

The Last Of The Barons, Volume 5.

Edward Bulwer-Lytton

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BOOK V.

CHAPTER I.

RURAL ENGLAND IN THE MIDDLE AGES--NOBLE VISITORS SEEK THE CASTLE OF MIDDLEHAM.

Autumn had succeeded to summer, winter to autumn, and the spring of 1468 was green in England, when a gallant cavalcade was seen slowly winding the ascent of a long and gradual hill, towards the decline of day. Different, indeed, from the aspect which that part of the country now presents was the landscape that lay around them, bathed in the smiles of the westering sun. In a valley to the left, a full view of which the steep road commanded (where now roars the din of trade through a thousand factories), lay a long, secluded village. The houses, if so they might be called, were constructed entirely of wood, and that of the more perishable kind,--willow, sallow, elm, and plum-tree. Not one could boast a chimney; but the smoke from the single fire in each, after duly darkening the atmosphere within, sent its surplusage lazily and fitfully through a circular aperture in the roof. In fact, there was long in the provinces a prejudice against chimneys! The smoke was considered good both for house and owner; the first it was supposed to season, and the last to guard "from rheums, catarrhs, and poses." [So worthy Hollinshed, Book II. c. 22.--"Then had we none but reredosses, and our heads did never ache. For as the smoke, in those days, was supposed to be a sufficient hardening for the timber of the house, so it was reputed a far better medicine to keep the goodman and his familie from the quacke, or pose, wherewith as then very few were oft acquainted."] Neither did one of these habitations boast the comfort of a glazed window, the substitute being lattice, or chequer-work,--even in the house of the franklin, which rose stately above the rest, encompassed with barns and outsheds. And yet greatly should we err did we conceive that these deficiencies were an index to the general condition of the working class. Far better off was the labourer when employed, than now. Wages were enormously high, meat extremely low; [See Hallam: Middle Ages, Chap. xx. Part II. So also Hollinshed, Book XI., c. 12, comments on the amazement of the Spaniards, in Queen Mary's time, when they saw "what large diet was used in these so homelie cottages," and reports one of the Spaniards to have said, "These English have their houses of sticks and dirt, but they fare commonlie so well as the king!"] and our motherland bountifully maintained her children.

On that greensward, before the village (now foul and reeking with the squalid population whom commerce rears up,--the victims, as the movers, of the modern world) were assembled youth and age; for it was a holiday evening, and the stern Puritan had not yet risen to sour the face of Mirth. Well clad in leathern jerkin, or even broadcloth, the young peasants vied with each other in quoits and wrestling; while the merry laughter of the girls, in their gay-coloured kirtles and ribboned hair, rose off and cheerily to the ears of the cavalcade. From a gentle eminence beyond the village, and half veiled by trees, on which the first verdure of spring was budding (where now, around the gin-shop, gather the fierce and sickly children of toil and of

discontent), rose the venerable walls of a monastery, and the chime of its heavy bell swung far and sweet over the pastoral landscape. To the right of the road (where now stands the sober meeting-house) was one of those small shrines so frequent in Italy, with an image of the Virgin gaudily painted, and before it each cavalier in the procession halted an instant to cross himself and mutter an ave. Beyond, still to the right, extended vast chains of woodland, interspersed with strips of pasture, upon which numerous flocks were grazing, with horses, as yet unbroken to bit and selle, that neighed and snorted as they caught scent of their more civilized brethren pacing up the road.

In front of the cavalcade rode two, evidently of superior rank to the rest,—the one small and slight, with his long hair flowing over his shoulders; and the other, though still young, many years older, and indicating his clerical profession by the absence of all love-locks, compensated by a curled and glossy beard, trimmed with the greatest care. But the dress of the ecclesiastic was as little according to our modern notions of what beseems the Church as can well be conceived: his tunic and surcoat, of a rich amber, contrasted well with the clear darkness of his complexion; his piked shoes, or beakers, as they were called, turned up half-way to the knee; the buckles of his dress were of gold, inlaid with gems; and the housings of his horse, which was of great power, were edged with gold fringe. By the side of his steed walked a tall greyhound, upon which he ever and anon glanced with affection. Behind these rode two gentlemen, whose golden spurs announced knighthood; and then followed a long train of squires and pages, richly clad and accoutred, bearing generally the Nevile badge of the Bull; though interspersed amongst the retinue might be seen the grim Boar's head, which Richard of Gloucester, in right of his duchy, had assumed as his cognizance.

"Nay, sweet prince," said the ecclesiastic, "I pray thee to consider that a greyhound is far more of a gentleman than any other of the canine species. Mark his stately yet delicate length of limb, his sleek coat, his keen eye, his haughty neck."

"These are but the externals, my noble friend. Will the greyhound attack the lion, as our mastiff doth? The true character of the gentleman is to know no fear, and to rush through all danger at the throat of his foe; wherefore I uphold the dignity of the mastiff above all his tribe, though others have a daintier hide and a statelier crest. Enough of such matters, archbishop,—we are nearing Middleham."

"The saints be praised! for I am hungered," observed the archbishop, piously: "but, sooth to say, my cook at the More far excelleth what we can hope to find at the board of my brother. He hath some faults, our Warwick! Hasty and careless, he hath not thought eno' of the blessings he might enjoy, and many a poor abbot hath daintier fare on his humble table."

"Oh, George Nevile! who that heard thee, when thou talkest of hounds and interments, [entremets (side dishes)] would recognize the Lord Chancellor of England,—the most learned dignitary, the most subtle statesman?"

