THE ROBBER BARON OF BEDFORD CASTLE

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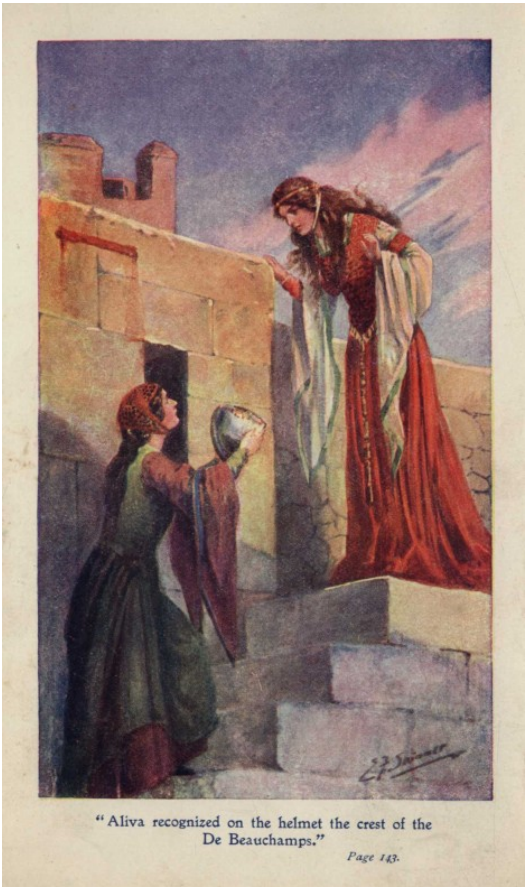
THE ROBBER BARON OF BEDFORD CASTLE

BY A. J. FOSTER AND E. E. CUTHELL



"Aliva recognized on the helmet the crest of the De Beauchamps." Page 143.

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THE ROBBER BARON OF

BEDFORD CASTLE.

CHAPTER I.

BY THE BANKS OF OUSE.

In the first quarter of the thirteenth century, the evil doings of King John were yet fresh in the minds of men all over England, and the indirect consequences of his evil deeds were still acutely felt, and nowhere more than in Bedfordshire, where the scene of our story is laid. The county itself has much altered in appearance since that period. Great woods, intersected by broad, soft green lanes, overran its northern portion. Traces of these woods and roads still survive in Puddington Hayes and Wymington Hayes, and the great broad "forty-foot." South of this wild wooded upland, one natural feature of Bedfordshire remains unchanged. Then, as now, the Great Ouse took its winding, sluggish course from southwest to north-east across the county, twisting strangely, and in many places turning back upon itself as though loath to leave Bedfordshire. Some fifteen miles from point to point would have taken it straight through the heart of the little county, whereas its total course therein is more like fifty. One poetic fancy likens the wandering stream to a lover lingering with his mistress, but old Drayton compares it to one of the softer sex:–

"Ouse, having Olney past, as she were waxed mad,
From her first staider course immediately doth gad,
And in meandering gyves doth whirl herself about,
That, this way, here and there, back, forward, in and out.
And like a wanton girl, oft doubting in her gait,
In labyrinthine turns and twinings intricate,
Through those rich fields doth flow."

It is in the Ouse valley that the events of our story will chiefly be laid, for here

was centred the life of the county, in those castles which once crowned with their keeps the various mounds which still exist,–

"Chiefless castles, breathing stern farewells
From gray but leafy walls, where Ruin greenly dwells."

It was along the banks of the Ouse, a little north of Bedford, that a young knight was riding one bright January morning in 1224. By his side hung his good sword, though he was clad only in the ordinary riding dress of the period; for these were troublous times, and the country round by no means secure. At Bedford Castle, Sir Fulke de Breauté, one of the late King John's lieutenants, sat strongly intrenched, like the robber-barons of a later day in their castles on the Rhine, spreading devastation far and wide.

Young Ralph de Beauchamp, who was making his way that winter morning along the marshy banks of the river, which were later to develop into Drayton's "rich meadows," was the son of the younger brother of the former occupant and ejected owner of Bedford Castle. For more than a hundred years the banner of the De Beauchamps had waved from Bedford keep. Their ancestor, Hugo de Beauchamp, had received the feof from the Conqueror, together with many a broad manor in the county. His son, Pain, had reared the strong keep on the lofty mound which to this day overlooks the Ouse, and from which Cuthwulf the Saxon had driven the Britons in 572, pursuing them far south into the Thames valley. Later on, the Danes, sailing up the Ouse, had burned the Saxon *Burh*; but the Norman keep, though it had surrendered, had never yet been taken by assault. Eight years before the time of our story, William de Beauchamp, the head of the family, and the uncle of young Ralph, had sided with the barons who were standing up for the liberties of England against King John, and had been ousted by John's ferocious lieutenant, Fulke de Breauté. This latter, as has been told, now held the castle, no longer as lieutenant for Henry, John's youthful successor, but as the leader of a band of robbers, who knew no right but might.

Thus it had come to pass that the house of De Beauchamp, once so powerful in Bedfordshire, was rather down in the world in the early part of the thirteenth century, and young Sir Ralph felt the reverses of his family. Left an orphan in childhood, he had been brought up by his uncle William, and though a penniless knight, heir neither to the estates of Bedford, nor to those of another branch of the family seated at the castle of Eaton Socon, lower down the river, he had, as it were, been rewarded by nature with more than a compensating share of the graces of face and form. He was, moreover, a proficient in those exercises of the tilt-yard which formed an important part of a knightly education, and which were as dear to young men in the thirteenth century as are their athletic pursuits to those of the present day. Nor had his mental training been entirely neglected. True, the latter would not be considered much now-a-days; but in his boyhood, in Bedford Castle, Ralph had sat many hours in the chaplain's room, when he would much rather have been bathing or fishing in the stream below the walls, learning from the venerable priest how to read, write, and speak Latin, then a

most necessary part of a gentleman's education.

But neither poverty nor the misfortunes of his family appeared to weigh heavily on Sir Ralph's mind, to judge by the cheerful expression of his countenance, as he rode along humming the refrain of an old Provençal love-song, which some of De Beauchamp's retainers had brought into Bedfordshire from fair France. Neither did he seem in any dread of Fulke de Breauté's myrmidons, for the valley was clear of such as far as eye could reach, though it was then in great measure overflowed by the waters of the Ouse. As was not unusual then in winter-time, the broad river had risen above its low-lying banks, and a vast expanse of water shimmered far and wide in the sunlight. Later on, in Fuller's time, a not uncommon saying gave the Ouse the name of the "Bailiff of Bedfordshire," from the quantity of hay and other produce *distrained* from the low-lying lands by these frequent and extensive floods.

As Ralph approached Milton Mill, which was half submerged, and perforce inactive, he reined up his steed, who was already up to her fetlocks in the shallow flood which covered the meadows and the track, and eagerly scanned the watery waste before him, for his keen eye had caught sight of something dark being whirled down the rushing torrent. For an instant he doubted as to whether it were not some snag or tree-branch torn from the willows in the osier-bed further up. But the truth flashed upon him when he perceived a slight struggle on the part of the object, something which might be an arm raised from the water, and clutching despairingly at nothing.

"B' our Lady!" exclaimed the young knight, "there goes some poor wretch who seems like to die unshriven, unless I can give him a helping hand! 'Tis but a chance.–But come up, my lady," he added, admonishing his good gray mare with a slight prick from the heavy goads or "pryck spurs" which armed his heels; "we can but do our best!"

So saying, Ralph hastily turned his steed to the left, and rode quickly through the slush, down the half-submerged bank, and into the stream. There was not a moment to lose. Judging his distance carefully, he forced the mare into the river a little below the struggling figure, which seemed to be encumbered with heavy clothing. The current, turgid and lead-coloured, swirled violently round the stout steed, who had enough to do to keep on her feet against it, weighted as she was with her stalwart rider. Further and further Ralph forced her with voice and spur, though she backed and stumbled, bewildered by the novel situation, and battling against the current. Already the swiftly-eddying water had reached her shoulders, when, by her head thrown back, her distended nostrils and starting eye, Ralph saw she could do no more.

So, bending low down over his saddle-bow, and reaching out his right arm as far as he was able to stretch, he awaited the critical moment when the drown-

ing man should be swept down towards him. Then, quick as thought, he gripped with an iron grasp at the black frock in which the figure was clothed, and turned his horse sharply round. The good steed fought her way bravely out of the stream, her rider dragging the drowning man behind him.

The moment he found himself on dry land once more, Ralph leaped off to breathe his horse, and to look at the half-unconscious man he had rescued, and who was clad in the lay or serving brother's habit of the Benedictines.

Kneeling by his side, the knight chafed his wet face and hands, and presently his eyes opened, and he sat up.

"Thanks to Our Lady and St. Benedict!" he muttered, "and to you, Sir Knight! But I thought it was all over with me."

"And, in good sooth, *I* thought so too, my good fellow!" exclaimed Sir Ralph, stamping to shake the water off his leathern hose and jerkin and woollen surcoat. "But how came you to venture alone, and without a guide, across the ford at flood time?" he added, much relieved to see the lay-brother, who was young and robust, rise to his feet and begin to wring his habit.

"I was bred and born in these parts, Sir Knight," replied the latter, "and I could find my way across Milton Ford blindfold. Nay, I have even crossed it in worse seasons than this. But that was before I took upon me this habit, and I trow our holy founder did not contemplate that his followers should have to swim for their lives in it. Moreover, I have travelled far and swiftly, and I am weary."

"And have you much further to go yet?" inquired the knight.

"But as far as Bletsoe," replied the lay-brother.

"Then get you up behind me on my horse," answered Ralph, "and together we will take our road, for my journey also ends at Bletsoe."

"Nay, Sir Knight," replied the lay-brother, glancing at Ralph's gilt spur of knighthood; "that would be far from seemly. This is not the first time by any means that the Ouse has tried to knock the breath out of my body, for I was brought up on his banks. My father is one of the retainers of my Lord de Pateshulle, and lives just between my lord's house and the river. Moreover, it will be best for me to trudge along on foot, and maybe my clothes will be dry before I have finished my journey. Not that I can ever forget your kind help, sir, or my merciful deliverance, thanks be to God," he added, devoutly crossing himself.

Accordingly Ralph, the mare having recovered herself from her gallant struggle in the water, remounted, and the lay-brother stepped out bravely by his side.

"And prithee, my good fellow," asked the knight, "how came you to be struggling in the Ouse this morning in your Benedictine dress?"

"Alas, sir!" replied the lay-brother, "I am one of the humblest servants of the holy Abbey of St. Albans, and I am but just now escaped from greater danger

than that which you beheld befall me in the Ouse, for at dusk yesterday came that enemy of God, Sir Fulke de Breauté–"

"Ay!" interrupted Ralph, "that disgrace to knighthood–the treacherous robber who hath seized my uncle's castle!"

The lay-brother looked up at the handsome face turned down upon him, and then at the arms embroidered on his surcoat. Bowing his head in obeisance to his companion when he recognized that he was in the presence of one of the family of De Beauchamp, he proceeded to relate a terrible tale of murder and outrage committed at St. Albans but the day before by the Robber Baron of Bedford Castle.

"We had but just finished the office of nones in our beautiful abbey church, Sir Knight," he continued, "when we heard a terrible noise of fighting and confusion at the very gate of the abbey itself. The porter's man came rushing in to tell us that De Breauté (whom the saints send to perdition!), with a large band of his Bedford robbers, was in possession of the town, ill-treating the townsfolk in every way, binding many of them fast as prisoners, and demanding admission into our own sacred precincts. I and some others ran to the gate-house, and looking forth from the upper windows, beheld a terrible sight. In front of the gate the soldiers and men-at-arms had formed a half-circle, and in the midst were a great crowd of townsfolk–men, women, and children–all with their arms bound behind their backs, buffeted, kicked, and mocked by the villains who guarded them. And against the gate there was a huge fire kindled, in order that the gate itself might, if possible, be destroyed. And by the fire stood that arch-fiend Fulke himself, calling to our reverend father abbot to come and speak with him. Then, as we looked, we saw certain soldiers drag forward one of the townsmen, and by the light of the blaze–for it was already dark–I saw that it was no other than his worship the bailiff of the town who was thus treated. And then (O merciful God, show thy vengeance upon Fulke and his crew!) they cast him, bound as he was, into the midst of the fire! O sir, the shrieks of this man, dying in torture, as the soldiers thrust him down with their spears!"

He paused for breath a moment, as if overwhelmed with the horrible memory of what he had witnessed. The gray mare started, spurred unconsciously in his wrath by her rider, who, with teeth clinched, muttered imprecations upon Fulke de Breauté.

"Go on," he said; "let me hear the whole of this devil's work!"

The lay-brother went on.

"Next our father abbot looked down from the window and began to upbraid the impious Fulke for his great wickedness. But when De Breauté heard him, he looked up and cried, 'Hasten, my Lord Abbot, and send me, with all speed, from your abbey coffers the sum of one hundred pounds, not more, not less, or, by my

"The soldiers cast the bailiff into the midst of the fire."

soul, the whole town shall be sacked, and the burgesses served as their bailiff!' Then some of my lord's court waxed wroth, and one of them, a young noble, and a dear friend of my lord abbot, cried, 'Who will with me, that we drive these impious robbers away?' And certain of the household, together with some of the younger serving-brothers, and myself among them, agreed to follow the young knight if he would lead us–"

"'Twas bravely spoken–bravely done," interrupted Ralph impetuously.

"And we rushed out through the gate, and through the fire, and across the burnt body of the bailiff. But, alack! we had but staves in our hands, and clubs–for Holy Church forbids us to use more carnal weapons–and so what could we do against armed men? Our leader was struck down dead by Fulke himself–I saw the deed with my own eyes. We could not get us back into the abbey, for the brethren had closed the gate behind us. We fled, or tried to flee, in all directions. I myself made my way by force of my right arm and my club through the soldiers where the line was the weakest. Whether my comrades escaped I know not. God be with their souls! Then I girded up my frock and ran until I had distanced those who pursued me, clad as they were in their heavy armour. Praise be to the saints, I am healthy and strong, and, thanks to you, Sir Knight, have escaped the broad Ouse's waters as well this day!"

Ralph, who during the lay-brother's narrative had kept up an undercurrent of muttered curses on Fulke de Breauté and his followers, glanced with admiration at the sturdy young hero by his side.

"Methinks," he said, smiting him a good-natured slap upon the back, "that Mother Church has despoiled us of a good soldier here! But, say, how comes it that you make your way by Milton Ford at this flood season, and not high and dry over Bedford Bridge?"

"I have journeyed all night, Sir Knight," he replied, "save that I rested a space in the houses of acquaintances at Luton and Ampthill, to whom I told my tale, and who refreshed me with meat and drink. But when I drew nigh to Bedford, I left the main road, and took the right bank up the river till I reached Milton Mill. I dared not venture to pass through the town. How could I tell but that some of De Breauté's men might not have already returned to the castle, and be ready to fall on any one clad in Benedictine habit, and crossing the bridge from the direction of St. Alban's? The rest, Sir Knight, you know. I suppose I was weak and weary with my fighting and my journeying, and when I missed the ford, had not strength to battle with the stream, many times as I have swum the broad Ouse. Perils by fire! perils by water! But thanks to Heaven and you, Sir Knight, in a short space I shall be once again in my old village home. I have not exactly found the religious calm and peace which was promised me when I professed as a lay-brother six months ago," he added, with a smile.

The recital of this raid on the town of St. Alban's, an account of which has been handed down to us in manuscript by an unknown scribe, together with various suggestions on the part of Sir Ralph for the destruction of Fulke and his "nest of the devil," occupied our travellers till they reached the village of Bletsoe. There the knight saw the lay-brother safe to his father's house, and after many renewed expressions of gratitude from him, rode on alone, further up the village to the mansion of the De Pateshulles.

CHAPTER II.

BLETSOE MANOR-HOUSE.

The manor-house of Bletsoe stood on the north side of the parish church of St. Margaret, about a mile from the point where the river makes a sharp bend from east to south. Of the manor-house, and of the castle which succeeded it, no traces remain, but portions of a seventeenth century mansion, now a farm-house, mark its site. The Pateshulles had come into Bedfordshire from Staffordshire, where is situated the village of Pateshulle, from which they took their name. From them Bletsoe passed to the De Beauchamps, another branch of the family to which Ralph belonged. Their heiress married into the family of St. John, who possess Bletsoe to this day.

But in the early part of the thirteenth century, when the Pateshulles first possessed it, Bletsoe was but a small place, not even fortified, till in 1327, more than a century later, John de Pateshulle obtained from the king a license to crenellate his mansion–that is, to erect defensive parapets on the walls.

The house to which Sir Ralph de Beauchamp made his way was therefore built in the usual fashion of a gentleman's residence at that period–timber-framed, and of no architectural pretensions. At one end of a central hall were the private apartments of the family, at the other the domestic offices and the rooms of the servants and retainers. In front of the hall was a gate-house, where a porter watched continually in his lodge; and from this gate-house flanking wooden palisades ran on either side to the private apartments and servants' offices, enclosing a small courtyard.

As Ralph rode through the gate, a round, white-haired face peeped from the lodge door.

"Soho! Dicky Dumpling," cried the young knight, springing from his gray

mare with a ringing of his spurs upon the pavement.

The individual thus accosted emerged from the doorway of his dwelling. Many years of service and of good living in the porter's lodge of the De Pateshulles, combined with very little active exercise, had caused Dicky's figure to assume the rotund proportions not inaptly expressed by the nickname by which he was universally known. When he perceived Sir Ralph, his broad countenance lighted up with a grin of satisfaction, which caused his twinkling eyes almost to disappear among wrinkles of fat, and he waddled forward with as much alacrity as he was capable of and seized the horse's bridle. As he did so, his eyes rested on Ralph's still moist and mire-stained surcoat and dripping hose.

"By St. Dunstan!" exclaimed the old servitor, speaking with the freedom of having known Ralph ever since the latter was a page in his uncle Sir William's service, and came often in his train to Bletsoe Manor–"by St. Dunstan, Sir Knight, and beshrew me if I don't think you choose a cold season to go swimming in the Ouse at flood time!"

"You speak with your usual wisdom, O Dumpling mine," responded Ralph, laughing; "but I've been a-fishing."

Dumpling opened his wide mouth to it fullest extent.

"A-fishing, good my lord?"

"Ay, a-fishing; and I've caught a larger and a fatter pike than ever yet gladdened your eyes and made that huge mouth of thine water, and with a finer set of teeth than you have, after all the hard work you have given yours. There has been bad and bloody work at St. Alban's, and fresh foul deeds have been done by yon devil in human form of Bedford. You can hear more anon, if your curiosity can drive your fat carcass as far down the village as Goodman Hodge's cottage. I cannot tarry to tell thee more. Say, Dickon, is your lord within?"

It was now Dumpling's turn to have a joke. His face assumed a mock expression of the utmost gravity, belied by the twinkle of his merry little eyes. He stood on tiptoe, and spoke in a low voice close to Ralph's ear.

"My lord went forth an hour ago to fly a new falcon he has just bought. He will return at noon to dine. I can smell even now the good and savoury odours that arise from the spit. But I'll warrant me that the meat is not yet done to a turn, and that you have yet time. Hist!"

Whereupon he laid his hand on the young knight's arm, and with finger on his lips drew him from under the gate-house arch, and pointed to the farther corner of the court-yard.

Under the windows of the Lord of Bletsoe's apartments a sort of garden had been railed off from the rest of the court-yard, so as to be somewhat private. Out in this garden, in the bright January sunshine, stood a tall and graceful girl engaged in nailing up some sort of creeper round the windows. Her long arms–

bare to their full length, for the long loose sleeves of the period had slipped up to her shoulders–were stretched above her head in order that she might reach her work. Her small, delicate head, which was uncovered, was thrown back as she looked up at the wall, and from it thick masses of brown hair waved down her shoulders. She had evidently been tempted out by the sunshine to do a little winter gardening, and wore neither fillet nor mantle, while the rather tight robe of the period, clinging to her figure, set off admirably her tall stately form, just budding into the full maturity of young womanhood.

There came a clanking of armed heels and the rattle of a scabbard over the stones of the court-yard, and the young lady turned sharply round. A smile of recognition and a deep flush passed together across her fair face. The next moment she glanced back at the half-open door of a turret staircase close at hand, evidently communicating with the private apartments above, and made a movement as if to flee.

But Ralph was too quick for her. In an instant he had vaulted the low fence, and gained her side, so that common courtesy, if no stronger motive, obliged her to remain. Then he caught her by both hands and made as if he would kiss her; but she shook her head.

"Aliva, my heart's darling!" he exclaimed; "I prithee tell me what is wrong this morning? You seem not glad to see me. Have I frightened you in coming on you so suddenly?" he added, half jesting.

The maiden's lips curled bewitchingly.

"A daughter of the De Pateshulles has yet to learn what fear is," she replied; "and I warrant you could not teach it me, Ralph, either in person or in practice," she added. And then the smile died away, and the grave expression stole over her face immediately.

"But, my ladye fair, I would fain have you overjoyed to see me this morning, for I bring news which will perhaps lead your father to look more favourably on my suit," continued Ralph. "But perchance that is news you would therefore be ill-pleased to hear," he added.

Aliva tossed her head with a laugh in her eyes.

"Try me, Sir Knight," she said–"say on your news," and her face lit up again with pleasure.

"One point in my fate still remains unchanged," Ralph went on. "A soldier of fortune I am, and such I must continue; there is no fresh news on that score. If you will wed me, dear heart, you will still have to wed one who must depend on his own right arm. But now I see a chance before me of exerting that right arm."

For the moment, however, the member to which he alluded had found its way round Aliva's waist, and did not appear to exert itself any further for the time being.

”Now that I have received my knightly rank,” Ralph continued, ”I have a hope, also, of active service. The king, as I have lately heard, meditates an expedition across the Border to punish the Scots, and a great council of the nation is to be summoned to meet at Northampton in the summer. When once the business is arranged, and the royal forces set forth for the north, methinks I am sure of a good post. My uncle’s weight and interest have not been utterly lost, though he has been driven from the home of our ancestors. When he begs for a command for a De Beauchamp, the king surely cannot say him nay. And then, when the war is over, when we have taught the Scots a lesson, in a few months I shall come again, my Aliva, and come no longer penniless and unknown, but with rank, position, the promise of further employment, and perhaps, if fortune favours me–for I will do all man can dare to do–with some deed of glory, some honour not unworthy to lay at your feet as a wedding-gift. Oh say, Aliva, your father will hearken then?”

Aliva had not spoken, had not interrupted him. She stood, her eyes cast on the ground, a fierce struggle going on within her. As a daughter, she felt that she ought not to have allowed this stolen interview against her father’s wishes. She ought to have fled by the turret-stair, with merely a courteous salutation for her visitor. Yet there he stood, this penniless young knight, by her side, his arm round her waist, and his large gray eyes gazing with devotion and love into her face. Moreover, he was telling her of a soldier’s duties; he spoke of war and danger. What could she do? She was but a woman, warm-hearted and also of impulsive nature. The court-yard was clear, for Dicky Dumpling had hobbled off to the stables with the gray mare. For all answer she laid her head upon his shoulder and her right hand sought his left–the one, be it remembered, that was disengaged.

It was but for a moment, however, and then it was not only maidenly instinct which made her draw herself free from his embrace.

”Ugh!” she exclaimed; ”where in the name of all that’s marvellous have you been this morning, Ralph? You are dripping wet, or at least anything but dry!”

”Have no fear, lady; I have had no worse encounter than one with our old river this morning, and I crave your forgiveness for thus presenting myself, for time brooked no delay. But I bear evil tidings for the ears of a devout daughter of Holy Church,” he continued; and he told her the story of De Breauté’s impious raid upon St. Alban’s Abbey.

The maiden listened horror-stricken, and when he had ended, pressed her fingers to her eyes, as if to shut out the horrible scene he had conjured up.

”O Mother of God!” she exclaimed, in a low shuddering voice, as if to herself. ”And it is with one of this family of spoilers of churches and murderers of the servants of holy men that my father would have me wed!”

Ralph drew back, astonished at her words.

”Aliva! what say you? You are dreaming! Wed with a De Breauté? Never while I draw breath; by the holy Cross I swear it. Your father! he speaks in sorry jest or in madness. And besides, the scoundrel Fulke has a wife already–that ill-fated Lady Margaret de Ripariis, affianced at one time to my uncle, Sir William, and forced against her will into a marriage with Fulke by our late king. Aliva, speak, I conjure you. What mean you by such words?”

”Alas!” replied the maiden, hesitatingly and mournfully, and answering only the latter part of her lover’s question, ”my father knows full well the sad history of the Lady Margaret, and ofttimes hath he said, more in jest than in earnest I trust, that after all the lady has become the *châtelaine* of Bedford Castle, and that since your noble uncle has been turned out, she did well to marry with the man who has got inside–”

”Peace, my sweetest Aliva,” interrupted Ralph impetuously. ”Speak not of that unfortunate Lady Margaret. But tell me, I beseech thee, what your father means by joining your name with one of the house of De Breauté.”

The Lady Aliva drew herself together, as with an effort.

”Nay, I would not have spoken–the name escaped me when you spake of the outrage on the church–forget–”

She stopped short, her voice breaking. The excitement of this unexpected meeting with the man she loved, the news that he was about to leave her for war and danger, the sweet moment in which she had allowed him to clasp her in his arms, the fearful tale of slaughter he had unfolded, which brought back suddenly to her mind, with the mention of the name of De Breauté, the fate that was proposed for her, and which she had well-nigh forgotten in her happiness of finding herself by Ralph’s side once more,–all these emotions proved too much for her. Bursting into a flood of tears, she made for the turret door, and, in spite of the young knight’s effort to detain her, disappeared up the stairs.

Ralph, stunned and mystified, was staring at the door which had closed behind her, when he heard a wheezing at his elbow.

”Sir Knight, the pasty is done brown and the cook is ready to serve up, and from the gate-house window I see my lord herding his falcons, and preparing to return,” said Dicky Dumpling’s voice.

It aroused Ralph as from a dream. Pressing a piece of money into the porter’s fat palm, he hastened to fetch his mare from the stable, and mounting her, rode away with a heavy heart through the gate of Bletsoe Castle.

Dicky Dumpling looked after him and shook his head.

”He comes with a jest, and he goes without a word! Things look ill, I trow. ’Laugh and grow fat’ is my motto, laugh and grow fat! Plague on that lazy scul-

lion! why lingers he so long with my dinner?"

CHAPTER III.

HOW ALIVA RECEIVED A SECOND SUITOR.

So fair and noble a maiden as the Lady Aliva de Pateshulle deserved a better father than she possessed. The Lord of Bletsoe was rather too inclined to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds, to play a double part, waiting to see where his own interests would best be served. But we must bear in mind the condition of affairs in the time in which he lived. The old and formerly powerful county family of the De Beauchamps were fallen from their high estate; for Sir William, their head, had been ousted from his castle, and in those days a baron without castle and stronghold occupied but an inferior position. On the other hand, the house of De Breauté had come decidedly to the front; for, as the chroniclers of the time tell us, Fulke held not only the castle of Bedford, but also the castles and the shrievalties of Oxford, Northampton, Buckingham, and Cambridge. All these he had received as the reward for his services against the barons on behalf of King John, so there could be no doubt but that the De Breauté family was wealthy, and also, apparently, firmly rooted at Bedford.

It must not be supposed, however, that De Pateshulle could excuse Fulke's outrages, or that he would have gone so far as to give his daughter to one who bore so evil a name, even had he not been already married. The intended son-in-law was another member of the De Breauté family.

