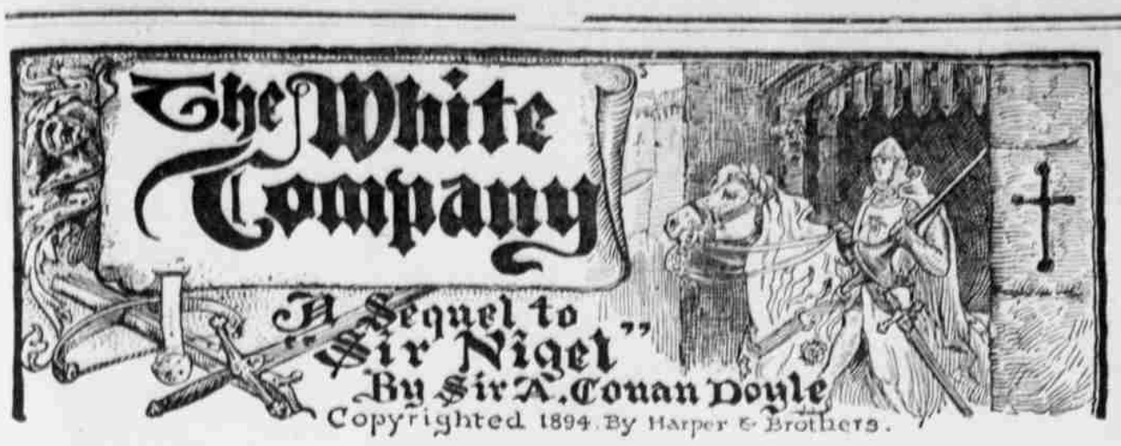


(Synopsis of preceding chapters at end of this installment.)

CHAPTER IX.

Sir Nigel, who had entered the room with a silvery-haired old lady upon his arm, stared aghast at this sudden burst of candor.

"Maude, Maude!" said he, shaking his head, "it is more hard for me to gain obedience from you than from the fourscore drunken archers who followed me to Guienne. Yet, hush! little one, for your fair lady-mother will be here anon, and there is no need that she should know it. We will keep you from the provost-marshal this journey. Away to your chamber, sweeting, and keep a blithe face, for she who confesses is shriven. And now, fair mother," he continued, when his daughter had gone, "sit you here by the fire, for your blood runs colder than it did. Alleyne Edricson, I would have a word with you, for I would fain that you should take service under me. And here in good time comes my lady, without whose counsel it is not my wont to decide aught to import; but, indeed, it was her own thought that you should come."

"For I have formed a good opinion of you, and can see that you are one who may be trusted," said the Lady Loring. "And in good sooth my dear lord hath need of such a one by his side, for he recks so little of himself that there should be one there to look to his needs and meet his wants. You have seen the cloister; it were well that you should see the world, too, ere you make choice for life between them."

"You can ride?" asked Sir Nigel, looking at the youth with puckered eyes.

"Yes, I have ridden much at the abbey."

"Yet there is a difference betwixt a friar's hack and a warrior's destrier. You can sing and play?"

"On citole, flute and rebeck."

"Good! You can read blazonry?"

"Indifferent well."

"I trust that you are lowly and serviceable?"

"I have served all my life, my lord."

"Canst carve too?"

"I have carved two days a week for the brethren."

"A model truly! Wilt make a squire of squires. But tell me, pray, canst curl hair?"

"No, my lord, but I could learn."

"It is of import," said he, "for I love to keep my hair well ordered, seeing that the weight of my helmet for thirty years hath in some degree frayed it upon the top.

"It is for you also to bear the purse," said the lady, "for my sweet lord is of so free and gracious a temper that he would give it freely to the first who asked alms of him. All these things, with some knowledge of venerie, and of the management of horse, hawk, and hound, with the grace and hardihood and courtesy which are proper to your age, will make you a fit squire for Sir Nigel Loring."

"Alas, lady," Alleyne answered, "I know well the great honor that you have done me in deeming me worthy to wait upon so renowned a knight, yet I am so conscious of my own weakness that I scarce dare incur duties which I might be so ill fitted to fulfil."