"And oh, Richard Plantagenet!" retorted the archbishop, dropping the mincing and affected tone, which he, in common with the coxcombs of that day, usually assumed, "who that heard thee when thou talkest of humility and devotion, would recognize the sternest heart and the most

daring ambition God ever gave to prince?"

Richard started at these words, and his eye shot fire as it met the keen calm glance of the prelate.

"Nay, your Grace wrongs me," he said, gnawing his lip,--"or I should not say wrongs, but flatters; for sternness and ambition are no vices in a Nevile's eyes."

"Fairly answered, royal son," said the archbishop, laughing; "but let us be frank. Thou hast persuaded me to accompany thee to Lord Warwick as a mediator; the provinces in the North are disturbed; the intrigues of Margaret of Anjou are restless; the king reaps what he has sown in the Court of France, and, as Warwick foretold, the emissaries and gold of Louis are ever at work against his throne; the great barons are moody and discontented; and our liege King Edward is at last aware that, if the Earl of Warwick do not return to his councils, the first blast of a hostile trumpet may drive him from his throne. Well, I attend thee: my fortunes are woven with those of York, and my interest and my loyalty go hand in hand. Be equally frank with me. Hast thou, Lord Richard, no interest to serve in this mission save that of the public weal?"

"Thou forgettest that the Lady Isabel is dearly loved by Clarence, and that I would fain see removed all barrier to his nuptial bliss. But yonder rise the towers of Middleham. Beloved walls, which sheltered my childhood! and, by holy Paul, a noble pile, which would resist an army, or hold one."

While thus conversed the prince and the archbishop, the Earl of Warwick, musing and alone, slowly paced the lofty terrace that crested the battlements of his outer fortifications.

In vain had that restless and powerful spirit sought content in retirement. Trained from his childhood to active life, to move mankind to and fro at his beck, this single and sudden interval of repose in the prime of his existence, at the height of his fame, served but to swell the turbulent and dangerous passions to which all vent was forbidden.

The statesman of modern days has at least food for intellect in letters when deprived of action; but with all his talents, and thoroughly cultivated as his mind was in the camp, the council, and the state, the great earl cared for nothing in book-lore except some rude ballad that told of Charlemagne or Rollo. The sports that had pleased the leisure of his earlier youth were tedious and flat to one snatched from so mighty a career. His hound lay idle at his feet, his falcon took holiday on the perch, his jester was banished to the page's table. Behold the repose of this great unlettered spirit! But while his mind was thus debarred from its native sphere, all tended to pamper Lord Warwick's infirmity of pride. The ungrateful Edward might forget him; but the king seemed to stand alone in that oblivion. The mightiest peers, the most renowned knights, gathered to his hall. Middleham,--not Windsor nor Shene nor Westminster nor the Tower--seemed the COURT OF ENGLAND. As the Last of the Barons paced his terrace, far as his eye could reach, his broad domains extended, studded with villages and towns and castles swarming with his retainers. The whole country seemed in mourning for his absence. The name of Warwick was in all men's mouths, and not a group gathered in

market-place or hostel but what the minstrel who had some ballad in praise of the stout earl had a rapt and thrilling audience.

"And is the river of my life," muttered Warwick, "shrunk into this stagnant pool? Happy the man who hath never known what it is to taste of fame,--to have it is a purgatory, to want it is a hell!"

Rapt in this gloomy self-commune, he heard not the light step that sought his side, till a tender arm was thrown around him, and a face in which sweet temper and pure thought had preserved to matronly beauty all the bloom of youth, looked up smilingly to his own.

"My lord, my Richard," said the countess, "why didst thou steal so churlishly from me? Hath there, alas! come a time when thou deemest me unworthy to share thy thoughts, or soothe thy troubles?"

"Fond one! no," said Warwick, drawing the form still light, though rounded, nearer to his bosom. "For nineteen years hast thou been to me a leal and loving wife. Thou wert a child on our wedding-day, m'amie, and I but a beardless youth; yet wise enough was I then to see, at the first glance of thy blue eye, that there was more treasure in thy heart than in all the lordships thy hand bestowed."

"My Richard!" murmured the countess, and her tears of grateful delight fell on the hand she kissed.

"Yes, let us recall those early and sweet days," continued Warwick, with a tenderness of voice and manner that strangers might have marvelled at, forgetting how tenderness is almost ever a part of such peculiar manliness of character; "yes, sit we here under this spacious elm, and think that our youth has come back to us once more. For verily, m'amie, nothing in life has ever been so fair to me as those days when we stood hand in hand on its threshold, and talked, boy-bridegroom and child-bride as we were, of the morrow that lay beyond."

"Ah, Richard, even in those days thy ambition sometimes vexed my woman's vanity, and showed me that I could never be all in all to so large a heart!"

"Ambition! No, thou mistakest,--Montagu is ambitious, I but proud. Montagu ever seeks to be higher than he is, I but assert the right to be what I am and have been; and my pride, sweet wife, is a part of my love for thee. It is thy title, Heiress of Warwick, and not my father's, that I bear; thy badge, and not the Neville's, which I have made the symbol of my power. Shame, indeed, on my knighthood, if the fairest dame in England could not justify my pride! Ah, belle amie, why have we not a son?"

"Peradventure, fair lord," said the countess, with an arch yet half-melancholy smile, "because that pride, or ambition, name it as thou wilt, which thou excusest so gallantly, would become too insatiate and limitless if thou sawest a male heir to thy greatness; and God, perhaps, warns thee that, spread and increase as thou wilt,--yea, until half our native country becometh as the manor of one man,--all must pass from the Beauchamp and the Neville into new Houses; thy glory indeed an eternal heirloom, but only to thy land,--thy lordships and thy wealth melting into the dowry of a daughter."