As the Lady Margaret de Ripariis, the unhappy wife of Fulke, had born her husband no children, the heir to his wealth was his younger brother William. Now this William de Breauté was not yet as widely known, nor as hated, as his brother, nor was it even asserted that he had taken part in any of the foul deeds committed by the latter. Soldier of fortune like his brother, he had but lately arrived from France, and taken up his residence in Bedfordshire, where perhaps he was not altogether unpopular, for he had even gone so far as to hint that, should Sir Fulke come to a violent end in one of his forays, and he, William, become the lord of Bedford Castle, the neighbourhood should have no reason to mourn the change. With regard to the De Beauchamps, however, he intimated pretty strongly that he considered his family to have sufficient title to the castle from the grant of King John, and no one, naturally, was prepared to say that the

young King Henry was in a position to upset his father's arrangements.

Accordingly, when William de Beauté approached De Pateshulle with a proposal that he should give him his daughter Aliva in marriage, it was not altogether unnatural that that gentleman, being of poor estate though of good family, and not even possessing a fortified dwelling–in itself a mark of position in those days–should be willing to listen to a suit which would place his descendants at Bedford Castle, and in the position held in former days by the De Beauchamps.

It was on the afternoon of the same day on which Ralph de Beauchamp had met Aliva de Pateshulle in the garden that William de Beauté presented himself in person at the mansion of Bletsoe. Had he been aware of the stolen interview which had taken place a few hours before by the turret door, he would hardly have selected this day for pressing his suit with Aliva herself. But ignorance is bliss. De Beauté had not been sufficiently long in the neighbourhood to learn that there had been love passages between Ralph and Aliva, so he rode over to Bletsoe in a self-satisfied frame of mind, armed as he was with De Pateshulle's permission, which, in those days when ladies were often given in marriage against their will, was, he flattered himself, of considerable force. But he little knew with what a resolute maiden he had to deal. Moreover, he was still ignorant of the outrages at St. Alban's the previous evening, which were likely to bring fresh discredit on his name. He only knew that Fulke had gone off on some raid, and had not yet returned when he left Bedford.

William de Beauté was several years younger than his brother–not much senior, in fact, to Ralph de Beauchamp himself. French by title and education, he had imported something of Continental grace and manners into the Anglo-Norman society of the time in Bedfordshire. He was more careful of his dress and person than the other young men of the neighbourhood. Instead of the short curling beard and half-long hair which was the fashion in England, he wore only a small, carefully-trimmed moustache, and his dark hair was cut short all over his head. He had first met the Lady Aliva at a hunting-party held in the woods on the other side of the river, by Sir William Wake of Stevington Castle, when the maiden, no mean horsewoman nor inferior shot with the cross-bow, had greatly distinguished herself by her prowess in venery. Since then, upon every occasion, William de Beauté had attempted to ingratiate himself with the daughter of De Pateshulle, by his foreign-cultured manners, and by showing, not altogether unsuccessfully perhaps, that he was more of a lady's man than the young knights and squires of the county who flocked around her. But up till now he had not ventured to make serious love to her. Indeed, with his frothy, shallow nature, an impetuous, earnest wooing such as Ralph's would not have been easy.

There was a twofold motive in the suit De Beauté now sought to press. With his admiration for the stately beauty mingled a desire to establish himself

firmly in his position by an alliance with an old family, such as that of a De Pateshulle. He was by no means totally insincere in disclaiming any part in Sir Fulke's malpractices, and was keenly alive to the precarious footing upon which he stood in Bedfordshire, both on account of the sympathy universally felt for the ejected De Beauchamps, and also by reason of his brother's lawless freebooting career.

In anything but an enviable state of mind Aliva sat at the little window of her chamber, her hands clasped convulsively round her knees, and watched the watery rays of the sunshine of a winter's afternoon piercing the fog, which slowly mounted from the river over the low-lying country around. The scene seemed to her typical of her unhappy position.

"The sunshine of my life is past and gone," she exclaimed to herself, with the acute bitterness of sorrowing youth. "My sun has vanished, and the mists creep on apace! They threaten to enshroud me. I know not which way to turn!" she added, with the reaction of despair common to all proud, high-spirited natures. "O my father, my father! the burden you have laid upon me is too heavy to bear! Since you first told of your wishes–nay, your commands–I have been torn hither and thither. Had I a mother, had that dear parent not been taken so early from me, she would have known, have felt, that this is no idle fancy, no passing friendship for Ralph! O be merciful! do not force me to take another!"

Those were the days when a dutiful and reverential spirit of obedience to parents, of which we find now, unhappily, not so much trace, was looked upon as a sacred duty. Daughters were given in marriage by their parents with but little regard for their own wishes, and rich heiresses–though indeed poor Aliva was not one of these latter–were even disposed of by royal authority for political purposes. In the hapless Margaret de Ripariis, the wife of Fulke, Aliva had herself seen an instance of such a forced marriage. No wonder that she was in despair, and had torn herself away from Ralph in confusion and distress, when her miserable position was suddenly recalled to her.

Even as she thus moaned to herself, the sun sank behind a bank of mist, and a raw, gray gloom fell over the landscape, while home-coming rooks settled in the tall elms round the house, cawing mournfully.

"My father said he might come this very day," Aliva thought to herself. "But surely the vesper-bell will soon be ringing from the church, and then, thanks to our blessed St. Margaret, I shall be safe for yet another day!"

But even as she spoke she heard the sound of a horseman riding in under the gateway, and of Dicky Dumpling's voice bawling to a serving-man; for after his visit to the lay-brother's cottage, and the news he had there heard, the fat porter felt in no mood to hold the bridle of a De Breauté.

But Aliva did not peep from her window as she had done when Ralph rode

off, for she guessed who had come, and her heart sank within her.

Quickly there came a knock at the door, and the old serving-woman entered.

"My lady, my lord thy father desires you attend him in the great hall."

"Tell him I come," answered Aliva, and she rose.

A daughter's obedience she owed, and she would indeed obey an order to confront this unwelcome suitor. But even as she smoothed her flowing hair, and, with the natural vanity of a girl about to meet an admirer, arranged it beneath the fillet, and settled the sweeping lines of her tight-fitting robe, the exigency of the crisis raised the maiden's spirit. For she was of Anglo-Norman blood. Her sires had fought at Hastings, and from each line of ancestors she inherited totally distinct qualities of bravery, dogged resolution, intrepid pride, and tenacity of purpose, which, blended together, have produced the finest race the world has ever seen.

As she entered the hall door opening into the dais or upper end, her father and William de Breauté, standing together in the oriel, thought they had never seen her look so "divinely tall, and most divinely fair."

With one glance at the latter she swept straight up to her parent, and spoke slowly and clearly, though it needed all her strong self-will to suppress her agitation.

"Father," she said, "I saw Sir Ralph de Beauchamp here this morning."

A complete silence followed as she ceased and stepped quietly to the deep oriel window, passing her father on the other side to that on which De Breauté stood. There was silence as she gazed fixedly out into the distant winter landscape, over which the dusk was already gathering, her teeth set, her lips firmly closed, and her clasped hands so tightly clinched that the nails cut into her flesh. She moved not a muscle, but stood rigid as a statue.

De Pateshulle shifted uneasily on his feet, and sought his guest's face with restless eyes and troubled expression, giving an apologetic cough.

The large log burning in the open fireplace half-way down the hall fell with a sudden crash from the fire-dogs, as one charred end gave way.

De Breauté started. He had been cowed for a moment by the flashing glance Aliva had given him as she entered the hall. He had been stabbed by a maddening pang of jealousy at the few words she had spoken. But in the silence which followed he regained courage, and plunged vehemently into the set speech he had prepared,–

"Most beauteous Lady Aliva, fairest daisy of an English meadow, witching Diana of the woods, behold in me a poor suppliant from *outre mer*, falling at your fair feet, wounded to death by the glance of your bright een, the victim of Venus *venerie*! I pray thee, proud damoiselle, to deign to look upon me with favour, and

to fan with words of comfort the fire ardent your beauty hath enkindled!"

He paused for lack of breath, and then launched out again into Continental flowers of compliment and gallantry.

As he spoke he advanced gradually towards Aliva, bowing, his hand upon his heart.

The two were only about six paces apart. Slowly and deliberately Aliva took those six paces, with an expression of indignation and scorn. Her right fist was tightly clinched. She raised her arm, and (we must remember this was the thirteenth and not the nineteenth century) she struck the dark little Frenchman full in the face.

CHAPTER IV.
IN BEDFORD CASTLE.

A few weeks after William de Breauté, his face smarting and disfigured by a blow from a woman's hand, had ridden off from Bletsoe, his elder brother Fulke–"that disgrace to knighthood," as Ralph de Beauchamp had termed him–sat one morning in his wife's apartment in his castle of Bedford.

The lady's bower, as the private room of the *châtelaine* was called, was at Bedford pleasantly situated in the upper part of the great keep reared by Pain de Beauchamp. The interior arrangement of a Norman castle was usually as follows:–

The ground-floor, to which there was no entrance from without, was called the *dungeon*, and was used as a storehouse for the provisions which were necessary to enable the castle to stand a siege. Here, also, was the well, another necessity, and prisoners were also sometimes confined in the ground-floor, hence the application of the name to prisons in general. The greater part of the first floor was occupied by the large apartment called the hall. This was approached by steps outside the building, and was entered through a portal which was often highly ornamented. The great hall was common ground to all who had any right to enter the keep, but above it were the private rooms for the lord and his family, which were usually approached by a staircase built at one corner of the keep. The windows were very small: in the lower portion of the building were long narrow tunnels pierced through the thickness of the wall; but in the upper stories, where the walls were safe from attack by battering-rams or such engines,

they were often splayed within at a wide angle. In the recess thus formed seats could be placed commanding a view through the narrow window, covered only by a wooden shutter, which could be hooked back when the weather permitted.

In such a nook, in her own private room, sat Margaret de Ripariis, the lady of Bedford Castle. The view from out of the open window was a pleasant one. Immediately at her feet was the strong wall surrounding the keep itself; its exact position can even now be determined, as we stand on the flat bowling-green which occupies the summit of the mound where the keep once stood. Beyond, the broad stream of the Ouse protected the castle along the whole of the southern front. Across the river, to the right, the Micklegate, or southern portion of the town, clustered round the two churches of St. Mary and St. Peter, Dunstable; and the view from the upper stories of the keep embraced the abbey of Elstow, with its great Norman church, some two miles further to the south, and was only bounded by the blue line of the Ampthill hills.

But charming as was the prospect, the Lady Margaret was not regarding it with any expression of satisfaction. In fact, her thoughts were quite otherwise occupied. A controversy was going on at that moment between herself and her lord and master, and she merely gazed out of the window in order to turn away her eyes from him, for they were full of tears. An unfortunate contrast to the scene within were the calm river and the bright spring sunshine without.

The Lady Margaret had barely reached middle age, but sorrow and care had worn weary lines on a face which, some twenty years before, must have been one of exceeding beauty. When a young girl, she had betrothed herself to William de Beauchamp, Ralph's uncle; but by an overstraining of that feudal law which allowed the king, or any other chief, the power to give his ward in marriage, she had been forced by King John into a distasteful match with Fulke de Breauté. It would have been possible, but difficult, for a strong-willed woman to resist the will and the command of a feudal superior. But in the case of an heiress, such as was Margaret de Ripariis, great pressure was exercised, and many women in those days had to yield against their will and inclination. Fulke de Breauté himself was at that time a young man in the height of favour with King John, who was then engaged in his desperate struggle with his barons, and who eventually rewarded his supporter with the governorship of Bedford, and the hand of the rich heiress.

But on the morning in question in this chapter the redoubtable Fulke was in a somewhat less defiant, and even in a penitent mood. Not, however, that he had as yet made any act of reparation for the terrible deed of pillage and murder committed on St. Vincent's Eve at St. Alban's, and which the ferocious knight had finally crowned by carrying off a crowd of men, women, and children to his stronghold at Bedford.

In those days freebooting barons pounced upon prisoners for the sake of ransom, much as the Greek brigands do now, and we may be sure that the burgesses of St. Alban's had to pay up pretty heavily ere their fellow-townsfolk were restored to them. The chronicler, however, does not relate the fate of these unfortunate creatures thus hurried off to Bedford, but what he does tell us is, that the conscience of Fulke, dead enough probably when that miscreant was awake, had been pricking him as he slept; and "conscience doth make cowards of us all."

De Breauté was suffering mentally from an uneasy night and a very ugly dream. He had seen, the chronicler relates–though how he came by such an intimate knowledge of the knight's dream does not transpire–he had seen a huge stone fall from the summit of the great central tower of St. Alban's Abbey–that tower built of the bricks of the Roman Verulam which we still see rising high above the city–and had felt it fall upon him and crush him to powder.

One cannot but think that Sir Fulke was paying the penalty for a too hearty indulgence in some indigestible dish at the supper-table the evening before. Be that how it may, however, he awoke with a great cry, and told the dream to Lady Margaret. The latter, as much alarmed as her husband, drew from him an account of his late raid, of which the presence of the captives had given her an inkling, and then urged him to go off forthwith to St. Alban's, and make reparation at the shrine of the saint.

With the morning light, however, Sir Fulke, himself again, demurred. He began to regret that he had told his wife all. The brief season of superstitious fear had passed away, and his usual condition of ferocity and self-will supervening, he was endeavouring, and not unsuccessfully, to master the better feeling that had arisen within him.

The Lady Margaret had, under the seemingly fortuitous circumstances of her husband's brief penitence, ventured to bring forward a matter she had at heart. It was now the season of Lent. In the famous Benedictine Nunnery of Elstow, close to Bedford, Martin de Pateshulle, Archdeacon of Northampton, and the uncle of Aliva, was holding a series of special devotional services for women, or what we should now call a retreat, which was attended by many of the ladies of the county. Margaret, sick at heart with her life at Bedford Castle, and weary of the blasphemies and the sacrilege of her husband, was most anxious to escape, if only for a time, into the seclusion of religious life.

The old chaplain of the castle, the pious and venerable priest, who had taught Ralph de Beauchamp his *hic*, *hæc*, *hoc*, had long since been gathered to his rest. Indeed, had he still been alive, he could scarcely have continued in his office under the new *régime*. So chaplain at this time there was none in Bedford Castle. He must, indeed, have been a strange priest who would have been acceptable to Fulke and his crew.

St. Paul's, the principal church in the town, had been despoiled by the sacrilegious baron, who had carried off the stones of which it was built to repair his stronghold, and it is not clear if the Augustinian canons who continued to serve it, though they had removed many years before to the priory erected for them at Newenham by Roisia de Beauchamp, would have found just then an altar to serve. Only on certain occasions would her brutal husband permit Margaret to attend to her religious duties at the chapel of St. Thomas-at-bridge, which stood at the foot of the bridge outside the castle gate. This morning, however, taking advantage of the fit of penitence which had seized him in the night, she was craving permission to go to the retreat at Elstow.

"I like not your running after these priests and their masses," remonstrated Sir Fulke. "We have gone many years with chapel unserved here. You know I have made of it a lumber-room; and we are none the worse for it, and," he added, with a grim chuckle, "perchance none the better."

"But, and did you allow me, I would go pray for you, while you yourself get you to the shrine of St. Alban, and make reparation to the holy servants of St. Benedict there, as you promised me last night, on your honour, you would do," pleaded the wife.

Sir Fulke winced at this allusion to his weakness and terror in the hours of darkness.

"Besides, you have often exhorted me to stand well for your sake with the knights and noble families round, and you know full well how many ladies are like to be at Elstow."

Sir Fulke paused awhile. It was perfectly true, as his wife had said, that he wanted to improve his social position in the neighbourhood, and though the superstitious fears arising from his fearful dream had now vanished, he was well aware that his last raid, with its accompanying murders, was more than any decent-minded men could put up with, even in those rough and cruel days. Therefore, as religious observances counted for much in the way of expiation of crime, he came to the conclusion that no harm would be done by a little vicarious repentance.

"Go, then," he said roughly. "But take care that if aught is said to you concerning this St. Alban's turmoil, you make out the best case you can for me. Say that the bailiff was burned by my men ere I got to the abbey gate, and that I knew naught of it till afterwards. You can add that some of my men-at-arms have been hanged for it, or aught else that occurs to you. Your woman-wit will tell you what to say."

"And then," exclaimed Lady Margaret, overlooking, in her thankfulness, the condition of lying imposed on the desired permission–"and then you will go yourself to St. Alban's, and–"

”Peace, woman!” interrupted the knight; ”leave me to order my own doings. I will command your palfrey to be ready. Take one of your women with you, and I will order varlets to go attend you. I would not that the wife of De Beauté should go to Elstow with any fewer train than the other dames.”

So saying, Sir Fulke strode from the room, leaving his wife setting about her preparations for departure with all alacrity.

De Beauté, rough and cruel as he was, had a great idea of keeping such state at Bedford as befitted a castle of such importance, and had no notion of letting it go down from the position which it had occupied in the time of the De Beauchamps. Indeed, from a military point of view, he had considerably strengthened it by adding to its defences with the material he had robbed from St. Paul’s. Within, it was well garrisoned and provisioned, and held by a force of nearly one hundred men-at-arms, or trained soldiers, besides grooms, servants, and followers. Though deprived of the services of a chaplain, the Lady Margaret was allowed to have two or three waiting-women or attendants, who held more the position of companions than mere servants.

Accompanied by one of these, she found herself, an hour or two after her interview with her husband, riding on her palfrey towards Elstow Abbey.

Her companion was a young and pretty girl who, by her combined prudence and archness, managed to hold her own among the rough crew who garrisoned Bedford Castle, while her bright wit and merry laugh at times shed a brief ray of brightness on the gloomy life of her unfortunate mistress, whose loneliness was cheered by her faithful attachment.

Beatrice Mertoun might, had she been inclined, have chosen a husband for herself from her many admirers among De Beauté’s chief retainers. But her affections were already fixed upon an officer in the royal army, one John de Standen, the king’s miner, from the Forest of Dean. De Standen occupied an important post as director of the mining operations so necessary in a siege, though he did not hold the rank of a knight, and therefore could hardly be said to represent a modern officer of engineers.

As the two ladies, followed by their grooms, proceeded on the way, the Lady Margaret confided to Beatrice the story of her lord’s dream, congratulating herself on its result being so far favourable as to allow her to pay this visit to the abbey.

”Now, by my halidom,” quoth the maiden, as she listened to the account of the vision, her thoughts running rather on her lover than on this pious pilgrimage, ”methinks to hurl down a stone like that were rather more like the work of Master John de Standen than of the holy Alban!”

”Tush, child! jest not of the blessed saints!” reproved the elder woman.

”I meant no harm, lady,” retorted the incorrigible Beatrice. ”I was ever

taught that the holy Alban was a good soldier and true, like De Standen, but I never heard that he was at his best in the mining works of a siege!"

But her lady hardly caught her last remark. Her eye perceived the tall central tower of Elstow rising among the trees, and the sight suggested alarming thoughts to her harassed mind.

"Ah me!" she said, half to herself. "What if my lord in his madness should attack the holy abbey of Elstow and the reverend women there!"

"And lack-a-day, my lady," Beatrice went on, "men do say that the king will certes one day pull down Bedford Castle over Sir Fulke's head; and who could raze those stout walls without the aid of bold John and his men?"

But the elder lady continued to pursue her own train of thought concerning the abbey and the approaching retreat, so that the conversation ran on between the two in the following somewhat disjointed fashion, the venerable Archdeacon Martin de Pateshulle and the bold John de Standen being alternately the theme.

"He will draw us all up higher when we come within those walls."

"Nay, lady; methinks he will draw them down about our ears and ourselves with them."

"How meanest thou? I speak of the holy church and the reverend father."

"In good sooth, it looks strong and stout, the abbey church; and yet, were it a castle, methinks John could find his way beneath its walls."

"And how, Beatrice? To me it seems to figure the firmness of Holy Church, founded on the rock of the blessed apostle, the see of our lord his Holiness the Pope."

"Yet neither rock nor sea can withstand the skilful miner's advances; for John has ofttimes explained to me how he has dug his mines beneath the water of the deepest moat."

And so, running on at cross purposes, they rode through the abbey gateway, and entered the outer or guests' yard.

CHAPTER V.

IN ELSTOW ABBEY.

Elstow is probably connected in the minds of most people with the name of John Bunyan only. But long before the time of the Puritan tinker Elstow had a history and a renown of its own. Here Judith, niece of the Conqueror and wife of

Waltheof, Earl of Northampton and Huntingdon, the Saxon hero and martyr, had founded an abbey of Benedictine nuns, endowing it with many broad acres. The stately abbey church still remains in part, and is used as the parish church, though much shorn of its beauty; for the central tower, chancel, and Ladychapel have all disappeared, and the nave only is left. The Lady de Breauté and her attendant dismounted from their palfreys in the outer yard, beyond which men were not allowed to penetrate, and whence the grooms returned to Bedford with the horses. The servants of the convent approached, headed by the ancient steward. He recognized the wife of the Robber Baron, but received her with a low obeisance; for he knew her to be a dutiful servant of the Church, and one who protested, as far as in her lay, against her husband's outrages on church and monastery. Informing her that the office had already commenced in the church, and that the archdeacon would address the congregation when vespers were over, he led them into the crowded nave.

It was now late in the afternoon, and already dusk within the depths of the severe Norman church. The narrow windows admitted but little light, and there were no lamps burning in the bare, unfurnished nave, which on an occasion like the present was thrown open to the public, who could listen to the offices chanted by the nuns within the massive screen, beyond which the *externs* were not allowed to penetrate. On the west side of the screen a small temporary platform or pulpit had been erected.

From within the choir, behind the screen, came the solemn sound of the sisters' voices, chanting vespers to Gregorian tones, unaccompanied by any instrumental music, and rolling thrillingly through the echoing church. As she knelt in the dim light Margaret felt almost happy. A calm, a peace, such as she had not known for months, stole over her somewhat weak and susceptible nature as she listened to the singing in the gloomy twilight of the grand church, and it fanned the ray of hope which her husband's professed penitence had kindled in her weary heart. Nor was Beatrice Mertoun, whose opportunities of worship since she had been at Bedford had been confined to attendance at the tiny chapel at St. Thomas-at-bridge, unimpressed.

The office over, the Archdeacon of Northampton, Martin de Pateshulle, took his stand on the little platform by the screen and began his sermon. It was addressed, not to the nuns in the choir behind, but to the lay-folk gathered in the nave before him. His subject–a favourite one with ecclesiastics of all ages–was the persecution of the Church; his text, so to speak, was the evil-doings of Fulke de Breauté. Of course he was unaware of the presence of the latter's unhappy wife, or he would not have touched so directly on the personal character of the Robber Baron, nor enlarged so particularly on the destruction of St. Paul's Church and the raid upon the Abbey of St. Alban. Finally, he rose to a pas-

sion of indignation and stern vengeance in denouncing the perpetrator of these outrages, and concluded in a different key–supplicating divine aid for Zion in her bondage, and describing the Church under forms of scriptural imagery much employed by the preachers of the time.

When the discourse was ended the congregation of *externs* passed out of the nave and into the outer court to the abbey gateway. But the Lady Margaret made her way to the lodgings of the abbess at the south-west corner of the church.

The foundation of Judith had risen in importance, and was now one of the principal religious houses in the neighbourhood. The abbess was of noble birth, and the convent was largely composed of ladies belonging to the county families, if we may believe the chronicle of names which has come down to us. In later days, just prior to the dissolution, these religious ladies waxed somewhat secular in their mode of life, and drew down upon them the stern reproof of their bishop; but in the thirteenth century Elstow Abbey retained most of its proper character and strict discipline. In so important a house, owning such wide estates, the abbess had many secular rights, duties, and privileges to occupy her without, so a prioress was responsible for the internal arrangement and order. To the abbess it fell, as the dignified head of the house, to receive visitors and to exercise hospitality. To the abbess Lady Margaret accordingly presented herself, that she might gain entrance to the convent, and share, during the archdeacon's special services, in the life of the nuns, as far as might be permitted to an outsider. A lay-sister, the portress of the abbess's lodgings, conducted Lady Margaret to the parlour or room open to guests. The dignified lady who had for some years so discreetly ruled at Elstow Abbey had just returned from the evening office, and received her visitor while still clad in her choir habit.

"Black was her garb, her rigid rule
Reformed on Benedictine school;
Her cheek was pale, her form was spare;
Vigils and penitence austere
Had early quenched the light of youth."

Above the long black robe and the scapulary, which formed the ordinary monastic dress of Benedictine nuns, she wore a cowl or hood similar to that used by the monks of the order and worn by the nuns in church. In her right hand she carried her pastoral staff, and the third finger of her left hand was adorned by a massive gold ring–the symbol of her profession as the spouse of Christ.

The abbess advanced to meet Lady Margaret with much cordiality, for the latter's sad history was well known to her; and all persons of whatever ecclesi-

astical degree who were acquainted with it felt sympathy and pity for her who was the wife, against her will, of the Church's deadly enemy.

"Lady of Bedford Castle," she said, "you are welcome to our abbey of Helenstowe, and to the protection of Our Lady and the Most Holy Trinity,"–for it was by this latter dedication that the house was then known.

As she spoke the nun made a gesture of benediction, and the Lady Margaret a low reverence of respect.

"Reverend mother," she replied, "to enter your sanctified dwelling and to pray in your holy church is indeed a privilege which lessens for me the remembrance of the many burdens which I have already borne and the dread expectation of the many sorrows which are still before me."

"Ah, my daughter," exclaimed the abbess, "you have already been in the church and joined in the holy office? Alas that it has been so, and that on your ears have fallen the words of our venerable Father Martin! He knew not of your presence, or he would have chosen another theme."

The words of the preacher had reached the nuns in the choir on the farther side of the screen, and they had heard that denunciation of Fulke de Breauté by Martin de Pateshulle which had thrilled all who had listened to it.

"It is indeed true, venerable abbess," replied the lady; "but no one knows better than your unworthy servant that the deeds of my lord have indeed deserved the just vengeance of Heaven. But I have come to entreat the prayers of yourself and of your holy sisters that the first signs of a repentance tardily begun may bear fruit."

The unhappy lady proceeded to recount to the abbess Fulke's dream of the preceding night, and the nun gave her comfort and encouragement.

"Reverend mother," said Margaret, "your peaceful words fall like balm on a weary heart. Suffer me, I pray, to remain awhile under this holy roof, that I may share in the ministration of Father Martin, and also for a time become, as it were, a dweller in this holy house."

"My daughter," replied the abbess, "right gladly do I accede to your request. Holy Church has ever been a consoler to those who labour and are heavy laden, and I doubt not but much peace shall come to you from the venerable father's exhortations. And indeed, that you may enjoy more frequent opportunities of converse with him in the intervals between the offices, I will arrange for you to be my guest in my lodgings, instead of sharing that portion of the abbey buildings which has been set aside for the *extern* women; for you know full well that Father Martin lodges in the priest's chamber in these lodgings, as no priest may enter further into the abbey except when engaged in the sacred office."

Margaret's eyes filled with tears at the abbess's kind words.

"Mother," she said, "I am all too unworthy of your goodness and hospitality.

Who am I, alas! that you should treat me thus?"

"My daughter, you are sorrowful; that is enough. To all who are in misery does Holy Church hold out her arms. Enter in and find peace," she added, with a sign of benediction.

The Lady Margaret shared the abbess's supper later in the evening. The archdeacon himself and the abbess's chaplain–that is to say, one of the sisters specially selected as her companion or secretary, and who bore that title of office–were the only other guests.

After the meal the Lady Margaret had an opportunity of unburdening her mind to Martin de Pateshulle, and of relating her story. The good priest was able to add further cheering suggestions to those already made by the abbess. Comforted and thankful, at the conclusion of the conversation the lady rose, and said,–

"Venerable father and reverend mother, thanks to your kind words I feel less heart-sick than I have been for many a long day. I pray you now to permit me to retire into the church, and there pray and meditate in thankfulness ere begins the hour of compline."

The abbess acceded, volunteering herself to accompany her. The two women passed out into the dark and silent cloisters, which ran along the south side of the nave of the church. Up and down the pavement, in silent meditation, paced here and there in the gloom a

Pensive nun, devout and pure,
Sober, steadfast, and demure,
All in a robe of darkest grain,
Flowing with majestic train,
And sable stole of cypress lawn."

