

walls" cried another. "What sort of talk is this for a public inn?"

"Shall it be a litaney, my good clerk?" shouted a third; "or would a hymn be good enough to serve?"

The jongleur had put down his harp in high dudgeon. "Am I to be preached to by a child?" he cried, staring across at Alleyne with an inflamed and angry countenance. "Is a hairless infant to raise tongue against me, when I have sung in every fair from Tweed to Trent, and have twice been named aloud by the High Court of the Minstrels at Beverly? I shall sing no more to-night."

"Nay, but you will so," said one of the laborers. "Hi! Dame Eliza, bring a stoup of your best will to clear his throat. Go forward with thy song, and if our girl-faced clerk does not love it he can take to the road and go whence he came."

"Nay, but not too fast," broke in Hordle John. "There are words in this matter. It may be that my little comrade has been over-quick in reproof, he having gone early into the cloisters and seen little of the rough ways and words of the world. Yet there is truth in what he says, for as you know well, the song was not of the cleanest. I shall stand by him, therefore, and he shall neither be put out on the road, nor shall his ears be offended indoors."

"Indeed, your high and mighty grace," sneered one of the yeomen, "have you in sooth so ordained?"

"By the Virgin!" said a second. "I think that you may both chance to find yourselves upon the road before long."

"And so belabored as to be scarce able to crawl along it," cried a third. "Nay, I shall go! I shall go!" said Alleyne hurriedly, as Hordle John began to roll up his sleeves, and bare an arm like a leg of mutton. "I would not have you brawl about me."

"Hush, lad!" he whispered. "I count them not a fly. They may find they have more tow on their distaff than they can give me space."

Both the foresters and the laborers had risen from their bench, and Dame Eliza and the travelling doctor had flung themselves between the two parties with soft words and soothing gestures, when the door of the Pied Merlin was flung violently open, and the attention of the company was drawn from their own quarrel to the new-comer who had burst so unceremoniously upon them.

CHAPTER IV.

He was a middle-sized man, of most massive and robust build, with an arching chest and extraordinary breadth of shoulder. His shaven face was as brown as a hazel-nut, tanned and dried by the weather, with harsh well-marked features, which were not improved by a long white scar which stretched from the corner of his left nostril to the angle of the jaw. His eyes were bright and searching, with something of menace and of authority in their quick glitter, and his mouth was firm-set and hard, as befitted one who was wont to set his face against danger. A straight sword by his side and a painted long-bow jutting over his shoulder proclaimed his profession, while his scarred brigandine of chain-mail and his dented steel cap showed that he was no holiday soldier, but one who was even now fresh from the wars. A white surcoat, with the Lion of St. George in red upon the centre, covered his broad breast, while a sprig of new-plucked broom at the side of his head-gear gave a touch of

Genoa velvet with twelve ells of purple silk. Thou rascal, there is dirt on the hem! Thou hast brushed it against some wall, couquin!"

"Not I, most worthy sir," cried the carrier, shrinking away from the fierce eyes of the bowman. "I say yes, dog! By the three kings! I have seen a man gasp out his breath for less. Had you gone through the pain and unease that I have done to earn these things you would be at more care. I swear by my ten finger bones that there is not one of them that hath not cost its weight in French blood! Four—a incense-boat, a ewer of silver, a gold buckle, and a cope worked in pearls. I found them, comrades, at the Church of St. Denis in the harrying of Narbonne, and I took them away with me lest they fall into the hands of the wicked. Five—a cloak of fur turned up with miniver, a gold goblet with stand and cover, and a box of rose-colored sugar. See that you lay them together. Six—a box of moneys, three pounds of Lillimousine gold-work, a pair of boots, silver tagged, and, lastly, a store of napping linen. So, the tally is complete! Here is a great piece, and you may go."

"Go whither, worthy sir?" asked one of the carriers. "Whither? To the devil, if ye will. What is it to me? Now, ma belle, to supper. A pair of cold capons, a mortise of brayn, or what you will, with a flask or two of the right Gascony. I have crowns in my pouch, my sweet, and I mean to spend them. Bring in wine while the food is dressing. Buvons, my brave lads! You shall each empty a stoup with me."

