in dumb despair back into the deeper recesses of the tunnel, Edgar bearing the limp form of the insensible Jeannette. On arriving at the spot where the great iron-bound chest half-blocked the passage, Peter halted and proposed that they should seat themselves. Jeannette was laid upon the top of the box and Beatrice took her seat upon it, while Edgar and Peter stood at her side, conversing in low tones upon the hopeless situation in which they found themselves. The spot at which they had halted was, as near as they could judge, beneath the castle moat, and the air was far cooler than at the end towards the fire.

"At least they cannot reach us," said Edgar presently. "The fire which bars our escape equally bars their attack. If they have no desire to encounter us hand to hand beneath the ground, they will have to keep the fires burning night and day."

"That will not be difficult with the woods so close at hand," replied Peter, shaking his head. "They will know that after a day or two we shall be weakened by hunger and thirst."

"But if the priest liveth he will guess the reason of these great fires, and will gather men to harass De Brin. They will find it hard to maintain themselves."

"I fear the Father will be dead. When De Brin and his men swept across the broken drawbridge, doubtless he would head the peasants. Who so likely to be slain?"

"Hark!" exclaimed Beatrice suddenly. "Surely that is the sound of knocking I hear above my head?"

Both men ceased talking and listened intently.

A slow and measured beat could be heard distinctly. Even as they listened it seemed to increase in volume, until it sounded as though someone were striking the roof above their heads with a muffled sledge.

Peter stared at his young master wide-eyed. Stout-hearted and faithful though he was, even he seemed to have been struck with fear at last.

"They are—-" he began.

"Hush!" whispered Edgar warningly, turning away and again leaning head and arms on the haft of his great axe.

"What is it, Edgar?" asked Beatrice softly, placing her hand gently on the

young man's shoulder. "Hide it not from me. Thou wilt, I hope, find that I can show fortitude when need be."

"I doubt it not," replied Edgar in a breaking voice. "But can I bring thee to such a pass and see thee perish unmoved?"

"But what is it?" reiterated Beatrice appealingly. "What meaneth this knocking which grows louder every moment? Look! The very wall seems to shake beneath these mysterious blows."

"Aye. It meaneth, Beatrice, that Black Eustace or blacker De Maupas is driving in the tunnel where it passes beneath the moat. Doubtless they are using an iron bar or a baulk of wood. Their unknightly and shameful plot is to drown us like rats, or to compel us to run the gauntlet of their fires. A few minutes and one or other fate is ours."

Horror-struck, Beatrice gazed at the roof of the passage, now perceptibly quivering beneath the blows from above. Already the water was trickling in between the widening cracks of the masonry and running in tiny streams down the wall to their feet. Once a block of stone had been driven in, an onrush of water must ensue that would quickly fill the tunnel. Though the dam that had held up the waters of the moat had been broken down, the stream water still flowed in volume sufficient to fill the tunnel a hundred times over.

"I must return to the mouth of the tunnel and seek speech with De Brin," cried Edgar, suddenly starting to his feet after contemplating the widening cracks in gloomy silence. "Better that thou shouldst wed De Maupas, evil fate though it be, than that thou shouldst perish thus miserably here."

"Nay, Edgar," replied Beatrice firmly. "Thou shalt do no such thing. 'Tis for me to say which fate is the better, and I elect to perish here among friends rather than to live elsewhere among enemies. Calm thyself and fret not at this mischance. *I* reproach thee not."

In spite of his agitation, Edgar could not help gazing in sheer admiration at his companion. She seemed the calmest and most unconcerned of the three. His attention was then caught by Peter's movements.

The lad had, half-absentmindedly, prized open with his dagger a loose board near the top of the great chest. He had then plunged in his hand and taken out a handful of its contents, which seemed to be merely black dry earth. Holding the substance close to the torch, he examined it in some perplexity.

"What hast thou there, Peter?" eagerly asked Edgar, in whose mind a suspicion of the truth had already begun to dawn.

"I know not. 'Tis a handful of black grains, of which the chest seems full."

"Ha!" ejaculated Edgar with a gasp of excitement, reaching out and drawing Peter's hand to him. "'Tis that mysterious new powder of which we have heard of late. It possesseth a strange and mighty power which some think will bring

great changes. I have heard it said[#] that it showeth promise of becoming a force to be reckoned with in warfare, even by knights clad in full armour."