The abbess led her companion along the northern side, or *walk* as it was called,

and entered the church by the door into the south transept; for no opening was allowed to exist in the close screen shutting off the nave, which was occasionally open to the public. Into the chancel and the transepts were permitted to enter none but the officiating clergy and the sisters themselves, or women introduced by authority.

Leaving the transept, they paused for a moment beneath the central tower, and the abbess drew her monastic cowl over her head. Save for the faint glow of a few lamps before the images of the saints, the church was almost dark. At the extreme end of the chancel, before the high altar, above which the blessed sacrament was deposited for veneration in a closed tabernacle or shrine, burned

one solitary lamp.

The abbess had happened to stop close to the massive Norman pier which supported the south-eastern angle of the great tower above them. In front of this pier stood a more than life-size figure of St. Paul. But the uplifted right hand was empty, and the sword it should have grasped was carefully laid at its feet.

"See, mother," cried Lady Margaret, "the sword has fallen from the hand of the blessed apostle!"

"Nay," replied the abbess, "I removed it with my own hand. On that evil day when we heard that Sir Fulke de Breauté had destroyed the fair church of St. Paul at Bedford, I vowed to the saints that his statue in our church should not bear the sword again till vengeance had been taken upon the destroyer."

The unhappy wife covered her face with her hands with a low moan.

"May it be the vengeance of a true repentance!" she ejaculated.

The abbess laid her hand soothingly on her head.

"Pardon me, my daughter," she said, "I should not have told you of the vow."

They passed on through the choir of the nuns, whose stalls occupied the central crossing under the tower and a portion of the chancel, and approached the high altar. At the foot of the steps a black-robed figure knelt motionless in prayer.

"See," whispered Lady Margaret, "one of the sisters is here already!"

"Nay," replied the abbess; "she is not one of our sisters. She is a young damsel of the neighbourhood who has come to our retreat and has craved permission to wear for the time the habit of our novices. Poor child, she is in sore distress! It is sad to see one so young and fair thus cast down. Her talk is all of embracing the religious life. But a vocation is not given to all damsels of lovely face and form. God has for each woman her work and her duty. Some must perchance be wives and mothers."

The abbess paused. A faint smile flickered over her still handsome face as her thoughts wandered for a brief moment, even in the precincts of her abbey church, back to bygone days when she, too, had been a young and high-born beauty.

"The damsel," she continued, returning to the present, "is evidently in sore perplexity. She has had much talk with her uncle, the revered archdeacon. Perchance you know her. Her name is–"

At this moment the kneeling girl, aroused by the sound of whispering behind her, looked round, and perceiving the abbess, rose and approached to make an obeisance. The sad face, marble-like in its pallor, which appeared above the

black robes of a novice, was that of Aliva de Pateshulle.

CHAPTER VI.
A PENITENT.

Fulke de Breauté had been in earnest when he had allowed his wife to go to the retreat at Elstow, on condition that she should try to set matters straight between himself and the Church; and she had no sooner gone than he set to work to think matters over, and to consider how best he could reinstate himself in the ecclesiastical good graces which he felt he had entirely forfeited, but, however, without expending any of his worldly wealth in restitution or reparation.

In those days there were two acknowledged ways of making peace with offended ecclesiastical authority. One of these was the endowing, building, or otherwise pecuniarily assisting religious foundations, especially monasteries.

But Fulke had no notion of spending his ill-gotten gain in such a manner.

There was another plan which he could adopt, and for which he had the highest precedent. Just half a century before the date of our story, no less a personage than the King of England himself, Henry II., had submitted to the penance of corporal punishment in the chapter-house of Canterbury, in expiation of words spoken in hasty anger which had indirectly brought about the death of an archbishop.

The idea seized Fulke of a similar form of reconciliation with Holy Church.

Accordingly, the day after his wife's departure he set off for the abbey of St. Alban. His dress was of studied simplicity. He wore no armour, but was clad in the ordinary long robe or gown which was worn in civil life by all above the rank of labourers and manual workers, and a plain cloak, fastened by a buckle or brooch on his right shoulder, fell over his left side.

The gowns or cloaks of the upper classes at that time were richly ornamented with deep borders of embroidery, but Fulke had carefully selected garments free from any such adornments. He had also removed his gilt spurs of knighthood, and any who met him riding along the road might well have taken him for a physician, notary, or some professional man of the laity. The grooms who followed him also wore the plainest attire; and the whole party were mounted upon mere hacks or palfreys, very unlike the ponderous war-horses usually bestridden by men in armour.

By the afternoon Fulke had reached St. Alban's, and saw before him rise the abbey towers.

"Once resplendent dome,
Religious shrine.....
Of warriors, monks, and dames the cloistered tomb.
Years roll to years, to ages, ages yield,
Abbots to abbots in a line succeed;
Religion's charter their protecting shield,
Till royal sacrilege their doom decreed."

At the abbey gate he made known his name and rank to the astonished porter,

who failed to recognize in the unobtrusive figure requesting an audience with the abbot the dreaded leader of the murderous attack upon the sanctuary but a few weeks before.

The abbot came hurrying out. He, too, was amazed that the sacrilegious robber who had lately extorted from him the sum of one hundred pounds, under threat of destroying the town, should again pay him a visit, and in such a guise.

Fulke was well acquainted with the etiquette necessary on such occasions. He dismounted, went down on one knee before the dignified ecclesiastic, and raised the hem of the latter's habit to his lips.

"Thou seest in me, reverend father," he exclaimed, "a humble penitent come to offer submission to his holy Mother, and to crave thy gracious absolution for misdeeds committed!"

The abbot was well aware how to deal with such cases. Penance he knew he could enjoin; restitution he hoped he might suggest.

"My son," he said, "Holy Church ever receives back into her fold those who have erred and strayed. But follow me," he added; "I, the humble servant of the Church, will call my brethren together to treat with me of so weighty a matter as concerneth this visit of thine."

Consigning Fulke to the care of the guest-master, the abbot went off to give directions for the immediate summoning of a chapter, and the Robber Baron was left swearing, in his usual brutal way, at his men for some carelessness as to his orders.

Wondering much for what cause a council was assembled at so unusual an hour, the monks came streaming into the chapter-house. The long, narrow, barrel-roofed apartment opening from the east walk of the cloister on the south side of the transept was soon filled, and the chapter duly opened according to the usual custom. Then the abbot announced the purpose of the assemblage.

”My brethren,” said he, ”we are here gathered together upon no slight matter. The prayers of this poor house have been heard, and God and our holy Alban have stretched forth their power and moved a heart of stone deeply sunken in iniquity. But even now came Fulke de Breauté to our gates, and came, not as before, an impious marauder, but as a penitent and a suppliant craving absolution.”

A great sigh of amazement floated from the lips of the assembled brethren up to the vaulted roof.

”Brothers,” added the abbot, ”I beg you to grant me the benefit of your wisest counsel in this matter.”

There was a silence. Advice is a thing usually to be had for the asking. But the abbot of the great house of St. Alban was a personage of much power and importance, and accustomed to rule with a high hand, and no one seemed at this moment in any way inclined to grudge him his supreme authority.

”By the holy rood,” exclaimed the father almoner, breaking the silence at last, ”this is no easy task. The French tyrant is even within our gates, say you, reverend father? Would he had stayed in his own ill-gotten castle! The lion is dangerous even in a cage, and Sir Fulke respects not even holy places, we know. We have e’en heard of a wolf in sheep’s clothing.”

”But he cometh as a penitent, we are to understand,” put in the prior.– ”Brothers, we see the finger of God in this matter. He hath delivered this Philistine of Gath into our hands. Praise be to him!” And they all crossed themselves devoutly.

”And a penitent beseeching absolution,” said another brother, the old father cellarer. ”He must show his repentance in works. A tree is known by its fruits. Let him give back the hundred pounds he hath taken from Holy Church.”

”And furthermore,” added the father sacristan, ”let us do even as the Israelites were commanded when they left the land of Egypt. Let us spoil him of silver and gold. He owes us not only our own, but some reparation.”

The discussion grew. The assembly seemed of many minds. At length, in the hope of arriving at some conclusion, the prior made a suggestion, an unfortunate one for the abbey, as matters turned out.

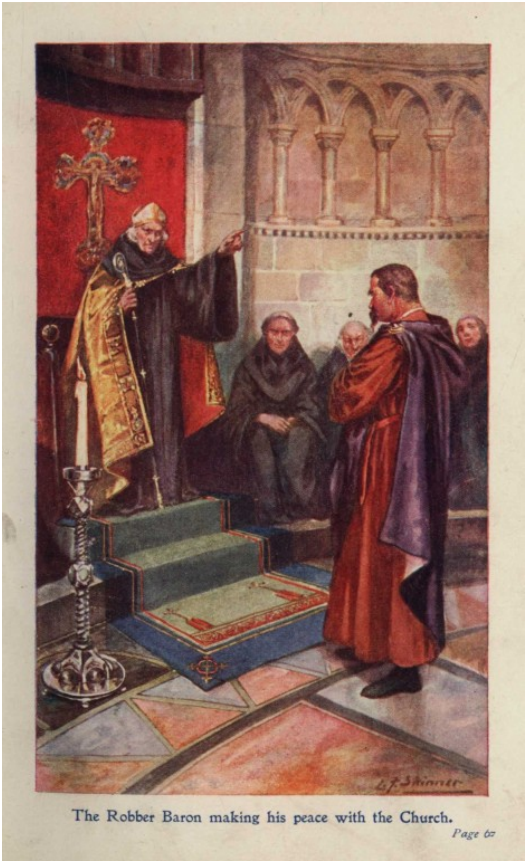
”By the mass, reverend father and brothers of the order of Holy Benedict, we waste our time. Were it not well to have this penitent before us, and to question him as to his purpose of showing his repentance?” he said.

In an evil moment the motion was carried, so to speak, and Fulke was invited to enter the chapter-house.

Unarmed and alone though he was, the monks began to tremble visibly as their grim visitor strode into the assemblage, and a silence fell on all the tongues so ready to wag but a few moments before.

The Robber Baron made obeisance to the abbot, who began by delivering a

suitable homily, adorned with texts and quotations, on the special subject of the readiness of the Church to receive sinners back to her arms. It concluded with a broad hint that the abbey should be compensated for the harm done to her; but it was a guarded discourse, for the abbot could not tell how the dreaded tyrant might receive his suggestion.



The Robber Baron making his peace with the Church.

Fulke ignored it.

In a reply full of proper respect and deep humiliation, he brought forward the leading case of Henry II at Canterbury, and expressed his willingness to sub-

mit to like discipline as full and complete satisfaction for his crime.

He chose his words carefully. The discipline was to be complete satisfaction. There was no mistaking the drift of his meaning.

Feeling that they had indeed been foiled, the chapter requested the penitent to withdraw, and deliberated again.

"By the light of Our Lady's brow," muttered the prior, under his breath, "had I been the reverend father, I would so have spoken that the knight could not fail to see that reparation was essential to repentance, as well as penance."

"Tush!" answered the old father cellarer; "we want not a martyr here in the abbey, even as the poor bailie (God rest his soul!) hath been martyred for the town."

"Methinks it was evil counsel that was given when we decided to let the penitent appear before us and choose his own punishment," said the abbot, with a scowl at the prior. "But, my brethren, we must even be content. As the humble ruler of this house, I think I may say that what was not thought too heavy a censure for the King of England, in the holy church of Christ at Canterbury, for the fearful crime of the murder of a minister of Christ, will be sufficient punishment for the sacrilege of this nameless Norman knight against our house. Is this the counsel of the brethren?"

Perforce every one agreed.

Accordingly, next morning a solemn conclave again assembled in the chapter-house. First came the brothers in their cowls, two and two; then the prior, sub-prior, and other officers; and, lastly, the father abbot himself in his robes of office. One of the officers, the master of the novices, carried in his hand a scourge of cords.

The chapter assembled, Fulke was introduced between two of the brothers. He had passed a not uncomfortable night, for though, as a penitent still under the displeasure of the Church, he could not be admitted to the abbot's table in the latter's lodgings, he seemed in no wise to feel the indignity, and had done ample justice to the guest-master's entertainment.

The abbot pronounced the sentence of the chapter, and Fulke, stripping himself to the waist, knelt down, and leaning forward, presented his bare back to the lash.

Round him in a circle stood the abbot and the monks, and from one to the other the brethren handed a discipline or scourge of small cords, and each monk in turn stepped forward and struck De Beauté a blow upon his naked shoulders.

We need not inquire with what force the lashes were given. The humiliation and the obedience were sufficient without taking into consideration the actual pain inflicted. The Church triumphed in the indignity of her enemy's position, and her ministers in avenging her insulted honour.

The penance over, Sir Fulke rose and kissed each monk present. His punishment was complete, and he left the chapter-house absolved. It did not, apparently, occur to him that any act of restitution should accompany the outward form of penance, for, as the chronicler pathetically remarks, ”Christ’s faithful poor stood at the door of the chapter-house expecting that something would be restored to them; but in vain.”

It may seem inconsistent in such a brutal and godless man as Fulke to have submitted himself to this ignominious punishment. He acted, however, from mixed motives. First, it was a little bit of religious feeling, very small indeed, and call it superstition if you will, such as caused him uneasiness the morning after his dream, which led him to pay this visit to St. Alban’s. Excommunication he feared, if indeed his brutal nature could feel fear. But he dreaded it quite as much for its temporal consequences as for those of the future; for it was apt to affect unpleasantly a man’s social and worldly position. Secondly, Sir Fulke reflected that King Henry had certainly greatly strengthened himself by that visit to the chapter-house at Canterbury. With such an example, no one could aver that Sir Fulke’s penance was unknightly or derogatory to his position. Further, he was obliged to confess to himself that he had much greater need of a coat of moral whitewash than had Henry; and, lastly, there was what he considered the great advantage of making his peace with the Church by an act of submission which did not necessarily involve any restitution–a matter so alien to his greedy disposition.

CHAPTER VII

” *ARCADES AMBO.* ”

In the evening of the day on which the strange scene at St. Alban’s Abbey just described had taken place, Sir Fulke de Breauté sat with his younger brother in the lord’s private room at Bedford Castle.

The Robber Baron was in a complacent mood, well satisfied with himself.

”By St. Denis,” he muttered, ”methinks I have done a good morning’s work;” and he reached across to the huge flagon of hippocras that stood on the table beside him, and poured himself out a deep draught. Then he passed the wine across to his brother, who sat moodily staring into the log-fire.

”Fill up, brother; meseemeth thou wantest cheering.”

"'Tis heady, this heavy English wine," replied the other sulkily. "I like it not overmuch. Give me the pure clarets of France and Italy," he added, but replenishing his horn all the same.

Sir Fulke looked askance at his brother. A great change had come over William since that eventful evening when he had ridden back from Bletsoe in a perfect frenzy of jealousy and passion, his curses keeping time to the rattle of his horse's hoofs. First and foremost he had cursed Ralph de Beauchamp–for now he knew that he had a rival–and in his rage he drove the rowels again and again deep into the flanks of his unfortunate steed. Next he cursed all the De Beauchamp family and all connected with it. Then gnashing his teeth, he recollected how De Pateshulle had urged him to prosecute the suit which had resulted in such dire humiliation. But here he had paused in his curses.

He could not couple the name of De Pateshulle's daughter with an oath. Her face haunted him as he rode along: her face–first, cold and set as marble, as when she stepped in majesty into the hall; and then, flushed and flashing, with gleaming eyes and distended nostrils, as she turned to him from the window, and took those six paces to confront him. Her scornful beauty seemed to madden him, and a wild lurid passion seized him.

He had flung himself from his horse in the castle-yard, and strode into the hall, scattering curses right and left at the astonished servants, used only to such a display of anger from his elder brother.

For weeks after this outburst he lived in a state of brooding sullenness, broken only by occasional violent fits of rage. His sister-in-law, if she met him in the hall, turned and fled. Even pretty Beatrice Mertoun, whom he was wont to regard with more favour than perhaps the bold miner would have approved of, flitted past him as quickly as possible, with a mere nod.

Sir Fulke observed this change in his brother with grim satisfaction. In furtherance of his new evil schemes he determined to turn to good or bad account the dormant ferocity which had been aroused.

"Marry, brother," he remarked, "methinks there sits a cloud on your brow, as if your thoughts were far away–perchance over Bletsoe way?" he added, with a grim chuckle.

"What's that to you?" retorted William sullenly. "In good sooth you had better mind your own business, and attend to your masses, and your flagellations, and your retreats, along with the rest of the women folk, and leave my thoughts to myself!"

"I crave your pardon, brother," replied Sir Fulke, in mock humility. "Fill up again, man. I was a fool not to see that your meditations were too unpleasant to be connected with so fair a subject as the Lady Aliva."

"The Lady Aliva!" exclaimed William fiercely, leaning forward on the table

eagerly, and confronting his brother, his chin supported on his hands, and his eyes gleaming–"the Lady Aliva! By the mass, I swear to you, brother, I cease not to think of her night and day! I see her ever before me, those eyes, those flashing eyes, that queenly form; I dream I clasp her, and I awake mad with despair! May the curses of St. Denis of France light for ever on that traitorous villain who dared supplant me, on that lying fool of a De Pateshulle, who–" And he buried his face in the deep flagon once more, as if to drown his feelings.

Fulke laid his hand firmly on his arm.

"Hark ye, brother," he said; "calm yourself and lower your voice. I have somewhat to say unto you which I care not that all the varlets in the hall hear. Do you wish for vengeance on a De Pateshulle?"

"Do I?" gasped William. "Try me!"

"So be it. I will put vengeance within your reach. It shall lie with you to take it, if you carry out the plan I have in my head."

"Another fat abbey to sack!" cried the younger brother. "In good sooth, brother, you smite with your hands while you give your back to be smitten," he laughed.

"Not so," rejoined Fulke. "I am in no mind to meddle with churches for the nonce. This is quite another kind of deer to chase. You mind that special commission of the king's justices, convoked at Dunstable not long since to inquire into certain of my doings in these parts, which it seemed pleased not those most concerned with them. It hath come to my knowledge that the court has pronounced judgment against me. They may, by my troth, if it pleases *them*, for it does *me* no harm. No less than thirty verdicts did they bring against me," he went on chuckling, "and for these thirty verdicts some one shall suffer, I warrant me, though it shall not be he whom their worships had in their mind's eye when they delivered them!"

William gazed at his brother admiringly. His weaker, shallower brain, already somewhat fuddled with his copious libations of the past few weeks, followed him with difficulty.

"Beshrew me, brother, if I see what nail thou art hammering at. These justices will have none of me."

"But I fain will that you have some of them," Fulke went on. "It would beseem ill to the repentant son of Holy Church to lift his arm so soon against her after she has absolved him, for one of these justices is a priest. But you, brother, owe her naught. From trusty sources I learn that these three legal spiders are to meet again at Dunstable for further spinning as soon as this retreat at Elstow is over. Now, what say you, brother, to meeting them upon their journey thither, and to bringing to Bedford Castle, instead of to Dunstable town, the worshipful Thomas de Muleton, Henry de Braybrooke, and Martin de Pateshulle?"

"Martin de Pateshulle!" interrupted William eagerly. "Pardie! a De Pateshulle is a quarry that would please me well."

"He is learned in the law, this priest," Fulke continued, apparently not heeding how his fish had risen to his bait. "The king can fare ill without his counsel in these parts, and methinks, were he and his brother worships safe caged in our stronghold here, it would prove Fulke de Breauté to be a greater fool than men hold him for did he not get what ransom he named. But, certes, I would be merciful, as it beseemeth with a priest. I would ask neither silver nor gold, naught save the remission of the thirty judgments that are out against me. What say you, brother? Is the snaring this legal vermin to your mind?"

"'Twould be good sport, by my troth!" ejaculated William, "though methinks it is no easy emprise! To seize the king's justices! 'Tis a bold swoop, brother."

"Tush!" replied Fulke scornfully; "there speaks no brother of mine! I trow a De Breauté, bastard from a little Norman village, had ne'er sat in the seigneur's parlour of this, one of the fairest of English castles, had he piped in that strain. Take another draught, brother," he added, pushing the flagon across.

"In good sooth, this English wine warms the blood in this cursed land of fogs," apologized William, draining his horn. "But I must have some of your best varlets at my back, Fulke–fellows who know the country, and plenty of them."

"Trust me, I will let fly my best trained hawks for such game as this, man! These reverend justices shall have a fair retinue to Bedford–a noble train! Take heart o' grace. Think thee of thy vengeance. It is a De Pateshulle that is the booty!"

"Ha! a De Pateshulle!" exclaimed William, screwing up his courage still further by another drink. Then he added sulkily, "Would it were the niece and not the uncle!"

Fulke smiled grimly.

"And why not?" he asked quietly.

William, half stupified as he was fast becoming, saw the development of a new plot.

"Pardie! That proud maiden here! Helpless–a prisoner! Niece snared with the uncle! Ha, ha!" he cried, his eyes rolling excitedly. "Ha, my lady! who would say me nay a second time? Not you, by St. Denis, I warrant me!" and he laughed wildly. "Travel they together, say you? Father Martin to Bletsoe–the haughty lady to Dunstable; nay, beshrew me, it is Father Martin to Dunstable, and–"

Here he fell forward on the table and burst into a maudlin giggle. Sir Fulke rose, pushed the wine-flagon out of his reach, and called to two varlets from the

hall to carry his brother off to bed.

CHAPTER VIII.
JUSTICE IN BONDS.

A few mornings later the two worshipful justices of the king, Thomas de Muleton and Henry de Braybrooke, were riding together through the central part of the county, a few miles south of Bedford. They had been engaged at Northampton in making preliminary arrangements for the great council which the king proposed to hold there in the summer, and having concluded that part of the business, were now journeying towards Dunstable to clear off certain matters which had been left unfinished, as their time there previously had been entirely taken up with examining the many suits brought before them against Fulke de Breauté.

They had entered the county from Northamptonshire by the ford through the Ouse at Turvey, and were riding leisurely along on their stout palfreys, with their serving-men jogging behind them, and discussed as they went grave legal questions and learned points of law.

For about eight miles after passing the ford, they took their way along the boundary-line between the counties of Bedford and Buckingham, in a southerly direction. Then turning eastward, they reached the amphitheatre of hills which encloses the vale of Bedford on the south-west. Passing the village of Cranfield and its Norman church, still in part existing, they rode under the old fortifications and earth-works of Brogborough–old even at that time–until at noon they reached the castle of Rougemount, standing on a red sandy hill (whence its name, corrupted in modern pronunciation and spelling into Ridgmount) and commanding the country to the north.

Here they were expected by the lord of the castle, the Baron Lisle, who had invited them to rest upon their journey and partake of his mid-day meal. Here also they had arranged to meet their colleague, Archdeacon Martin de Pateshulle, with whom they proposed to travel on to Dunstable.

As soon as the retreat at Elstow was over, the archdeacon had promised to come direct to Rougemount, but Lord Lisle had awaited him in vain. So when the other justices made their appearance, their host commanded the repast to be served, without any further waiting for the absent guest, whose non-arrival was unexplained.

Lord Lisle had exerted himself to provide a suitable entertainment for guests of such high degree as the lords justices of the king.

"'Twas now the merry hour of noon,
And in the lofty arched hall
Was spread the gorgeous festival.
Steward and squire, with heedful haste,
Marshalled the rank of every guest;
Pages with ready blade were there,
The mighty meal to carve and share.
O'er capon, heronshaw, and crane,
And princely peacock's gilded train,
And o'er the boar-head, garnished brave,
And cygnet.....
The priest had spoke his benison."

At the high table sat the host, his distinguished visitors on either hand. Some of the notables of the neighbourhood were also present, among whom was the lord abbot of the abbey of Woburn hard by. The head of the Cistercian house, founded not a century before by Hugh de Bolebec, had already come to hold a high position in the county.

Thronging the hall and the castle-yard was a crowd of servants and retainers, who had accompanied their masters, many of them strangers not only to one another, but to the servants belonging to the castle. In those days any festivities at a great castle were attended by a motley crowd of hangers-on, such as beggars, travelling minstrels, and the like, who seemed to scent from afar the preparations for the banquet.

On this occasion, however, these gentry were somewhat disappointed to find that the expected guests were to be grave judges and churchmen. The beggars, indeed, ranged themselves into position to ask for alms in the name of religion, but the minstrels and the jugglers felt themselves *de trop.* Finding their entertainments unacceptable to the guests, they betook themselves to an audience of grooms and varlets in the castle-yard.

The ancient seneschal of the castle, moving through the various groups, his keys of office jingling at his side, remarked a swarthy man of considerable height and size, who was evidently not connected with the Saxon peasants around him. He was wrapped in a long, large cloak.

"So ho, friend! and whence comest thou?" asked the seneschal.

The nondescript stranger answered him in French; not in the Norman-

"Thronging the castle-yard was a crowd of servants and retainers."

Page 81.

"Thronging the castle-yard was a crowd of servants and retainers."

French which his interlocutor could easily have followed, but in a dialect imperfectly known to the worthy head of the household of Lord Lisle.

"I come from distant lands, noble seneschal. I chant love-lays to fair ladies' ears."

"We have e'en no ladies here anon," replied the functionary gruffly, "naught but abbots and justices. So get thee gone!"

At the mention of the word "justices" a momentary gleam of satisfaction passed over the swarthy face of the stranger.

"Justices, good my lord seneschal?" he repeated.

"Yea, justices," retorted the seneschal, not noting the look. "Art deaf, man? My lord the king's justices who travel towards Dunstable. Did you *jongleurs* expect a bevy of giddy damsels and young gallants?"

The burden of his duties had made Lord Lisle's officer somewhat testy.

"But perchance, with your good leave, I may sing to my lords the justices' serving-men a song of fair France; or a love *chansonnette* will I teach them, wherewith to tingle the ears of their Saxon gills?"

"As you will, man," answered the seneschal with a shrug, turning away, "an you find fools to listen to such trash!"

"Thanks for your leave, good sir," the stranger called after him, with a queer twinkle in his dark eye. Then he turned to one of De Braybrooke's men, staring open-mouthed and stolid at the strange dialect and stranger countenance. "Wilt list to a song, friend? It hath a refrain will ring in thy ears and cheer thee on thy long journey."

"A long journey! Gramercy, a mole might see as how thou art a stranger in these parts. A long journey to Dunstable, forsooth!"

"And is it not far?"

"Nine miles as the crow flies, I trows, and but eke some ten the way we ride, through the woodland, by way of Eversholt," replied the varlet, with a snigger of contempt.

"Aver–aver–sole," repeated the dark stranger, mispronouncing the name. "This English tongue cracks the jaw!"

"Marry, he stammereth like a cuckoo at hay-harvest," jeered the other. "Say it plain, man–Eversholt."

"Gather your fellows together while I go fetch my rebec I left at the gatehouse, and, pardie, you shall see what you shall see, and hear what you shall hear," retorted the stranger imperturbably. But as he strode across the yard, the serving-man, had he not been so busily engaged mimicking the Frenchman's accent to his companions, might have noticed an armed heel glitter beneath the folds of his cloak.

The day was wearing on ere the justices could tear themselves away from

Lord Lisle's hospitable board and once more proceed on their journey.

Southwards, beyond Rougemount, the country becomes more wooded. In the higher parts of Woburn Park old timber trees even now show where once the forest extended round the famous Cistercian abbey. In the midst of this district stands a village, whose name, Eversholt–the *holt*, or wood, of the *efer* or wild boar–still hands down the characteristics of the neighbourhood.

Into this wood, in the waning afternoon, rode, unsuspectingly, the two justices, engaged in a warm discussion over some quibble of the law.

"Now, by my troth, brother Thomas," De Braybrooke was saying, "all our jurisconsults are agreed that if the judge be free to act–"

He stopped short, and never finished his sentence, for he was "free to act" no longer.