"At least no king hath daughters so dowried," answered Warwick; "and

though I disdain for myself the hard vassalage of a throne, yet if the channel of our blood must pass into other streams, into nothing meaner than the veins of royalty should it merge." He paused a moment, and added with a sigh, "Would that Clarence were more worthy Isabel!"

"Nay," said the countess, gently, "he loveth her as she merits. He is comely, brave, gracious, and learned."

"A pest upon that learning,--it sicklies and womanizes men's minds!" exclaimed Warwick, bluntly. "Perhaps it is his learning that I am to thank for George of Clarence's fears and doubts and calculations and scruples. His brother forbids his marriage with any English donzell, for Edward dares not specialize what alone he dreads. His letters burn with love, and his actions freeze with doubts. It was not thus I loved thee, sweetheart. By all the saints in the calendar, had Henry V. or the Lion Richard started from the tomb to forbid me thy hand, it would but have made me a hotter lover! Howbeit Clarence shall decide ere the moon wanes, and but for Isabel's tears and thy entreaties, my father's grandchild should not have waited thus long the coming of so hesitating a wooer. But lo, our darlings! Anne hath thine eyes, m'amie; and she groweth more into my heart every day, since daily she more favours thee."

While he thus spoke, the fair sisters came lightly and gayly up the terrace: the arm of the statelier Isabel was twined round Anne's slender waist; and as they came forward in that gentle link, with their lithesome and bounding step, a happier blending of contrasted beauty was never seen. The months that had passed since the sisters were presented first to the reader had little changed the superb and radiant loveliness of Isabel, but had added surprisingly to the attractions of Anne. Her form was more rounded, her bloom more ripened; and though something of timidity and bashfulness still lingered about the grace of her movements and the glance of her dove-like eye, the more earnest thoughts of the awakening woman gave sweet intelligence to her countenance, and that divinest of all attractions--the touching and conscious modesty--to the shy but tender smile, and the blush that so came and went, so went and came, that it stirred the heart with a sort of delighted pity for one so evidently susceptible to every emotion of pleasure and of pain. Life seemed too rough a thing for so soft a nature, and gazing on her, one sighed to guess her future.

"And what brings ye hither, young truants?" said the earl, as Anne, leaving her sister, clung lovingly to his side (for it was ever her habit to cling to some one), while Isabel kissed her mother's hand, and then stood before her parents, colouring deeply, and with downcast eyes. "What brings ye hither, whom I left so lately deep engaged in the loom, upon the helmet of Goliath, with my burgonet before you as a sample? Wife, you are to blame,--our rooms of state will be arrasless for the next three generations, if these rosy fingers are suffered thus to play the idlers."

"My father," whispered Anne, "guests are on their way hither,--a noble cavalcade; you note them not from this part of the battlements, but from our turret it was fair to see how their plumes and banners shone in the setting sun."

"Guests!" echoed the earl; "well, is that so rare an honour that your hearts should beat like village girls at a holiday? Ah, Isabel! look

at her blushes. Is it George of Clarence at last? Is it?"

"We see the Duke of Gloucester's cognizance," whispered Anne, "and our own Neville Bull. Perchance our cousin George, also, may--"

Here she was interrupted by the sound of the warder's horn, followed a moment after by the roar of one of the bombards on the keep.

"At least," said Warwick, his face lighting up, "that signal announces the coming of king's blood. We must honour it,--for it is our own. We will go forth and meet our guests--your hand, countess."

And gravely and silently, and in deep but no longer gloomy thought, Warwick descended from the terrace, followed by the fair sisters; and who that could have looked upon that princely pair and those lovely and radiant children, could have foreseen that in that hour, Fate, in tempting the earl once more to action, was busy on their doom!

CHAPTER II.

COUNCILS AND MUSINGS.

The lamp shone through the lattice of Warwick's chamber at the unwonted hour of midnight, and the earl was still in deep commune with his guests. The archbishop, whom Edward, alarmed by the state of the country and the disaffection of his barons, had reluctantly commissioned to mediate with Warwick, was, as we have before said, one of those men peculiar to the early Church. There was nothing more in the title of Archbishop of York than in that of the Bishop of Osnaburg (borne by the royal son of George III.) [The late Duke of York.] to prevent him who enjoyed it from leading armies, guiding States, or indulging pleasure. But beneath the coxcombry of George Neville, which was what he shared most in common with the courtiers of the laity, there lurked a true ecclesiastic's mind. He would have made in later times an admirable Jesuit, and no doubt in his own time a very brilliant Pope. His objects in his present mission were clear and perspicuous; any breach between Warwick and the king must necessarily weaken his own position, and the power of his House was essential to all his views. The object of Gloucester in his intercession was less defined, but not less personal: in smoothing the way to his brother's marriage with Isabel, he removed all apparent obstacle to his own with Anne. And it is probable that Richard, who, whatever his crimes, was far from inaccessible to affection, might have really loved his early playmate, even while his ambition calculated the wealth of the baronies that would swell the dower of the heiress and gild the barren coronet of his duchy. [Majerns, the Flemish chronicler, quoted by Bucke ("Life of Richard III"), mentions the early attachment of Richard to Anne. They were much together, as children, at Middleham.]

"God's truth!" said Warwick, as he lifted his eyes from the scroll in the king's writing, "ye know well, princely cousin, and thou, my brother, ye know well how dearly I have loved King Edward; and the mother's milk overflows my heart when I read these gentle and tender words which he deigns to bestow upon his servant. My blood is hasty and over-hot, but a kind thought from those I love puts out much fire. Sith he thus beseeches me to return to his councils, I will not be

sullen enough to hold back; but, oh, Prince Richard! is it indeed a matter past all consideration that your sister, the Lady Margaret, must wed with the Duke of Burgundy?"