Here was an offer which the company in an English inn, at that or any other date, are slow to refuse. The flagons were regathered, and came back with the white foam dripping over their edges. Two of the woodmen and three of the laborers drank their portions off hurriedly and trooped off together, for their homes were distant and the hour late. The others, however, drew closer, leaving the place of honor to the right of the gleeman to the free-handed newcomer. He had thrown off his stool cap and his brigandine, and had placed them with his sword, his quiver, and his painted long-bow, on the top of his varied heap of plunder in the corner. Now, with his thick and somewhat bowed legs stretched in front of the blaze, his green jerkin thrown open, and a great quart pot in his corded fist, he looked the picture of comfort and good-fellowship. His hard-set face had softened, and the thick crop of crisp brown curls which had been hidden by his helmet grew low upon his massive neck. He might have been forty years of age, though hard toil and harder pleasure had left their grim marks upon his features. Alleyne sat, staring with open eyes at a type of man so strange and so unlike any whom he had met. Men had been good or had been bad in his catalogue, but here was a man who was fierce one instant and gentle the next, with a curse on his lips and a smile in his eye. What was to be made of such a man as that?

It chanced that the soldier looked up and saw the questioning glance which the young clerk threw upon him. He raised his flagon and drank to him, with a merry flash of his white teeth. "A toi, mon garcon!" he cried. "Hast surely never seen a man-at-arms, that thou shouldst stare so?" "I never have," said Alleyne frankly. "though I have oft heard talk of their deeds."

"By my hit!" cried the other, "if you were to cross the narrow sea you would find them as thick as bees at a teehole. Couldst not shoot a bolt down any street of Bordeaux, I warrant, but you would pink archer, squire or knight. "And where got you all those pretty things?" asked Hordle John, pointing at the heap in the corner. "Where there is as much more wait-

stranger and more stirring were soon to crowd upon him. The fat, red-faced gleeman, the listening group, the archer with upraised finger beating in time to the music, and the huge sprawling figure of Hordle John, all thrown into red light and black shadow by the flickering fire in the centre—memory was to come often lovingly back to it.

At the time he was lost in admiration at the deft way in which the jongleur disguised the loss of his two missing strings, and the lusty, hearty fashion in which he trotted out his little ballad of the outland bowmen, which ran in some such fashion as this:

"What of the bow?
The bow was made in England:
Of true wood, of yew wood.
The wood of English bows;
So men who are free
Love the old yew tree
And the land where the yew tree grows.

"What of the cord?
The cord was made in England:
A rough cord, a tough cord.
A cord that you lay them together
So we'll drain our jacks
To the English flax
And the land where the hemp was wove.

"What of the shaft?
The shaft was cut in England:
A long shaft, a strong shaft,
Barbed and trim and true;
So we'll drink all together
To the gray goose feather
And the land where the gray goose flew.

"What of the men?
The bowmen—yeomen—
The lads of dale and fell.
Here's to you—and to you!
To the bests that are true
And the land where the true hearts dwell."

"Well sung, by my hit!" shouted the archer, in high delight. "Many a night have I heard that song, both in the old way-time and after, in the days of the Whit Company, when Black Simon of Norwich would lead the stave, and four hundred of the best bowmen that ever drew string would come roaring in upon the chorus. I have seen old John Hawkwood, the same who has led half the company into Italy, stand laughing in his beard as he heard it, until his plates rattled again. But to get the full smack of it ye must yourselves be English bowmen, and be far off upon an outland soil."

"It passes me," he cried "how all you lusty fellows can find so catching your backs at home when there are such doings over the seas. Look at me—what have I to do? It is but the eye to the cord, the cord to the shaft, and the shaft to the mark. There is the whole song of it."

"You see what the wage brings," he answered. "I eat of the best. I treat my friend, and I ask no friend to treat me. I clap a silk gown upon my rirl's back. Never a knight's lady shall be better betrimmed and be-trinketed. How of all that, mon garcon? And how of the heap of trifles that you can see for yourselves in yonder corner? They are from the South French, every one, upon whom I have been making war. By my hit! comrades, I think that I may let my plunder speak for itself."