With a fierce cry of "A De Breauté! a De Breauté!" armed men rushed down from either side of the road upon the hapless representatives of the law, and surrounded them ere they could recover from their stupefaction.

"Let the varlets go free!" cried William de Breauté. "We have no need of grooms!" he added, as he saw his men seizing the bridles of the servants' horses as well as those of their masters.

It was a lucky cry for Thomas de Muleton, for it led to his escape. By some mistake, the men who held his horse, not distinguishing in the confusion between master and man, released their hold, and his servants, closing round him, hurried him back along the woodland bridle-path towards Rougemount.

Too late De Breauté saw the error. But De Muleton and his men had put spurs to their horses, and he and his men-at-arms were all dismounted, their horses tethered to the trees, or held by some of the band. Pursuit was out of the question, even had the marauders dared to follow up their prey to the very walls of Rougemount Castle.

William de Breauté's rage knew no bounds when he became aware that but one of the desired prisoners had been secured. Swearing roundly at his men for their blunder, he struck the unfortunate serving-man who had been detained instead of his master a blow with the flat of his sword which nearly knocked him off his horse, and allowed him to ride away after his fellows.

"Pardie!" he swore. "We trouble not ourselves with dogs that can pay no ransom. Get you gone!"

Disgusted with the less than half success of his scheme, he ordered his men to remount, and the party rode off rapidly towards Bedford, the hapless Henry de Braybrooke well guarded in their midst. De Breauté's rage was a little softened, however, when he learned that he had not missed two of his prey–that Martin de Pateshulle had not been of the party, though as to his whereabouts De Braybrooke

could give no information.

CHAPTER IX.
AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

The troop of horsemen made their way out of the wood, and soon afterwards, riding down the romantic glen of Millbrook, reached the Bedford valley. They were now on the road to Elstow, and nearing Bedford itself; but as they approached the town, an incident occurred which changed the direction of De Breauté's route.

The cavalcade were hurrying along, as their leader was anxious to get his prisoners safe into the castle ere the town-folk should be aware of their capture. For although the burgesses of Bedford had by this time been sufficiently cowed by the Robber Baron and his men, and were by no means unaccustomed to seeing prisoners swept off into the "devil's nest," as they called his castle, yet it was more satisfactory that the impounding should be done without any fuss or disturbance.

So through the little village of Elstow clattered the horsemen, their arms and accoutrements ringing as they went. The village people recognized with a shudder the soldiers from Bedford Castle. They were mostly retainers of the abbey, and they crossed themselves devoutly and uttered a prayer as the enemies and spoilers of the church rode by. They scarcely noted the unfortunate judge who was being jolted along in their midst at a pace so different from that at which he usually travelled, and who

"Little thought when he set out
Of running such a rig."

Increasing their pace, the hurrying troop scattered the wayfarers right and left. The inhabitants fled into their houses; the peasants dragged their beasts and carts into the ditches. All knew that there could be the servants of but one man who would ride through the country in this fashion.

But as they passed the abbey gate, De Breauté and his men, in their headlong career, charged full tilt into a small party of riders just turning out of the archway.

This knot of travellers seemed in no wise disposed to give De Breauté's

horsemen more than their fair share of the road, and did not draw aside into the hedge, after the manner of the peasants. The two foremost of the little company were an elderly and dignified ecclesiastic, and a young and graceful lady whose wimple and riding-hood concealed her face. The old priest, encumbered with his ecclesiastical habit, was unable to resist the impetus with which the armed party bore down upon the defenceless travellers. Too late, he drew rein aside; but the ponderous war-horse of the foremost man-at-arms struck his palfrey full on the flank, and rolled both horse and rider to the ground.

The mass of horsemen, rushing in wedge shape, separated the priest from his companion, and the latter was forced to the opposite side of the road. She was either quicker, more skilful, or better mounted than was the elderly ecclesiastic; for not only did she turn her horse aside just at the right moment and avoid an imminent collision, but putting him at the boundary hedge which bordered the road, cleared it in a style which showed her to possess the hand and seat of a first-rate horsewoman.

The unexpected encounter caused a sudden and confused halt to De Breauté's party, and their leader was able to give a by no means pleased look at those who, by no fault of their own, but by reason of the furious onrush of his own men, had unintentionally impeded his progress. But when once he had glanced at the bold horsewoman escaping by her leap from the confused throng, he hardly deigned to notice the prostrate priest striving to extricate himself from his dangerous position. For as her horse cleared the obstacle, the riding-hood, which concealed the features of the rider, fell back upon her shoulders, and revealed to his astonished gaze the lovely face of Aliva de Pateshulle.

In a moment his brother's orders were all forgotten. Even had he recognized Martin de Pateshulle in the dismounted horseman, it is not likely he would have paused to capture him. But shouting to two of his men to follow him, he turned quickly round, and putting spurs to his horse, rode after the retreating figure at the top of his speed.

His leaderless party pulled themselves together, so to speak, and gazed after the pursued and the pursuer till they vanished round the corner of the abbey walls. They gave vent to a few coarse jests over their master's disappearance, and then the senior among them took upon himself the command of the party. He turned to the unlucky priest, whom his servants had now raised from under his fallen steed. Martin de Pateshulle–for it was he–had evidently been severely injured, and lay prostrate in his attendants' arms. In reply to the soldier's questions they told that their master was the Archdeacon of Northampton, and the lady his niece. Had they mentioned his name, it is possible the trooper might have recognized that of one of the justices they had sallied out to seize. But as it was, deeply imbued with a soldier's notion of implicit obedience to orders before

all things, he thought only of conveying the prisoner he had already made with all speed to Bedford. Even Henry de Braybrooke, whom his guard had removed to a little distance from the scene of the accident, could only learn that it was an old priest who had been injured, ere he was again hurried off in the direction of the Robber Baron's castle.

Meanwhile, the grooms who had picked up the archdeacon proceeded to carry him, moaning with pain, back to the abbey they had just left. In vain the unhappy priest conjured them to leave him to his fate, and to hasten after his niece, as soon as he realized that she was being pursued by De Breauté.

With one exception, none seemed inclined to obey their master, protesting that it was their first duty to see his injuries attended to within the abbey walls.

That exception was our fat friend Dicky Dumpling, who had been of the party, in attendance on his young mistress. He, too, had been rolled over; but no sooner had he picked himself up out of the mire and learned that she had fled, than his distress was great.

"Alack! alack!" he cried. "Chased by that young French popinjay, say you? Oh, woe the day! He came a-wooing her that day the gallant Sir Ralph rode over, and he departed with his beauty marred, the serving-maid doth say–but women have such long tongues! Oh, my hapless young lady! I must after her to her succour!"

"Thou Dickon!" gasped one of his fellows,–"with thy feather weight, to say nothing of that good dinner of beef and ale in the porter's lodge."

"And thy nag's good browse in the abbey stables," put in another. "Think you he is a match for the knight's war-horse?"

"Alack! alack!" moaned worthy Dicky; "my heart misgives me sore. But bring me my horse, lads, and find me my cap. With good St. Dunstan's aid I will do my best. Give me a leg up, lads, and Dobbin and I will after her as long as there is a breath left in our bodies!"

CHAPTER X.

THROUGH OUSE MARSHES.

The Lady Aliva had gone to the retreat at Elstow with a heavy heart. In the first place, she had dismissed the man whom she loved with all her soul without giving him to understand that she would remain true to him; indeed, she even doubted

within herself whether the words she had used to him might not, in fact, have implied the exact opposite. Then, further, her conduct to her father had given her pain. She confessed to herself that in that scene in the hall she had acted as an undutiful daughter, and even, at the conclusion of it, with want of maidenly reserve and self-respect.

Thus it was that with all true sorrow of repentance she had knelt in the abbey church. When the Lady Margaret and the abbess came upon her in the dusk bending before the high altar, she was indeed, as the abbess had intimated, praying not for strength to face the troublesome world again, but for grace to take the vows of the Benedictine rule.

It has already been shown how she had made known her wish to the lady abbess, and had obtained leave to wear for the time the habit of a novice. But her desire for the profession of a religious life had been combated, strange to say, by two persons who in any other case would have thought it their duty to strengthen it.

These two were the lady abbess herself and the archdeacon her uncle; and when she had learned Aliva's story, the Lady Margaret added her objections to theirs. All these three elders deemed it unadvisable for so young a girl–she was only eighteen–to think of monastic vows, and held out hopes that the course of true love might yet run smoothly. The archdeacon himself had always been a supporter of Ralph de Beauchamp's suit, and the two ladies joined with him in comforting the distressed damsel with plans for the future happiness of Ralph and herself.

With regard to the unlucky incident in the hall which had so abruptly terminated the other suitor's visit, Aliva made a clean breast of the whole matter. The ladies even went so far as to justify her conduct; and the archdeacon, speaking as a spiritual father, considered it sufficiently condoned by the exhortation he administered on the duty of maidenly reserve and the virtue of checking anger.

So when the retreat was ended, Aliva's plans were discussed in real earnest, and a determination arrived at. The good archdeacon decided to give up his projected journey to Dunstable, leaving his learned friends to finish their business by themselves, and to accompany his niece to Bletsoe. There he hoped to convince his brother of the injustice of repressing Ralph de Beauchamp's suit.

The *pros* and *cons* of this discussion occupied all the early part of the day, and it was accordingly late in the afternoon when Aliva, after an affectionate parting with the two elder ladies, set off towards home, accompanied by her uncle and his two serving-men, and by Dicky Dumpling, who had brought over her riding-horse that morning.

Of the untoward event that befell the little party as they passed out of the abbey gateway we are already aware, and we must now take up the story of

Aliva's flight and De Breauté's pursuit.

After a short spurt across country, she turned her horse back again into the road, that she might take in the situation and see what had become of her uncle. But she could see nothing in the distance save a confused group of horsemen. Between herself and that group, however, she was soon aware that a rider, William de Breauté, was following her at the top of his speed.

Now, had he been alone, it is not improbable that the courageous maiden, who had already faced him once, would boldly have awaited his arrival; but close at his heels came two of his men, and Aliva felt that there was nothing for it but a flight towards home.

The road to Bedford was quite cut off from her by the advancing horsemen, but she knew that at some distance further west there was a bridge across the Ouse at Bromham, and she determined to try to escape in that direction.

It was a desperate chance. Her horse was a mere palfrey, while De Breauté and his men were mounted on some of the best horses to be found in the stables of Bedford Castle.

She hurried through the little village of Kempston on the river-bank, for she knew it would prove no safe asylum. The approach of De Breauté's men always struck terror into the peasants of the villages around Bedford. They gazed open-mouthed after the flying maiden, and then slunk back into their huts as the mail-clad soldiers came clattering after her in pursuit.

Only upon her own wit and readiness could Aliva depend in this terrible race. She was less acquainted with this side of the Ouse valley than with the other, in which she had been accustomed to ride and hawk since childhood. But she knew that between Kempston and Bromham lay a stretch of marshy ground intersected by broad ditches, and into these marshes she resolved to ride with the hope of baffling her pursuers. She thought it not unlikely that in the ground which would bear the weight of herself and her palfrey the armed men and huge horses might be bogged.

Her conjecture proved not incorrect, and for a time the distance increased between herself and her pursuers. But the spring afternoon was now closing in, and in the failing twilight it was difficult to select the best track through the marshy ground. Once or twice Aliva had actually to return upon her path, and the men behind gained an advantage, as they watched her movements and avoided the impassable places. Moreover, her lightly-built horse, not much more than a pony, was beginning to tire. He had cleared one or two of the ditches with difficulty, and now, as he attempted to jump one of considerable breadth, a rotten take-off sent him floundering into the middle of it.

Aliva scrambled quickly from the saddle, and threw herself on the bank. But unfortunately it was the nearer one. For a minute or two she stood vainly

trying to reach the reins, and calling to her palfrey to approach her.

But her pursuers were drawing on apace. The foremost was not De Breauté himself, but one of his men, who sprang from his horse and seized Aliva by the hood which hung loosely from her shoulders.

”Let go thy hold, varlet!” shouted De Breauté, in the rear. Even in his madness he could not bear to see her thus roughly handled by a rude soldier.

But Aliva was free ere he spoke. She unclasped the buckle which fastened her hood and mantle round her neck, and as the man fell back with the garments in his hand, flung herself into the muddy dike.

The water reached nearly to her waist, and with difficulty she struggled through. As she passed her horse, standing half bogged in the middle, she seized the reins and drew them over his head. By good chance a stunted willow overhung the further bank. She made a snatch at it, caught it, and with a supreme effort gained firm ground.

With the purchase afforded by the tree, Aliva was now able to get a tight hold of her horse’s head, and encouraging him with her voice, she induced him to follow her example, and to struggle up the bank.

The two soldiers, meanwhile, watched her manoeuvres from the further side in some perplexity. Their lord’s order to release her had been peremptory, and it was now apparent that she was escaping them again. Their lord himself, at some little distance, dismounted, his horse dangerously engulfed in a bog, was in as much uncertainty as they were.

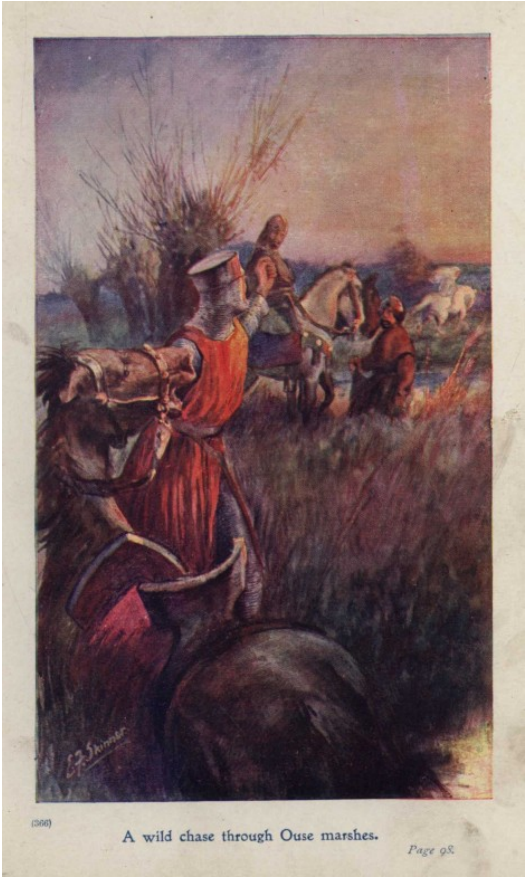
When he had first started off in his wild chase of Aliva, he had indeed no fixed intention with regard to her, except perhaps to carry her off to Bedford along with Henry de Braybrooke; and now that he had pursued her thus far from Elstow, and held her, as it were, in his grasp, he was still undecided.

Any brutal violence was far from his thoughts; for had he not forbidden his man to lay a hand upon her? A marriage was what he contemplated, though indeed it might be a forced marriage, like that of his brother Fulke with the Lady Margaret.

But no sooner did he perceive that the draggled girl was remounting her tired palfrey than he called to his men, standing stupidly looking at her from the nearer side of the ditch.

”Here, varlets, quick! Plague take you and these English morasses! Why came ye not to my help sooner? Saw ye not how I am well-nigh smothered in this cursed bog?”

It took some little time for the men-at-arms to free their master and his floundering steed. They dragged him out in as deplorable condition as that in which Aliva found herself, and by that time both he and they had had enough of the Ouse marshes.



A wild chase through Ouse marshes.

Not that De Breauté was by any means inclined to give up the chase. He could see the hapless horsewoman he was pursuing far ahead and entering the little village of Bromham, and he followed her along firmer ground at some distance from the river.

The long, many-arched bridge which still stretches over the flat meadows at Bromham was furnished at the western end in those days with a small wayside chapel, the ruins of which can still be traced in the mill-house. Aliva rode slowly into the village, and wearily approached the foot of the bridge. As she cast an anxious glance over her shoulder, she saw that her pursuers had now reached hard ground, and were gaining on her rapidly.

Her little palfrey was dead beat. The struggle in the dike had completely exhausted him, and he no longer answered to his mistress's voice or to the touch of her riding-wand. As he reached the first cottage at Bromham, he stumbled and rolled heavily from side to side.

Aliva was off his back in a moment. A rustic stood by, gazing in astonishment at the young lady's condition–drenched and hoodless, her fair hair streaming over her shoulders.

But Aliva's first thought was for her horse.

"Prithee, friend," she cried to the peasant, "take my palfrey and tend him. You shall be well rewarded. I am the daughter of the lord of Bletsoe, and if I come not to claim him myself, take him to Bletsoe Castle when he has recovered."

She hurried on. How to escape now she knew not. But suddenly, as she approached the bridge, she perceived a haven of refuge. The chapel door stood open, and the poor hunted girl stepped into the welcome sanctuary.

CHAPTER XI.

BREATHING-TIME.

As Aliva entered the little chapel on the bridge, she saw, in the uncertain twilight, two figures kneeling before the altar. One was that of a stalwart young man in the garb of a lay-brother of the Benedictine order, and the other that of an elderly woman in the dress of a peasant.

Both rose from their knees, disturbed by the hurried entrance of Aliva, and were surprised to see before them a lady of the upper classes so damp and bedraggled and hoodless. The heart of the woman was touched.

”Lack-a-day, lady!” she exclaimed; ”hast thou been in Ouse water?” she added, with a slight shudder.

”I have come here for rest,” replied Aliva, not wishing to reveal her story to peasant strangers. ”I have indeed, as you say, suffered somewhat by mishap in a stream, and I have lost my horse.”

As she spoke, the sound of her voice, and a closer scrutiny of her features, increased the astonishment of the two listeners.

”Gramercy on us!” cried the woman; ”if this is not our lady from Bletsoe!”

Aliva looked more narrowly at her, and then at the lay-brother.

”Our Lady be praised!” she murmured faintly; ”I find friends. Are you not the wife of Goodman Hodges; and is this not your son, the lay-brother from St. Alban’s?”

Mother and son both made a deep obeisance, and Aliva continued:–

”My friends, I am in sore plight. But I know ye to be faithful to your lord, and I trow ye will aid his daughter. I have ridden far and fast, at peril of my life, to escape De Breauté and his men, who even now follow hard upon my track. But I trust I am safe in this holy house, and with–”

But here exhausted nature gave way, and the brave girl, now that she found herself in comparative safety, fell senseless on the chapel floor.

Mistress Hodges, though but a peasant, was a woman of resource and energy.

”Alack, alack! she will die of chill in this cold chapel,” she exclaimed. ”Son, we must bear her hence!”

”But what if De Breauté’s men be without, mother?” replied the cautious lay-brother.

”In good sooth, you speak true,” replied the woman, casting an anxious gaze round the chapel, while she supported the head of the unconscious Aliva in her arms. Then she noticed a gleam of light shining through a half-open door on the south side of the altar.

”See, my son,” she exclaimed, ”whither that door leads. There may be help near at hand.”

The lay-brother opened the door and looked into the apartment within.

”’Tis a sacristy, or priest’s room,” he replied, with his knowledge of ecclesiastical arrangements. ”There is no one within,” he added, glancing hastily around, ”and there is a fire on the hearth, and a settle with cushions.”

The mother and son lifted up Aliva’s senseless form, and carrying her into the sacristy, laid her on the couch.

”Go thou now,” said the Mistress Hodges, ”and guard the chapel door, and I will see to the young lady. Praise be to our Lady, with warmth and care I shall yet bring her round.”

The young man shut the door of the sacristy behind him, and crossing the chapel to the entrance, closed the heavy door and drew its strong oaken bar across it. He then took up his position against it, keeping a careful and patient watch.

The woman, left alone with Aliva, proceeded to treat her with maternal care; for had not the young lady herself once tended her when the fever ravaged the peasants' huts round Bletsoe Manor House?

She removed her wet garments and chafed her cold hands and feet. As she undressed her, she found, fastened round her waist, a wallet containing a small flask of cordial and some food, with which the good abbess of Elstow had provided Aliva for her journey. Mistress Hodges poured some of the wine down Aliva's throat, and she revived.

Delighted that her efforts had so far succeeded, the good woman redoubled her care. She even stripped herself of some of her rough but warm clothing, and wrapped it round Aliva, as she lay on the settle. Then she busied herself in drying and cleaning the soiled and dripping garments, for fortunately, in this room prepared for the priest who served the chapel, there was a good store of firewood.

Aliva lay watching her feebly, with the half-dazed gaze of returning consciousness.

"Thanks to our Lady and the blessed saints," she murmured at last in such weak voice, "that I have happed on you, good mother; else methinks the cold of this chapel might have finished the work the stream began."

"The saints forfend!" ejaculated the worthy woman. "But, lady," she added, her curiosity getting the upper hand, "might I crave your pardon, and ask how comes it that you are in a woful plight? They said in the village you had gone to the retreat at Elstow, which the venerable archdeacon–"

"Ah!" cried Aliva, "selfish wretch that I am, I had well-nigh forgotten him in my own trouble! Know you, good mother, that it was even as he and I were leaving the abbey of Elstow, on our return home, that this fierce company of De Breauté and his men rode down upon us. They scattered us as a hawk scattereth a flight of doves. I escaped by the lucky chance that my good genet can be stopped by no fence or dike in all this countryside. When I last saw my uncle, he was surrounded and closed in upon by the horsemen. I wot not what became of him."

"Alack, alack!" said Mistress Hodges, shaking her head. "These be evil days now in the which we live, when that terrible Frenchman from over the seas, Sir Fulke de Breauté (may the foul fiend fly off with him!), spares neither the ministers of Holy Church nor defenceless damsels–"

"Indeed, it would seem as if De Breauté had a grudge against me," Aliva could not help interposing, with a half smile. "He owes me somewhat, by my faith. He asked for my hand; he cannot say he did not get it. How like to

a drowned water-rat he looked, coated with our good honest English mud! A pretty dance I led him, I trow," she added, with a ripple of laughter. "He'll ne'er forgive me."

Mistress Hodges grinned good-humouredly, pleased to see the lady's spirits rising again.

"In good sooth, lady, but young knights find it hard to forgive fair ladies who will have none of them when they come a-wooing."

The conversation was becoming too personal. Aliva flushed slightly, and tried to turn it.

"And now, prithee goody, it seems to me that I too may well ask, how comes it that you and your son come so far from Bletsoe this evening?"

The smile faded from the woman's face.

"I am on a weary errand, fair lady," she replied. "I have come thus far in company with my son, who is on his journey back to the abbey of St. Alban, where he is a lay-brother. I have come but to say a prayer with him, in this the wayfarer's chapel, to good St. Nicolas, who protects all travellers. Alas! he will return to St. Alban's; he says it is his duty. I have dissuaded him sore with tears and prayers, but it is of none avail. In these bad times there is no peace even in the religious houses, nothing but wars and rumours of wars."

"Certes, I did hear from Dicky Dumpling–(ah, poor Dickon! how fares it with him, I wonder? He presented a broad surface to the horsemen's charge)–that your son had barely 'scaped with his life from that fearful St. Vincent's Eve at St. Alban's!"

"Gramercy, lady," replied the woman, wiping her eyes, "'twas a hairbreadth 'scape, in good sooth! But, thanks to our Lady and the good St. Benedict–who, my son says, preserved the humblest of his servants to serve him further–he got off scot-free from the fire and the sword, yea, and the water too!"

"The water! how mean you?" asked Aliva.

"Marry, lady, he was weary and worn, and he mistook the ford at Milton as he was fleeing homewards. The Ouse was in full flood, and but for that noble knight Sir Ralph de Beauchamp, whom the saints preserve–"

"Sir Ralph de Beauchamp!" murmured Aliva, now deeply interested. "Ah," she added, with a blush, "I mind me how soaked he was with water!"

"Ay, a fair gallant he is," the other proceeded. "He thought naught of riding boldly into the Ouse at full stream, and saving my poor lad in the very nick of time, when he was being swept down the river like a truss of hay in a midsummer flood!"

Aliva lay listening, her large eyes fixed dreamily on the speaker.

"It sounds like a bold deed, and a truly marvellous turn of luck for your son. Tell on, good mother, I prithee. I would fain hear more of the fishing out

of the worthy lay-brother–thine only son, too–tell on," added the astute maiden, playing on maternal feeling.

Mistress Hodges' tongue was unloosed by the evident interest the young lady of the manor evinced. His recent dangers and escapes had made the lay-brother somewhat of a hero in the village of Bletsoe. His mother was nothing loath to fight his battles over again, and prattled on with maternal pride for some time ere she perceived that her fair charge had sunk into a sound and healthful slumber, lulled by the account of her lover's daring.

Meanwhile De Breauté and his men had hurried up. They passed Aliva's riderless palfrey.

"Ah, pardie! the fair hare has run to ground, and cannot be far distant.–Lady, thy pride is nigh unto a fall," murmured William to himself, chuckling.

But the rustic in charge of the horse was either naturally or intentionally stupid. De Breauté could make nothing of him.

Riding eagerly to the bridge-foot, he scanned its length. But he saw no sign of Aliva's retreating figure in the fast-falling twilight, and heard no sound save the swirl of the rushing river as it swept beneath the arches.

Had she escaped him?

Leaving one of his men to guard the bridge, he proceeded to search the cottages round. But from the trembling peasants he could only gather that they had indeed seen a lady, in soiled and damp clothing, pass down the village.

But as he was thus cross-questioning and searching, he was approached by a personage clad in ecclesiastical garb. He was a coarse-looking individual, the expression of whose features showed a mixture of greed and cunning.

"William de Breauté," he asked, "thou seekest a bird? Shall I show thee the nest where that bird is hidden?"

"If thou meanest that thou canst tell whither the lady has escaped who but now made her way through the village," replied De Breauté, not much relishing the tone of familiarity in which he was addressed, "thou shalt be well rewarded if thou dost direct me thither. And understand," he added, trying to speak with dignity, "no harm is intended to the lady. It is simply needful for her own protection that I conduct her to my brother's castle at Bedford."

"Ay, in good sooth, all are in safe keeping there!" muttered the priest with a sneer, not brooking haughty patronage from a soldier of fortune. "But, perchance, my secret will remain with me, and she will not take the road to Bedford."

William de Breauté saw that he was not going the right way to work, and altered his tone. He had a shrewd guess that a bribe would both be expected and received.

"Certes, reverend father," he replied, "but I mean a reward to Holy Church in the person of one of her ministers."

”Knightly sir,” answered the priest, ”we understand each other. I am but a minister, as you rightly say, and humblest, you would more rightly have said, of Holy Church. Whatever her ministers receive, it is really the Church who receiveth and benefiteth.”

And if winking were the fashion in the thirteenth century, doubtless he winked at De Breauté as he spoke.

”Follow me,” he added.

And he led him to the door of the chapel on the bridge.

CHAPTER XII.

AT THE CASTLE OF EATON SOCON.

While Aliva de Pateshulle lay in a dreamy state listening to the praises of her lover, the said lover was far away on the other side of Bedford, in anything but such a complacent frame of mind.

Since the day Aliva had escaped from him up the turret stairs he had not seen her, and she had left him in much perplexity as to whether she intended to obey her father or to follow her own inclinations.

But on one point his mind was made up. Ralph was determined to be off to the Scottish war. In any case a soldier’s life or perhaps a soldier’s death was still before him, and in his youthful imagination he saw himself performing deeds of daring against the northerners, and dying heroically in the moment of victory, leaving Aliva to mourn for his loss and regret her own cruelty.

To carry out these plans, however, it was necessary, in the first instance, that he should interview his uncle, William de Beauchamp, for it was by the latter’s influence, as he had told Aliva, that Ralph hoped to obtain a command in the royal army.

Since they had been wrongfully deprived of their castle, Bedford was no longer a home to the De Beauchamps. The usual gathering-place of the family now was at Eaton Socon, some twelve miles further down the river. The castle there has as completely disappeared as that of Bedford, but a huge mound on the banks of the Ouse marks the site of the stronghold. Here was established a younger branch of the De Beauchamps, and here William de Beauchamp met Ralph and his kinsmen, to discuss the position of the family, and to consult as to the best means of overthrowing the robber chief at Bedford.