"Warwick," replied the prince, "thou mayest know that I never looked with favour on that alliance; that when Clarence bore the Bastard's helmet, I withheld my countenance from the Bastard's presence. I incurred Edward's anger by refusing to attend his court while the Count de la Roche was his guest. And therefore you may trust me when I say now that Edward, after promises, however rash, most solemn and binding, is dishonoured forever if he break off the contract. New circumstances, too, have arisen, to make what were dishonour danger also. By the death of his father, Charolois has succeeded to the Duke of Burgundy's diadem. Thou knowest his warlike temper; and though in a contest popular in England we need fear no foe, yet thou knowest also that no subsidies could be raised for strife with our most profitable commercial ally. Wherefore we earnestly implore thee magnanimously to forgive the past, accept Edward's assurance of repentance, and be thy thought--as it has been ever--the weal of our common country."

"I may add, also," said the archbishop, observing how much Warwick was touched and softened,--"that in returning to the helm of state, our gracious king permits me to say, that, save only in the alliance with Burgundy, which toucheth his plighted word, you have full liberty to name conditions, and to ask whatever grace or power a monarch can bestow."

"I name none but my prince's confidence," said Warwick, generously; "in that, all else is given, and in return for that, I will make the greatest sacrifice that my nature knoweth, or can conceive,--I will mortify my familiar demon, I will subdue my PRIDE. If Edward can convince me that it is for the good of England that his sister should wed with mine ancient and bitter foe, I will myself do honour to his choice. But of this hereafter. Enough now that I forget past wrongs in present favour; and that for peace or war, I return to the side of that man whom I loved as my son before I served him as my king."

Neither Richard nor the archbishop was prepared for a conciliation so facile, for neither quite understood that peculiar magnanimity which often belongs to a vehement and hasty temper, and which is as eager to forgive as prompt to take offence,--which, ever in extremes, is not contented with anything short of fiery aggression or trustful generosity, and where it once passes over an offence, seeks to oblige the offender. So, when, after some further conversation on the state of the country, the earl lighted Gloucester to his chamber, the young prince said to himself, musingly,--

"Does ambition besot and blind men? Or can Warwick think that Edward can ever view him but as one to be destroyed when the hour is ripe?"

Catesby, who was the duke's chamberlain, was in attendance as the prince unrobed.

"A noble castle this," said the duke, "and one in the midst of a warlike population,--our own countrymen of York."

"It would be no mean addition to the dowry of the Lady Isabel," said Catesby, with his bland, false smile.

"Methinks rather that the lordships of Salisbury (and this is the chief) pass to the Lady Anne," said Richard, musingly. "No, Edward were imprudent to suffer this stronghold to fall to the next heir to his throne. Marked you the Lady Anne?--her beauty is most excellent."

"Truly, your Highness," answered Catesby, unsuspectingly, "the Lady Isabel seems to me the taller and the statelier."

"When man's merit and woman's beauty are measured by the ell, Catesby, Anne will certainly be less fair than Isabel, and Richard a dolt compared to Clarence. Open the casement; my dressing-robe; good-night to you!"

CHAPTER III.

THE SISTERS.

The next morning, at an hour when modern beauty falls into its first sickly sleep, Isabel and Anne conversed on the same terrace, and near the same spot, which had witnessed their father's meditations the day before. They were seated on a rude bench in an angle of the wall, flanked by a low, heavy bastion. And from the parapet their gaze might have wandered over a goodly sight, for on a broad space, covered with sand and sawdust, within the vast limits of the castle range, the numerous knights and youths who sought apprenticeship in arms and gallantry under the earl were engaged in those martial sports which, falling elsewhere in disuse, the Last of the Barons kinglily maintained. There, boys of fourteen, on their small horses, ran against each other with blunted lances. There, those of more advanced adolescence, each following the other in a circle, rode at the ring; sometimes (at the word of command from an old knight who had fought at Agincourt, and was the preceptor in these valiant studies) leaping from their horses at full speed, and again vaulting into the saddle. A few grim old warriors sat by to censure or applaud. Most skilled among the younger was the son of Lord Montagu; among the maturer, the name of Marmaduke Nevile was the most often shouted. If the eye turned to the left, through the barbican might be seen flocks of bees entering to supply the mighty larder; and at a smaller postern, a dark crowd of mendicant friars, and the more destitute poor, waited for the daily crumbs from the rich man's table. What need of a poor-law then? The baron and the abbot made the parish! But not on these evidences of wealth and state turned the eyes, so familiar to them, that they woke no vanity, and roused no pride.

With downcast looks and a pouting lip, Isabel listened to the silver voice of Anne.

"Dear sister, be just to Clarence. He cannot openly defy his king and brother. Believe that he would have accompanied our uncle and cousin had he not deemed that their meditation would be more welcome, at least to King Edward, without his presence."

"But not a letter! not a line!"

"Yet when I think of it, Isabel, are we sure that he even knew of the

visit of the archbishop and his brother?"

"How could he fail to know?"

"The Duke of Gloucester last evening told me that the king had sent him southward."

"Was it about Clarence that the duke whispered to thee so softly by the oriel window?"

"Surely, yes," said Anne, simply. "Was not Richard as a brother to us when we played as children on yon greensward?"

"Never as a brother to me,--never was Richard of Gloucester one whom I could think of without fear and even loathing," answered Isabel, quickly.

It was at this turn in the conversation that the noiseless step of Richard himself neared the spot, and hearing his own name thus discourteously treated, he paused, screened from their eyes by the bastion in the angle.