"Modesty and a humble mind," said she, "are the very first and rarest gifts in page or squire. Your words prove that you have these, and all the rest is but the work of use and of time."

"We can scarce hope," said Sir Nigel, "to have all ready for our start before the feast of St. Luke, for there is much to be done in the time. You will have leisure, therefore, if it please you to take service under me, in which to learn your devoir."

"And I have one favor to crave from you," added the lady of the castle, as Alleyne turned to leave their presence. "You have, as I understand, much learning, which you have acquired at Beaulieu. I would have you give an hour or two a day whilst you are with us in discoursing with my daughter, the Lady Maude; for she is somewhat backward, I fear, and hath no love for letters, save for these poor fond romances, which do but fill her empty head with dreams of enchanted maidens and of errant cavalier. Father Christopher comes over after nones from the Priory, but he is stricken with years and slow of speech, so that she gets small profit from his teaching. I would have you do what you can with her, and with Agatha, my young tire woman, and with Dorothy Pierpont."

And so Alleyne found himself not only chosen as squire to a knight, but also as squire to three damozels, which was even further from the part which he had thought to play in the world.

And now there came a time of stir and bustle, of furbishing of arms and ring of hammer from all the southland counties. Fast spread the tidings, from thorpe to thorpe and from castle to castle, that the old game was afoot once more, and the lions and lilies to be in the field with the early spring. Great news this for that fierce old country whose trade for a generation had been war, her exports archers and her imports prisoners. For six years her sons had chafed under an unwonted peace. Now they flew to their arms as to their birthright. The old soldiers of Crecy, of Nogent, and of Poictiers were glad to think that they might hear the war-trumpet once more, and gladder still were the hot youth who had chaffed for years under the martial tales of their sires. To pierce the great mountains of the south, to fight the tamers of the fiery Moors, to follow the greatest captain of the age, to find sunny cornfields and vineyards, when the marches of Picardy and Normandy were as bare and bleak as the Jedburgh forests—here was golden prospects for a race of warriors. From sea to sea there was stringing of bows in the cottage and clang of steel in the castle.

Nor did it take long for every stronghold to pour forth its cavalry, and every hamlet its footmen. Through the late autumn and the early winter every road and country lane resounded with nakir and trumpet, with the neigh of the war-horse and the clatter of marching men.

In the ancient and populous county of Hampshire there was no lack of leaders or of soldiers for a service which promised either honor or profit. Greatest of all the musters, however, was that at Twynham Castle, for the name and the fame of Sir Nigel Loring drew toward him the keenest and boldest spirits, all eager to serve under so valiant a leader. Archers from the New Forest and the Forest of Bere, billmen from the pleasant country which is watered by the Stour, the Avon, and the Itchen, young cavaliers from the ancient Hampshire houses, all were pushing for Christchurch to take service under the banner of the five scarlet roses.

And how could Sir Nigel have shown the bachelles of land which the laws of rank required, he might well have cut his forked pennon into a square banner, and taken such a following into the field as would have supported the dignity of a banneret. But poverty was heavy upon him; his land was scant, his coffers empty, and the very castle which covered him the holding of another. Sore was his heart when he saw rare bowmen and war-hardened spearmen turned away from his gates for the lack of the money which might equip and pay them. Yet the letter which Aylward had brought him gave him powers which he was not slow to use. In it Sir Claude Latour, the Gascon lieutenant of the White Company, assured him that there remained in his keeping enough to fit out a hundred archers and twenty men-at-arms, which, joined to the three hundred veteran companions already in France, would make a force which any leader might be proud to command. Carefully and sagaciously the veteran knight chose out his men from the swarm of volunteers. Many an anxious consultation he held with Black Simon, Sam Aylward, and others of his more experienced followers, as to who should come and who should stay. By All Saint's Day, however, he had filled up his full numbers, and mustered under his banner as stout a following of Hampshire foresters as ever twanged their war-bows. Twenty men-at-arms, too, well mounted and equipped, formed the cavalry of the party, while young Peter Terlake of Fareham, and Walter Ford of Botley, the martial sons of martial sires, came at their own cost to wait upon Sir Nigel and to share with Alleyne Edricson the duties of his squireship.