"Beshrew me, Nephew Ralph," said his uncle, "if I wot what to make of this talk of thine of fighting against the northern savages, when savages far worse hold the castle of thy fathers."

Ralph had been holding forth to his seniors upon the duty of a young knight taking up his country's quarrels and joining his sovereign's army.

"Ay," rejoined the lord of Eaton Socon, an elderly man, "were I but of thy age and strength, with my gilded spurs newly girt upon my heels, I would never throw myself away on this mad Scottish scheme–craving his majesty's pardon, if indeed so be that our young king favours it–whilst there lacked not an excuse for the placing myself at the head of bold men who would rally to the cry of 'A De Beauchamp! a De Beauchamp!'"

"And, Cousin Ralph," whispered one of his uncle's married daughters, for some of the ladies of the family were present, "they tell me there is one in Bedford Castle with whom thou wouldest fain splinter lances, were he but worthy to meet thee in knightly combat!"

Something of William de Breauté's visit to Bletsoe, and of his reception there by Aliva, had evidently leaked out.

Ralph shook his head dismally. For the time being he was that most unhappy individual, a wet blanket to all around him, a despondent lover.

"Come now, coz," continued the Lady Mabel, "if our reverend elders will dismiss us from attendance at this table, we young folk will out on to the castle walls and take a turn. Kinsfolk do not often gather together in these days, at least in our family, and thou knowest I have not forgotten old times in Bedford Castle, even though I have formed new ties. Blood is thicker than water."

It was early afternoon. The mid-day meal, which took place at the then fashionably late hour of noon, was just over. Ralph could not refuse the invitation of his fair cousin, who had been to him as a sister in his boyhood. So, with due obeisance to the others, the pair quitted the hall, leaving their elders deep in talk over old times, and the departed glories of the house of Beauchamp, and the days of Hugo, the Conqueror's favourite.

In truth, Ralph was not sorry to have a confidant to whom he could confide his troubles. For the last few weeks both he and his uncle William had been but melancholy guests at Eaton Socon, despite the efforts of their cheery old kinsman to rouse them. William de Beauchamp was naturally a taciturn, reserved man, and the loss of his affianced bride, followed by the loss of his ancestral castle and domains, had further increased the gloom of his character. His uncle's depression, of course, added to Ralph's low spirits.

"And now, fair coz," said Lady Mabel, linking her arm in Ralph's, as they passed up a flight of stone steps leading to a walk on the top of the encircling wall behind the battlements, "thou art to talk to me of somewhat else than this

Scottish war, or even the battering down of Bedford Castle about the ears of that dear friend of our family, Fulke de Breauté. Nay, seek not to deny it. I can see by thy face that thou hast somewhat to tell me, and perchance I have somewhat to tell thee."

"I have naught to say, sweet cousin, but what I have already spoken of in the hall. But yet so be–"

"I knew it!" interrupted the lady; "so it ever is with men. First they will tell naught–those were thy very words–and then with the same breath they go on to say much. They are parlous, like my favourite sleuth-hound, my lord's morning gift, who at times from mere wantonness refuseth to feed from my hand, and then when I make a show to turn away, cannot fawn on me enough. Had I but said to thee, Let us speak of the land of the Picts and Scots, and of the honour that, forsooth, will never be found there by Norman knights, thou wouldest straightway have spoken on what lies nearest thy heart nimbly enough. Now, thou art hesitating; thou leavest me to lay the scent, and then thou wilt follow. Yet, I gage, thou wouldest fain speak of the fair damsel of Bletsoe?"

Ralph flushed, and the lady smiled.

"Tell me," she added, "when thou last didst set eyes on thy lady-love?"

The ice was broken. Ralph thawed rapidly, and related to the Lady Mabel his meeting with the Lady Aliva on the morrow of St. Vincent's Day, and of her sudden flight from him.

"And, in good sooth," ejaculated the lively lady, with a shrug of her fair shoulders, "in this slough of despondency hast thou remained ever since! Not so should I have done had I been in thy shoes, cousin. Thou a bold lover, Ralph, thy charger at hand! The fair damsel should have been on the croup of thy saddle ere she could reach the turret stair. Then hadst thou brought her hither to me, I would have guarded her safety and honour till priest and chapel were ready, which would not have been long waiting, I trow."

"But, cousin," Ralph put in gloomily, "thou hast forgotten: she spake to me unawares, as she confessed, and unmindful of her father's command that she should wed with a De Breauté. Nay, it boots not here of carrying off a bride. Rather let me carry off my wretched self to the war. I spake to her of winning glory for her sake, but now, methinks, I would rather win death."

And folding his arms the young man leaned over the parapet of the castle wall, and gazed dejectedly into the shining Ouse below him, as if he would fain cast himself headlong into the stream.

But Lady Mabel answered with such a ripply laugh that Ralph turned round to her, now really offended at the light manner with which she met his tragic mood.

"And what thinkest thou, Ralph, that William de Breauté will go a-wooing

to Bletsoe Manor again?"

Ralph's face assumed such an angry look, as he ground out something between his teeth about "wooing" and "Bletsoe Manor," that the Lady Mabel drew back, half frightened at the storm she had aroused.

"William de Breauté, in good truth, came to Bletsoe!" he ejaculated; "but when, and how? Tell me all, tell me the worst, cousin, for the love of Heaven!"

"Thou knewest not that he went thither?" she asked, puzzled.

"I know naught of it," replied Ralph sulkily.

"And that he hath gained the hand of the Lady Aliva?" she continued.

Ralph turned upon her, furious. But the Lady Mabel laughed louder than before.

"Certes he did. But upon his face!" she added.

Her cousin looked bewildered.

"Where hast thou been, and what hast thou heard these weeks last past?" Lady Mabel went on.

"Thou knowest!" replied Ralph, still offended. "Here I have been at Eaton Castle with thy father. I have heard no news;" and he heaved a sigh, and turning away, looked out vacantly again over the Ouse valley.

"Ay, moping like a pair of owls at noontide, had I not come hither to bear ye company," Lady Mabel continued, "till, perchance, ye had been driven to make two holes for yourselves in the stream yonder. By my troth," she added, with very little of the reverence for elders which was such a characteristic of the age, "I intend to stir my father into life again ere I leave Eaton; and as for thee, Cousin Ralph," touching him lightly on the shoulder, "I command thee to be of good cheer, and no longer to look down on that vile cold water as though thou lovest it!"

Ralph turned to her again, though still sulky under her apparently meaningless gaiety.

"Now hearken to me, Ralph, and I will tell thee much of the Lady Aliva that thou wottest not of."

And Lady Mabel went on to relate the story of the second suitor's visit to Bletsoe, and of his reception, which had not penetrated to Ralph's ears, shut up hermit-fashion at Eaton.

As she continued, the light gradually broke in on Ralph's mind, and the gloom vanished from his face; and when she described the blow inflicted by Aliva upon William de Breauté, his eyes positively sparkled with delight.

Scarcely had the Lady Mabel finished her recital ere her hearer had rushed from her. Such broken exclamations as "My brave girl!" "Still my own!" escaping from him, he ran headlong down the steps, across the bailey yard, and abruptly disturbed his elders' conversation round the board in the hall.

Hardly giving himself time to pay the usual salutation of respect which the period demanded from juniors to elders of their house, he broke in upon them with these words:–

"By thy leave, my revered uncle, and with thine, my noble kinsman, I leave thy castle at once, tarrying but to give thee my best thanks for thy hospitality of the last few weeks."

In a moment, ere De Beauchamp could recover from his surprise, Ralph was out of the hall again, and shouting eagerly in the yard for his groom, his squire, or any one, to assist him in getting ready his horse.

Meanwhile the guests streamed out of the hall behind him, headed by their host and William de Beauchamp. Lady Mabel, who had followed her cousin in his headlong career as fast as she was able, rushed to her father.

"Stay him not!" she exclaimed; "rather bid the varlets hasten to help him. 'Tis no demon hath gotten possession of him–unless, in good sooth, love may be termed a demon. Speed him on his way, and I will tell whither he goes, and wherefore."

Lady Mabel's laughing face dispersed any fears which might have been entertained for Ralph's sanity, and a moment or two later, the latter, who had hastily girded on his armour, emerged into the yard as his groom brought round his horse.

"Adieu, fair cousin!" he exclaimed. "Thou hast indeed removed a burden from my heart!" he added, placing his foot in the stirrup.

At that moment a man hurried into the castle-yard through the outer bailey, and made his way through the group of serving-men and grooms gathered round the hall door.

It was a young lay-brother in the garb of a Benedictine. His long frock was girt up round his loins, as though he had been running violently. He was muddy and wayworn, and one side of his face was smeared with blood, flowing apparently from a wound in the head, hastily bound up with a bandage.

Tottering and reeling from exhaustion, the Benedictine pushed his way up to Ralph, his eyes staring wildly and starting from his head.

"Sir Ralph," he cried, "the Lady Aliva hath been carried captive to Bedford Castle!"

And then he fell senseless into the arms of the nearest bystander.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BIRD IN THE CAGE.

When William de Breauté and the priest reached the door of the chapel on Bromham Bridge, the latter simply pointed to it, saying,–

"There is the bird in the cage. But the key of the cage is in the keeping of the Church."

After this parabolic remark, he led De Breauté away again to a small hostelry, where they entered a private room. De Breauté perceived that the priest had a proposal to make, but waited for him to begin.

"Thou spakest anon of guerdon to Holy Church for helping thee on with thy plans in hand," the priest commenced.

"Ay, in good sooth," said De Breauté, seeing that the ecclesiastic meant business; "or a reward to her servants," he added. "Speak! what wouldst thou–money, lands, wealth?"

Fixing his cunning dark eyes on his companion's face, the latter answered in one word,–

"Power!"

"Ah, pardie! and what have I to do with the advancement of churchmen?" said De Breauté, with a shrug. "Our name is in no good odour with Mother Church at this time, forsooth!"

The priest smiled sardonically.

"Certes, I have no wish that your brother Fulke should recommend me for high office among the Benedictines of St. Alban's, for example."

The news of Fulke's penance and pardon had already spread far and wide among the churchmen of that neighbourhood.

"At St. Alban's, pardie!" laughed De Breauté, as he recollected his brother's account of the scene in the chapter-house, and of the manner in which he had, for the second time as it were, defrauded the abbey coffers.

But the priest suddenly changed the tone of banter in which he had hitherto addressed De Breauté, and the sarcastic expression of his face gave place to one of bitter anger.

"Hearken, Sir Knight," he exclaimed. "Once I stood high in my order. Brother Bertram was honoured, respected, rising, among the brethren of St. —-. But I care not to tell a layman the reason of my fall. Suffice it that I fell, and that I was expelled my order. I, of more noble blood than all the other brethren together–I, more than half a Norman–here have I been for the last three years, ministering to Saxon swine who grovel in their hovels round yon bridge chapel; a mere mass-priest, offering prayers to St. Nicolas that travellers may pass safe, that sordid merchants may keep their chattels safe from roadside robbers! A

fair portion, forsooth, for one who might have commanded men, been honoured, famed, obeyed!"

De Beauté shrugged his shoulders again.

"Marry, Sir Priest, but by my troth I see not how I am to help thee! What power can I give thee, save the command of a party of men-at-arms?"

"Sir De Beauté," replied the other, "your chapel is unserved. No priest passes 'neath the castle portcullis."

"Ay, and you speak true."

"Hark ye," continued the priest, "the castle of Bedford will be still more famous ere long. The star of the De Beautés riseth fast. The fault thy brother hath committed against Holy Church hath been pardoned, and what matter a few Saxon churls, if the Norman nobles but own him their peer?"

"Marry, Sir Priest, and I thank you heartily. I am, in good sooth, glad to hear that my family are so in fortune's way. But how mattereth that to thee?"

"When the De Beautés rise and are ennobled, all who serve them will rise too. The chaplain of Bedford Castle shall be no mean priest then. As one of the secular clergy I would then lord it over the regulars, and show the order that expelled me, Bertram de Concours, that they must needs bow before one who stands well with a rich and powerful Norman baron."

"If, then, the chaplaincy of the castle is all thou dearest, I can safely promise it shall be thine," replied De Beauté, laughing in his sleeve at the price the other had named. "But, certes, we must have the chapel swept out and the altar repaired. By my troth, there will be much ado with my sister and her women when they hear there will be mass sung again at home," he added, with a cynical laugh. "But say on now, Sir Priest or Sir Chaplain, as I may well call thee, how about the present work on hand?"

"Leave that to me," returned the other. "The Church shall open her doors, and the bird will hop out. See thou to it that thou secure her when she is beyond my care."

"And how so?" said William.

"Marry, that is your affair," replied the priest. "Mine ends at the chapel door."

"Pardie! shall I swing her up to my saddle-bow and be off with her? By St. Hubert, I might have done so this evening had I not bidden my varlets loose her. A curse on my hesitation! But counsel me, prithee."

"If it is my counsel you wish, I will not deny it. Methinks the damsel should be conveyed through the streets of Bedford town otherwise than swinging to a saddle like a market-wife's butter-basket. But, Sir Knight, thou knowest far better than I how to treat a fair lady."

"I have it!" exclaimed De Beauté. "There is the horse-litter of my sister, in

the which she sometimes is graciously permitted to go abroad, when her ailments allow her not to mount her palfrey. She is ever sickly, the woman. I will send to Bedford for it. Nay, I would go myself, could I trust my men to guard."

"Go thyself, if thou art so minded," replied the priest. "I will so far stand, on my part, to my pledge, that I will answer for it that the bird be not uncaged till I hear from thee. Do not thou show thyself in the matter at all. Seest thou not that in that case thou canst anon tell the fair one a pretty tale, of how thou callest thy men off from chasing her, even as thou didst in the marshes, and that they captured her without thy knowledge or consent? See," he continued, "here is this small crucifix. Send it to me. When I receive it back from thy hands, I shall know that all is ready–that the litter waits anon." And as he spoke, the priest handed the soldier a small metal emblem of redemption, the pledge of his nefarious doings. "See, also, that the Lady Margaret's women prepare a suitable lodging for the lady. Thou wouldst, certes, see her well attended? I have thy knightly word that she is in honour treated, or I loose her not? Withdraw, then, thy men from guard here, and send others more seemly to escort a lady. I plight my word that, as I hope to be chaplain of thy brother's castle, I loose her not till I receive thy pledge."

"But," objected De Breauté, "how am I to warrant me she will be conveyed–"

"Leave that to me," said the treacherous priest. "If she be not placed of her own free will in the litter, I shall not have done my share of the work–that thou mayest hold sure. Have only a care, however, that naught about the horses or the litter proclaimeth it to be from De Breauté's stables."

So saying he passed out of the room. De Breauté followed him. Calling to the man who was not on guard to bring him his horse, and then to come after him with his fellow, De Breauté rode off to Bedford, some two miles distant from Bromham Bridge.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SANCTUARY VIOLATED.

"The key is in the keeping of the Church."

At the actual moment when Father Bertram, at the beginning of the interview recorded in the last chapter, uttered these words, the door of the chapel was literally in the Church's charge, in the person of the stout lay-brother, who,

hearing footsteps and voices without, now stood with his broad shoulders leaning against the oak. He could hear but little of the conversation through the thick door, but he guessed it had to do with his lady, and concluded that De Breauté had tracked her to her hiding-place.

For a time he remained uncertain how to act. Churchman as he was, it seemed almost impossible to him that any one, even a brutal soldier, should dare to violate the sanctuary of the chapel; but yet he feared that those without were plotting to carry off the Lady Aliva.

At length, when all was quiet again outside, he crossed the little building, and knocked gently at the door of the sacristy. It was opened by his mother, who laid her finger upon her lips as a sign to him to keep silence.

"My lady sleeps," she whispered, and shut the door again. Evidently no advice was to be had from her.

Uncertain whither to turn for aid, he recrossed the chapel, and, for the first time since Aliva had sought refuge in it, unbarred the door and looked out.

It was now past midnight. The village was sunk in silence, and no one was to be seen about. His first idea was to make his way towards Bedford, and he passed half across the bridge over the dark river. Then he fancied he heard the sound of a horse's hoof echoing from a distance through the stillness of the night. Though he knew it not, it was the sound of De Breauté spurring towards Bedford.

But another sight close at hand called off his attention. Through the gloom he became distinctly aware of a tall, armed figure leaning against the parapet of the bridge.

"Gramercy!" he said to himself, stopping short; "here is one of the soldiers on guard! There can be no escape this way. St. Benedict aid us!"

Of course, unaware that in a few minutes the man would be withdrawn, the lay-brother retraced his steps. Next he met the other man-at-arms leading the horses toward his comrade, and his heart sank within him at what he imagined were further measures to guard the Bedford road. He passed the soldier unchallenged in the dark, and then a little further met a man coming towards the chapel.

It was the priest, straight from his conclave with De Breauté.

Bertram de Concours approached the lay-brother.

"A brother servant in the ministry of Holy Church, an I mistake not," said he.

"Nay, reverend father," returned the Benedictine, "but a lay-brother I, of the holy house of Alban."

"And I," returned the other, "am but the unworthy priest who serves the altar of St. Nicolas in yonder chapel. But the chapel," he continued, eying the lay-brother closely, "is occupied by other than its priest to-night. A lady hath

sought sanctuary there. She must be guarded, watched, tended."

The Benedictine was puzzled. The voice sounded to him like the voice of him whom he had heard talking with De Breauté without the chapel door. Should he ask his advice and help? He was the priest of the chapel; surely he was to be trusted.

"Tended she hath been by my mother," he answered, "and I myself have watched and guarded the chapel door. But she must remove hence. It is not fit that our fair lady of Bletsoe should remain in this plight, tended by peasants only. She must to her father's house."

Bertram saw his opportunity.

"Sooth, thou speakest truly, brother," he said. "I would fain despatch her thither. Not that I quite make out her case," he continued craftily. "My people do tell me that yester evening a lady came into the village in sore plight, and leading a steed well-nigh ridden to death, and thou sayest she is the Lady de Pateshulle. She should to Bletsoe. But can she walk?"

"Walk, father! nay, in good sooth. For all my mother's care she is so weary with her ride that she even now sleeps. Besides, do ladies such as she tramp the country roads like a churl's wench? And her palfrey cannot carry her!"

"She should be carried thither in a litter," replied Bertram de Concours; "but whither shall we fetch one? A messenger must forthwith to Bletsoe, and acquaint the noble house of De Pateshulle with its lady's need, and that at once."

The bait was thrown out by which he hoped to remove the lay-brother out of the way. The fish rose.

"I am thy messenger, father," responded the Benedictine with eagerness. "I will myself to Bletsoe, and devise means to transport my lady thither in safety and comfort."

"By my faith, brother," exclaimed Bertram, in simulated gratitude, "thou hast well spoken. A burden is lifted from my heart. Haste thee, and see that help is here by dawn. But tarry a moment," he continued, still weaving his treacherous web; "we must to the chapel and let the lady know that aid is at hand, and that she will shortly be quit of this dangerous and unpleasant position."

The two men entered the chapel. The old woman was still watching by the sleeping girl, but hearing steps, she came out of the sacristy.

"Tell thy mother to warn her charge that she may expect to journey shortly," said the priest.

"But my lady still sleeps softly," objected the good woman.

"Then let her know when she awakens that thy son hath gone to Bletsoe for aid, and that help she shall have shortly, and means of travelling hence," said Father Bertram.

Mistress Hodges returned to the sacristy.

”My lady is awakened,” she said. ”She heard your voices. Ye should have spoken more softly. She needs yet rest.”

”Go thou then to the door,” said Bertram to the lay-brother. ”She knows thy voice, but I am a stranger. Tell her what thou purposest to do.”

The Benedictine did as he was bid. Standing at the half-open door, he announced in a few words that he was off to Bletsoe for help.

Aliva, barely aroused, sank back again into slumber, murmuring words of thanks to her messenger.

”And now haste thee on thy road,” said the priest to the lay-brother; ”I myself will watch the chapel door.”

The latter set off. He did not again attempt to cross the bridge, still guarded as he imagined by De Breauté and his men, or he would now have found it clear of sentinels. He made his way along the right bank of the river to the ford at Milton in the dark quietness of the small hours that precede the dawn. But ere he reached the spot which had so well-nigh proved fatal to him some few weeks before, the birds had begun to twitter in the brushwood and the sedge, and on the eastern horizon

”Lightly and brightly breaks away
The morning from her mantle gray.”

In the uncertain light he became aware that a horseman was in front of him,

trying apparently to force a wearied steed through the ford. As he approached, a clearer view revealed the rider to be none other than Dicky Dumpling, the fat porter.

”Soho, soho, Dickon! And whither so early, or so late, as you will?”

Thus apostrophized, Dicky turned his horse and recognized the lay-brother.

”St. Dunstan be praised! Here is a friend from Bletsoe. O brother, there is ill news–a sore mishap! Our Lady Aliva is chased, and carried captive too, for aught I know, by that devil in man’s shape, Fulke de Breauté, or his brother. The livelong night have I sought her on the road ’twixt here and Elstow, over marsh and bank, up hill and down dale. Not a bite or a sup–”

”Peace, Dicky, and cheer thy heart. Thy lady is safe.”

”Safe, thou sayest? Oh, the saints be praised!–safe?”

”As safe as Holy Church can make her,” replied the other. ”She hath found refuge in the chapel on Bromham Bridge.”

Dumpling gave a vast sigh of satisfaction, and his face once more assumed its usual jolly expression.

”That was it then! Beshrew me for a fool! I found her palfrey in Bromham

village, and though I asked up and down among the folks, no one could tell me aught of the lady. Even the women, whose tongues go fast enow, like the clapper of a bell at vespers time, when they are not wanted, had nothing to say. Gramercy! safe in the chapel! But you, brother, what doest here?"

"On an errand thou canst well relieve me of. Four legs are better than two. Thy Dobbin has still enow strength left in him to carry him back to his manger. So haste thee, good Dickon, with all speed thou mayest, and bid them at Bletsoe Castle send quickly a litter for my lady to bear her home. She is weary and weak. I, meantime, will return to her. Somehow it mislikes me leaving her alone with priests and women, when those devil's servants, the Breauté varlets, are about. And 'twill cheer her heart to hear good news of thee, for she misdoubted some mishap to thee also."

"I fall not lightly, brother," replied Dicky. "The armed men came with the rush of a battering-ram. But thanks to St. Dunstan and the muddy roads, I got off scathless.–And now, Dobbin–to our oats, Dobbin, to our oats; and to our lady's aid."

The lay-brother, much relieved in his mind, hurriedly retraced his steps. It was broad daylight as he once more approached the chapel, and while yet at a distance he plainly perceived a little crowd gathered at the door.

A horse-litter, consisting of a kind of curtained couch resting on two poles, borne by two stout horses, was in waiting. On the foremost horse rode a groom. Another mounted man stood by, leading a spare saddle-horse.

As the lay-brother drew nearer, he saw three figures issue from the chapel, and recognized the Lady Aliva, his mother, and Father Bertram.

Struck with astonishment that the desired conveyance should have appeared so speedily, the Benedictine halted in the middle of the road. Then the truth flashed upon him.

It was impossible that the litter could have come from Bletsoe. There must be treachery afoot.

A glance at the De Breauté livery worn by the mounted groom confirmed his suspicion.

Without a moment's hesitation he rushed forward, exclaiming in warning tones,–

"Mother! my lady! Stay, stay! for God's sake stay!" and as he spoke he stretched out a detaining hand towards the litter.

But ere he could grasp it, the priest, who had been assisting Aliva into the conveyance, turned sharply round, and with the key of the chapel door, which he still held in his hand, dealt the Benedictine a heavy blow on the head.

Then he shouted to the postillion to hurry off, and himself jumping on to the spare saddle-horse, followed the litter towards Bedford, leaving the lay-

brother senseless and bleeding on the road, his mother bending over him.

CHAPTER XV.

RALPH RAPS AT THE CASTLE GATE.

At the moment when the Benedictine lay-brother, haggard and wounded, rushed into the yard of Eaton Castle, Ralph de Beauchamp was on the point of starting for Bletsoe, reassured as to Aliva by his cousin's account of the reception the former had given to William de Breauté. The single sentence uttered by the Benedictine ere he fell senseless to the ground came as a terrible reaction. His impulse had been to ride off rapidly to Bletsoe and urge his suit with Aliva and her father; and now, at one fell swoop, came the news that she was prisoner in the hands of his rival, her discarded and insulted lover. Overcome with the shock of the news, following so soon upon his late rapture, he rode out of the castle yard, after commending the messenger to the care of the by-standers. He was almost reeling in his saddle with mental agony.

When the lay-brother, left senseless at the door of the bridge chapel, had been restored to consciousness by his mother's care, his first thought was for the young lady so treacherously kidnapped.

Despite his mother's entreaties, he made his way into Bedford, his bleeding head roughly bandaged; and soon learned that the horse-litter of Margaret de Ripariis had passed through the town into the castle in the early morning. But who might be within it no one could tell.

Then the Benedictine hastened to tell the townsfolk of this new outrage on the part of the De Breautés, and endeavoured, but in vain, to stir them to action. They had lived too long under the tyranny of the Robber Baron to have courage enough to attempt to throw off his yoke.

Baffled and disheartened, the brave young fellow now determined to seek Ralph de Beauchamp. The latter's devotion to the Lady Aliva was too well known among the dependents of the De Pateshulles for the Benedictine to think for a moment that he should implore his aid in vain.

Once outside the castle wall, Sir Ralph turned his horse's head towards Bedford. What he intended to do there, alone and unaided, he perhaps had scarcely considered. An irresistible impulse drew him to the spot where she whom he loved was imprisoned.

Bedford is some twelve miles from Eaton Socon, and when Ralph arrived there he found the burghers much exercised in their minds over the event of that morning. They had hardly recovered from the shock of seeing Henry de Braybrooke, but the evening before, hurried through the streets as a prisoner, ere this fresh outrage had followed. Not that it was by any means strange to see luckless women carried off to the castle–as, for instance, after the St. Alban's raid; but never yet had the Robber Baron dared to treat a member of one of the noble families of the county in this fashion.

But though the Bedford burgesses were duly impressed with the enormity of Fulke de Breauté's doings, they were loath to take any steps to put a stop to them. And indeed Ralph himself was obliged to confess that any attempt to climb those lofty stone walls, or to throw themselves on to the spears of the armed men who kept watch and ward night and day at the castle gate, would have been utter madness. The only hope was that, now that one of the king's justices was actually a prisoner, the royal forces might be sent to extirpate this nest of robbers.

"Ah, Sir Knight," quoth one of the fathers of the town to Ralph, as he gravely shook his head, "our goodly town has indeed grievously suffered since thy noble family and thy renowned uncle were driven away. In the old days the castle was a protection and a great benefit to us. But now–alas, fair sir! thou knowest as well as we do what we suffer. We can scarce call our souls our own."

"Ay," put in one of the clergy of the town, who formed one of the group which had gathered round young De Beauchamp, "see our fair church of St. Paul. It hath stood here since the days of the Saxon Bedicanford. And now, alas! how forlorn and shorn it standeth, even as a widow in her weeds mourning for her lord! Thus hath she stood since the day the impious Fulke did wickedly break down the carved work of our Zion with axes and hammers, and carry off her stones to strengthen yon great castle which towers above us. In the chancel resteth thy ancestor Simon, he who finished the good work begun by his mother, the Lady Roisia–to wit, the priory at Newenham for the canons of St. Paul's. In good sooth, Sir Knight, thy house and Holy Church have both good reason to curse these French intruders."

Ralph turned dejectedly away from priests and burghers. The loss of his family possessions hardly weighed with him, compared with the loss of her who was more precious to him than spoils wrested from the Church. He rode slowly and deliberately to the castle gate.

The sentinels on duty stood at attention, ready to resist an attack should a single horseman be so foolhardy as to ride against their uplifted spears.

Ralph looked upwards at the stern walls frowning down upon him, and shook his sword at them in futile rage.

As he did so two figures appeared above the battlement of the barbican.