[#] Gunpowder was used at Crécy shortly afterwards. It had, of course, been used in battle by the Venetians years before.

"What doth it here?" asked Peter, glancing at the chest with sudden awe.

"'Twas not here when last we came this way, and perchance Black Eustace, hearing of the unrest among his vassals, thought to overawe them by this strange and wellnigh supernatural force. Our sudden attack, and the rapid blows we never ceased to strike, have given him no opportunity to make use of his dread possession. Lift down the maid, Peter, and let us prize open the lid."

Peter obeyed, and in a moment the great chest lay open before them. It was full almost to the brim with the little black grains.

"A way of escape is opening before us!" cried Edgar, in a voice which vibrated with a new and mighty hope. "Beatrice, wilt thou permit us to leave thee and thy maid while we make a last attempt to carve a way to freedom? The risk is great, and it may well prove that we shall burst in the gates of death rather than wedge open those of life. But to remain here is to abandon hope."

For a moment Beatrice hesitated. The thought of being left alone with the insensible Jeannette in the gloomy tunnel evidently terrified her. In a moment or two, however, she answered bravely: "I will stay, Edgar."

"Then follow to the far end. We will leave thee a torch. Come, Peter, not an instant is to be lost–see how the water begins to gush through in streams!"

Rapidly Beatrice and Jeannette were conveyed to the castle end of the passage. Then the two young men sped quickly back to the great chest, replaced the lid, and lifted and carried it along in the opposite direction. Soon they reached the place where the door stood open, admitting the glare and heat of the great fires burning fiercely above.

"Set this down for a moment," cried Edgar, dragging the door to. He then seized his axe and attacked the hinges which held it in position. A dozen heavy blows rained down with the fierce rapidity of one fighting for his life, and the door fell outwards with a crash, letting in again the fierce glare which had been momentarily shut out.

As the door fell, the sound of cheers, followed by loud laughter, became audible. Evidently the thunder of the axe strokes had reached the ears of the men above, and had been received by them as evidence that the fugitives, driven frantic by the fear of an inrush of water, had thoughts of making an effort to break through the ring of fire.

"Wilt yield thee now, braggart esquire?" rang out the stentorian voice of De Brin, high above the crackling of the fires.

"Doubtless–an he gets the chance," answered De Maupas with a loud laugh

of derision.

The sally was received with a roar of laughter from the assembled men-at-arms, whose enjoyment of the anticipated proceedings seemed great. At last they were obtaining some return for the alarms and defeats inflicted upon them by the despised peasantry.

"We shall see," muttered Edgar to himself as he darted out into the blazing heat about the steps, lifted the door, and bore it back into the tunnel. Then he again darted out, and with quick swings of the foot scattered the heap of burning brands at the foot of the steps until a space was cleared. The heat was great–wellnigh insupportable.

"Now, Peter," he gasped, once more bounding back into the partial shelter of the passage, "aid me to carry the chest to the foot of the steps. 'Tis our last and only hope."

Livid with superstition and fear, Peter obeyed. The box was quickly lifted to the foot of the steps and there set down. Then Peter darted back into the tunnel and Edgar followed, grasping the door as he passed and carrying it along with him.

The peril was tremendous, for at any moment the burning brands which dropped and rolled down the steps with every puff of wind might set light to the box and explode its contents. Knowing this, Edgar strained every nerve to put as much space between himself and the fires as possible. Half the length of the passage was traversed in safety, and then, with the thought of Beatrice in his mind, he called Peter back and raised the door upright so that it nearly closed the tunnel.

"Aid me to hold it thus, Peter. Set all thy weight against it. Perchance we may then keep the flame from penetrating to our charges. I know not much of this powder, but I fear the explosion will be terrible."

For nearly half a minute the two young men waited, holding the massive door in position. Then with a mighty roar and flash the explosion came. The noise was terrific, and the shock made the very earth tremble. The door was blown back flat, dashing the two young men to the ground like straws, and a rush of hot air sped over them like a hurricane. Jumping to their feet the instant it had passed, they lifted the door back into position and held it there, choking and gasping with the thick fumes and smoke of the fiery blast.