Though there may be peace between our own provinces and the French, yet within the marches of France there is always war, for the country is much divided against itself, and is furthermore harried by bands of flayers, skinned, Brabacons, tardevins, and the rest of them. When every man's grip is on his neighbor's throat, and every five-sous-piece of a baron is marching with tuck of drum to fight with the Marquis of Nonferat to fight against the Lord of Milan, there are but ten-score of us left; and I am able to bring some back with me to fill the ranks of the White Company.



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A grocer may recommend a loose coffee at so much a pound. He is all right. He means well. If he handled the coffee himself, from the tree to you, you might well trust him implicitly.

He may know something about coffee. He may think he does, but let that pass. He buys it loose! From whom? You don't know—if you did it would not mean anything. He trusts the man he buys it from—maybe a salesman, maybe a wholesaler, maybe a little local roaster. It does not matter. What do they know about coffee? More than the grocer? Perhaps.

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quick feint he threw the other off his guard, and then, bounding upon him, threw his legs round his bull neck, in the hope of bearing him to the ground with the sudden shock. With a bellow of rage, Hordle John squeezed him limp in his huge arms; and then, picking him up, cast him down upon the floor with a force that might well have splintered a bone or two, had not the archer with the most perfect coolness clung to the other's forearms to break his fall. As it was, he dropped upon his feet and kept his balance, though it sent a jar through his frame which set every joint a-creaking. He bounded back from his perilous foam; but the other, heated by the bout, rushed madly after him, and so gave the practised wrestler the very advantage for which he had planned. As big John flung himself upon him the archer ducked under the great red hands that clutched for him, and catching his man round the thighs, hurled him over his shoulder—helped as much by his own mad rush as by the trained strength of the heave. To the archer's eye, it was as if John had taken into himself wings and flown, the floor whirled under his feet, and the giant limbs revolving, the lad's heart was in his mouth; for surely no man ever yet had such a fall and came scatheless out of it. In truth, hardy as the man was, his neck had been assuredly broken, had he not pitched the head first on the very midriff of the driven artist, who was slumbering so peacefully in the corner, all unaware of these stirring doings. The luckless limner, thus suddenly brought out from his dreams, sat up with a piercing yell, while Hordle John bounded back into the circle almost as rapidly as he had left it.

"One more fall, by all the saints!" he cried, throwing out his arms.

"Not I," quoth the archer, pulling on his clothes. "I have come well out of the business. I would sooner wrestle with the great bear of Navarre."

"It was a trick!" cried John.

"Aye was it! By my ten fingers! it is a trick that will add a proper man to the ranks of the Company!"

"Oh, for that," said the other, "count it not a fly; for I had promised myself a good hour ago that I should go with thee, since the life seems to be a goodly and proper one. Yet I would fain have had the feather-bed."

"To be continued Next Week."

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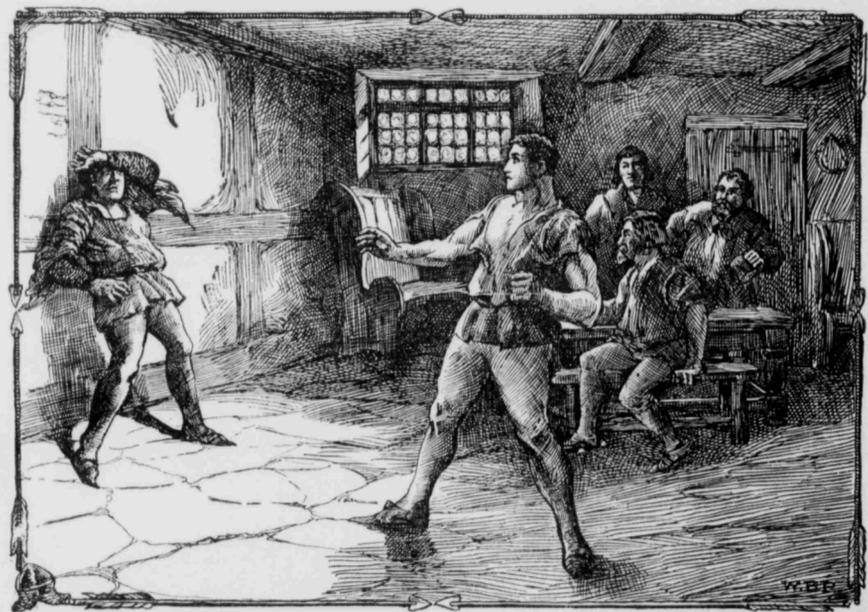
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"HORDLE JOHN HURLED HIM ACROSS THE ROOM SO THAT HIS HEAD CRACKED AGAINST THE WALL."

gayety and grace to his grim, war-worn equipment.