Yet, even after the enrolment, there was much to be done ere the party could proceed upon its way. For armor, swords, and lances there was no need to take much forethought, for they were to be had better and cheaper in Bordeaux than in England. With the long-bow, however, it was different. Yew-staves indeed might be got in Spain, but it was well to take enough and to spare with him. Then three spare cords should be carried for each bow, with a great store of arrow-heads, besides the brigandines of chain-mail, the wadded steel caps, and the brassarts or arm-guards, which were the proper equipment of the archer. Above all, the women for miles round were hard at work cutting the white surcoats which were the badge of the company, and adorning them with the red lion of St. George upon the centre of the breast. When all was completed and the muster called in the castle-yard, the oldest soldier of the French wars was fain to confess that he had never looked upon a better equipped or more warlike body of men, from the knight with his silk jupon, sitting his great black war-horse in the front of them, to Hordle John, the giant recruit, who leaned carelessly upon a huge black bow-stave in the rear. Of the six score, fully half had seen service before, while a fair sprinkling were men who had followed the wars all their lives, and had a hand in those battles which had made the whole world ring with the fame and the wonder of the English infantry.

Six long weeks were taken in these preparations, and it was close on Martinmas ere all was ready for a start. Nigh two months had Alleyne Edricson been in Castle Twynham—months which were fated to turn the whole current of his life, to divert it from that dark and lonely bourne toward which it tended, and to guide it into freer and more sunlit channels. Already he had learned to bless his father for that wise provision which had made him seek to know the world ere he had ventured to renounce it.

For it was a different place from that which he had pictured—very different from that which he had heard described when the master of the novices held forth to his charges upon the ravening wolves who lurked for them beyond the peaceful folds of Beaulieu. There was cruelty in it, doubtless, and lust and sin and sorrow; but were there not virtues to atone, robust, positive virtues, which did not shrink from temptation, which held their own in all the rough blasts of the workaday world? How colorless by contrast appeared the sinlessness which came from inability to sin, the conquest which was attained by flying from the enemy! Abbot Berghersh was a good man, but how was he better than this kindly knight, who lived as simple a life, held as lofty and inflexible an ideal of whatever came to his hand to do? In turning from the service of the one to that of the other, Alleyne could not feel that he was lowering his aims in life. Henceforth for seven hours a day he strove in the tilt-yard to qualify himself to be a worthy squire to so worthy a knight. Young, supple, and active, with all the pent energies from years of pure and healthy living, it was not long before he could manage his horse and his weapon well enough to earn an approving nod from critical men-at-arms, or to hold his own against Terlake and Ford, his fellow-squires.

But were there no other considerations which swayed him from the cloisters toward the world? Here, day after day, for an hour after drones, and for an hour before vespers, he found himself in close communion with three maidens, all young, all fair, and all therefore doubly dangerous from the monkish stand-point. Yet he found that in their presence he was conscious of a quick sympathy, a pleasant ease, a ready response to all that was most gentle and best in himself, which filled his soul with a vague and new-found joy.

And yet the Lady Maude Loring was no easy pupil to handle. An older and more world-wise man might have been puzzled by her varying moods, her sudden prejudices, her quick resentment of all constraints and authority. Did a subject interest her, was there space in it for either romance or imagination, she would fly through it with her subtle active mind, leaving her two fellow-students and even her teacher toiling behind her. On the other hand were there dull patience needed with steady toil and strain of memory, no single fact could, by any driving, be fixed in her mind. Alleyne might talk to her of the stories of old gods and heroes, of gallant deeds and lofty aims, of he might hold forth upon moon and stars, and let his fancy wander over the hidden secrets of the universe, and he would have a rapt listener with flushed cheeks and eloquent eyes, who could repeat after him the very words which had fallen from his lips. But when it came to almagest and astrolable, the counting of figures and reckoning of epicycles, away would go her thoughts to horse and hound, and a vacant eye and listless face would warn the teacher that he had lost his hold upon his scholar. Then he had but to bring out the old romance-book from the Priory, with bedingered cover of sheepskin and gold letters upon a purple ground to entice her wayward mind back to the paths of learning.