For a moment there was a calm, followed by the ominous sound of falling objects as the rocks, flung into the air by the explosion, dropped heavily back to the ground. Then all was still again.

"Prop this in position while we go back and see how fared the lady Beatrice," gasped Edgar. "If all is well with her, I believe we may yet win through to safety."

Back through the passage beneath the moat, now knee-deep in water, the

young men pressed. The torch had been blown out by the rush of air, and all was pitchy dark.

"Beatrice! Beatrice!" shouted Edgar loudly.

"Here–I am safe–but in sore distress," came the reply, and with a cry of triumph Edgar sprang to her side.

Half-choked by the smoke and fumes, with torch blown out and knee-deep in water, Beatrice's heart had almost failed her, not knowing how her friends had fared exposed to the nearer shock of the dread explosion. Had they perished, her plight and that of poor Jeannette, whom she bore in her arms, would have been mournful indeed.

Burning with a desire to see the last of the passage which had almost become their tomb, Edgar lifted Jeannette without a word, grasped Beatrice by the hand, and stumbled back along the tunnel, Peter going on ahead. A faint light could be seen gleaming in the distance, and full of hope that the way lay open to the sky, they pressed on faster and faster.

Two-thirds of the length of the passage had been traversed when they encountered great heaps of fallen earth and masonry, over the top of which the gleam of daylight dimly struggled. Crawling and scrambling on all-fours as best they could, they made their way onward still, until at last they emerged into the open air in the midst of a great pit torn in the earth by the force of the explosion.

The air was still sultry with the heat of the fires, burning embers and blackened branches lay strewn about in all directions, and a thin veil of smoke lay over all. But not a sign of life was there, save upon the walls of the castle, where one or two figures could be seen peeping fearfully over the battlements.

Clambering up the side of the pit, the little party plunged hurriedly into the woods. The fate of the soldiery who had revelled about the fires they knew not, but they had no mind to be recaptured after all the terrors and privations they had endured. Even when well within the shelter of the woods, they still pressed breathlessly onward until they met a party of the peasants approaching the scene of the strange explosion with slow and timid steps. At the sight of Edgar's party they stopped and made as though to flee.

"Where is Father Armand?" cried Edgar quickly. "Fear not–we are flesh and blood. Take us to Father Armand–if he still lives."

With their fear changed into amazement the peasants clustered about the fugitives with every manifestation of joy and gladness. Then, at Edgar's repeated request, they led the way for a few hundred yards through the woods to where a larger number of the peasantry were gathered, doubtless awaiting the report of their scouts before venturing to approach the scene of the explosion. In their midst, supporting himself against the trunk of a tree, was Father Armand. At the sight of Edgar and his companions he gave a cry of pleasure, and, wounded as he

was, made shift to stumble towards them with hands eagerly outstretched.

"All hope had I given up of seeing you again," he cried in a voice trembling with emotion. "I feared that you had stayed to fight on, and had been beaten down at last. Thank God you are safe!"

"Thank God indeed!" replied Edgar reverently, "for were it not for a strange discovery at the last moment we must have met a dreadful fate. Almost we were spent."

"That dread noise and quaking of the earth was it then thy doing?"

"Aye, Father; but of that I will tell thee later. Canst now have these maidens taken to a place of calm and safety, where some of the peasant women may minister to them? They have been through a trial this day that might well shake the courage of men used to facing death in many forms."

"They shall be taken to the cave, and there treated with loving care and hospitality," cried the priest; and calling two of his men he sent them off running to the village. Soon they were back with two women, who took charge of the maidens, and set out with them for the shelter of the cave.

With the departure of the ladies, Edgar's thoughts turned again to the task still remaining unaccomplished. Their enemies had no doubt been thrown into a panic by the strange and unexpected explosion, and, though exhausted and nerve-shaken, he felt reluctant to lose an opportunity of subduing them before they had had time to recover. So he proposed to Father Armand that he should lead those among the peasantry whose courage was still unbroken to the attack of the castle once more. The spirits of the depressed peasants had risen considerably at the appearance of the second of their leaders, and when the priest called for volunteers to follow Edgar nearly all responded.

