CHAPTER XV.

The Prince with his English and Gascon army moved swiftly southward in battle array and Sir Nigel having recruited his ranks with the two hundred members of the original White Company, from the woods near Montpezard, joined the army and received the honorable commission from the Prince, to push ahead into Spain and discover the location and strength of the Spanish and French army under King Henry of Transtamare. The little band wound through the passes of Navarre and into the rugged land of Spain.

Sir Nigel had with him Sir William Felton, Sir Oliver Buttesthorn, stout old Sir Simon Burley, the Scotch knight errant, the Earl of Angus, and Sir Richard Causton, all accounted among the bravest knights in the army, together with sixty veteran men-at-arms, and three hundred and twenty archers. Spies had been sent out in the morning, and returned after night-fall to say that the King of Spain was encamped some fourteen miles off in the direction of Burgos, having with him twenty thousand horse and forty-five thousand foot. A dry-wood fire had been lit, and round this the leaders crouched, the glare beating upon their rugged faces, while the hardy archers lounged and chatted amid the tethered horses, while they munched their scanty provisions.

"For my part," said Sir Simon Burley, I am of the opinion that we have already done that which we have come for. For do we not now know where the king is, and how great a following he hath, which was the end of our journey."

"True," answered Sir William Felton, "but I have come on this venture because it is a long time since I have broken a spear in war, and, certes, I shall not go back until I have run a course with some cavalier of Spain."

"I will not leave you, Sir William," returned Sir Simon Burley; "and yet, as an old soldier and one who hath seen much of war, I cannot but think that it is an ill thing for four hundred men to find themselves between an ar of sixty thousand on the one side and a broad river on the other."

"Yet," said Sir Richard Causton, "we cannot for the honor of England go back without a blow struck."

"Nor for the honor of Scotland, either," cried the Earl of Angus.

"By Saint Paul! you have spoken very well," said Sir Nigel, "and I have always heard that there were very worthy gentlemen among the Scots, and fine skirmishing to be had upon their border. Bethink you, Sir Simon, that we have this news from the lips of common spies, who can scarce tell us as much of the enemy and of his forces as the prince would wish to hear."

All night they led their horses, stumbling and groping through wild defiles and rugged alleys, following the guidance of a frightened peasant who was strapped by the wrist to Black Simon's stirrup-leather. With the early dawn they found themselves in a dark ravine, with others sloping away from it on either side, and the bare brown crags rising in long bleak terraces all round them.

"If it please you, fair lord," said Black Simon, 'this man hath misled us, and since there is no tree upon which we may hang him, it might be well to hurl him over yonder cliff."

The peasant, reading the soldier's meaning in his fierce eyes and harsh accents dropped upon his knees, screaming loudly for mercy.

"How comes it, dog?" asker Sir William Felton in Spanish, "Where is this camp to which you swore you would lead us?"

"By the sweet Virgin! By the blessed Mother of God!" cried the trembling peasant, " I swear to you that in the darkness I have myself lost the path, I—"At the instant, there rose the scream of a hundred bugles, with the deep rolling of drums and the clashing of cymbals, all sounding together in one deafening uproar. Knights and archers sprang to arms, convinced some great host was upon them; but the guide dropped upon his knees and thanked Heaven for its mercies.

"We have found them caballeros!" he cried. This is their morning call."

As he spoke he scrambled down one of the narrow ravines, and, climbing over a low ridge at the further end, he led them into a short valley with a stream purling down the centre of it, and a very thick growth of elder and box upon either side. Pushing their way through the dense brushwood, they looked upon a scene which made their hearts beat harder and their breath come faster.

In front of them lay a broad plain, watered by two winding streams and covered with grass, stretching away to where, in the furthest distance, the towers of Burgos bristled up against the light blue morning sky. Over all this vast meadow there lay a great city of tents—thousands upon thousands of them, laid out in streets and squares like a well-ordered town. High silken pavilions or colored marquees, shooting up from among the crowd of meaner dwellings, marked where the great lords and barons of Leon and Castile displayed their standards, while over the white roofs, as far as eye could reach, the waving of ancients, pavons, pensils, and banderoles, with flash of gold and glow of colors, proclaimed that all the chivalry of Iberia were mustered in the plain beneath them. Far off, in the centre of the camp, a huge palace of red and white silk, with the royal arms of Castile waving from the summit, announced that the gallant Henry lay there in the midst of his warriors.