At times, too, when the wild fit was upon her, she would break into pettiness and rebel openly against Alleyne's gentle firmness. Yet he would jog quietly on with his teachings, taking no heed to her mutiny, until suddenly she would be conquered by his patience, and break into self-revilings a hundred times stronger than her fault demanded. It chanced, however, that, on one of these mornings when the evil mood was upon her, Agatha, the young tire-woman, thinking to please her mistress, began also to toss her head and make tart rejoinder to the teacher's questions. In an instant the Lady Maude had turned upon her two blazing eyes and a face which was blanched with anger.

"You would dare!" said she. "You would dare!"

The frightened tire-woman tried to excuse herself. "But, my fair lady," she stammered, "what have I done? I have said no more than I heard."

"You would dare!" repeated the lady, in a choking voice. "You, a graceless baggage, a foolish lack-brain, with no thought above the hemming of shifts! And he so kindly and hendy and long-suffering! You would—ha, you may well flee the room!"

She had spoken with a rising voice, and a clasping and opening of her long white fingers, so that it was no marvel that, ere the speech was over, the skirts of Agatha were whisking round the door and the click of her sobs to be heard dying swiftly away down the corridor.

Alleyne stared open-eyed at this tigress who had sprung so suddenly to his rescue. "There is no need for such anger," he said mildly. "The maid's words have done me no scath. It is you yourself who have erred."

"I know it," she cried; "I am a most wicked woman. But it is bad enough that one should misuse you. I will see that there is not a second one."

"Nay, nay, no one has misused me," he answered. "But the fault lies in your hot and bitter words. You have called her a baggage and a lack-brain, and I know not what."

"And you are he who taught me to speak the truth!" she cried. "Now I have spoken it, and yet I cannot please you. Lack-brain she is, and lack-brain I shall call her."

Such was a sample of the sudden janglings which marred the peace of that little class. And yet, there were times when Alleyne had to ask himself whether it was not the Lady Maude who was gaining sway and influence over him. If she were changing, so was he. In vain he strove and reasoned with himself as to the madness of letting his mind rest upon Sir Nigel's daughter. Stronger than reason, stronger than cloister teachings, stronger than all that might hold him back, was that old, old tyrant who will brook no rival in the kingdom of youth.

He had scarce dared to face the change which had come upon him, when a few sudden chance words showed it all up hard and clear, like lightning in the darkness.

He had ridden over to Poole, one November day, with his fellow-squire, Peter Terlake, in quest of certain yew-staves from Wat Swathling, the Dorsetshire armorer. Peter was a hard, wiry brown-faced country-bred lad, who looked on the coming war as the school-boy looks on his holidays. This day, however, he had been sombre and mute, with scarce a word a mile to bestow upon his comrade.

"Tell me, Alleyne Edricson," he broke out suddenly, "has it not seemed to you that of late the Lady Maude is paler and more silent than is her wont?"

"It may be so," the other answered shortly.

"And would rather sit distrait by her oriel than ride gayly to the chase as of old. Methinks, Alleyne, it is this learning which you have taught her that has taken all the life and sap from her."

"Her lady-mother has so ordered it," said Alleyne.

"By our Lady! and withouten disrespect," quoth Terlake, "it is in my mind that her lady-mother is more fitted to lead a company to a storming than to have the upbringing of this tender and milk-white maid. Hark, ye, lad Alleyne, to what I never told man or woman yet. I love the fair Lady Maude, and would give the last drop of my heart's blood to serve her." He spoke with a gasping voice, and his face flushed crimson in the moonlight.

Alleyne said nothing, but his heart seemed to turn to a lump of ice in his bosom.

"My father has broad acres," the other continued, "from Fareham Creek to the slope of the Portsdown Hill. Sure am I that Sir Nigel would be blithe at such a match."

"But how the lady?" asked Alleyne, with dry lips.