They were the Robber Baron and his brother, who had been informed that Sir Ralph de Beauchamp had ridden up to the castle.

Fulke made the knight a mocking gesture of salutation.

"Sir Ralph," he said, "it grieves me sore that I cannot bid thee enter within these walls, and proffer thee the hospitality which is suitable to thy rank. But we entertain guests already."

So saying, he turned round and shoved forward the disconsolate-looking judge, Henry de Braybrooke.

"Our worthy guest here," he continued, "has not yet thought proper to cancel those writs which he and his brethren were pleased to issue from their court at Dunstable. In consequence, he hath been forced to partake of the somewhat meagre hospitality of bread and water in the dungeon-vault beneath the keep. It may perchance be even necessary to resort to yet more painful measures."

"Sir Ralph de Beauchamp," called out the plucky little judge, trying to lean over the battlements, "I prithee, convey to the king, my royal master, that his servant will never consent to any reversal of judgments given in concert with the learned Thomas de Muleton and the learned Martin de Pateshulle, at the bidding of the unlearned–

"Peace!" cried De Breauté, pushing the little man back violently; "I brought thee not hither to speak, but to be seen.–Soho, warder! take the justice back again to the dungeon, and see that his supper be somewhat more scanty than was his dinner. Those who bend not must starve."

And the warder led away the little justice, remonstrating and quoting legal Latin anent wrongful imprisonment and detention.

Fulke de Breauté again looked over the parapet.

"Yet another prisoner have I here, Sir Ralph," he said; "but she is entertained in the lady's bower, as befits a damsel who is shortly to be the bride of the brother to the lord of the castle. Even now our new chaplain, Bertram de Concours, he who anon served the chapel on Bromham Bridge, prepares our long-disused chapel for the marriage rites."

Ralph could bear it no longer. He gnashed his teeth, and whirling his sword round his head in impotent fury, flung it at the speaker. The good blade shivered in two against the stone wall, and Fulke resumed his banter.

"Little boots it sending thy sword where thou thyself darest not follow," said he; "but methinks thou hast tarried long enow beneath our walls. Get thee gone ere thy churlishness be returned with usury."

Ralph sprang from his horse. Unarmed though he was, he made for the gate, as if he would tear it down with his bare hands.

Fulke coolly signed to the sentinel who stood at his post over the gatehouse, with cross-bow ready strung and quarrel fitted in the slot. The man took

aim and released his string. The missile struck Ralph in a spot where his hastily-donned armour was imperfectly fastened, and he fell wounded to the ground.

At the same moment two female figures reached the western end of the walk which ran along the top of the long wall bordering the river side of the castle, at right angles to the gate-house.

One of them, a damsel of inquisitive disposition, hearing the twang of the cross-bow, sprang on to the parapet to see what was happening. From the angle she could look down upon the level space outside the gate.

"What see you, Beatrice, that you watch so closely?" inquired a girl's voice from the wall beneath the former's vantage-ground.

"My lady," exclaimed Beatrice Mertoun, "the archer hath struck some knight below, for I see the townsfolk carrying off a wounded man clad in armour. His helmet hath rolled from his head. What curly hair! How pale he looks, alas, poor youth! Ah, I see my lord pointing to the helmet. There goes a man from the wicket-gate. He has picked it up; he is bringing it in. Marry, how the burghers shrank back when he appeared! Methought they were like to drop the wounded man. But no; they have borne him off."

"I wot not what this may mean," said Lady Aliva; for she was the speaker from below. "There is no attack on the castle? There come no more armed men?"

"Nay, none but the wounded one," replied Beatrice. "But stay, my lady; I will to the gate-house. Perchance I may learn somewhat."

Impelled by curiosity, the girl made her way down from the wall, and quickly crossed the yard.

Fulke, when the helmet had been brought him, glanced at it and then threw it contemptuously on one side. Then, when the burghers carrying Ralph had disappeared into a neighbouring house, he turned away and went to another part of the castle.

No sooner had he vanished than Beatrice Mertoun, standing below, called up in her most bewitching tones to the archer who had shot the quarrel.

"Ho, Hubert–Hubert of Provence! Wilt do me a favour?"

The man-at-arms was one of her most ardent admirers. He looked down on the pretty upturned face.

"A thousand, Mistress Beatrice! You have but to ask, pardie."

"Then throw me down yon helmet your lord cast away anon."

The man hesitated. He glanced round; but Sir Fulke was out of sight. Beatrice pouted deliciously.

"I said not a thousand, but one favour, Hubert. By my troth, Arnoul or Denis would have given it me in a trice. Methinks you set less store on my words than–"

"Be not so cruel, fair one," exclaimed the admiring archer. "I obey your

slightest wish. Here!"

The helmet fell at her feet. Beatrice picked it up, and then, without so much as a look at the archer, ran back with it to Aliva.

"See, my lady," she cried, "thou canst read these riddles of the heralds."

Aliva recognized on the helmet the crest of the De Beauchamps.

CHAPTER XVI.

WITHIN THE CASTLE WALLS.

The Lady Aliva had been carried off to Bedford in a half-unconscious state; for though she had awoke from her sleep refreshed and restored–thanks to the kind care of Mistress Hodges–the treacherous priest had so arranged that nothing should hinder him from carrying out his part of the shameful contract.

After the departure of the lay-brother he returned to the chapel.

"Daughter," he said to Aliva, through the half-open door of the sacristy, "thou hast done well in seeking the protection of Mother Church, and I, the humble minister of this altar, will see that thou art well guarded if thou remainest here."

"Thanks, reverend father," replied the maiden; "but a short time since, towards dawn of day, methinks (but I have slept since), this faithful woman's son offered to set off to my father's house at Bletsoe and warn the household there of my whereabouts."

"Thy messenger will be yet some time ere he returneth," answered the priest, "and if thou art minded to depart at once, we needs must find some other means of conveyance for thee, lady. I have looked round about since it grew light, and thy pursuers have departed," he added, revolving in his mind how best to induce Aliva to enter the horse-litter from Bedford, which he guessed would by now not be far off.

"Thanks for the hospitality of this holy sanctuary," Aliva replied, "but I would fain depart as speedily as may be," she added, not caring to occupy the sacristy of a chapel as her apartment any longer than was necessary, and with an indefinable dislike, if not distrust, of the speaker.

"So be it, lady," Bertram hastened to answer. "I will myself to Bedford. Doubtless from some of the burghers can I procure a conveyance suited to thy rank. Moreover, thou art doubtless weak in body, and I have taken upon myself

to order food to be brought thee."

So saying he moved to the door and beckoned to some one without. A woman from the village entered, bringing such food and wine as the hostelry could supply.

"Thou mayest eat yonder in the sacristy, my daughter, for it is not consecrated to holy purposes."

He followed the woman into the priest's room and then dismissed her. This left him alone for a few moments, for Aliva had entered the chapel to kneel down before the rude altar, and offer up a heartfelt thanksgiving for her preservation.

Father Bertram took a small vial from within his robe and poured some drops from it into the wine-flask.

He had not studied the art of drug-concocting in the infirmary of his late monastery in vain.

Then he passed out of the chapel, saying that he was going to Bedford.

Aliva rose from her knees and went into the sacristy and found the food awaiting her. But she could not swallow, famished though she was, the rough village fare copiously seasoned with garlic.

"Alack!" exclaimed Goody Hodges. "But thou wilt die of weakness. See the wine-flask, lady! Drink, if thou canst not stomach the food."

Aliva did as she advised; and when the priest shortly returned, having brought the litter which he had found waiting on the bridge, and having received back again the pledge of the crucifix, he found the maiden in a half-unconscious state.

"Alack, alack! father, she hath swooned again!" cried the deluded peasant woman.

"She is overwrought with her hardships," replied the priest. "We must get her home with all speed. I have found a litter on the road, and it is in readiness. Help me to bear her to it."

The fresh morning air outside the chapel door partially revived Aliva. Opening her eyes she moaned,–

"Where am I? where are you taking me?"

"Home, daughter, to Bletsoe. Let me lay you in the litter!" exclaimed Bertram hurriedly, and rudely pushing back Dame Hodges, who had stopped short when she too recognized the De Breauté livery, and saw that she had been deceived.

Aliva sank back languidly on the cushions, and her eyes closed again. She was deaf to a well-known voice imploring her to stay, and unaware of the lay-brother's gallant attempt to detain her.

When she recovered her senses again, the litter was jolting fearfully, for the horses were going at the top of their speed. Bertram rightly conjectured that

Aliva had taken but little of the drugged wine, and was alarmed lest its numbing influence should wear off ere his captive was safely secured. So he urged the postillion along, galloping by his side.

With returning consciousness Aliva drew aside the curtains of the litter and looked out. They were certainly not on the road to Bletsoe; she saw that at once. They were swinging through streets, and curious burgesses came to their house doors, marvelling what brought the litter of the Lady Margaret out so early.

While she was doubting whether she should cry for help or fling herself from the litter, it turned under an echoing gateway, and stopped in a courtyard before the entrance of a castle keep.

A girl of about her own age came down the steps.

"Lady, please to alight and follow me to the apartment prepared for you."

Aliva descended from the litter and looked around her, bewildered. A group of men-at-arms were drawn up at a respectful distance, and the grooms who had brought her stood silent by their horses. The priest had vanished as soon as he had seen her safe into the castle.

Aliva turned to the girl beside her.

"Where am I?" she murmured, still half dazed. "Is this not Bedford Castle? There has been treachery–treachery by that ill-looking priest! This is more of De Breauté's doings, damsel."

"Nay, lady, I can tell thee naught, save that my lord Sir Fulke bade me prepare a lodging in the keep for a lady who was to arrive in my lady's litter. Thy chamber is ready on the floor above the great hall, next to my lady's bower. Prithee, let me lead thee thither."

Aliva felt somewhat reassured by this reception. At least she found herself in the care of women.

Silently she allowed her conductress to show her the way across the hall and up a turret stair to her apartment, where she sank wearily on a couch.

The pretty waiting-woman bustled about, offering the unhappy girl various attentions. She brought her articles of dress from her mistress's coffer, and assisted Aliva to remove her travel-stained garments and clothe herself in becoming attire.

The latter eyed her curiously.

"And who art thou, maiden?" she inquired.

"My name is Beatrice Mertoun. I am the waiting-woman of the Lady Margaret, the wife of Sir Fulke. And thou, lady, if I might make so bold?"

"I am Aliva de Pateshulle from Bletsoe," returned Aliva.

"From Bletsoe!" echoed Beatrice. "Methought I remembered your face and figure as one of the nuns at Elstow when I attended my mistress to the retreat there. We returned but yesterday. But thou art no nun–no sister of an abbey?"

”Nay,” replied Aliva, ”but I wore the habit of a novice as a penitent during the retreat. Doubtless,” she added, sighing, ”this trouble which hath come upon me is the reward of my sins.”

”Fair lady,” said Beatrice gently, ”you look sad;” and she came and knelt down at her feet.

”Sad!” exclaimed Aliva, raising herself on her elbow and gazing down at the waiting-maid with horror-stricken face; ”I am miserable–betrayed–undone! Ah, I see it all now–this foul plot! William de Breauté hath encompassed my ruin!”

”William de Breauté!” cried Beatrice. ”It is he who is at the bottom of this, forsooth! By my halidom, *I* see daylight now! I overheard him speaking of you with his brother–and then the chapel, repaired and cleaned. That was what Sir Fulke meant as he watched the men at work and said in jesting mood that from his own experience an unwilling bride was all the sweeter for the trouble of snaring and catching her, and William de Breauté answered that for his part he cared not for a ripe plum that fell into one’s mouth without the picking.”

”The chapel–an unwilling bride!” gasped poor Aliva. ”The Lady Margaret was such! I see it all, alas! Does my father know of this? Does he give his consent?”

”Alas, fair lady, I know naught! It pains me to see thee in such grief, and in good sooth I mind me well of the stories I have heard of the unwilling wooing, the hasty bridal of my mistress. But, lady, cheer thee. Thou art weary and mazed. Rest here awhile, and talk no more, and I will watch by thee.”

The bright spring afternoon was already waning when, some hours after the events related above, the two maidens walked out upon the south wall of the castle. Beatrice had persuaded Aliva to come thither, hoping that the fresh air might revive her drooping spirits; and Sir Fulke had given permission that his prisoner might repair thither when she pleased, though the precincts of the castle were forbidden.

As they paced up and down the terrace the fertile brain of Mistress Beatrice, already a warm partisan of the fair young prisoner, began to weave plans of escape.

”Canst swim, fair lady?” she inquired. ”’Twould be naught to leap into Ouse water from yon turret! Or, better still, that thy knight (she took it for granted that Aliva had a knight) should bring hither a skiff some dark night, beneath the walls!”

At that moment they heard the twang of an archer’s bow sounding from

the gate-house hard by.

CHAPTER XVII.
THE KING IN COUNCIL.

For some time Ralph lay in a precarious state in the house of one of the burgesses of Bedford. The bolt from the cross-bow had given him a nasty wound, which it required all the skill of the leech to heal. Moreover, he lay fretting and fuming at the thought that his Aliva was a prisoner in the hands of his enemy, and his mental anxiety seriously interfered with his bodily recovery.

As he got better, however, he received visits from many of the principal townspeople, who were much attached to the house of De Beauchamp, and full of pity for the young knight.

"Sir Ralph," quoth one of these grave personages, as he sat solemnly stroking his beard by the pallet where the young man still lay, "if one richer in the experience of years than thou art may be permitted to advise thee, I would show thee how useless a waste of life and blood would be any attempt of thine, unaided, to rescue thy fair lady from her direful plight."

"Marry, but have I not learned that lesson already!" ejaculated Ralph irritably; "but whither then to get aid? for get aid I must. This emprise is of more worth to me than a dozen lives! Speak you on behalf of your kind, Gilbert the Clothier, the other traders and craftsmen of the town? Are ye ready to strike a blow against this tyrant?"

"I crave thy pardon, Sir Knight, but we are men of peace, unused to warlike weapons, and we have much to lose. With one swoop Fulke de Breauté could burn about our ears all the amassed gain of a lifetime!"

Ralph shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"'Tis vain to speak to barn-door fowls of the liberty of the hawk's flight!" replied Ralph, somewhat ungraciously. "But, Sir Merchant, if the only weapons ye can use be your tools and your measuring-yards, yet methinks ye have store of wisdom in your heads, in full measure above us who spend all our wits upon our sinews!" he added laughingly. "Prithee, counsel me."

"There are none in all the county round, in these days when so many of our gentlefolks are impoverished with the wars and disturbances of these last years, who can hope to lift a spear successfully against this rich Frenchman," the

merchant began. ”We must e’en seek aid further afield. Anon I had word brought me that the churchmen brook ill that the learned brother of Martin de Pateshulle and Thomas de Muleton lies in the keeping of the enemy of the Church, and are minded to stir in this matter with the king.”

”The king!” exclaimed Ralph, half raising himself. ”That is in good sooth good news!”

”The king holds a council shortly at Northampton, as ye know,” Gilbert went on, ”and it is there they purport to lay our case before him and his barons and bishops assembled.”

”I will to Northampton, then,” cried Ralph eagerly. ”Certes, I was even purposing to go thither ere this unlucky scratch detained me. I sought the king’s favour to give me some command in this army which is about to inarch for the north.”

”Better turn your lance-point nearer home, Sir Knight,” the merchant replied. ”There will be work enow and glory enow to be gotten for all who list in pulling down this robber Frenchman’s stronghold!”

”I will to Northampton as soon as this leech who holds me in his clutches gives me leave to buckle on my armour again,” Ralph added.

And so it came about that, not many days later, our hero rode over to Northampton, where he found the king in council with the bishops, abbots, barons, and justices.

The youthful Henry III. was at this time only seventeen years old, though he had been declared to be of age two years before. His trusted guardian and adviser, Hubert de Burgh, was, however, still with him, and was present at the council. The old chronicler tells how, while the monarch and his advisers were thus assembled, deliberating on the affairs of state, news was brought of the raid upon the judges, and of the capture of Henry de Braybrooke by William de Breauté.

Here was an unbearable insult to the royal supremacy. The attention of the council was instantly turned from the banks of the Tweed to those of the Ouse.

In the storm of indignation which was aroused by the Robber Baron’s latest misdeed the voice of the Church made itself heard. The judges of the land were at that period mostly ecclesiastics. Could they put up with this indignity to their learned brother? Was not Fulke also a destroyer of abbeys and churches? Had he not pulled down St. Paul’s Church at Bedford? and had not that impious raid upon St. Alban’s Abbey been but poorly atoned for by the discipline in the chapter-house? Had any restitution been made?

Further, doubtless, the great barons called to their master’s council–they whose sires had forced his father to sign Magna Charta on the field of Runnymede, and who had spilt their blood for the liberties of England–had somewhat to say against this French upstart, De Breauté, this bastard soldier of fortune, who

The council at Northampton.

had ensconced himself in a fortress where one of the old Norman families had been established ever since the days of the Conqueror.

Prelate and lord both agreed that the most pressing question of the day was the overthrow of this robber chief.

When Ralph rode into the ancient town of Northampton, now crowded with the magnates of the land, he had no difficulty in finding men of position and weight who were willing to introduce him, as a scion of the De Beauchamp family, to the council.

Henry and his advisers, in earnest discussion over this business of Bedford, were not sorry to find one who was well acquainted with the castle and its fortifications. Accordingly, when Ralph was presented to the council, he was received by the young king with much cordiality. Henry III., though one of the few weak-minded monarchs of the strong Plantagenet line, was still so young that his character could hardly be said to be yet formed, and any mistakes he might make were naturally set down to his youth and inexperience. This affair of Bedford Castle, however, was an undertaking in which he exhibited all the promptitude and energy of his predecessors upon the throne. He resolved to attend the siege in person, and ordered his council to suspend all other business and direct their attention solely to the means of carrying it out.

The council of war, or committee, to whom were confided the necessary preparations, took Ralph into their confidence. They were presided over by no less a personage than Hubert de Burgh himself, who summoned the young knight to appear before them in the chamber in Northampton Castle, where they held their conclave.

Ralph's feelings, as he found himself in the presence of one so renowned, formerly the governor of Dover Castle, and the custodian in Brittany of King John's luckless nephew Arthur, and the late guardian of the king, were those of some shyness. He was a plain, country-born youth, unused to courts and dignitaries, and even of late years a landless, penniless knight, one of an outcast family. But the great justiciary's manner reassured him.

"Sir Ralph," he said, "we understand that thou wast brought up in Bedford Castle, and art well acquainted with all its parts."

"Certes, noble Hugh," replied Ralph, "always excepting those portions where Fulke de Breauté may have made alterations and additions during the last few years."

"Well answered, and with a caution exceeding thy years, Sir Knight. Say on–what alterations?"

"By my faith, I can scarcely tell! But he hath pulled down and well-nigh destroyed the church of St. Paul, and the stones thereof have been used in the castle walls."

”For new work, mean you, or for the strengthening of old work?” inquired the justiciary.

”That cannot I rightly say,” answered Ralph, ”for since my uncle was driven forth, or rather surrendered to Fulke acting in his sovereign’s name, I have not set foot within the castle walls.”

But he added beneath his breath: ”Would I were within at this moment!”

De Burgh overheard him, and with some surprise.

”So shalt thou be, and that shortly, and with stout men-at-arms at thy back, an I mistake not. But for the nonce we must learn more about these walls. How sayest thou the castle lieth?”

”Along the banks of the Ouse, and on the north side of the stream.”

”And its defences–what be they? All say that the keep was indeed built by thy ancestor Pain de Beauchamp, and is strong and not easily to be assaulted.”

”The keep is indeed strong and well built,” Ralph replied, ”and round it run a high wall and a deep moat. On the west side only might an attack be made with any hope of victory, for there lie the bailey yards, the gate-house, and the barbican. Moreover, between the outer and the inner bailey there standeth a tower, which we call the old tower, the like of which, I have heard tell, is not to be found in many castles, and which commands the bridge.”

As he spoke Ralph made a sort of rough drawing.

”Here,” he said, ”is the keep, upon a lofty mound. On this side only is an entrance possible. We must e’en break through all the outer defences, and pass on from west to east. But it will be no light emprise.”

A gleam of pleasure came over the face of the veteran.

”By the bones of St. Thomas,” he exclaimed, ”thou showest no mean knowledge or skill, fair sir. Where hast thou learned the art of war?”

”I have oft heard my uncle tell the story of how King Stephen besieged the castle when our ancestor Milo de Beauchamp held it for the Empress Matilda, nigh upon a hundred years ago,” modestly answered Ralph. ”He even contended that it was so strong that no attack could prevail, and that had it been better victualled it would never have surrendered. And then, noble knight, if I may make so bold as to remind thee, there is that sad passage in the history of our house which hath been seared into the memory of my boyhood–I mean when my uncle, Sir William, surrendered to this same Fulke, who came in the name of our late king, who was indeed the enemy of our house. Ofttimes hath my uncle gone over that tale with me, and hath showed me how he might yet have held the castle had he possessed better stores and more men.”

The end of this interview was that Ralph, in consideration of the valuable information he had proved himself willing and able to bestow, was admitted to all the deliberations of the council, and was listened to with attention. Neither

his uncle William de Beauchamp, nor his kinsman at Eaton Socon, had come to Northampton; the latter by reason of his age, and the former on account of his sullen despair, and perhaps also hindered by a latent distrust of the house of Plantagenet, which had dealt so ill with him. Thus it happened that Ralph represented, as it were, the De Beauchamp family.

He was given plenty to do in the way of hastening preparations, moreover, and as his heart was in the work, for Aliva's sake, he was busy both night and day.

His duties brought him into frequent communications with a personage who was much to the front when any question of a siege was on hand–namely, John de Standen, the chief of the miners. Ralph soon discovered that John had considerable knowledge of Bedford Castle and its fortifications. This puzzled him not a little at the time, and it was not till later on that he solved the mystery.

When the chief of the miners and his assistants had determined what supplies of material were necessary for the siege, royal writs were issued for their production. Timber was required for the manufacture of the bombarding engines or *petraria*, which were to fling great stones at the castle, and ox or horse hides were needed for the protection of these machines. Thousands of quarrels were ordered for the cross-bows and dart-throwing engines. Iron was ordered in great quantities, to be worked up on the spot, and pickaxes and other tools were not forgotten.

Moreover, writs were issued to the sheriffs of Hertford, Oxford, Cambridge, Huntingdon, Northampton, Warwick, Leicester, Rutland, Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk, Lincoln, and Middlesex, directing them to send two men from each plough-land (the usual division of land in those days) to work the aforementioned engines. Then the feeding of these men had to be attended to. One Peter Buyam, a Burgundian merchant, was ordered to purchase one hundred and eight casks of wine at St. Botolph's fair, at forty-three shillings and four-pence a cask.

From St. Briavels in Gloucestershire, the native place of John de Standen, were brought thirty assistant miners. But carpenters, saddlers, and leather-workers, to shape the shields for the engines, were found nearer at hand by the sheriffs of the counties of Northampton and Bedford, as were also the men who were to fashion the stones to be discharged from the petraria. The whole of the midlands was astir over the siege of Bedford Castle.

Neither was the Church inactive. To show their horror at the outrages of the wicked Fulke, the assembled prelates and abbots forthwith granted the king a subsidy of half a mark for each of their plough-lands, and also sent, for each hide of land held by them, two men to work the engines, taking care, however, to obtain an acknowledgment from the king that this was a special grant. The priory of Newenham, which had been founded by the De Beauchamps, furnished

the stones for the bombardment, and the abbey of St. Alban's naturally took a deep interest in the proceedings, which are fully chronicled in the records of the house.

No sooner, however, was it known that a Bedfordshire maiden, the Lady Aliva de Pateshulle, was a prisoner of the foreign interloper, than all the men of the county rose to assist in the undertaking. Even our stalwart friend the Benedictine lay-brother, as soon as–thanks to the care of Lady Mabel–he had recovered at Eaton Socon from the dastardly wound inflicted by Bertram de Concours, found his way to the headquarters of preparations.

Martin de Pateshulle, also, as one of those justices whose writs had been so rudely repudiated by Fulke, was summoned to the council. This worthy ecclesiastic, who was none the worse for his overthrow by William de Breauté's horsemen, was much concerned over the fate of his niece.

In him Ralph, tortured by anxiety which he was striving to drown in work, found a friend and ready sympathizer.

"My son," said the archdeacon one day at the close of a long sitting of the council of war, "thou toilest in this business both as a servant of Holy Church and as a gallant knight for the rescue of fair lady."

Ralph sighed.

"Indeed, venerable father, it is only when my whole heart is busy with my work that it finds peace. I am torn with doubts and fears concerning her whom I love. Could I but have one word, one token from her! Could I but hear something of her, were it even ill news! But this silence, it ofttimes is more than I can bear."

John de Standen, still busy at the table over a rough sketch, looked up at these words.

"Sir Knight," he said, "thou meanest what thou sayest? Hast a stout heart? Canst bear ill news?"

Ralph sprang from his seat, and gripped the king's miner by the arm till he winced.

"Speak, man, I conjure thee! Thou hast heard aught?"

"Speech is just what is forbidden to me," replied John. "My lips are sealed. All the message I have for thee is: 'Haste, or it may be too late!' Ask me no more."

CHAPTER XVIII.

HEARD UNDERGROUND.

On the twenty-second of June 1224, the king arrived at Bedford, and the siege of the castle commenced almost immediately. Outside the town, on the Northampton road, pavilions were pitched for himself, for Hubert de Burgh the justiciary, and other great officers, while the troops and their officers, Ralph de Beauchamp among them, were quartered in rude shelters near the castle, or billeted upon the townsfolk, that they might be ready to repel any sortie which the besieged might make with a view of burning the engines of war. Close to these latter were encamped the men who worked them, together with the miners, carpenters, and other artificers ready for their respective turn of duty.

Before any hostile movement was commenced, however, the king, in due form, summoned the castle to surrender. An ecclesiastic was detailed for the purpose; for priests in those days often performed strange functions.

It was but an empty form, for no one expected that the king's command would be obeyed. Moreover, Sir Fulke de Breauté himself was not in the castle. With the astute craftiness which pervaded all his actions, he had gone away some little while before, leaving his brother in command. He took himself off into Wales, where he joined the Earl of Chester, who, though siding for some time with the king, had left him, in conjunction with some other barons, under somewhat suspicious circumstances.

As was to be expected, William de Breauté made answer to the archdeacon–for such was the office of the king's messenger–that he had received no orders from his brother to surrender the castle, and that he certainly should not do so without authority from him. So the siege was begun without delay.

The method of taking a castle in those days was much the same as that which continued in vogue till, long afterwards, stone walls gave place to earthworks. The walls were first battered by stones thrown from the petraria, and when a breach had been made a storming-party rushed in. The only change consequent upon the introduction of gunpowder was that cannon then took the place of the stone-throwing engines.

The machines were placed one or two on each side of the castle, and they must have been of considerable size and strength, as one of them projected stones right across the river. The men who worked them were protected against the quarrels, arrows, and other missiles directed at them from the walls, by screens made of ox and horse hides. Two lofty erections, which towered far above the fortifications of the castle, were manned by slingers and cross-bowmen, who thence shot down upon the garrison on the walls and in the baileys below them.

Close up against the face of the wall itself was pushed a movable screen, called the "cat," the object of which was to protect John de Standen and his men as they carried on their work of undermining the walls.

Ralph was ordered by his superior officer, a grim old baron who had been

one of those assembled at Runnymede when John signed the charter, but who now supported his son, to pay special attention to the mining operations. To Ralph and John de Standen attached himself one who could hardly be called a soldier, though he exhibited all the courage and zeal which are the necessary qualities of a man of war. This was the young lay-brother from St. Alban's. He was received as a sort of volunteer, and was granted permission to serve in the mining work, for his religious vows, he said, forbade him to carry sword or spear. This young man proved, however, a valuable assistant.