As the English adventurers, peeping out from behind their brushwood screen, looked down upon this wondrous sight, they could see that the vast army in front of them was already afoot. The first pink light of the rising sun glittered upon the steel caps and breastplates of dense masses of slingers and crossbowmen, who drilled and marched in the spaces which had been left for their exercise. A thousand columns of smoke reeked up into the pure morning air where the faggots were piled and the camp-kettles already simmering. In the open plain, clouds of light horse galloped and swooped with swaying bodies and waving javelins, after the fashion which the Spanish had adopted from their Moorish enemies. All along by the sedgy banks of the rivers long lines of pages led their masters' chargers down to water, while the knights themselves lounged in gayly-dressed groups about the doors of their pavilions, or rode out, with their falcons upon their wrists and their greyhounds behind them, in quest of quail or leveret.

The leaders sat amongst the boxwood, and took counsel together as to what they should do; while from below there surged up the buzz of voices, the shouting, the neighing of horses, and all the uproar of a great camp.

"What boots it to wait?" said Sir William Felton. "Let us ride down upon their camp before they discover us."

"And so say I, cried the Scottish earl; for they do not know that there is any enemy within thirty long leagues of them."

"For my part," said Sir Simon Burley, "I think that it is madness, for you cannot hope to rout this great army; and where are you to go and what are you to do when they have turned upon you?"

"Nay," said Sir Nigel, "I have a plan by which we may attempt some small deed upon them, and yet, by the help of God, may be able to draw off again; which, as Sir Simon Burley hath said, would be scarce possible in any other way."

"How then, Sir Nigel?" asked several voices.

"We shall lie here all day; for amid this brushwood it is ill for them to see us. Then when evening comes we shall sally out upon them and see if we may not gain some honorable advancement from them. We shall have nightfall to cover us when we draw off so that we may make our way back through the mountains. I would station a score of archers here in the pass, with all our pennons jutting forth from the rocks, and as many nakirs and drums and bugles as we have with us, so that those who follow us in the fading light, may think that the whole army of the prince is upon them, and fear to go further. What think you of my plan, Sir Simon?"

"By my troth! I think very well of it," cried the prudent old commander. If four hundred men must needs run a tilt against sixty thousand, I cannot see how they can do it better or more safely."

"And so say I," cried Felton, heartily. "But I wish the day were over, for it will be an ill thing for us if they chance to light upon us."

The words were scarce out of his mouth when there came a clatter of loose stones, the sharp clink of trotting hoofs, and a dark-faced cavalier, mounted upon a white horse, burst through the bushes and rode swiftly down the valley from the end which was farthest from the Spanish camp. Lightly armed, with his vizor open and a hawk perched upon his left wrist he looked about him with the careless air of a man who is bent wholly upon pleasure, and unconscious of the possibility of danger. Suddenly, nowever, his eyes lit upon the fierce faces which glared out at him from the brushwood. With a cry of terror, he thrust his spurs into his horse's sides, and dashed for the narrow opening of the gorge. For a moment it seemed as though he would have reached it, for he had trampled over or dashed aside the archers who threw themselves in his way; but Hordle John seized him by the foot in his grasp of iron and dragged him from the saddle, while two others caught the frightened horse.

"Ho, ho!" roared the great archer. "How many cows wilt buy my mother, if I set thee free?"

"Hush thy bull's bellowing!" cried Sir Nigel impatiently. "Bring the man here. By St. Paul! it is not the first time that we have met; for, if I mistake not, it is Don Diego Alvarez, who was once at the prince's court."

"It is indeed I," said the Spanish knight, "I trust that I am now the prisoner of some honorable knight or gentleman."

"You are the prisoner of the man who took you, Sir Diego," answered Sir Nigel. "And I may tell you that better men than either you or I have found themselves before now prisoners in the hands of the archers of England."

"What ransom, then, does he demand?" asked the Spaniard.

Big John scratched his red head and grinned in high delight when the question was propounded to him. "Tell him," said he, "that I shall have ten cows and a bull too, if it be but a little one. Also a dress of blue sendall for mother and a red one for Joan; with five acres of pasture-land, two scythes, and a fine new grindstone. Likewise a small house, with stalls for the cows and thirty-six gallons of beer for the thirsty weather."

"Tut, tut," said Sir Nigel, laughing. "All these things may be had for money; and I think, Don Diego, that five thousand crowns is not too much for so renowned a knight."

"It shall be duly paid him."

"For some days we must keep you with us; and I must crave leave also to use your shield, your armor and your horse. I have need of it this day, but it shall be duly returned to you. Set guards, Aylward, with arrow on string, at either end of the pass; for it may happen that some other cavaliers may visit us ere the time be come."