"Ah, lad! there lies my trouble. It is a toss of the head and a droop of the eyes if I say one word of what is in my mind. I did but ask her yester-night for her green veil, that I might wear it as a token or lambrequin upon my helm; but she flashed out at me that she kept it for a better man, and then all in a breath asked pardon for that she had spoke so rudely. Yet she would not take back the words either, nor would she grant the veil. Has it seemed to thee, Alleyne, that she loves any one?"

"Nay, I cannot say," said Alleyne, with a wild throb of sudden hope in his heart.

"I have thought so, and yet I cannot name the man. Indeed, save myself, and Walter Ford, and you, who are half a clerk, and Father Christopher of the Priory, and Bertrand the page, who is there whom she sees?"

"I cannot tell," quoth Alleyne shortly; and the two squires rode on a gain, each intent upon his own thoughts.

Next day at morning lesson the teacher observed that his pupil was indeed looking pale and jaded, with listless eyes and a weary manner. He was heavy-hearted to note the change in her.

"Your mistress, I fear, is ill, Agatha," he said to the tire-woman, when the Lady Maude had sought her chamber.

The maid looker aslant at him with laughing eyes. "It is not an illness that kills," quoth she.

"Pray God not!" he cried. "But tell me, Agatha, what is it that ails her?"

"Me thinks that I could lay my hand upon another who is smitten with the same trouble," said she, with the same sidelong look. "Canst not give a name to it, and thou so skilled in leechcraft?"

"Nay, save that she seems aweary."

"Well, bethink you that it is but three days ere you will be gone, and Castle Twynham be as dull as the priory. Is there not enough there to cloud a lady's brow?"

"In sooth, yes," he answered. "I had forgot that she is about to lose her father."

"Her father!" cried the tire-woman, with a little trill of laughter. "Oh, simple, simple!" And she was off down the passage like arrow from bow, while Alleyne stood gazing after her, betwixt hope and doubt, scarce daring to put faith in the meaning which seemed to underlie her words.

CHAPTER X.

St. Luke's day had come and had gone, and it was in the season of Martinmas, that the White Company was ready for its journey. Loud shrieked the brazen bugles from keep and from gate-way, and merry was the rattle of the war-drum, as the men gathered in the outer bailey, with torches to light them, for the morn had not yet broken. Alleyne, from the window of the armory, looked down upon the strange scene—the circles of yellow flickering light, the lines of stern and bearded faces, the quick shimmer of arms, and the lean heads of the horses. In front stood th bowmen, ten deep, with a fringe of under-officers, who paced hither and thither, marshalling the ranks with curt precept or sharp rebuke. Behind were the little clump of steel-clad horsemen, their lances raised, with long pensils drooping down the oaken shafts So silent and still were they that they might have been metal-sheethed statues, were it not for the occasional quick impatient stamp of their chargers, or the rattle of chamfron against neck-plates as they tossed and strained. A spear's length in front of them sat the spare and long-limbed figure of Black Simon, the Norwich fighting man, his fierce, deep lined face framed in steel and the silk guidon, marked with the five scarlet roses, slanting over his broad right shoulder.

The young squire was leaning forward gazing at the stirring and martial scene, when he heard a short quick gasp at his shoulder, and there was the Lady Maude with her hand to her heart, leaning up against the wall, slender and fair, like a half-plucked lily. Her face was turned away from him, but he could see, by the sharp intake of her breath, that she was weeping bitterly.

"Alas! alas!" he cried, all unnerved at the sight, "why is it that you are so sad, lady?"

"It is the sight of these brave men," she answered; "and to think how many of them go and how few are like to find their way back. I have seen it before, when I was a little maid, in the year of the Prince's great battle. I remember then how they mustered in the bailey, even as they do now, and my lady-mother holding me in her arms at this very window that I might see the show."

"Please God, you will see them all back ere another year be out," said he.

She shook her head, looking round at him with flushed cheeks and eyes which sparkled in the lamp-light. "Oh, but I hate myself for being a woman!" she cried, with a stamp of her little foot. "What can I do that is good? Here I must bide and talk and sew and spin, and spin and sew and talk. Ever the same dull round, with nothing at the end of it. And now you are going, too, who could carry my thoughts out of these gray walls, and raise my mind above tapestry and distaffs. What can I do? I am of no more use or value than that broken bow-stave."