Without a moment's delay, and straight forward to the gates of the castle, Edgar led the men. Crossing the filled-in moat, the band pressed through the gateway, and found their way barred by the merest handful of the defenders of the castle. At the first attack these, dumbfounded and dispirited, threw down their arms and surrendered.

Directing several men to take charge of the prisoners and to treat them well, Edgar next made for the door of the keep. This again was weakly defended, and he realized that almost without a stroke the castle had been won. What, then, could have become of De Brin and De Maupas? Could they have perished in the explosion?

Questioning the prisoners, Edgar found that only a bare half-dozen of burnt and panic-stricken men had succeeded in making their way back into the castle from the circle of fires in the woods. From none of these could news be obtained of their leaders, and it could only be concluded that they had been blown to pieces in company with the major part of their followers.

Desirous of avoiding the giving-up of the castle to promiscuous plunder, Edgar posted a guard at the gates, and withdrew with the rest of the band to the woods. Amid the rapturous cheers of the peasantry he reported their success to Father Armand. The good priest was indeed overjoyed to hear that the power of the oppressors of his flock was broken at last, and that no more bloodshed need be incurred.

With Edgar's desire to prevent indiscriminate plundering he heartily agreed, and a plan was quickly arranged by which all that was useful and valuable in the castle might be saved and used for the common good, and the building then be razed to the ground.

This arrangement was carried out to the letter, and in a day or two the site which had been disgraced by the grim Castle of Ruthènes bore nothing but a heap of tumbled ruins. No more could the mercenaries of the castle sally out and burn and destroy without let or hindrance, and no more need the poor villagers live in hourly dread of violence and extortion.

The survivors of the garrison were given the choice of settling down in the neighbourhood, where they could be kept under observation, or of being conducted over the mountains into Spain, well out of harm's way. Most elected to take the former offer, and were soon living on good terms with their erstwhile enemies.

As Father Armand and Edgar well knew, such summary justice might in ordinary times have brought a fresh body of soldiery to the spot, intent to rivet a yoke, perchance every whit as irksome, afresh upon their necks. But the confusion caused by the invasion of the English was so great that they had hopes that it might pass unnoticed.

Indeed, the invasion of the English was followed closely by the fearful depredations of the Free Companies and the general insurrection of the peasantry. Convulsed by these successive blows, France had little time or energy to spare for internal affairs, and if the news of the capture of Ruthènes ever reached the ears of the authorities, they were too much occupied to take any action, and the matter was allowed to fade into the obscurity of the past.

CHAPTER XXII
The Last of Ruthènes

The shock and strain of their trying ordeal beneath the castle moat was so great that it was some days before the lady Beatrice and her maid were sufficiently recovered to leave the shelter of their quiet retreat on the slopes of the mountains. They were tended devotedly by the kindly women-folk of the peasantry, and regularly visited by Edgar and Peter; but even so, it was nearly a week before Beatrice, eager to be gone though she was, could pronounce herself fit to travel on horseback.

When the news of their approaching departure was told to Father Armand he showed much concern.

"Deeply sorry shall I be to lose thee," he said to Edgar in a voice in which there was more than a trace of sadness. "I know that thy path and mine must diverge widely and that I shall never see thee more. We have been comrades, and stood shoulder to shoulder for a brief space, and it wrings my heart that it must be so no more. But come, 'tis useless to dwell upon our sorrows; the last act in the story of the freeing of Ruthènes is about to commence, and at least thou wilt stay to witness it?"

"What act is that, Father? The castle is now razed to the ground, and all seemeth already over."

"Nay, there is still one thing more to be done. Ye men of war think that once the citadel is captured all is done that is worth doing. Stay with us for a few short hours and then all will be ready."

Edgar assented gladly enough, for the thoughts of a final parting from the brave old priest were far from pleasing. The time was occupied in preparations for the departure, and when a summons came from Father Armand to meet him before the castle ruins all was in readiness for the journey.

Leading their horses through the wood, the little party presently emerged on the strip of sward which once surrounded the castle, and found themselves in the presence of an assemblage of the whole of the peasantry of the neighbourhood, drawn up in orderly array as though summoned to a ceremony. In front stood the priest, and as the ladies, Edgar, and Peter came into sight he beckoned them to approach. The contrast was great. Father Armand was robed as for Mass, while Edgar and Peter had donned most of their armour, and looked as martial as could be.