All day the little band of Englishmen lay in the sheltered gorge, looking down upon the vast host of their unconscious enemies. The sun had sunk behind a cloud-bank in the west before Sir Nigel at last gave word that the men should resume their arms and have their horses ready. He had himself thrown off his armor, and had dressed himself from head to foot in the harness of the captured Spaniard.

"Sir William," said he, "it is my opinion to attempt a small deed, and I ask you therefore that you will lead this outfall upon the camp. For me, I will ride into their camp with my squire and two archers. I pray you to watch me, and to ride forth when I am come among the tents. You will leave twenty men behind here, and as we planned this morning, and you will ride back here after you have ventured as far as seems good to you."

"I will do as you order, Nigel; but what is that you propose to do?"

"You will see anon, and indeed it is but a trifling matter. Alleyne, you will come with me, and lead a spare horse by the bridle. I will have the two archers who rode with us through France, for they are trusty men and of stout heart. Let them ride behind us, and let them leave their bows here among the bushes for it is not my wish that they should know that we are Englishmen. Say no word to any whom we may meet, and, if any speak to you, pass on as though you heard them not.

So saying, Sir Nigel mounted the white horse of the Spanish cavalier, and rode quietly forth from his concealment with his three companions behind him. Alleyne leading his master's own steed by the bridle. So many small parties of French and Spanish horse were sweeping hither and thither that the small band attracted little notice, and making its way at a gentle trot across the plain, they came as far as the camp without challenge or hindrance. On and on they pushed past the endless lines of tents, amid the dense swarms of horsemen and of footmen, until the huge royal pavilion stretched in front of them. They were close upon it when of a sudden there broke out a wild hubbub from a distant portion of the camp, with screams and war-cries and all the wild tumult of battle. At the sound soldiers came rushing from their tents, knights shouted loudly for their squires, and there was mad turmoil on every hand of bewildered men and plunging horses. At the royal tent a crowd of gorgeously dressed servants ran hither and thither in helpless panic for the guard of soldiers who were stationed there had already ridden off in the direction of the alarm. A man-at-arms on either side of the doorway were the sole protectors of the royal dwelling.

"I have come for the king," whispered Sir Nigel; "and, by Saint Paul! must back with us or I must bide here."

Alleyne and Aylward sprang from their horses, and flew at the two sentries, who were disarmed and beaten down in an instant by so furious and unexpected an attack. Sir Nigel dashed into the royal tent, and was followed by Hordle John as soon as the horses had been secured. From within came wild screamings and the clash of steel, and then the two emerged once more, their swords and forearms reddened with blood, while John bore over his shoulder the senseless body of a man whose gray surcoat, adorned with the lions and towers of Castile, proclaimed him to belong to the royal house. A crowd of white-faced sewers and pages swarmed at their heels, those behind pushing forwards, while the foremost shrank back from the fierce faces and reeking weapons of the adventurers. The senseless body was thrown across the spare horse, the four sprang to their saddles, and away they thundered with loose reins and busy spurs through the swarming camp.

But confusion and disorder still reigned among the Spaniards, for Sir William Felton and his men had swept through half their camp, leaving a long litter of the dead and dying to mark their course. Uncertain who were their attackers, and unable to tell their English enemies from their newly-arrived Breton allies, the Spanish knights rode wildly hither and thither in aimless fury. The mad turmoil, the mixture of races, and the fading light, were all in favor of the four who alone knew their own purpose among the vast uncertain multitude. Another five minutes of wild galloping over the plain, and they were all back in their gorge, while their pursuers fell back before the rolling of the English drums and blare of trumpets, which seemed to proclaim that the whole army of the prince was about to emerge from the mountain passes.

"By my soul! Nigel," cried Sir Oliver, "what have we here?"

"It is a prisoner whom I have taken, and in sooth, as he came from the royal tent and wears the royal arms upon his jupon, I trust that he is the King of Spain."

"The King of Spain!" cried the companions, crowding round in amazement.

"Nay, Sir Nigel," said Felton, peering at the prisoner through the uncertain light. "I have twice seen Henry of Transtamare, and certes this man in no way resembles him.

"Who are you, fellow?" he added in Spanish, "and how is it that you dare to wear the arms of Castile?"

The prisoner was but recovering the consciousness which had been squeezed from him by the grip of Hordle John. "If it please you," he answered, "I and nine others are the body-squires of the king, and must ever wear his arms, so as to shield him from even such perils as have threatened him this night. The king is at the tent of the brave Du Guesclin, where he will sup to night. But I am a caballero of Aragon, Don Sancho Penelosa, and, though I be no king, I am yet ready to pay a fitting price for my ransom."