"You are of such value to me," he cried, in a whirl of hot, passionate words, "that all else has become naught. You are my heart, my life, my one and only thought. Oh, Maude, I cannot live without you! I cannot leave you without a word of love. All is changed to me since I have known you. I am poor and lowly and all unworthy; but if great love may weigh down such defects, then mine may do it. Give me but one word of hope to take to the wars with me, but one. Ah, you shrink, you shudder! My wild words have frightened you."

Twice she opened her lips, and twice no sound came from them. At last she spoke in a hard and measured voice, as one who dare not trust herself to speak too freely.

"This is over-sudden," she said; "It is not so long since the world was nothing to you. You have changed once; perchance you may change again."

"Cruel!" he cried. "Who hath changed me?"

"And then your brother!" she continued with a little laugh, disregarding his question. "Methinks this hath become a family custom amongst the Edricsons. Nay, I am sorry; I did not mean a jibe. But, indeed, Alleyne, this hath come quickly upon me, and I scarce know what to say."

"Say some word of hope, however distant—some kind word that I may cherish in my heart."

"Nay, Alleyne, it were a cruel kindness, and you have been too good and true a friend to me that I should use you despitefully. There cannot be a closer link between us. It is madness to think of it. Were there no other reasons, it is enough that my father and your brother would both cry out against it."

"My brother, what has he to do with it? And your father —"

"Come, Alleyne, was it not you who would have me act fairly to all men, and certes, to my father amongst them?"

"You say truly," he cried, "you say truly. But you do not reject me, Maude? You give me some ray of hope? I do not ask pledge or promise. Say only that I am not hateful to you—that on some happier day I may hear kinder words from you."

Her eyes softened upon him, and a heartfelt answer was on her lips, when a hoarse shout, with the clatter of arms and stamping of steeds, rose up from the bailey below. At the sound her face set, her eyes sparkled, and she stood with flushed cheek and head thrown back—a woman's body, but a soul of fire.

"My father hath gone down," she cried. "Your place is by his side. Nay, look not at me, Alleyne. It is no time for dallying. **Win my father's love, and all may follow.** It is when the brave soldier hath done his devoir that he hopes for his reward. Farewell, and may God be with you!" She heldout her white, slim hand to him, but as he bent his lips over it she whisked away and was gone, leaving in his outstretched hand the very green veil for which Peter Terlake had craved in vain. Again the hoarse cheering burst out from below, and he heard the clang of the rising portcullis. Pressing the veil to his lips, he thrust it into the bosom of his tunic, and rushed as fast as feet could bear him to arm himself and join the muster.

The raw morning had broken ere the hot spiced ale was served round and last farewell spoken. First came Black Simon with his banner, bestriding a lean and powerful dapple-gray charger, as hard and wiry as himself. After him, riding three abreast, were nine men-at-arms, all picked soldiers, who had followed the French wars before. So, with jingle of arms and clatter of hoofs, they rode across the Bridge of Avon, while the burghers shouted for the flag of the five roses and its gallant guard.

Close at the heels of the horses came two-score archers, burly and mostly bearded, their round targets on their backs and their long yellow bows, the most deadly weapon that the wit of man had yet devised, thrusting forth from behind their shoulders. From each man's girdle hung sword or axe, according to his humor, and over his right hip there jutted out the leathern quiver, with its bristle of goose, pigeon, and peacock feathers.

So we'll toast altogether
To the Gray Goose Feather,
And the land where the Gray Goose flew.

Behind the bowmen strode two trumpeters blowing upon nakirs, and two drummers in parti-colored clothes. After them came twenty-seven sumpter-horses carrying tent poles, cloth, spare arms, spurs, wedges, cooking kettles, horseshoes, bags of nails, and the hundred other things which experience had shown to be needful in a harried hostile country. A white mule with red trappings, led by a varlet, carried Sir Nigel's own napery and table comforts. Then came two-score more archers, ten more men-at-arms, and, finally, a rear-guard of twenty bowmen, with big John towering in the front rank and the veteran Aylward marching by his side, his battered harness and faded surcoat in strange contrast with the snow-white jupons and shining brigandines of his companions. A quick cross-fire of greetings and questions and rough West Saxon jests flew from rank to rank, or were bandied about betwixt the marching archers and the gazing crowd.