"'Tis a simple act I have now to perform," the priest said with solemn dignity, in a voice which reached to the farthest point of the assembly. "The emblem of cruelty and oppression is gone, and in its place I purpose to plant emblems of new life, pure and undefiled, which shall be to my people a sign of new hopes, new progress, and new joys."

Turning towards several young men and maidens clad in white near him, the priest spread his hands to heaven, and besought that a blessing might de-

scend upon the act they were appointed to perform. Then he signed to the others to commence, and, with slow and subdued tread, the young men and maidens scattered over the ruins, bearing young shrubs, shoots, and climbing plants, and began to plant them everywhere.

"As these plants blot out the ugly blood-stained wreck of the stronghold of Eustace de Brin, so I trust will the memory and the injury of the wicked deeds this place has known grow dim and fade away. As the new shoots spring up to heaven so shall our faith in God and His goodness receive fresh life until we are a new people."

Reverently the priest spoke, and reverently his people listened and watched until the simple task was ended. Still the priest spoke to them, warning them that they let not slip the chance of fuller life and growth. Gently, too, he chided them that naught would be gained were the yoke of their oppressors but exchanged for an inward yoke of unrestrained selfishness or indulgence.

To Edgar the simple act, and the gentle, earnest words with which it was accompanied, seemed deeply impressive. The profession of arms, of which he had till then thought so highly, seemed to shrink and to become mean and transient when brought into contact with the healing powers of the good old priest. Almost he regretted that the future held out no hopes of his being able to relinquish the trade of arms, and to follow a profession more peaceful and more fraught with benefit to the world at large.

Presently Father Armand began to refer to their visitors' approaching departure.

"In the sudden appearance of Sir Squire here at the moment when our need was greatest I see the finger of God, and to God our thanks are firstly due. But we must yet tell our friend how much we owe him and his comrade for the dauntless courage with which they led us peasants, ignorant of the art of war, to the assault of the mighty castle upon whose dust we stand. How wisely they counselled us and how gallantly they led us, ever taking the foremost and heaviest tasks upon their own shoulders! Upon these maidens, whose misfortunes were the cause of our doughty friends' appearance, we bestow our blessing, and we trust that the memory of their sufferings may soon be blotted out in happiness and joy.

"Sir Squire hath refused to accept any presents from the contents of the castle, save only two mounts for the ladies from the best steeds the stables could provide. With those chargers and our thanks we must bid Godspeed to them, hoping that such a dread experience as the siege beneath the castle moat may never again be thrust upon them. Farewell, true friends, farewell!"

The priest advanced and embraced each of the party in turn, while the simple peasant folk crowded about, and, with many ejaculations of gratitude, signified in their own way their thanks for the strong and timely aid rendered

them in their fight for freedom. As soon as he could, Edgar gave the signal for the party to mount, and with a last farewell they rode slowly and thoughtfully from the scene.

* * * * *

The shadow which lay over the Wolsingham ladies and their escort all the time they were in the neighbourhood of Ruthènes gradually lifted as they left the thick, dark woods and the slopes of the Pyrenees behind them. More and more freely they rode, until they were almost as gay as in their departure from Wolsingham but a month or two–though it seemed a lifetime–before.

Edgar took the journey in easy stages. True, Sir John would be anxiously awaiting their return; but the ladies were still scarcely recovered from their ordeal, and he had no mind to make any calls upon their endurance. Besides, somehow he seemed to look forward to the time when he should hand his charges over to his master with strangely little eagerness. So they lingered somewhat, and enjoyed to the full their journey through the beautiful land which was so soon to be devastated by invasion and internal strife. Beatrice, too, seemed to be content, and made no complaint that the pace was slow. One day Edgar had been speaking of Sir John, and wondering whether he would now be recovered sufficiently to take his place with the earl's force, which had doubtless by this time moved forward.

"Wilt thou stay with Gertrude in Bordeaux or travel to Faucigny, Beatrice?" he asked.

"I know not, Edgar," she replied. "I wish with all my heart that we might take Sir John back to Wolsingham. I am sure he will not be really strong enough for more campaigning for months to come."

"Ah–then I fear I shall have to bid you all a long adieu."

"Why–what meanest thou? Thou must come, of course."