"By Saint Paul! I will not touch your gold," cried Sir Nigel. "Go back to your master and give him greeting from Sir Nigel Loring of Twynham Castle, telling him that I had hoped to make his better acquaintance this night, and that, if I have disordered his tent, it was but in my eagerness to know so famed and courteous a knight. Spur on, comrades! for we must cover many a league ere we can venture to light fire or to loosen girth.

CHAPTER XVI.

It was a cold, bleak morning in the beginning of March, and the mist was drifting in dense rolling clouds through the passes of the Cantabrian mountains. The Company had passed the night in a sheltered gully. Here and there, through the dense haze which surrounded them, there loomed out huge pinnacles and jutting boulders of rock: while high above the sea of vapor there towered up one gigantic peak, with the pink glow of the early sunshine upon its snow-capped head.

The camp was loud with laughter and merriment, for a messenger had ridden in from the prince with words of heart-stirring praise for what they had done, and with orders that they should still abide in the forefront of the army.

"The Lord Loring craves your attendance in his tent," said a young archer to Alleyne.

The squire found the knight seated upon a cushion, with his legs crossed in front of him and a broad ribbon of parchment laid across his knees, over which he was poring with frowning brows and pursed lips.

"It came this morning by the prince's messenger," said he, "and was brought from England by Sir John Fallslee, who is new come from Sussex."

Alleyne turned to the letter, and, as his eyes rested upon it, his face turned pale and a cry of surprise and grief burst from his lips.

"What then?" asked the knight, peering up at him anxiously. "There is nought amiss with the Lady Mary or with the Lady Maude?"

"It is my brother—my poor unhappy brother!" cried Alleyne, with his hand to his brow. "He is dead."

"By Saint Paul! I have never heard that he had shown so much love for you that you should mourn him so."

"Yet he was my brother—the only kith or kin that I had upon earth. Alas! alas! He has been slain—and slain, I fear, amidst crime and violence."

"Ha!" said Sir Nigel. "Read on, I pray you."

"God be with thee, my honored lord, and have thee in his holy keeping. The Lady Loring hath asked me, the priest, so set down in writing what hath befallen at Twynham, and all that concerns the death of thy ill neighbor the Soeman of Minstead. For when ye had left us, this evil man gathered around him all outlaws, villeins, and masterless men, until they were come to such a force that they slew and scattered the king's men who went against them. Then, coming forth from the woods, they laid siege to thy castle, and for two days they girt us in and shot hard against us, with such numbers as were a marvel to see. Yet the Lady Loring held the place stoutly, and on the second day the Soeman was slain—by his own men, some think—so that we were delivered from their hands; for which praise be to all the saints, and more especially to the holy Anselm, upon whose feast it came to pass. The Lady Loring and the Lady Maude, thy fair daughter, are in good health. May all the saints preserve thee!"

"My fair lord," said Alleyne, with a flush on his weather-stained cheeks, "I love your daughter, the Lady Maude; and, unworthy as I am, I would give my heart's blood to serve her."

"By St. Paul! Edricson," said the knight coldly, arching his eyebrows, "you aim high in this matter. Our blood is very old."

"And mine also is very old," answered the squire.

"And the Lady Maude is our single child. All our name and lands center upon her."

"Alas! that I should say it, but I also am now the only Edricson."

"And why have I not heard this from you before, Alleyne? In sooth, I think you have used me ill."

"Nay, my fair lord, say not so; for I know not whether your daughter loves me, and there is no pledge between us."

Sir Nigel pondered for a few moments, and then burst out a-laughing. "By St. Paul!" said he, "I know not why I should mix in the matter; for I have ever found that the Lady Maude vas very well able to look to her own affairs. Since first she could stamp her little foot, she hath ever been able to get that for which she craved; and if she set her heart on thee, Alleyne, and thou on her, I do not think that this Spanish king, with his three-score thousand men, could hold you apart. Yet this I will say, that I would see you a full knight ere you go to my daughter with words of love. I have ever said that a brave lance should wed her; and, by my soul! Edricson, if God spare you, I think that you will acquit yourself well. But enough of such trifles, for we have our work before us, and it will be time to speak of this matter when we see the white cliffs of England once more. Go to Sir William Felton, I pray you, and ask him to come hither, for it is time that we were marching. There is no pass at the further end of the valley, and it is a perilous place should an enemy come upon us."