The Company had marched to the turn of the road ere Sir Nigel Loring rode out from the gate-way, mounted on Pommers, his great black war war-horse, whose ponderous footfall on the wooden drawbridge echoed loudly from the gloomy arch which spanned it. Sir Nigel was still in his velvet dress of peace, with flat velvet cap of maintenance, and curling ostrich feather clasped in a golden brooch. He bore no arms save the long and heavy sword which hung at his saddle-bow; but Terlake carried in front of him the high wivern-crested bassinet, Ford the heavy ash spear with swallow-tail pennon, while Alleyne was entrusted with the emblazoned shield. The Lady Loring rode her palfrey at her lord's bridle-arm, for she would see him as far as the edge of the forest, and ever and anon she turned her hardlined face up wistfully to him and ran a questioning eye over his apparel and appointments.

"I trust that there is nothing forgot," she said, beckoning to Alleyne to ride on her farther side. "I trust him to you, Edricson. Hosen, shirts, cyclas, and under-jupons are in the brown basket on the left side of the mule. His wine he takes hot when the nights are cold, malvoise or vernage, with as much spice as would cover the thumb-nail. See that he hath a change if he comes back hot from the tilting. There is goose-grease in a box, if the old scars ache at the turn of the weather. The purse I have already given you, Edricson," continued the lady. "There are in it twenty-three marks, one noble, three shillings and fourpence, which is a great treasure for one man to carry. And I pray you to bear in mind, Edricson, that he hath two pair of shoes, those of red leather for common use, and the others with golden toechains, which he may wear should he chance to drink wine with the Prince or with Chandos."

"My sweet bird," said Sir Nigel, "I am right loath to part, but we are now at the fringe of the forest, and it is not right that I should take the chatelaine too far from her trust."

"But, oh, my dear lord," she cried, with a trembling lip, "let me bide with you for one furlong further—or one and a half, perhaps. You may spare me this out of the weary miles that you will journey alone."

"Come then, my heart's comfort," he answered. "But I must crave a gage from thee. It is my custom, darling, and hath been since I have first known thee, to proclaim by herald in such camps, townships, or fortalices as I may chance to visit, that my lady-love being beyond compare the fairest and sweetest in Christendom, I should deem it great honor and kindly condescension if any cavalier would run three courses against me with sharpened lances, should he chance to have a lady whose claim he was willing to advance. I pray you then, my fair dove, that you will vouchsafe to me one of those doe-skin gloves, that I may wear it as the badge of her whose servant I shall ever be."