"Nay, how can I? If Sir John cannot lead the Wolsingham men-at-arms against the foe, he will be certain to bid me take his place."

"That must not be. I will myself speak to Sir John. Thou hast warred enough–let others do their share. Thou oughtest now to settle down in peace."

"Ah–'tis the impossible of which thou speakest. Thou know'st, surely, that I have naught but my sword. 'Tis easy for those with broad acres to speak of peace, but for me, war and preparations for war are my sustenance."

"Take, then, of my acres–my possessions in Guienne, take them in part payment of my debt to thee. With our country at war with the King of France, they will need a strong arm indeed to defend them if they are not to be lost for ever."

Edgar's face flushed. "Nay—-" he began, and then stopped suddenly. Absorbed in the conversation he had been caught napping. He and his companion had been riding some paces in advance of Peter and the maid, and had topped a rise without taking any precaution to see first what might be beyond it. Thus they found themselves in full view of what looked like an army on the march, with banners streaming and helmets and lance points gleaming in the sunshine.

One glance, however, was sufficient to tell Edgar that the force was at any rate largely English, and the hand he had momentarily laid in alarm upon his companion's bridle dropped again by his side. "'Tis the earl," he said. "Let us ride straight forward."

It was evident that they had been seen at least as quickly as they had seen, for half a dozen knights were already spurring rapidly towards them.

As they drew near, the foremost slackened speed and, addressing Edgar, cried:

"Who art thou and what is thine errand?"

"I am Edgar Wintour, esquire to Sir John Chartris. I and my party are riding into Bordeaux."

"Ha! Methinks I remember seeing thee in the lists a while agone. But come, follow me to the earl, for he will be glad to question thee and find out what thou know'st of the movements of our enemy."

Peter and Jeannette had by this time ridden up, and, preceded by the knights, the whole party moved forward to the head of the advancing army. As they drew close the column was halted, and in a moment Edgar found himself in the presence of the Earl of Derby and the other lords and nobles of the English and Gascon forces. All were mounted and clad in full mail in readiness for instant action.

"They tell me," said the earl, glancing keenly at the young man who had just ridden steadily up and saluted him, "they tell me thou art Edgar Wintour, the esquire of our good Sir John Chartris. If so, tell me what thou art doing here, in the enemy's country. I have heard somewhat from Sir John, but tell me all–and briefly, for our time is short."

In a few quick sentences, Edgar told the earl the story of his quest, its strange vicissitudes, and its successful accomplishment. Though the story lost much by its baldness and absence of detail, he could see that it made no small impression upon his hearers. One or two exchanged glances, though what they meant he scarce knew what to think.

"Humph!" said the earl shortly, "so thou hast been in league with the subjects of the King of France, hast thou? That remindeth me: was it not thou who masqueraded as Sir John Chartris in his combat of honour with our worthy Sir Gervaise de Maupas? Dost remember that, Sir Walter?" he said, turning to Sir

Walter Manny. "Thou wert one of the marshals that day. Nicely wert thou tricked by this fledgling here."

Sir Walter frowned and growled an inarticulate reply.

Edgar turned pale. Things seemed to be going awry. He glanced at Beatrice, but she seemed merely amused. Angered at her indifference, he turned resolutely to the earl:

"I am not ashamed," he said, with a touch of haughtiness. "What I did seemed for the best, and who can do more?"

"We must see about that," responded the earl, quite unmoved. "Dismount, Sir Squire."

Mechanically Edgar obeyed. Disgrace and humiliation were hard indeed to bear, but firmly he held up his head and faced the earl. He would not flinch, he vowed, before his countrymen any more than he had flinched before his enemies in the Castle of Ruthènes. The earl's face had flushed and his eyes sparkled.

"Bow thy head," he cried peremptorily, and his sword flashed from its sheath. Rapidly but gently it fell upon Edgar's shoulder.

"Sir Edgar Wintour, we are proud of thee. Knightly hast thou borne thyself in field and castle, and the knight's spurs are thine indeed." There was a loud murmur of assent from the knights and nobles crowding about, and as it ceased, the earl went on: "Mount now and come with us a furlong or two, for time presses and I would ask thee if thou hast seen aught of our enemies. Then thou canst resume thy journey. But when and wherever thou wilt, we shall welcome thee to our banners."