"La petite is frightened," said he. "Ah, c'est l'amour, l'amour! Curse this trick of French, which will stick to my throat, must wash it out with some good English ale. By my hit, comrades, there is no drop of French blood in my body, and I am a true English bowman, Samkin Aylward by name; and I tell you, mes amis, that it warms my very heart-roots to set my feet on the dear old land once more. When I came off the galley at Hythe, this very day, I down on my bones, and I kissed the good brown earth, as I kiss thee now, ma belle, for it was eight long years since I had seen it. The very smell of it seemed life to me. But where are my six rascals? Hola, there! En avant!"

At the order, six men, dressed as common drudges, marched solemnly into the room, each bearing a huge bundle upon his head. They formed in military line, while the soldier stood in front of them with stern eyes, checking off their several packages.

"Number one—a French feather-bed, with the two counterpanes of white sandell," said he.

"Here, worthy sir," answered the first of the bearers, laying a great package down in the corner.

"Number two—seven ells of red Turkey cloth and nine ells of cloth of gold. Put it down by the other. Good dame, I prythee give each of these men a bottle of wine or a jack of

ing for any brave lad to pick it up. Where a good man can always earn a good wage, and where he need look upon no man as his paymaster, but just reach his hand out and help himself. Aye, it is a goodly and a proper life. And here I drink to mine old comrades, and the saints be with them! A pain of my displeasure! To Sir Claude Latour and the White Company!"

"Sir Claude Latour and the White Company!" shouted the trave's "drainy off their goblets."

"Well quaffed, mes braves! It for me to fill your cups again, since you have drained them to my dear lads of the white jerkin. Hola, mon ange, bring wine and ale. How runs the old stave?"

"We'll drink altogether
To the gray goose feather,
And to the land where the gray goose flew."

He bowed out the catch in a harsh unmusical voice, and ended with a shout of laughter. "I trust th' I am a better bowman than a minstrel," said he.

"By the tooth of Peter! it would be a bad thing if I could not muster many a Hampshire man who would be ready to strike in under the red flag of St. George, and the more so if Sir Nigel Loring of Cristchurch, should don hauberk once more and take the lead of us."

"Ah, you would indeed be in luck then," quoth the woodman, "for it is said that, setting aside the prince, and mayhap good old Sir John Chandos, there was not in the whole army a man of such tried courage."

"It is sooth, every of it," the archer answered. "I have seen him with these two eyes in a stricken field, and never did a man carry himself better. Mon Dieu! yes, ye would not credit it to look at him, or to hearken to his soft voice, but from the sailing from Orwell down to the foray to Paris, and that is clear twenty years, there was not a skirmish, onfall, sally, bushment, escaudo, or battle, but Sir Nigel was in the heart of it. I go now to Christ-church with a letter to him for you."

"Take the place of Sir John Hawkwood; and there is the more chance that he will if I bring one or two likely men at my heels. What say you, woodman: wilt leave the bucks to loose a shaft at a nobler mark than his?"

The forester shook his head. "I have wife and child at Emery Down," quoth he; "I would not leave them for such a venture."

"You then, young sir?" asked the archer.

"Nay, I am a man of peace," said Alleyne, Edrickson. "Besides I have other work to do."

"Peste!" growled the soldier, striking his flagon on the board until the dishes danced again. "What, in the name of the devil, hath come over the folk why sit ye all moping by the fireside, like crows round a dead horse, when there is man's work to be done within a few short leagues of ye? Out upon you all, as a set of laggards and hang-backs! By my hit! I believe that the men of England are all in France already, and that what is left behind are in sooth the women dressed up in their paltocks and hosen."