"Nay, nay, sister," said Anne; "what is there in Richard that misbeseems his princely birth?"

"I know not, but there is no youth in his eye and in his heart. Even as a child he had the hard will and the cold craft of gray hairs. Pray Saint Mary you give me not Gloucester for a brother!"

Anne sighed and smiled. "Ah, no," she said, after a short pause, "when thou art Princess of Clarence may I--"

"May thou what?"

"Pray for thee and thine in the house of God! Ah, thou knowest not, sweet Isabel, how often at morn and even mine eyes and heart turn to the spires of yonder convent!" She rose as she said this, her lip quivered, and she moved on in the opposite direction to that in which Richard stood, still unseen, and no longer within his hearing. Isabel rose also, and hastening after her, threw her arms round Anne's neck, and kissed away the tears that stood in those meek eyes.

"My sister, my Anne! Ah, trust in me, thou hast some secret, I know it well,--I have long seen it. Is it possible that thou canst have placed thy heart, thy pure love--Thou blushest! Ah, Anne! Anne! thou canst not have loved beneath thee?"

"Nay," said Anne, with a spark of her ancestral fire lighting her meek eyes through its tears, "not beneath me, but above. What do I say! Isabel, ask me no more. Enough that it is a folly, a dream, and that I could smile with pity at myself to think from what light causes love and grief can spring."

"Above thee!" repeated Isabel, in amaze; "and who in England is above the daughter of Earl Warwick? Not Richard of Gloucester? If so, pardon my foolish tongue."

"No, not Richard,--though I feel kindly towards him, and his sweet voice soothes me when I listen,--not Richard. Ask no more."

"Oh, Anne, speak, speak!--we are not both so wretched? Thou lovest not Clarence? It is--it must be!"

"Canst thou think me so false and treacherous,--a heart pledged to thee? Clarence! Oh, no!"

"But who then--who then?" said Isabel, still suspiciously. "Nay, if thou wilt not speak, blame thyself if I must still wrong thee."

Thus appealed to, and wounded to the quick by Isabel's tone and eye, Anne at last with a strong effort suppressed her tears, and, taking her sister's hand, said in a voice of touching solemnity, "Promise, then, that the secret shall be ever holy; and, since I know that it will move thine anger--perhaps thy scorn--strive to forget what I will confess to thee."

Isabel for answer pressed her lips on the hand she held; and the sisters, turning under the shadow of a long row of venerable oaks, placed themselves on a little mound, fragrant with the violets of spring. A different part of the landscape beyond was now brought in view; calmly slept in the valley the roofs of the subject town of Middleham, calmly flowed through the pastures the noiseless waves of Ure. Leaning on Isabel's bosom, Anne thus spake, "Call to mind, sweet sister, that short breathing-time in the horrors of the Civil War, when a brief peace was made between our father and Queen Margaret. We were left in the palace--mere children that we were--to play with the young prince, and the children in Margaret's train."

"I remember."

"And I was unwell and timid, and kept aloof from the sports with a girl of my own years, whom I think--see how faithful my memory!--they called Sibyll; and Prince Edward, Henry's son, stealing from the rest, sought me out; and we sat together, or walked together alone, apart from all, that day and the few days we were his mother's guests. Oh, if you could have seen him and heard him then,--so beautiful, so gentle, so wise beyond his years, and yet so sweetly sad; and when we parted, he bade me ever love him, and placed his ring on my finger, and wept,--as we kissed each other, as children will."

"Children! ye were infants!" exclaimed Isabel, whose wonder seemed increased by this simple tale.

"Infant though I was, I felt as if my heart would break when I left him; and then the wars ensued; and do you not remember how ill I was, and like to die, when our House triumphed, and the prince and heir of Lancaster was driven into friendless exile? From that hour my fate was fixed. Smile if you please at such infant folly, but children often feel more deeply than later years can weet of."

"My sister, this is indeed a wilful invention of sorrow for thine own scourge. Why, ere this, believe me, the boy-prince hath forgotten thy very name."

"Not so, Isabel," said Anne, colouring, and quickly, "and perchance, did all rest here, I might have outgrown my weakness. But last year, when we were at Rouen with my father--"

"Well?"

"One evening on entering my chamber, I found a packet,--how left I know not, but the French king and his suite, thou rememberest, made our house almost their home,--and in this packet was a picture, and on its back these words, Forget not the exile who remembers thee!"

"And that picture was Prince Edward's?"

Anne blushed, and her bosom heaved beneath the slender and high-laced gorget. After a pause, looking round her, she drew forth a small miniature, which lay on the heart that beat thus sadly, and placed it in her sister's hands.

"You see I deceive you not, Isabel. And is not this a fair excuse for--"

She stopped short, her modest nature shrinking from comment upon the mere beauty that might have won the heart. And fair indeed was the face upon which Isabel gazed admiringly, in spite of the stiff and rude art of the limner; full of the fire and energy which characterized the countenance of the mother, but with a tinge of the same profound and inexpressible melancholy that gave its charm to the pensive features of Henry VI.,--a face, indeed, to fascinate a young eye, even if not associated with such remembrances of romance and pity.

Without saying a word, Isabel gave back the picture; but she pressed the hand that took it, and Anne was contented to interpret the silence into sympathy.

"And now you know why I have so often incurred your anger by compassion for the adherents of Lancaster; and for this, also, Richard of Gloucester hath been endeared to me,--for fierce and stern as he may be called, he hath ever been gentle in his mediation for that unhappy House."

"Because it is his policy to be well with all parties. My poor Anne, I cannot bid you hope; and yet, should I ever wed with Clarence, it may be possible--that--that--but you in turn will chide me for ambition."