Again there was a murmur of cordial agreement, and, with his head in a whirl, Edgar mounted and rode by the earl's side, answering his eager questions as best he could. Then he rejoined his companions, and, halting a few paces from the path of the army, watched them move forward upon their march of conquest. The sight was an inspiriting one, for the force seemed to strike the highest note of both hardihood and chivalry, and Edgar, as he watched, longed to take his place within its ranks.

Presently the last files of the army had passed by, the waving banners had receded into the distance, and the Wolsingham party, feeling a sudden sense of loneliness, had nothing left them but to resume their march towards Bordeaux.

For a long time the party was a silent one. Edgar was thinking over the changes which must ensue now that he was a gold-spurred knight. For one thing, he could no longer remain in Sir John's service. His late master could now scarce afford to support a knight, even if he desired to do so. Thus his connection with Wolsingham would seem to be at an end. The thought was hardly a pleasant one.

Beatrice, too, rode as though lost in thoughts none too bright, though once or twice she stole a quick look at her silent companion. Presently she roused

herself with an effort, and began to rally Edgar on his gloominess.

"Thou art glum, Sir Edgar," she cried gaily. "Surely thou hast all thou canst desire–knighthood and a goodly fame, the earl's approval: what more canst wish for?"

"Yes, yes, Beatrice," replied Edgar half absently, "'tis as thou sayest. I have much to be thankful for–and yet there are some things I regret, for I fear 'twill mean that I must leave Sir John's service."

"Is that all?" asked Beatrice, raising her eyebrows in indifference.

Edgar's absence of mind vanished, and he stared at his fair companion with a chagrin that his sudden astonishment did not give him time to conceal.

"Is it–is it nothing to thee, then?" he stammered, after an awkward pause.

"Why should it be, Sir Edgar?" asked Beatrice easily.

"I know not–but I thought that perhaps what hath passed—-" Edgar stopped quickly, feeling that what he was about to say was far from generous.

"What thou hast done for me, thou meanest? Thou shalt be paid."

"Paid!" almost shouted Edgar. "Not one groat will I accept. How can'st think of such a thing, Beatrice?"

"Dost scorn payment, Edgar? Mayhap thou wilt one day be glad to accept what ye now so scorn."

"Never, Beatrice!" cried Edgar emphatically. "'Tis true I am landless, but at any rate I can always ride away and join the league of the 'knights of the sword', or one of the other bands of knights who spend their lives defending Christendom from the inroads of the Turks. Long have I thought that with no means but a ready sword such might be my fate."

"Dost then look forward to warring all thy days?" asked Beatrice, a look of trouble coming into her face for the first time.

"Nay, how can I, with Father Armand's words still ringing in my ears? But—-" and Edgar relapsed again into a silence which his companion for a long time did not care to disturb.

The following day they arrived at Bordeaux.

CHAPTER XXIII
Sir John's Choice

Our story draws to a close, and we must pass over the eager welcome that awaited the travellers from Sir John and his daughter, who were still at the inn. Sir John, indeed, had not progressed so rapidly as had been expected. His fever and his wounds had left him very weak, and he had but the day before resolved to leave France and return to Wolsingham until such time as he might have completely recovered. Gertrude, of course, was to go with him, and now that Beatrice had returned she, too, must accompany her guardian, and the visit to Faucigny had perforce to be completely abandoned.

With Edgar a knight, there was no question as to his movements. It was obvious that his duty was to join the earl's force without delay.

"Thou hast begun well, Edgar," remarked Sir John, when Edgar's final visit was drawing to a close. "Thou must go on and win fame, for I believe that this campaign will be filled with deeds which will add much to the honour and glory of England's name. I would that I might fling my sword into the conflict and strike a few more blows for my beloved country. But no–thou must represent me for the nonce."

Edgar bowed slightly.

"As for Beatrice here," went on Sir John, turning suddenly towards his ward, "she must home with me. I fear she is getting wayward and headstrong, and if I am to keep close watch upon every gallant who dreams of the revenue of her lands, my task will be no light one. Fortunately for me, I have the bestowal of her hand in marriage, and, with no little relief, I have decided to find a suitable husband for her. 'Twill lighten my responsibilities, and her lands need a good sword to defend them in these troublous times. I have for some time had in mind a knight of good descent and of staid demeanour, and I shall now bring matters to a head."