"Archer," quoth Hordle John, "you have led more than once and more than twice; for which, and also because I see much in you to mislike, I am sorely tempted to lay you upon your back."

"By my hit! then, I have found a man at last!" shouted the bowman. "And, fore God, you are a better man than I take you for if you can lay me on my back. For seven long years I have sought no man in the Company who could make my jerkin drier, and I will allow that there is no man in the Company who would pull against you on a rope; so let that be a salve to your pride. On the other hand, I should judge that you have led a life of ease for some months back, and your muscle is harder than your own; and I am ready to wager upon myself against you, if you are not afraid."

"Afeard, thou lurdin!" growled big John. "I never saw the face yet of a man that was afraid of me. Come out, and we shall see who is the better man."

"But the wager?"

"I have nought to wager. Come out for the love and the lust of the thing."

"Nought to wager!" cried the soldier. "Why, idiot, you have that which I covet above all things. It is that big body of thine that I am after. See now, I have a French feather bed there, which have been at pains to keep these years. I had it at the sack of Isoudun, and the king himself bath not such a bed. If you throw me, it is thine; but, if I throw you, then you are under a vow to serve the White Company as long as we be enrolled."

"Then you may bid farewell to your bed, soldier," roared Hordle John. "Nay; I shall keep the bed, and I shall have you to France in spite of your teeth, and you shall live to thank me for it. How shall it be, then, my infant? Collar and elbow, or close-lock, or catch how you can?"

"To the devil with your tricks!" said John, opening and shutting his great red hands. "Stand forth, and let me clip thee."

"Shalt clip me as best you can, then," quoth the archer, moving out into the open space, and keeping a wary eye upon his opponent. He had thrown off his green jerkin, and his chest was covered only by a pink silk jupon, or undershirt, cut low in the neck and sleeveless. Hordle John was near stripped from his waist upward, and his huge body, with his great muscles swelling out like the gnarled roots of an oak, towered high above the soldier. The other, however, though near a foot shorter, was a man of great strength; and there was a set upon his white skin which was wanting in the heavier limbs of the renegade monk. He was quick on his feet too, and skilled at the game; so that it was clear, from the poise of head and shine of eye, that he counted the chances to be in his favor. It would have been hard that night, through the whole length of England, to set up a finer pair in the face of each other.

Big John stood waiting in the centre with a sullen, menace; and his red hair in a bristle, while the archer stood lightly and swiftly to the right and the left with crooked knee and hands advanced. There, with a sudden dash, so swift and fierce that the eye could scarce follow it, he flew in upon his man and locked his leg around him. It was a grip that between men of equal strength would mean a fall; but Hordle John tore him off from him as he might a rat, and hurled him across the room, so that his head cracked upon the wall.

"Ma foi!" cried the bowman, passing his fingers through his curls, "you were not far from the feather-bed then, mon gar."

Nothing daunted, he approached his man once more; but this time with

quick feint he threw the other off his guard, and then, bounding upon him, threw his legs round his bull neck, in the hope of bearing him to the ground with the sudden shock. With a bellow of rage, Hordle John squeezed him limp in his huge arms; and then, picking him up, cast him down upon the floor with a force that might well have splintered a bone or two, had not the archer with the most perfect coolness clung to the other's forearms to break his fall. As it was, he dropped upon his feet and kept his balance, though it sent a jar through his frame which set every joint a-creaking. He bounded back from his perilous foam; but the other, heated by the bout, rushed madly after him, and so gave the practised wrestler the very advantage for which he had planned. As big John flung himself upon him the archer ducked under the great red hands that clutched for him, and catching his man round the thighs, hurled him over his shoulder—helped as much by his own mad rush as by the trained strength of the heave. To the archer's eye, it was as if John had taken into himself wings and flown, the floor whirled under his feet, and the giant limbs revolving, the lad's heart was in his mouth; for surely no man ever yet had such a fall and came scatheless out of it. In truth, hardy as the man was, his neck had been assuredly broken, had he not pitched the head first on the very midriff of the driven artist, who was slumbering so peacefully in the corner, all unaware of these stirring doings. The luckless limner, thus suddenly brought out from his dreams, sat up with a piercing yell, while Hordle John bounded back into the circle almost as rapidly as he had left it.

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