"How?"

"Clarence is heir to the throne of England, for King Edward has no male children; and the hour may arrive when the son of Henry of Windsor may return to his native land, not as sovereign, but as Duke of Lancaster, and thy hand may reconcile him to the loss of a crown."

"Would love reconcile thee to such a loss, proud Isabel?" said Anne, shaking her head, and smiling mournfully.

"No," answered Isabel, emphatically.

"And are men less haught than we?" said Anne. "Ah, I know not if I could love him so well could he resign his rights, or even could he regain them. It is his position that gives him a holiness in my eyes. And this love, that must be hopeless, is half pity and half respect."

At this moment a loud shout arose from the youths in the yard, or sporting-ground, below, and the sisters, startled, and looking up, saw that the sound was occasioned by the sight of the young Duke of Gloucester, who was standing on the parapet near the bench the demoiselles had quitted, and who acknowledged the greeting by a wave of his plumed cap, and a lowly bend of his head; at the same time the figures of Warwick and the archbishop, seemingly in earnest conversation, appeared at the end of the terrace. The sisters rose hastily, and would have stolen away, but the archbishop caught a glimpse of their robes, and called aloud to them. The reverent obedience, at that day, of youth to relations left the sisters no option but to advance towards their uncle, which they did with demure reluctance.

"Fair brother," said the archbishop, "I would that Gloucester were to have my stately niece instead of the gaudy Clarence."

"Wherefore?"

"Because he can protect those he loves, and Clarence will ever need a protector."

"I like George not the less for that," said Warwick, "for I would not have my son-in-law my master."

"Master!" echoed the archbishop, laughing; "the Soldan of Babylon himself, were he your son-in-law, would find Lord Warwick a tolerably stubborn servant!"

"And yet," said Warwick, also laughing, but with a franker tone, "beshrew me, but much as I approve young Gloucester, and deem him the hope of the House of York, I never feel sure, when we are of the same mind, whether I agree with him, or whether he leadeth me. Ah, George! Isabel should have wedded the king, and then Edward and I would have had a sweet mediator in all our quarrels. But not so hath it been decreed."

There was a pause.

"Note how Gloucester steals to the side of Anne. Thou mayst have him for a son-in-law, though no rival to Clarence. Montagu hath hinted that the duke so aspires."

"He has his father's face--well," said the earl, softly. "But yet," he added, in an altered and reflective tone, "the boy is to me a riddle. That he will be bold in battle and wise in council I foresee; but would he had more of a young man's honest follies! There is a medium between Edward's wantonness and Richard's sanctimony; and he who in the heyday of youth's blood scowls alike upon sparkling wine and smiling woman, may hide in his heart darker and more sinful fancies. But fie on me! I will not wrongfully mistrust his father's son. Thou spokest of Montagu; he seems to have been mighty cold to his brother's wrongs,--ever at the court, ever sleek with Villein and Woodville."

"But the better to watch thy interests,--I so counselled him."

"A priest's counsel! Hate frankly or love freely is a knight's and soldier's motto. A murrain on all doubledealing!"

The archbishop shrugged his shoulders, and applied to his nostrils a small pouncet-box of dainty essences.

"Come hither, my haughty Isabel," said the prelate, as the demoiselles now drew near. He placed his niece's arm within his own, and took her aside to talk of Clarence; Richard remained with Anne, and the young cousins were joined by Warwick. The earl noted in silence the soft address of the eloquent prince, and his evident desire to please Anne. And strange as it may seem, although he had hitherto regarded Richard with admiration and affection, and although his pride for both daughters coveted alliances not less than royal, yet, in contemplating Gloucester for the first time as a probable suitor to his daughter (and his favourite daughter), the anxiety of a father sharpened his penetration, and placed the character of Richard before him in a different point from that in which he had hitherto looked only on the fearless heart and accomplished wit of his royal godson.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DESTRIER.

It was three days afterwards that the earl, as, according to custom, Anne knelt to him for his morning blessing in the oratory where the Christian baron at matins and vespers offered up his simple worship, drew her forth into the air, and said abruptly,--

"Wouldst thou be happy if Richard of Gloucester were thy betrothed?"

Anne started, and with more vivacity than usually belonged to her, exclaimed, "Oh, no, my father!"

"This is no maiden's silly coyness, Anne? It is a plain yea or nay that I ask from thee!"

"Nay, then," answered Anne, encouraged by her father's tone,--"nay, if it so please you."

"It doth please me," said the earl, shortly; and after a pause, he added, "Yes, I am well pleased. Richard gives promise of an illustrious manhood; but, Anne, thou growest so like thy mother, that whenever my pride seeks to see thee great, my heart steps in, and only prays that it may see thee happy!--so much so, that I would not have given thee to Clarence, whom it likes me well to view as Isabel's betrothed, for, to her, greatness and bliss are one; and she is of firm nature, and can rule in her own house; but thou--where out of romaunt can I find a lord loving enough for thee, soft child?"

Inexpressibly affected, Anne threw herself on her father's breast and wept. He caressed and soothed her fondly; and before her emotion was well over, Gloucester and Isabel joined them.

"My fair cousin," said the duke, "hath promised to show me thy renowned steed, Saladin; and since, on quitting thy halls, I go to my apprenticeship in war on the turbulent Scottish frontier, I would fain ask thee for a destrier of the same race as that which bears the

thunderbolt of Warwick's wrath through the storm of battle."

"A steed of the race of Saladin," answered the earl, leading the way to the destrier's stall, apart from all other horses, and rather a chamber of the castle than a stable, "were indeed a boon worthy a soldier's gift and a prince's asking. But, alas! Saladin, like myself, is sonless,--the last of a long line."