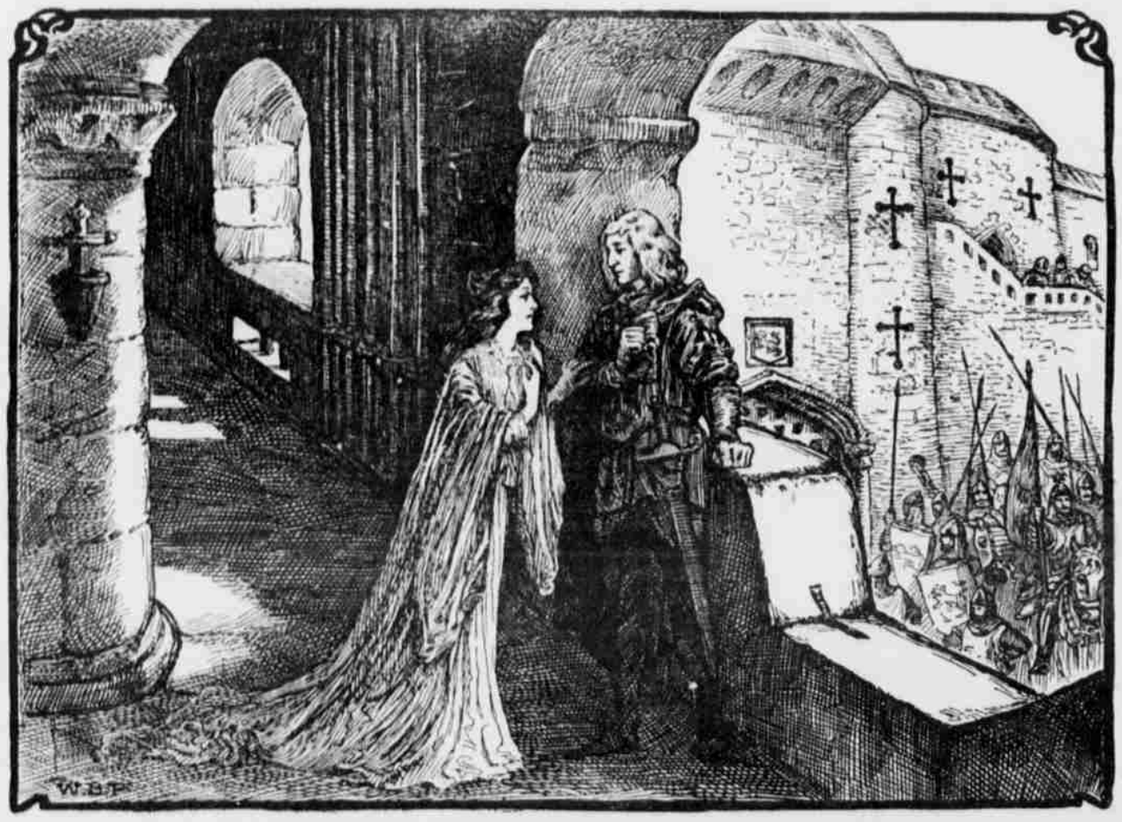
"Alack and alas for the fairest and sweetest!" she cried. "Fair and sweet I would fain be for your dear sake, my lord, but old I am and ugly, and the knights would laugh should you lay lance in rest in such a cause."

"Edricson," quoth Sir Nigel, "you have young eyes, and mine are somewhat bedimmed. Should you chance to see a knight laugh, or smile, or even look, arch his brows, or purse his mouth, or in any way show surprise that I should uphold the Lady Mary, you will take particular note of his name, his coat-armor, and his lodging. Your love, my life's desire!"

The Lady Mary Loring slipped her hand from her yellow leather gauntlet, and he, lifting it with dainty reverence, bound it to the front of his velvet cap.

"It is with mine other guardian angels," quoth he, pointing at the saint's medals which hung beside it. "And now, my dearest, you have come far enough. May the Virgin guard and prosper thee! One kiss!" he bent down from his saddle, and then, striking spurs into his horse's sides, he galloped at top speed after his men, with his three squires at his heels. Half a mile further, where the road topped a hill, they looked back, and the Lady Mary, on her white palfrey, was still where they had left her. A moment later they were on the downward slope, and she had vanished from their view.

(To be Continued Next Week.)



"A HEARTFELT ANSWER WAS ON HER LIPS WHEN A HOARSE SHOUT ROSEUP FROM THE BAILEY BELOW."

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.

The scenes of the story are laid in the 14th century. Hordle John, of the Cistercian Monastery, flees from the Abbey of Beaulieu, guilty of certain serious charges brought against him by a number of the monks. Another of the lay-brethren, Alleyen Edricson, takes his departure in accordance with his father's will, designating that he should, when he became 21, go forth for one year to choose for himself his future calling. In sadness he goes to visit his brother, the Socman of Minstead, whose reputation is unsavory. At night Alleyne seeks a road-side inn, where he meets Hordle John, and Samkin Aylward, an English archer just back from the French wars. Alleyne finds his brother in Minstead woods quarreling with a beautiful damsel. He rescues her, thereby gaining the Socman's enmity. The maiden, learning that he intends to join his companions at Christchurch, where dwells Sir Nigel, leaves him laughingly without telling him her name. He rejoins his companions and they journey to Sir Nigel's home. On seeing the renowned knight, Hordle John is much vexed at his apparent bodily weakness but quickly changes his mind when they have an adventure with a huge bear. Here Alleyne meets his companion of the woods, whom he learns is the daughter of Sir Nigel.