"But, Sir John—-" stammered Beatrice in hot amaze.

"Be silent, maid!" cried Sir John angrily. "Wouldst dare to oppose thy wishes against the considered judgment of thy guardian?"

But Beatrice stood her ground rebelliously, tossing her pretty head in unmistakable anger and defiance. Nevertheless, Sir John showed no sign of relenting, and, not daring to oppose him openly, at last she turned with a look of appeal to Edgar, who was staring at the floor with an air that betokened no little disturbance of mind. His glance met hers, and it was clear to her that he knew as little of Sir John's plans as she.

"Who is this knight, then?" she cried in a stifled voice, turning again towards Sir John.

"He is a knight of some fame. One, moreover, of sober and godly habits."

"But who is he?"

"Think not that I will allow thee to question my—-"

"Torture me not, Sir John!" cried Beatrice vehemently. "Who is he?"

"'Tis Sir Edgar Wintour, Beatrice."

"*Oh!*"

"Darest thou oppose my will, Beatrice?"

Beatrice was flushed, and looked as though she hardly knew which way to turn. Edgar was staring at Sir John as if he thought his ears had played him a trick.

For some moments there was silence, and then Sir John repeated his question, for Beatrice had turned away and was toying with her brooch.

"Dost oppose my will, Beatrice?"

"It would grieve me to disobey thee, Sir John," she said at length, in a tone of dutiful submission.

"He will make thee a good husband," replied Sir John, smiling in a way that made Beatrice inwardly furious. "What dost think of my choice, girl?"

Beatrice subdued her resentment as best she could, and replied demurely:

"Mayhap he is better than De Maupas."

"De Maupas! Canst say no more than that, Beatrice?" cried Edgar, breaking in impetuously.

"Not one word," replied the maid, with a haughty stamp of the foot as she turned the vials of her resentment upon the luckless Edgar. Sir John laughed outright, and with the best grace he could Edgar was, for the moment, forced to rest content. But a time would come, he vowed to himself, when a much more satisfactory reply should be forthcoming.

The farewells were soon said, and in a few hours Edgar was on his way to join the earl, while Sir John and his daughter and ward were en route for England. Though scarce another word was exchanged, it was nevertheless well understood between Beatrice and our hero that, on his return from the wars, he would receive a warmer welcome and the full payment promised him so readily a day or two before.

The campaign proved to be a brilliant one. It opened with a sudden and desperate onslaught upon Bergerac, where the French had strongly entrenched themselves. The town was stormed with a swing that so astounded the French that their forces dispersed before the earl, and allowed him to overrun Perigord and the Agenois with scarce an attempt at resistance.

Presently, however, the French collected a new army, and, returning to the attack, laid siege to Auberoche with ten thousand men. The news of the attack reached the Earl of Derby too late to enable him to collect a proper force, but, with the true spirit of chivalry, he started away for the scene with but three hundred lances and six hundred archers.

Arrived in the vicinity of the beleaguered town, the tiny English force stole

upon the enemy under cover of a wood, and, regardless of their overwhelming strength, attacked them so furiously that the whole French army were glad to save themselves by flight. So great was the respect this feat brought to the English name that fortress after fortress fell into their hands with scarce a check, and it was not until France was completely aroused, and sent the Duke of Normandy with one hundred thousand men, that the small force of conquering Englishmen could be stayed.

Aiguillon, held by Sir Walter Manny for England, was attacked by the whole of the huge French army. For five months assault after assault was made upon it. On one occasion, indeed, for five successive days the fight went on, each of the four divisions of the French army taking its turn for three hours at a time. All to no purpose. The brave garrison repulsed all assaults, and even then showed no sign of exhaustion. The siege was at length raised, and the earl was left for the time being the undisputed ruler of the south of France.

In all these gallant doings Edgar, still attended by the faithful Peter, took part; and when, only two years after his departure from Wolsingham, he returned to England, he had seen as many stirring fights as most knights of twice his age. He never went to the wars again, for he soon became fast anchored to one whom he had learned to love in the stirring events that centred round the grim Castle of Ruthènes.

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