"His father, methinks, fell for us on the field of Towton. Was it not so? I have heard Edward say that when the archers gave way, and the victory more than wavered, thou, dismounting, didst slay thy steed with thine own hand, and kissing the cross of thy sword, swore on that spot to stem the rush of the foe, and win Edward's crown or Warwick's grave." ["Every Palm Sunday, the day on which the battle of Towton was fought, a rough figure, called the Red Horse, on the side of a hill in Warwickshire, is scoured out. This is suggested to be done in commemoration of the horse which the Earl of Warwick slew on that day, determined to vanquish or die."--Roberts: York and Lancaster, vol. i. p. 429.]

"It was so; and the shout of my merry men, when they saw me amongst their ranks on foot--all flight forbid--was Malech's death-dirge. It is a wondrous race,--that of Malech and his son Saladin," continued the earl, smiling. "When my ancestor, Aymer de Nevile, led his troops to the Holy Land, under Coeur de Lion, it was his fate to capture a lady beloved by the mighty Saladin. Need I say that Aymer, under a flag of truce, escorted her ransomless, her veil never raised from her face, to the tent of the Saracen king? Saladin, too gracious for an infidel, made him tarry a while, an honoured guest; and Aymer's chivalry became sorely tried, for the lady he had delivered loved and tempted him; but the good knight prayed and fasted, and defied Satan and all his works. The lady (so runs the legend) grew wroth at the pious crusader's disdainful coldness; and when Aymer returned to his comrades, she sent, amidst the gifts of the sultan, two coal-black steeds, male and mare, over which some foul and weird spells had been duly muttered. Their beauty, speed, art, and fierceness were a marvel. And Aymer, unsuspecting, prized the boon, and selected the male destrier for his war-horse. Great were the feats, in many a field, which my forefather wrought, bestriding his black charger. But one fatal day, on which the sudden war-trump made him forget his morning ave, the beast had power over the Christian, and bore him, against bit and spur, into the thickest of the foe. He did all a knight can do against many (pardon his descendant's vaunting,--so runs the tale), and the Christians for a while beheld him solitary in the melee, mowing down moon and turban. Then the crowd closed, and the good knight was lost to sight. 'To the rescue!' cried bold King Richard, and on rushed the crusaders to Aymer's help; when lo! and suddenly the ranks severed, and the black steed emerged! Aymer still on the selle, but motionless, and his helm battered and plumeless, his brand broken, his arm drooping. On came man and horse, on,--charging on, not against Infidel but Christian. On dashed the steed, I say, with fire bursting from eyes and nostrils, and the pike of his chaffron bent lance-like against the crusaders' van. The foul fiend seemed in the destrier's rage and puissance. He bore right against Richard's standard-bearer, and down went the lion and the cross. He charged the king himself; and Richard, unwilling to harm his own dear soldier Aymer, halted wondering, till the pike of the destrier pierced his own charger through the barding, and the king lay rolling in the dust. A panic seized the cross-men; they fled, the Saracens pursued,

and still with the Saracens came the black steed and the powerless rider. At last, when the crusaders reached the camp, and the flight ceased, there halted, also, Aymer. Not a man dared near him. He spoke not, none spoke to him, till a holy priest and palmer approached and sprinkled the good knight and the black barb with holy water, and exorcised both; the spell broke, and Aymer dropped to the earth. They unbraced his helm,--he was cold and stark. The fierce steed had but borne a dead man."

"Holy Paul!" cried Gloucester, with seeming sanctimony, though a covert sneer played round the firm beauty of his pale lips, "a notable tale, and one that proveth much of Sacred Truth, now lightly heeded. But, verily, lord earl, I should have little loved a steed with such a pedigree."

"Hear the rest," said Isabel. "King Richard ordered the destrier to be slain forthwith; but the holy palmer who had exorcised it forbade the sacrifice. 'Mighty shall be the service,' said the reverend man, 'which the posterity of this steed shall render to thy royal race, and great glory shall they give to the sons of Nevile. Let the war-horse, now duly exorcised from infidel spells, live long to bear a Christian warrior!'"

"And so," quoth the earl, taking up the tale--"so mare and horse were brought by Aymer's squires to his English hall; and Aymer's son, Sir Reginald, bore the cross, and bestrode the fatal steed, without fear and without scathe. From that hour the House of Nevile rose amain, in fame and in puissance; and the legend further saith, that the same palmer encountered Sir Reginald at Joppa, bade him treasure that race of war-steeds as his dearest heritage, for with that race his own should flourish and depart; and the sole one of the Infidel's spells which could not be broken was that which united the gift--generation after generation, for weal or for woe, for honour or for doom--to the fate of Aymer and his House. 'And,' added the palmer, 'as with woman's love and woman's craft was woven the indissoluble charm, so shall woman, whether in craft or in love, ever shape the fortunes of thee and thine.'"

"As yet," said the prince, "the prophecy is fulfilled in a golden sense, for nearly all thy wide baronies, I trow, have come to thee through the female side. A woman's hand brought to the Nevile this castle and its lands; [Middleham Castle was built by Robert Fitz Ranulph, grandson of Ribald, younger brother of the Earl of Bretagne and Richmond, nephew to the Conqueror. The founder's line failed in male heirs, and the heiress married Robert Nevile, son of Lord Raby. Warwick's father held the earldom of Salisbury in right of his wife, the heiress of Thomas de Montacute.] from a woman came the heritage of Monthermer and Montagu, and Salisbury's famous earldom; and the dower of thy peerless countess was the broad domains of Beauchamp."