A kind of friendly rivalry went on between the two branches of warfare into which the besiegers were divided. Those who had charge of the engines favoured the notion of pounding the walls till they battered them down. The sappers and miners, however, built their hopes of reducing the fortress upon their methods of burrowing underneath it. But before these latter were able to push on far with their works, the besiegers above ground gained two important advantages. They carried by assault the barbican or outer defence of the gate, and with but a loss of four or five men. By this means they were able to rush the gate itself, and in a second assault forced their way into the outer bailey or yard, the first one on the west side.

Here were the store-houses, and here also were kept the horses and live stock which the besieged took care to have always within the castle walls. Forage, grain, and such like bulky articles as could not be removed into the keep were likewise stored in the yard. All these fell into the hands of the besiegers, who removed the arms, the horses, and the pigs, and burned the buildings which contained the corn and hay. The besieged retreated within the inner wall, which defended the lesser bailey.

But between the upper and lower bailey there stood–a rather unusual feature in a Norman castle–a strong building known by the name of the "old tower." It had probably something to do with fortifications which at an earlier date protected the bridge across the Ouse, before the castle precincts were prolonged westwards. Here the besieged gathered in strength and made an obstinate stand.

The assistance of John de Standen and his men was now necessary. The other defences, the barbican and the wall of the outer bailey, had been carried by assault, the soldiers climbing the walls and forcing their way within. But the wall which separated the two baileys, protected as it was by the old tower, proved a more formidable obstacle. The king's troops intrenched themselves in the outer bailey, and the cat was wheeled into position ready for the operations of the miners.

These latter worked with a will. Ere long they were able to report to Ralph de Beauchamp, as their superior officer, that the foundations of the old tower were undermined, and that the building would fall directly the stays and struts

with which they had propped it up should be removed.

So Ralph went down into the mine with John de Standen, that he in his turn might report to his superiors that the underground work was indeed finished, and that the soldiers might be held in readiness to storm the inner bailey.

With some professional pride the king's miner conducted the knight through the dark passages he had burrowed, explaining as he went the manner in which the supports should be removed directly he received the signal to do so.

They were just beneath the old tower, and John de Standen was enlarging on the excellent arrangements which he had made for the overthrow of the building, when, to their intense astonishment, a woman's voice was heard speaking in the vault overhead.

"By my faith," cried John de Standen, "but I wot not that we had dug so close to the lower vault of the tower. Methinks I must be out of my reckoning, Sir Knight, or mayhap your recollection of the place plays you false."

"In good sooth we are close beneath the tower," replied Ralph. "How thinkest thou, good John? Has the enemy countermined, or are they about to break in upon our works?"

Before John de Standen could vouchsafe an opinion, the voice again was heard from above.

"Ho, royal miners, are ye below?"

"We be miners sure enow," called John de Standen in reply. "But who be ye above there?–They cannot be for Sir Fulke," he added in a lower tone to Ralph, "or they would not let us hear them. Methinks, too, the voice is that of a woman or a boy."

"I am for the king and his miners," spoke the voice again. "But tell me, prithee, is your master, John de Standen, with thee?"

"I, John de Standen, myself am here, and speak; and with me is no one save Sir Ralph de Beauchamp," replied the miner. "But speak; who art thou? Woman or boy; no man, I trow?"

"Now fie upon thee, John de Standen," said the unseen speaker, "that thou knowest not the voice of Beatrice Mertoun."

"Beshrew me, Beatrice, if I can know thy voice, an it *be* thou, if it come to me through these plaguy paving-stones," cried De Standen. "Moreover, why askest *thou*, hearing me speak, if I am John de Standen?"

"Marry," exclaimed Beatrice, "in the night all cats are gray. All men's voices sound the same. But mind thee, John, how oft thou hast sworn that thou wouldest know my voice anywhere."

John de Standen felt he was getting the worst of the argument. He changed the subject.

”And prithee, fair Beatrice, what art doing above us?”

”Hush! not so loud,” she answered. ”I have but a few moments. The guard watch closely the vault ever since that machine of thine was dragged up against the tower. I marvel much that they have not heard the noise of thy workers, and broken in upon thee. But for many days have I too watched, hoping to get a word with thee, for I have a message to send to a knight. But stay–didst not say one Sir Ralph de Beauchamp was with thee?”

”In good sooth I am here,” replied Sir Ralph, both amused and puzzled by this unexpected and remarkable meeting between the king’s miner and a lady who seemed an old acquaintance, if nothing nearer. ”I am here, lady fair, whosoever thou art, for methinks a fair face must e’en suit so sweet a voice.”

”She is the waiting-woman of the Lady Margaret de Ripariis, and a mighty comely damsel withal,” explained the bold miner.

”Now a truce to fair speeches! I have somewhat to say to Sir Ralph that ill brooks delay. The Lady Aliva, who is prisoner here–

”The Lady Aliva! I know it well!” shouted Ralph, forgetful of the caution to speak softly. ”But tell me quick, I pray thee, is she safe? is she well?”

”Safe as yet,” replied Beatrice. ”But there is mischief brewing against her. Say, did I not see thee carried away wounded from before the castle gate not many weeks since? They brought thy helmet into the castle. I showed it to the Lady Aliva, and she knew it for thine by the crest. And then darkness seized her mind, for not long after came Fulke de Breauté to her, and told her that thou wast slain!”

”The lying scoundrel!” cried Ralph hotly. ”Could I but meet him, he would see I am yet alive!”

”Ere he quitted the castle he came oft to her with suit of marriage for his brother,” Beatrice went on, lying down upon the stone floor above and speaking with her mouth to an open joint she had discovered between two of the paving slabs. ”Canst hear me, Sir Knight? The guards approach; I must tell thee in few words, for I hear the warders relieved not many posts away. William de Breauté came himself to the lady to plead his suit. But she hates him. She told him so to his face.”

”She told him so on his face!” muttered Ralph.

”But the chapel hath been prepared,” continued the waiting-woman, ”and that traitor priest, Bertram de Concours, was ready. They dragged the lady thither by force. Sir Fulke and William de Breauté were waiting. What might have happened I know not, but my Lady Margaret stepped forward, and shamed the shameless man into respect for a lady.”

”And all this while she was faithful to me, though believing me dead!” exclaimed Ralph, half to himself.

”But Sir Fulke, ere he left for the marches of Wales, swore a great oath he would find her wedded ere he return, or else–And William de Breauté, he apeth the fine French gentleman. He maketh sweet speeches, and vows that when the king’s troops be driven back, and the care of the castle be passed from him, he will return to bask once more in the sunlight of his lady’s eyes! Faugh! the smooth-tongued villain! He has sung the same song to me, but not to my honour. But hist! they come!”

A sound, as of the trampling of armed men, penetrated to those below. Then the eager listeners there caught some words in a rough man’s voice.

”Pardie! pretty maiden, what doest here? Must pay forfeit with a kiss ere thou depart!”

Then there was the sound of a struggle and a scream, and John de Standen shook his fist in mute rage at the floor above him.

CHAPTER XIX.

FEARS AND HOPES.

William de Beauchamp, the taciturn and melancholy, had not attended the council at Northampton. But he could not well absent himself when an attack was made upon the castle which once had been his; and for his own benefit, for the king had promised to reinstate him as soon as the Robber Baron should have been driven out. He had been given a command in the royal force, and found himself in the anomalous position of besieging his own castle.

But the march of events did not, as might well have been imagined, raise his drooping spirits. He was, indeed, more dismal than ever, having got a fixed idea in his head that he should never come to his own again. Though he had escaped unhurt from the two first assaults, by which the barbican and the outer bailey had been won, he was well aware that yet more serious struggles were before the besiegers ere they might hope to win the inner bailey and the keep. These assaults, he had made up his mind, he should not survive, and in his gloomiest, most funereal manner, called Ralph to him at the close of a summer’s evening, when they were resting from duty in the house of Gilbert the Clothier, where they were quartered, and prepared to deliver to him what he supposed to be his last wishes and dispositions.

”Nephew Ralph,” he began, in his most lugubrious tones, ”thou hast been

as a son to me, since my only son was cut off in early childhood."

"True, uncle much revered by me," replied Ralph, puzzled at this solemn address. "I know not quite if I have been a good son to thee, but thou hast, in good sooth, given me all the father's care I have ever known."

"And now, Nephew Ralph," William de Beauchamp continued, "I am about to confide to thee a very precious and holy message. Thou hast heard tell of the Lady Margaret de Ripariis?"

"Ay, certes," replied Ralph.

"And now that my time is at hand, and that the sands of my life are–"

"Thy time is at hand! By my faith, uncle, what mean these words?"

"Thou wottest that ere long we attack the old tower and the inner bailey," the uncle proceeded, in a tragic manner.

"I have but just come from the old tower, where John de Standen hath showed me how nigh is its overthrow."

"Hark ye, nephew. I shall fall then; I know it of a certainty. I have seen in a dream that I shall not survive the assault. I shall ne'er again set eyes on the Lady Margaret, now for many years the unhappy wife of Fulke de Breauté. Once, when we were young and she was fair, we plighted our troth, and I have never forgotten it, though a cruel fate tore us asunder. My wife, who was ne'er to me as the first love of my youth the Lady Margaret, hath been dead these many years; and had the time come for the end of the miserable Fulke, I would fain have offered myself again to my once affianced bride. But I die before him. I feel it. For us there is no hope."

Ralph began to perceive the gloomy forebodings that had seized his uncle, and tried, but in vain, to reassure him, pointing out how much danger he had already escaped, and bidding him hope for the best.

"For eight long years thou hast pined an exile from the halls of thine ancestors, uncle. But to-day our star is again in the ascendant, and fortune smiles once more upon the De Beauchamps."

William shook his head sadly.

"It may not be, nephew. But bear thou to the Lady Margaret my last words of unalterable affection for the love of my youth."

"Nay, uncle, thou shalt bear them thyself, when Fulke shall have gone to the perdition reserved for him! But cease these dark meditations, and list awhile to a sprightly wooing I overheard 'twixt one of those within the castle, and no less a person than the king's miner, in the old tower, this very noontide."

And to turn his uncle's thoughts, Ralph proceeded to relate the strange meeting between John de Standen and Beatrice.

But at the very hour these two talked thus together in Master Gilbert's guest-chamber, the subject of their conversation, the Lady Margaret, sat with

her waiting-woman in the deep window of the lady's bower.

The latter was brimming over with eagerness to impart to Aliva the good news she had just ascertained as to Ralph's safety, but deemed it prudent to confide it first to her mistress.

"By'r Lady, mistress mine, I vow I heard him, though I cannot say I saw him, and he is whole and in good heart."

"The saints be praised!" ejaculated Lady Margaret. "It hath grieved me sore that this sweet maiden should be thus held prisoner by my evil-disposed brother, and yet sadder am I to think that she should have been told her knight was slain."

"And such a knight, lady! Fair spoken, and of good courage. I heard it in the ring of his voice, as he hasted to ask after her welfare, how much he loveth her."

"Thou knewest that he was the Lady Aliva's knight, then, Beatrice?"

"Ever since the affair of the helmet, lady. My Lady Aliva could not contain herself then, when she knew him wounded, and told me all. She is as true to him as the pole-star to the north, or as I to–"

"I know it, Beatrice, and it would be a deadly sin, and one I will stand out against as long as I draw breath, were she to be forced to wed William. The lying wretch! he will stick at naught to gain his end. To tell Aliva Sir Ralph was dead! Alas, alas! But peace, Beatrice; here she comes. I will tell her the news."

Inwardly chafing at being deprived of the pleasure of imparting such delightful information, Beatrice retreated behind the chair of her mistress as Aliva entered.

The weary weeks the latter had spent as a prisoner since that fatal morning when she was hurried into the castle, and the intense mental anguish she had endured since the helmet of the wounded knight had been handed to her on the ramparts that same evening, had left their traces on Aliva's pale cheek. The listless attitude in which she sank upon a stone seat, and gazed with mournful eyes out into the fast-falling summer twilight, contrasted strangely with the natural vigour and vivacity of the brave horsewoman who had led William de Breauté such a chase over the Ouse marshes. Something akin to despair had crushed her soul since Sir Fulke had brought her the news of Sir Ralph's death.

"Daughter," began Lady Margaret, tenderly drawing the fair head which leaned so wearily upon the thin hand down upon her knee, "I have somewhat to say to thee. This suit of my husband's brother–methinks Sir Fulke knew, as well as thou and I, how vain it was to urge it while thy true knight yet lived–"

"It were ever vain, lady, were Ralph alive or dead. Death would be sweeter to me than marriage with William de Breauté," replied Aliva mournfully.

"He hath used treachery once to gain his end; what if he hath also used deceit of words?" Lady Margaret went on. "Other De Beauchamps than thy knight

bear the crest thou sawest on the casque."

"Ah, lady," moaned Aliva, "beguile me not with vain hopes. Did not Beatrice here see him fall?"

"In good sooth! But, lady, I saw him not die."

"Mind you how the townsfolk bore him off with much care? Perchance Hubert of Provence aimed not o'er true with his quarrel–"

"He is but a sorry wight in many things, lady," put in Beatrice scornfully.

"And the leeches are possessed of marvellous skill, as thou well knowest, and Sir Ralph is young and strong–"

"*Was* young and strong, you mean, lady. O prithee, peace! Open not thus afresh a wound which bleeds, ay, and will bleed for ever!"

"My lady means what she says, and naught else," interrupted Beatrice, unable to restrain herself any longer. "He is young and strong, or beshrew me for a deaf old crone, for I trow his voice was strong enough this noontide!"

"His voice!" exclaimed Aliva, raising herself eagerly, and a faint colour overspreading her pallid cheek. "O Beatrice, mock me not!"

"Thou mockest thyself, daughter," said Lady Margaret, smiling. "Take heart o' grace. Beatrice speaks true; she hath heard him not many hours since."

And Beatrice, coming forward and falling at her lady's knees, poured forth her wonderful tale in a torrent of words.

When she paused for lack of breath, Aliva rose, like one waking from a dream, and clutched Beatrice's arm.

"Beatrice, an thou lovest me, take me to this chink in the vault of the old tower. Haste thee, haste thee! Let me hear him speak again."

"Alas, lady! but this very evening William de Breauté hath ordered that all women keep within the keep, as the enemy presseth us round so close."

A merry laugh as of old, the first which had rung from her since she had been a prisoner, and the first to which the lady's bower had re-echoed for many a day, burst from Aliva's lips. With the violent revulsion of feeling born of her youth and high mettle, she waved her hand scornfully and laughed again.

"William de Breauté! Oh, he may command and order, in good sooth, if it please him. What for him now, or for his commands! Methinks his time comes apace, and Ralph de Beauchamp will be master here. My Ralph–to think they had dared to tell me that he was slain!"

And then she fell to bidding Beatrice tell her story all over again.

"Pretty Beatrice, an could I, I would give thee a lapful of gold nobles for this news thou hast brought. It is to me worth a king's ransom. I feel like one risen from the dead. But I trow, Mistress Beatrice," she added archly, "that thou hast had thy reward, in that the bold miner was also below. But tell me once more the very words Sir Ralph spake."

”Nay, nay, maidens,” put in Lady Margaret; ”it is already night, and joy oft wearies as much as grief. Let us now to rest while we may. The strife will begin again at dawn.”

”Lady,” cried Aliva, embracing the elder woman with tenderness, ”go thou and rest if thou canst. I could not close my eyes for very joy.–Go, Beatrice, and leave me here a while alone, that I may think it all o’er again. Go to thy dreams of mines and miners!”

Left to herself, Aliva sat down in the deep window-seat where Lady Margaret had sat when Sir Fulke related to her a less pleasant vision of the night than that which probably haunted the couch of Beatrice–a dream which now seemed in fair way of coming true. The short July darkness had fallen. Across the river the petraria were at rest, and in the silence of the night Aliva only

”Heard the sound, and could almost tell
The sullen words of the sentinel,
As his measured step on the stone below
Clanked as he paced it to and fro.”

Aliva gazed out into the beautiful balmy night, and a peace to which she had long been a stranger stole in upon her heart. The world was at rest, and it seemed sad to think that in a few short hours, when the darkness should be over, man would be once more at his cruel work of war. But the stars, shining deep in the purple overhead and reflected in the placid stream below, seemed to her stars of hope.

”It is the hour when lovers’ vows
Seem sweet in every whispered word,
And gentle winds and waters near
Make music to the lonely ear.”

As she gazed she thought she heard her name called softly from out of the gloom below.

”Aliva!” said a voice, ”Aliva!”

CHAPTER XX.
LOVE LAUGHS AT LOCKSMITHS.

When the interview with his uncle had ended and Ralph’s endeavours to cheer the latter’s gloom had in a measure succeeded, the young knight went off to make his report upon John de Standen’s operations to his superiors. Evening was falling fast ere he found himself free, and then it suddenly came into his mind to pay a kind of unofficial visit to the sentries on the south side of the river, and see if they were on the alert. Perhaps, also, he was impelled by an uncontrollable desire to gaze from as close a point as was possible on that stern keep, where he had that noontide learned from Beatrice Mertoun that his lady-love lingered in much doubt and distress.

He crossed the bridge and walked along the river-bank, giving the required password to each post, and adding a few syllables of caution. In so doing, he told himself he was but fulfilling the object of his nocturnal ramble. Ere long he found himself facing the huge keep, rising on the opposite shore of the river black against the northern sky.

Ralph knew every window of the southern face of the keep, and well-nigh every stone. He perceived a light in one of the large openings of the upper story. He knew that window well. It was that of the lady’s bower, which had been his cousin’s apartment in the old days, and was probably now occupied by the Lady Margaret.

Dark though the night was, the young man’s eyesight was keen, and as he gazed at that window, a crowd of tender thoughts flooding his heart, he saw in the opening two figures in dark profile against the light behind them.

Seized by an uncontrollable impulse, Ralph hastily doffed his armour, and, clad only in the soft leathern dress which knights wore beneath their harness, dropped into the stream so quietly as to be unperceived by the nearest sentry on the river-bank.

Starting from a well-known old pollard willow, Ralph breasted the stream manfully, making, as nearly as the sweep of the current and the darkness of the night would allow him, for certain iron stanchions which he remembered he had fixed, when a boy, into the castle wall.

To his great joy he found they had not been removed. He caught hold of the lowest, which was near the water's edge, and quickly scaled the wall. When he reached the top he looked eagerly down and around.

No one was near. William de Breauté, whose garrison was but scanty, had judged that no attack would be made upon the river side of the castle, except by boat, and accordingly had contented himself with posting sentries at each end of the long river-wall, concentrating his principal strength on the landward side of the castle.

Ralph slid down the other side of the wall, and cautiously crossed the open space which separated him from the huge mound on which stood the keep. He was still unperceived; so, climbing the steep side of the mound, he crouched down against the lofty wall, immediately beneath the lighted window.

Were those two figures still there?

Twice he softly called Aliva by name, and then, to his intense rapture, sweet as an angel's voice from heaven to him, came the words from above,–

"Ralph! Ralph! can it be thou?"

"Stone walls do not a prison make,
Nor iron bars a cage."

Love laughs at locksmiths. In this case it made light, too, of some forty perpendicular feet of massive stone wall. After five weary months of uncertainty, all doubts, mistrusts, and tortures of anxiety were swept away in a breath, as these two heard, each one once more, the loved voice neither had expected ever to hear again; and old Father Ouse, rippling sluggishly on between the willows through the dark summer night, had never listened to warmer raptures, to more passionate protestations of love.

But some one else was listening too.

In the thickness of the wall, at the south-east corner of the keep, on the same floor as the great hall, was the small chapel of the castle. It was a tiny apartment, affording room for but few worshipping besides those attending on the ministrations of the priest. Behind a round arched arcading in a stone gallery were accommodated the ladies and the household of the lord's family; but the bulk of the congregation would have to stand in a sort of antechapel opening out of the great hall, and join in the mass from that position.

Up and down the narrow space in front of the altar–freshly repaired and cleaned for the bridal of Aliva and De Breauté–paced restlessly at midnight Bertram de Concours. His thoughts were not pleasant ones. The freshly-appointed chaplain of Bedford Castle had conceived that his new position would

be one which would lead him to power and authority, and probably give him an opportunity to triumph over those whom he considered his enemies, the ecclesiastical superiors who had dishonoured and disowned him. But now, instead of rising to power with the De Beauté family, he found his new patrons in sore distress. He was well aware that the two assaults which had already been made on the castle had been completely successful, and that all the outer defences had been taken. He gleaned, from the talk of De Beauté and his under-officers, that if the walls were really undermined, and a fresh attack should be made with the same vigour, nothing could avert the fall of the castle.

For the fate of De Beauté and his men Bertram de Concours cared nothing, but in the event of his own capture he clearly foresaw for himself condemnation in the ecclesiastical court. The sentence would be perpetual imprisonment in the cell of some stringent order, where offending priests were subjected to even more severe discipline than that voluntarily assumed by the most austere monks themselves.

"Fool that I was," he muttered to himself, "to have thrown in my lot with these French upstarts! Why did I not see this maiden safe to her father's house, and so have won me the eternal gratitude of this love-sick knight, and what is more, the favour of his family?"

As he moved restlessly to and fro, he paused, and opening the rude shutter which closed the narrow window on the south, looked out into the silent summer night. The calm freshness seemed to mock the consuming uneasiness in his mind.

But as he gazed he heard voices. He leaned out and listened intently.

Yes, he was not mistaken: a voice there was above him–a woman's–answering to a man's below in the darkness.

"Escape, my Ralph, ere dawn break! There are watchers at each end of the long wall, and they will certes espy thee if thou lingerest till it grows light. How it came that thou crossedst the glacis, and scaledst the keep mound unseen, I cannot tell. May the saints bear thee safe across the river!"

And then another female voice went on,–

"And take my message to thy revered uncle, bold young Sir Knight. Tell him that Margaret de Ripariis has but lived these long years in sorrow and mourning for the false step into which she was both forced and betrayed, and that she hath ever held his memory dear."

Then a man's voice answered from below,–

"Fare thee well, my heart's darling, Aliva!–My Lady Margaret, I salute thee. Forget not the signal. When the last assault comes–as come full soon it must–and we attack this mighty keep, hang your scarves from the windows of the chamber to which ye retreat, and I will come and convey ye both away in safety."

Then Bertram heard the speaker cautiously feeling his way among the loose

stones which lay at the foot of the keep.

He drew a short, sharp breath, and clinched his teeth.

"By the mass," he exclaimed, "though naught can undo my folly in the past, yet I will have vengeance now! Ho, warder, ho!" he cried, hurrying from the chapel into the hall, and shouting to the sentry on duty at the entrance; "ho! quick to the window, and take thy aim at yon figure hastening down to the river wall. 'Tis the young knight De Beauchamp. It grows light enow for thee to see thy mark."

At that moment William de Breauté entered the hall from the turret staircase in the corner. He had been taking a few hours' sleep in one of the upper chambers, and was now about to sally out on his early morning rounds, fearing an attack when his guards were weary and drowsy.

"How sayest thou, Sir Chaplain?" he exclaimed; "Ralph de Beauchamp here–beneath the castle wall! 'Tis not possible!"

"Nay, Sir William, not so impossible," replied the priest. "I trow he hath been drawn across the Ouse by a lodestar within these walls. From the chapel window I heard him e'en now hold converse with the Lady Aliva at a window above."

With a furious volley of French oaths William de Breauté rushed wildly out of the hall, calling upon all the sentries near to stop or kill Sir Ralph.

It was a maddening race. From the upper window the girl watched it in agony. The cross-bow bolts flew thick and fast around Ralph as he hurried to the wall. Some shattered themselves against the stones as he scaled it.

For a brief moment he stood out clearly upon the summit against the gray dawn, an easy mark for the archers. Then, without waiting to descend by the iron stanchions, he took a desperate plunge into the stream.

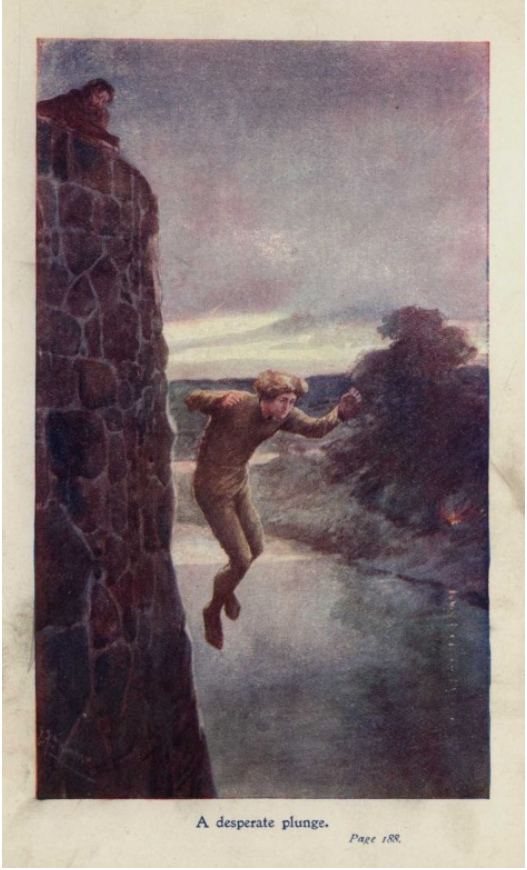
Aliva saw him rise to the surface, and watched him swimming with all his might to the opposite bank.

But as he leaped from the top of the wall she saw another figure reach it, and she recognized the pursuer to be William de Breauté.

He held in his hand a ready-strung cross-bow which he had snatched from one of the warders.

Aliva saw him take aim and loose the shaft.

The figure of the swimmer half rose in the water, and then disappeared from view beneath its surface.



A desperate plunge.

With a faint cry Aliva fell back swooning into the arms of Lady Margaret.

CHAPTER XXI.
THE CASTLE FALLS.

The unfortunate Lady Aliva was in despair.

The cup of happiness had been rudely dashed from her lips. After all her perils and anxieties of the last few weeks, her lover had been suddenly restored to her; once more she had heard his voice, had listened to his vows and caressing words, but only to see him slain, as she imagined, by his rival before her very eyes. From the summit of unexpected joy she was plunged into a depth of misery tenfold harder to bear than that which had gone before. All hope seemed over.

But within some twenty-four hours she was rudely awakened from her grief by the horrible din of the assault, which at dawn of day commenced against the old tower and the inner bailey.

”Hark how the hall, resounding to the strain,
Shakes with the martial music’s novel din!
The heralds of a warrior’s haughty reign,
High-crested banners wave thy walls within.
Of changing sentinels, the distant hum,
The mirth of feasts, the clang of burnished arms,
The braying trumpets, and the hoarser drum
Unite in concert with increased alarms.”

”The wall is rent, the ruins yawn,
And, with to-morrow’s earliest dawn,
O’er the disjointed mass shall vault
The foremost of the fierce assault.”

The storm of war reached nearer to the ladies in the keep than it had ever yet done. Through the crack of the closely-shuttered windows they could watch the fray below, and catch the sound of angry voices borne up to them, and mingling with the crash of falling masonry.

The Lady Margaret, whose shattered nerves could ill bear such tumult, betook herself to the little chapel in the angle of the wall, and passed the time upon her knees in prayer. But Aliva and Beatrice, impelled by the curiosity of youth, could not forbear to see what was to be seen.

The point of interest was the old tower. The girls knew it to be undermined, and watched anxiously to see it totter to its fall.

"I see a mass of soldiers gathering under the outer wall and halting as if for a signal," cried Aliva.

"The tower will soon fall, and these are ready to rush in," said Beatrice.

"But how falls it?" asked Aliva. "Thou art in the miner's secrets; tell, prithee."

"They tie ropes to the great wooden beams and props on which John hath supported the foundations. At a safe distance stand men ready to pull them away; and then–ah, our Lady have them in her keeping!"

And as she spoke a sound was heard, a rumbling as of thunder, followed by a cloud of blinding dust, which obscured everything–court-yard, men, and masonry. There was a fearful crash, and the girls shrank with terror and looked at each other.