"And a woman's craft, young prince, wrought my king's displeasure! But enough of these dissour's tales; behold the son of poor Malech, whom, forgetting all such legends, I slew at Towton. Ho, Saladin, greet thy master!"

They stood now in the black steed's stall.--an ample and high-vaulted space, for halter never insulted the fierce destrier's mighty neck, which the God of Battles had clothed in thunder. A marble cistern contained his limpid drink, and in a gilded manger the finest wheaten

bread was mingled with the oats of Flanders. On entering, they found young George, Montagu's son, with two or three boys, playing familiarly with the noble animal, who had all the affectionate docility inherited from an Arab origin. But at the sound of Warwick's voice, its ears rose, its mane dressed itself, and with a short neigh it came to his feet, and kneeling down, in slow and stately grace, licked its master's hand. So perfect and so matchless a steed never had knight bestrode! Its hide without one white hair, and glossy as the sheenest satin; a lady's tresses were scarcely finer than the hair of its noble mane; the exceeding smallness of its head, its broad frontal, the remarkable and almost human intelligence of its eye, seemed actually to elevate its conformation above that of its species. Though the race had increased, generation after generation, in size and strength, Prince Richard still marvelled (when, obedient to a sign from Warwick, the destrier rose, and leaned its head, with a sort of melancholy and quiet tenderness, upon the earl's shoulder) that a horse, less in height and bulk than the ordinary battle-steed, could bear the vast weight of the giant earl in his ponderous mail. But his surprise ceased when the earl pointed out to him the immense strength of the steed's ample loins, the sinewy cleanness, the iron muscle, of the stag-like legs, the bull-like breadth of chest, and the swelling power of the shining neck.

"And after all," added the earl, "both in man and beast, the spirit and the race, not the stature and the bulk, bring the prize. Mort Dieu, Richard! it often shames me of mine own thews and broad breast, --I had been more vain of laurels had I been shorter by the head!"

"Nevertheless," said young George of Montagu, with a page's pertness, "I had rather have thine inches than Prince Richard's, and thy broad breast than his grace's short neck."

The Duke of Gloucester turned as if a snake had stung him. He gave but one glance to the speaker, but that glance lived forever in the boy's remembrance, and the young Montagu turned pale and trembled, even before he heard the earl's stern rebuke.

"Young magpies chatter, boy,--young eagles in silence measure the space between the eery and the sun!"

The boy hung his head, and would have slunk off, but Richard detained him with a gentle hand. "My fair young cousin," said he, "thy words gall no sore, and if ever thou and I charge side by side into the foeman's ranks, thou shalt comprehend what thy uncle designed to say, --how, in the hour of strait and need, we measure men's stature not by the body but the soul!"

"A noble answer," whispered Anne, with something like sisterly admiration.

"Too noble," said the more ambitious Isabel, in the same voice, "for Clarence's future wife not to fear Clarence's dauntless brother."

"And so," said the prince, quitting the stall with Warwick, while the girls still lingered behind, "so Saladin hath no son! Wherefore? Can you mate him with no bride?"

"Faith," answered the earl, "the females of his race sleep in yonder dell, their burial-place, and the proud beast disdains all meaner

loves. Nay, were it not so, to continue the breed, if adulterated, were but to mar it."

"You care little for the legend, meseems."

"Pardieu! at times, yes, over much; but in sober moments I think that the brave man who does his duty lacks no wizard prophecy to fulfil his doom; and whether in prayer or in death, in fortune or defeat, his soul goes straight to God!"

"Umph," said Richard, musingly; and there was a pause. "Warwick," resumed the prince, "doubtless, even on your return to London, the queen's enmity and her mother's will not cease. Clarence loves Isabel, but Clarence knows not how to persuade the king and rule the king's womankind. Thou knowest how I have stood aloof from all the factions of the court. Unhappily I go to the Borders, and can but slightly serve thee. But--"(he stopped short, and sighed heavily).

"Speak on, Prince."

"In a word, then, if I were thy son, Anne's husband, I see--I see--I see--" (thrice repeated the prince, with a vague dreaminess in his eye, and stretching forth his hand)--"a future that might defy all foes, opening to me and thee!"

Warwick hesitated in some embarrassment.

"My gracious and princely cousin," he said at length, "this proffer is indeed sweet incense to a father's pride. But pardon me, as yet, noble Richard, thou art so young that the king and the world would blame me did I suffer my ambition to listen to such temptation. Enough, at present, if all disputes between our House and the king can be smoothed and laid at rest without provoking new ones. Nay, pardon me, prince, let this matter cease--at least, till thy return from the Borders."

"May I take with me hope?"

"Nay," said Warwick, "thou knowest that I am a plain man; to bid thee hope were to plight my word. And," he added seriously, "there be reasons grave and well to be considered why both the daughters of a subject should not wed with their king's brothers. Let this cease now, I pray thee, sweet lord."

Here the demoiselles joined their father, and the conference was over; but when Richard, an hour after, stood musing alone on the battlements, he muttered to himself, "Thou art a fool, stout earl, not to have welcomed the union between thy power and my wit. Thou goest to a court where without wit power is nought. Who may foresee the future? Marry, that was a wise ancient fable, that he who seized and bound Proteus could extract from the changeful god the prophecy of the days to come. Yea! the man who can seize Fate can hear its voice predict to him. And by my own heart and brain, which never yet relinquished what affection yearned for, or thought aspired to, I read, as in a book, Anne, that thou shalt be mine; and that where wave on yon battlements the ensigns of Beauchamp, Monthermer, and Neville, the Boar of Gloucester shall liege it over their broad baronies and hardy vassals."

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