"Oh, this is horrible!" whispered Aliva, hiding her face.

"My lady, my lady, I can see! The tower is down–it is a heap of rubble; and they come, they come! O lady, you are saved!"

"Saved!" said Aliva with a sad smile, shaking her head; "what boots it now? What wish have I for aught but death?"

"Death, lady? and in the moment of victory? Oh, speak not so! See the king's men, how they hurry, they scramble, they pour through the breach! 'Tis a noble sight. Forward, forward! Down with the Breauté!" shouted the excited waiting-woman, opening the shutter wide and craning out her neck.

"Beatrice, have a care. They will let fly a bolt at thee, and what will say the master miner? *Thou* hast some one to live for!"

"If I die for it, I must look!" protested Beatrice. "Oh, the king's men, how they fall! Alas, alas! William de Breauté hath well posted his men in all the best places for defence! But on they come–they waver not! By my halidom, there comes a gallant band, though small! How fast that knight leads them across the inner bailey! They make for the steps of the door of the keep. But how thick the arrows fly! William must have lined every loophole in the donjon and in the hall with men!"

"But how the royal men-at-arms pour in! De Breauté is far outnumbered–his men fly–they fall back–they seek to gain the steps," gasped Aliva, looking over Beatrice's shoulder.

"Gallantly done, gallantly done! That little close band follows them hard

up the steps. Well led, Sir Knight! (Hold my hand, prithee, lady, lest I fall out and break my neck! I *must* see.) But our men make a stand upon the steps; that is to gain time to close the door. The swords are at it now–I hear the ringing. Ah me! it is Sir William himself defends the steps. He raises his sword; he will smite that bold knight who leads them! He *has* smitten–By our Lady, 'twas a near thing! Who was that parried the stroke with his staff? I see! a man in monkish dress. And now the knight falls–he rolls down the steps–his armour is heavy–he strives in vain to rise, but alack, alack!"

"What seest thou? speak, Beatrice!"

"The poor brother, lady, he who saved the knight–he has fallen. Oh, he moves not! Alack, he is slain!"

"They are all falling back; what means it, Beatrice?"

"I cannot see, lady; the wooden porch over the steps hinders me. But the knight has risen–he is unhurt–he calls his men back."

"They retreat–they retreat?"

"Meseemeth Sir William and his men have shut to the door, lady," replied Beatrice, drawing in her head; and as the two girls stared blankly in each other's faces, the Lady Margaret, pallid and haggard, entered the apartment.

"Daughters," she exclaimed, "the king's men have won the inner bailey; the old tower is down; we now only hold the keep!"

That evening sore disappointment reigned in the camp of the besiegers. Had they but been able to reach the door ere it was closed, the keep would have been theirs; but as it was, they were compelled to draw off after considerable loss from the storm of arrows which rained upon them from the loopholes.

All had to be begun over again. John de Standen and his men once more set to work. The cat was wheeled up close to the walls of the keep, and the digging recommenced. This time the task was more laborious and difficult than ever. The foundations were strongly laid. The work of Pain de Beauchamp was built to last, and the besieged did all they could to hinder the operations. It was not till the fourteenth of August that De Standen could report that his work was ready.

Late that afternoon the fourth and last attack commenced. The miners sprung a huge fissure in the wall of the keep. Simultaneously another agent was set to work–fire. A light was set to the wooden porch over the steps.

The work was finished. The flames, caught the woodwork within, and broke out in some of the apartments. Through fire and smoke the besiegers stormed the breach, the besieged fighting desperately, and only yielding step by step.

At last, however, William de Breauté was forced to acknowledge himself beaten.

"My brother cannot say I did not do my utmost," he gasped to one of his

"Through fire and smoke the besiegers stormed the breach."

officers as they leaned exhausted against the pillar of the turret stair.

"Yield thee, now yield thee, William de Breauté!" cried a voice through the din.

"I yield me to the king's mercy," began the Frenchman, "but not to thee," he added, as the tall form and gloomy visage of William de Beauchamp loomed down upon through the smoke. "To a De Beauchamp? never!"

His men had ceased to offer any resistance, and stood with spears and swords point downwards and cross-bows unstrung. William looked around.

"My Lord Lisle of Rougemount, I surrender to you, rescue or no rescue."

The baron thus addressed seized De Breauté's outstretched sword, and signalled to his men. They closed round the prisoner and his immediate attendants, and prepared to march them off to the dungeon.

But as they crossed the great hall they met a young knight, followed by two or three men-at-arms, hurrying towards the turret stair.

"Ho, nephew!" exclaimed Sir William de Beauchamp, pointing to Lord Lisle's prisoner with the nearest approach to a smile of which his lugubrious features were capable; "see here! He hath tried long enough how it feels to sit in our great hall; we go now to give him a taste of our dungeon."

William de Breauté turned his head, and for the first time, and for a few moments only, found himself face to face with his rival, Ralph de Beauchamp. He cast upon him a look in which malignant hatred was mingled with the haggard despair of frustrated hopes.

"Dog!" he ejaculated, "methought thou liedst safe at the bottom of thy muddy Ouse!"

"Not so safe as thou wilt shortly lie in our donjon vaults," retorted Ralph, scarcely deigning to glance at him. "I can dive, man."

The guards led on.

To engage in such open rebellion against Henry was a somewhat different matter to joining in the confederation of barons against the tyranny and injustice of King John, as William de Beauchamp had done: and as William de Breauté and his men were led away down the steep stairs to the gloomy cells beneath the keep, they felt that their doom was sealed.

CHAPTER XXII.

RALPH TO THE RESCUE.

As William de Breauté was being marched to his fate, Ralph hurried up the winding turret stair, half choked by the blinding smoke which poured from the burning wood-work, and much impeded in his impetuous course by the chain of soldiers engaged in passing up water to extinguish the conflagration.

Even in the heat and din of the final assault his keen lover's eye had found time to look for and to note the signal promised by Aliva. High up from one of the windows hung her scarf. But when Ralph and his men had toiled thither they found the room empty.

Ralph experienced a painful tightening of the heart. Whither had the bird flown?

But it was the smoke which had driven the ladies from their apartment, and Ralph, exploring higher still, up a rude stone stair, found them collected on the flat wooden roof covering the inner space between the lofty parapets and the four corner turrets.

Aliva, standing out tall and slim against the August twilight, was assisting Beatrice Mertoun to support the Lady Margaret, who was quite overcome with all that was taking place.

Ralph fell on his knee before Aliva, and kissed her hand with a rapture too deep for words. But Aliva bent over him, and throwing up his visor, kissed his face.

A voice sounded behind them. "Tut, children! this is neither time nor place to tarry to make love.–Ladies, haste you, and get you gone to a place of safety. We have conquered our enemies, but not yet subdued the fire.–Lady Margaret, permit that I assist thee down these stairs.–Nephew Ralph, bring the Lady Aliva."

And the whole party, guided by De Beauchamp, hurried down into the hall, and thence into the *débris* and confusion which reigned in the bailey yards. The fast-falling darkness added to the weirdness of the scene–the ruins, the dead and dying, the shouts and cries of the victors, the crackling of the flames, and the crash of the charred beams as they fell.

Somehow or other in the tumult Ralph and Aliva got separated from the rest, and found themselves, when once clear of the fortifications, obliged for a few moments to stand aside on the river-bank to let a company of men-at-arms pass by with wounded and prisoners.

Suddenly, from behind some dark corner, a figure rushed at them in the gloom, and fell on his knees before Aliva. She started violently, and Ralph drew his sword.

"Misericorde, misericorde! for the love of Heaven and our Lady!" whined a familiar voice, that of Bertram de Concours. "Fair lady, as you hope for mercy, show some to me, and mind you how I succoured you in the chapel, when De Breauté and his men might have–ah!"

He never finished. A trampling of armed feet was heard behind, and he turned his head to see a guard advancing upon him.

"Better a watery grave than a living tomb!" he shrieked, and, before Ralph could stop him, plunged into the stream.

"Plague take the traitor priest! We have lost him," growled the veteran man-at-arms in command.

"Old Ouse will have naught of such foul spawn, I trow," corrected Ralph. "There are but two feet of water 'neath this bank at harvest-time. Fish him out; he sticketh in the mud, and is set fast.–But come, sweet Aliva," he added, turning to the maiden at his side; "let us hasten. The Lady Margaret hath without doubt ere now gained the house of good Master Gilbert the Clothier, who bade me offer thee his hospitality."

Aliva moved on, clinging to her lover's arm. Behind them, into the darkness, the guard marched off the bedraggled priest. As regards the latter's ultimate fate the chronicler is silent, beyond relating the fact that he was committed for trial in the court of the archbishop, and doubtless the ambitious Bertram de Concours fretted away the remainder of his days a prisoner in the cell of some austere order. But the little episode had awakened another memory in Aliva's breast.

"My Ralph," she exclaimed, "and what of the other, the Benedictine lay-brother, the Bletsoe youth, who did in all truth and fidelity succour me and strive to bring me aid?"

Sir Ralph looked down on the fair face resting on his arm, and then up to the purple sky of the summer night–

"The azure gloom,
When the deep skies assume
Hues which have words, and speak to ye of heaven."

"God rest his soul!" he answered, in a low voice. "I owe it to his strong arm and ready wit, as he parried with his mace the blow De Breauté aimed at me, that I am here to-night with thee."

Ralph only waited to see the ladies safely bestowed in the worthy burgess's abode ere he hurried back again to the castle. There was no rest for him that night. Not the least onerous part of a commander's duty in those rough times was to restore order and discipline among his men after the capture of a fortress which had held out against them. It was a melancholy sight to the young knight this sacking and firing of his ancestral castle, the home of his boyhood. It stood there with ruined walls and a huge rift in the side of the great keep like a lightning-stricken oak.

And morning light brought more work. Hubert de Burgh, the king's justiciary, opened a court of justice in his sovereign's name, and before it were brought William de Breauté and eighty of his men.

Late in the afternoon Beatrice Mertoun, devoured with curiosity as to what was happening, and chafing at her restraint in Master Gilbert's house, persuaded one of Lady Margaret's women to come with her towards the castle, intending, under cover of the twilight, to secure such of their possessions as the fire and the plunderers should have spared. But they returned quicker than they went, and empty-handed, driven back by horror; for in the bailey yard they came suddenly upon a rude gallows on which, grim and stark in the dim twilight, hung William de Breauté and seventy-three of his men.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A TÊTE-À-TÊTE RIDE TO ELSTOW ABBEY.

Contrary to his dream and to the gloomy forebodings which he had been hugging to himself after the manner of certain dismal natures which delight to make themselves miserable, William de Beauchamp, as we have seen, escaped unscathed from the assaults on the castle. But lest his melancholy should lack food, as it were, fate had another blow in store for him. No sooner had the castle of Bedford been captured than the royal mandate went forth that it should be destroyed.

Henry III., young though he was, was too well aware of the difficulties which his father had experienced with his barons not to be convinced that his best policy lay in curbing their power. Now the chief strength of a medieval noble lay in his castle. In the taking of Bedford an excellent opportunity seemed ready to Henry's hand for getting rid of one of the most important and substantial fortresses in his kingdom.

He was, moreover, completely in his rights in so doing. King John had granted the castle to Fulke de Breauté as a reward for his services, more especially in turning out the De Beauchamps. But now that De Breauté had rebelled against John's successor, deprivation brought the castle once more into royal hands. What came absolutely to the king, the king could destroy.

This determination was a severe blow to William de Beauchamp. He was grievously hurt when he learned that the destruction of his ancestral home was definitely settled, but he was unable to take any steps to preserve it. It was, how-

ever, intimated to him that the site of the castle would be granted to him, together with certain of the lands and manors thereunto appertaining, after the fortress itself had been pulled down. No occupier or owner of a house could then proceed to fortify or crenellate–that is, erect defensive parapets–without the royal license; and William de Beauchamp was informed that though he might build within the castle precincts as suitable a dwelling as he pleased, on no account would such permission be granted.

So he had no choice in the matter, but found himself under the painful necessity of silently beholding the mighty keep where he had been born, and in which all his early days had been spent, destroyed before his very eyes.

The work of destruction, however, was no easy one. Securely and solidly had Pain de Beauchamp erected his fortress, less than a century and a half before. It was necessary to employ John de Standen and his men again. For many a long day after the king and his justiciary, and the barons, ecclesiastics, soldiers and labourers who had been gathered together for the siege had dispersed, the crash of falling masonry was to be heard. Mines had to be dug and the walls overthrown, just as though the siege were still proceeding, with the important difference that the miners could work unmolested by attacks, and with no need of the protecting "cat."

John de Standen seemed in no wise to regret that the work of demolition detained him so long at Bedford. In the midst of his duties he contrived to find many opportunities for visits to Master Gilbert's house, where Beatrice Mertoun was also detained in attendance upon her mistress, who was prostrated by illness consequent on the anxieties she had undergone during the siege. Aliva de Pateshulle also stayed with the Lady Margaret, loath to leave her and return to Bletsoe till she should be quite recovered; for she felt she owed the lady a debt of gratitude for her care of her during her imprisonment, and also for interposing on her behalf with Fulke and his brother, which she could never sufficiently repay.

The consequence was that the king's miner did not appear surprised to run against Sir Ralph de Beauchamp issuing one evening from the ladies' temporary abode.

"By my troth, Sir Knight," exclaimed John de Standen, with a merry laugh, "methinks we come both on the same errand here. You seek the lady; I seek the maid. But it is easier work than when we had to break through stone walls and swim broad rivers to get speech of them."

"Certes, bold miner. Meseemeth I have now discovered whence thou gottest that close knowledge of Bedford Castle which stood thee in such good stead at the Council of Northampton. I warrant me thou wast oft enow within its walls ere thou breakedst through in the breach not many days since, and I doubt

not thou hast paid many a visit to fair Mistress Beatrice when no paving-stones came between ye. But thy siege is over now, bold miner. Thou hast won thy bride. I have yet to win the fortress of De Pateshulle the sire," he added, with a sigh.

"If the lord of Bletsoe be what I take him for," the miner responded consolingly, "he will not say nay for his daughter to such a knight as Sir Ralph hath proved himself in this tough work."

"I hope from my heart thou speakest true," replied Ralph; "but naught hindereth *thy* bridal?"

"Nay, certes. Beatrice is an orphan with no friend but her lady, who took charge of her when she was but a child. And as it would seem the Lady Margaret purposeth to betake her to a nunnery, she is quite ready to hand over the maiden to one who asks no less than to burden himself with her!" laughed the miner.

And so it turned out. One bright September morning, not long after the fall of the castle, and when John de Standen had completed his work of destruction, he and Beatrice were married in the chapel of St. Thomas-at-bridge, the little edifice where she had occasionally been allowed to attend mass with her mistress when Sir Fulke was in a more benign mood than usual. The ceremony was graced by the presence of Lady Margaret and Sir Ralph, but Lady Aliva had already returned to her father's house.

When the marriage was over the Lady Margaret prepared to start for Elstow. In her present forlorn condition, the forsaken wife of an outlawed and fugitive baron dispossessed of all his lands, homeless and sickly, the unfortunate lady had implored shelter within the abbey walls, and not in vain. But short as was the distance from Bedford, in the present shattered condition of her nerves it was impossible for her to take the journey alone. Sir Ralph had offered to be her escort, but at the last moment he was detained by some duty in connection with the destruction of the castle which was really John de Standen's business, but which the worthy miner's marriage had hindered him from seeing to.

Ralph found an unexpected substitute. When the Lady Margaret emerged from Master Gilbert's hospitable door to mount her palfrey, she beheld to her surprise Sir William de Beauchamp waiting to assist her.

"I crave thy pardon, lady, if I intrude upon thee. But to my nephew and me it beseemed ill-fitting that Margaret de Ripariis should arrive unattended at the gates of Elstow. I beseech thee, grant me the melancholy joy of escorting thee thither."

It was many years since William de Beauchamp and his once affianced bride had found themselves alone together. During the days of Fulke's power there had been no meetings between De Breauté's and De Beauchamps. It was only once during the confusion of the capture of the castle that the two *quondam* lovers

had set eyes on each other. As they somewhat silently started on their *tête-à-tête* ride, the groom in charge of the sumpter mule lagging a little distance behind, they had ample time to observe in each other the changes wrought by time.

"How strange it seemeth to miss the sight of the great keep, rising proud and stately to the north across the river!" began the lady, turning her head as they were crossing the bridge.

"Alack, lady, what a change! Was ever luckless man doomed to see such a destruction of his own, and not be able to lift a hand or to utter a word?"

"But I am told that thou purposest to build thyself a fair dwelling between the inner and outer baileys, with a goodly hall and large apartments."

"Alack! what boots a fair dwelling and a goodly hall to one whose whole life has been marred–a solitary man whose years creep on–who finds himself alone?"

"Alone!" murmured Lady Margaret. "Free, unshackled by a bondage worse than death, not trembling lest a hateful tyrant return at any moment and claim his rights. 'Twere good to be so alone!"

"Alack, lady," said Sir William, "can naught be done to aid thee? Will not Holy Church loose this unholy bondage, forced upon thee unwillingly by the king's command?"

"Alas, no, Sir Knight! On that score have I sought advice of the venerable archdeacon and other ecclesiastics, but they offer me no hope. Therefore I go hide me in a nunnery, lest Sir Fulke return. We must e'en each bear our fate. We each have our woes. Thou hast lost thy castle."

"Is thy memory so short, lady, that thou sayest it is only my castle I have lost, most miserable of men that I am? Hast forgotten the days–"

"When I came to Bedford Castle with my father and his train to the great tourney," interrupted Lady Margaret, wishing to turn the conversation, and reining in her palfrey that she might turn round to survey the ruins, "'twas a noble sight. How the banners waved from the pavilions on the tilt-ground, and the trumpets blared, and the horses pranced! How like silver ran old Ouse that merry summer's morning, when I sat 'neath the canopy–"

"The Queen of Beauty, fair lady, and rightly so! And how your bright eyes dazzled a certain youth on whom you had deigned to bestow your favour to wear on his crest, and who ill deserved such an honour!"

"But who acquitted himself right gallantly. I can see him still! But all is changed: the castle is no more; we are not what we were; only the old river runs the same. But come, Sir Knight; the reverend mother waits me."

"Lady, it grieveth me sore that the way 'twixt Bedford and Elstow is so short. See how near loometh the abbey tower."

"To me it riseth like the beacon of a port to the weary, wind-driven mariner.

Would I could find rest within its walls for aye!"

"Say not so, lady; it sounds to my heart like a funeral knell."

"No fear, Sir Knight; as long as Sir Fulke draws breath no cloister may receive me. The reverend mother tells me that so long as my vows to him are unloosed by death, I can ne'er plight any others; so long as I am his wife, I cannot become the spouse of Christ."

"Alack, lady, how woful a fate is mine! I, too, once plighted vows. Dost recall them, lady? Nay, I received others in return. I can hear them yet. Vows they were, not less sacred than those made to priest before altar. Yet here I stand alone, like some wind-swept oak on the hill-side, bowed before the blast."

"Yet the helpless ivy would fain twine round the proud lord of the woods," replied the lady, somewhat coyly. "Be thou sure, Sir Knight, my heart grieveth sore for thee. I promise thee that thou shalt have my prayers."

And shortly afterwards the pair parted at the abbey gate.

CHAPTER XXIV.

" DE MORTUIS. "

"O God, that it were possible, after long years of pain,
To find the arms of my true love around me once again!"

"The walls where hung the warriors' shining casques
Are green with moss and mould;
The blind worm coils where queens have slept, nor asks
For shelter from the cold."

Three years had passed since John de Standen pulled down the stronghold of the De Beauchamps. William de Beauchamp, making the best of the necessity which was forced upon him, set to work to erect himself a house between the inner and outer bailey. It still went by the name of the castle. Unfortunately no plan or description of this building has been handed down to us. It only existed for about twice as long as its predecessor, the Norman keep of Pain de Beauchamp. Camden, writing in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, describes it as a stately ruin overhanging the Ouse; and an old map of about the same time shows that these

ruins occupied a pleasant position a little back from the river, and looking south. As it was strictly an unfortified mansion, we may opine that it was much such a building as that which we have described at Bletsoe, consisting of a large, long hall, with private apartments at one end one story high, but larger and built of stone.

In one of these apartments, one afternoon in the summer of 1227, sat Aliva de Pateshulle, now Aliva de Beauchamp, with her baby-boy upon her knee. She was looking out of the round, arched window, which was somewhat larger than the shuttered apertures in the old keep. The house was intended for a comfortable dwelling, and not for a place of defence. The walls were not half the thickness of those which had enclosed her prison of three years before, though built of identically the same stones. The rooms, too, were lighter, larger, and more habitable. The science of domestic architecture was beginning.

Aliva herself was also a more fully developed specimen of beautiful young womanhood. The angularity of her tall figure had disappeared, and there was more ripeness and fulness about her cheeks and mouth. But her large gray eyes remained unchanged. Her beautiful fair hair, perhaps a shade darker than it had been when it hung down over her shoulders that morning in the garden at Bletsoe, was partly covered with the ugly wimple, the matronly head-dress of the period, which had replaced the maidenly fillet.

Aliva was gazing from the window, which commanded a view of the river, and was apparently watching for the approach of some one from the entrance to the west. Presently she waved her hand in that direction, and holding up the boy to the window, bade him look down at his father.

Ralph entered the house, crossed the large hall, and made his way to his wife's apartment. He also had somewhat altered in three years. His massive frame had filled out, and with his large limbs more covered with flesh and muscle, he looked even more like a young giant than he had done that eve of the Assumption when he had fought his way into the keep.

He strode into the room, his face lighting up with a smile as his little son clambered down from his mother's knee and toddled to meet him. He lifted the boy up and kissed him. Then he kissed his wife; and she, returning his embrace, began forthwith with feminine curiosity,–

"Well, sweetheart mine, what news?"

Ralph was in his riding-dress. He had come in from a journey, and this was why Aliva was watching for him so anxiously from the window. The country had, indeed, much quieted down since the siege of Bedford Castle and the ejection of the De Breauté marauders. During the period which elapsed between the revolt against King John and the wars of the barons, which troubled the latter end of his successor's reign, there intervened a period of peace. Nevertheless, Aliva was

always glad to see her husband safe home again.

"And so, Ralph mine, if thou hast news, prithee tell it me. Here naught has passed out of the common. The boy and I have played together, and awaited the home-coming of father."

"My business for which I set forth is ended," began Ralph; "but, marry, 'twas dull work! 'Tis ill to deal with scriveners and such like folk! But as I rode through St. Alban's I bethought me of turning in to the abbey gate, and making my obeisance to the reverend father abbot. Thou knowest that a De Beauchamp is ever welcome in a house of Holy Church."

"Ah, St. Alban's!" cried Aliva; "and, prithee, didst give my message relating to the incised stone to the memory of my protector, who was slain at the siege, the bold young lay-brother of Bletsoe?"

"Ay, verily I did," replied Ralph. "And the father abbot was well pleased to learn that one of their house, who fell in fighting for Holy Church (for thus, thou knowest, these priests always speak of the siege), should sleep in our fair church of St. Paul at Bedford. He hath given me an inscription to have writ on the slab. He saith it should be cut in letters as is cut the inscription to Muriel Colt on the north of the high altar. But hearken, wife," he added, sitting down beside her; "I have other news for thee."

"And good news, prithee?"

"Heaven forfend that I should speak hastily or harshly of a dead enemy!" continued Ralph gravely. "Sir Fulke is no more. The reverend father hath instructed me that I may say, an if I will, 'Rest his soul in peace.' For it seemeth he died free from the censure of Holy Church."

Aliva received the news in silence. Her thoughts flew back to those few terrible weeks when she was an unwilling guest in Fulke's castle. Then she replied,–

"I, too, would say, 'God rest his soul.' As thou knowest, I scarce saw him here, for he fled to Wales when he heard that the council had determined to attack the castle. But his brother–"

She paused, for even now she could not make the least allusion to William de Breauté without a shudder.

"Tell me all thou hast heard," she added.

"I will give the tale in few words," Ralph answered. "Thou mindest how, after he had submitted himself to our lord the king in Bedford here, he was given, as an enemy of Holy Church, into the safe-keeping of my Lord Eustace, the Bishop of London."

"Ay," put in Aliva. "Some time since, when I went to Elstow to visit Lady Margaret, the reverend mother told me how she had restored the sword into the hands of the figure of St. Paul in the abbey church, as soon as it was told her that the holy apostle had the destroyer of St. Paul's Church safe in the keeping of the

Bishop of St. Paul's in London."

"But see here," Ralph went on. "The good father has had writ out for me a copy of the entry of Sir Fulke's history, as recorded by the scribe of the monastery to be laid in the scriptorium. I will e'en read it to thee, if I have not forgot the Latin the old chaplain taught me when I was a boy."

And Ralph read out the following history, which is still preserved to us in the chronicles of St. Alban's:–

"Fulke, after that he was pardoned at London, and because he was marked with the cross, was allowed to depart for Rome. After crossing the sea he applied for a passport at Fiscamp, and was detained by the bailiffs of France. At last, the following Easter, after that he had been released from prison, he went to Rome, and sent very piteous letters to the king, asking that his wife and his lands might be restored to him."

"Alack! The poor Lady Margaret!" put in Aliva, with a sigh.

"Whereupon the king, with his barons," read on Ralph, "sent word to our lord the Pope of the treachery of Fulke; and the latter, having had his refusal, set off for Troyes; and after staying there a year, was sent out of France, because he would not pay homage to the king. He went to Rome, and again, with much entreaty, begged that his wife and his patrimony might be restored to him; and on his return from that city, burdened with debt, he died at St. Cyriac."

"His wife would ne'er have returned to him!" ejaculated Aliva indignantly.

"Neither had he any patrimony here, either in the castle or in the manors," added Ralph. "Were they not wrested from my uncle and from others, and given to him as a reward for his evil services to our late king John? And hark ye, my Aliva, the father abbot showed me also, written by his learned scribe, the whole account of the siege of the castle; and he saith that, in after ages, the history of Bedford will be known ever as it is known now. Perchance our names are mentioned, but I read not that portion of the chronicle."

His wife scarcely heeded. She was thinking of the present, and not of the future. Woman-like, her mind was running on match-making.

"Does the Lady Margaret know of Sir Fulke's death?" she asked.

"I trow not," answered Ralph. "The news hath but even now reached England, and hath but just been set down by the abbey scribe at the end of his history of the siege. But doubtless news will be sent to Earl William de Warenne, who, as thou knowest, has charge of the lands and possessions which were hers ere she married, and which have been restored to her."

"Then she is free!" mused Aliva.

"Ay, free, poor lady. The priests decided, when she sought to be released, that there had been no impediment of canon law to her marriage, and that it could not, even if it had been in a manner forced, and the bride unwilling, be

dissolved by the authority of the Church. Death hath loosed her bonds."

There was a stirring of the heavy curtain which hung in the doorway of the apartment. But so engrossed were the two speakers that no one noticed it but the child, who, after looking towards it, began to toddle uncertainly in that direction.

"She is free," repeated Aliva thoughtfully. "Her husband is dead, and she hath not yet bound herself by the vows of a religious life, even did she wish it, which, often as I have talked with her these three years past since she hath sought shelter at Elstow, I doubt much."

"True, wife; if any one should know the Lady Margaret's mind, it should be thou, who art to her as a daughter. But beshrew me if I wot what thou art driving at, sweetheart."

Aliva sprang up, and throwing her arms round her husband's neck, exclaimed, with an arch smile,–

"How oft dunder-headed men are where love is concerned! Ralph, we shall see the Lady Margaret the *châtelaine* of Bedford again!"

And then a most extraordinary thing occurred. Behind, in the doorway, they heard a joyful laugh.

There stood their uncle, Sir William, who never within the memory of either of them had been known even to smile.

He advanced hurriedly into the room, and catching up his great-nephew in his arms, kissed his little flaxen head, and laughed again.

THE END.

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