Alleyne delivered his message, and then wandered forth from the camp, for his mind was all in a whirl with this unexpected news, and with his talk with Sir Nigel. Sitting upon a rock, with his burning brow resting upon his hands, he thought of his brother, of their quarrel, of the Lady Maude in her bedraggled riding-dress, of the gray old castle, of the proud pale face in the armory, and of the last fiery words with which she had sped him on his way. Then he was but a penniless, monk-bred lad, unknown and unfriended. Now he was himself Soeman of Minstead, the head of an old stock, and the Lord of an estate which, if reduced from its former size, was still ample to preserve the dignity of his family. Further, he had become a man of experience was counted brave among men, had won the esteem and confidence of her father, and above all, has been listened to by him when he told him the secret of his love. As to the gaining of knighthood, in such stirring times it was no great matter for a brave squire of gentle birth to aspire to that honor. He would leave his bones among these Spanish ravines, or he would do some deed which would call the eyes of men upon him.

Alleyne was still seated on the rock, his griefs and his joys drifting swiftly over his mind like the shadow of clouds upon a sunlit meadow, when of a sudden he became conscious of a low, deep sound which came booming up to him through the fog. He shouted an alarm to the camp.

"It is a great body of horse," said Sir William Felton, "and they are riding very swiftly hitherwards."

The Company stood peering into the dense fog wreath, amidst a silence so profound that the dripping of the water from the rocks and the breathing of the horses grew loud upon the ear. Suddenly from out the sea of mist came the sound of a neigh, followed by a long blast of a bugle.

"It is a Spanish call, my fair lord," said Black Simon.

"By my faith, said Sir Nigel, smiling, "we may promise them some sport ere they sound the mort over us. But there is a hill in the center of the gorge upon which we might make our stand."

"I marked it yester night," said Felton, "and no better spot could be found for our purpose, for it is very steep at the back."

The whole Company, leading their horses, passed across to the small hill which loomed up from the mist. It was indeed admirably designed for defence, for it sloped down in front, all jagged and boulder strewn, while it fell away behind in a sheer cliff of a hundred feet or more. On the summit was a small, uneven plateau, with a stretch across of a hundred paces, and a depth of half as much again.

"Unloose the horses," said Sir Nigel. "Now order the ranks, and fling wide the banners, for our souls are God's and our bodies the king's, and our swords for Saint George and for England!"

Sir Nigel had scarcely spoken when the mist seemed to thin in the valley, and to shred away into long ragged clouds which trailed from the edges of the cliffs, and the sun broke through. It gleamed and shimmered with dazzling brightness upon the armor and headpieces of a vast body of horsemen who stretched across the barranca from one cliff to the other, and extended backwards until their rear-guard were far out upon the plain beyond. Line after line, and rank after rank, they chocked the neck of the valley with a long vista of tossing pennons, twinkling lances, waving plumes and streaming banderoles, while the curvets and gambades of the chargers lent a constant motion and shimmer to the glittering, many-colored mass. A yell of exultation, and a forest of waving steel through the length and breadth of their column, announced that they could at last see their entrapped enemies, while the swelling notes of a hundred bugles and drums, mixed with the clash of Moorish cymbals, broke forth into a proud peal of martial triumph. Strange it was to these gallant and sparkling cavaliers of Spain to look upon this handful of men upon the hill, the thin lines of bowmen, the knots of knights and men-at-arms with armor rusted and discolored from long service, and to learn that these were indeed the soldiers whose fame and prowess had been the camp-fire talk of every army in Christendom. Very still and silent they stood, leaning upon their bows, while their leaders took counsel together in front of them. No clang of bugle rose from their stern rank, but in the center waved the leopards of England, on the right the ensign of their Company with the roses of Loring, and on the left over three score of Welsh bowman, there floated the red banner of Merlin with the red-boar's heads of the Buttesthorns. Gravely and sedately they stood before the morning sun, waiting for the onslaught of their foemen.

"By Saint Paul," said Sir Nigel, gazing with puckered eye down the valley, "there appear to be some very worthy people among them. What is this golden banner which waves over the left?"

"It is the ensign of the Knights of Calatrava" answered Felton.

"And the one upon the right?"

"It marks the Knights of Santiago and I see by the banner that the grand master rides at their head."

"You are right, for I can also see them. There is much Spanish blazonry also if I could but read it. Don Diego, you know the arms of your own country, and who are they who have done us so much honor?"

The Spanish prisoner looked with exultant eyes upon the deep and serried ranks of his countrymen.

"By Saint James" he said, "if ye fail this day, ye fall by no mean hands for the flower of the army of Castile ride under the banner of Don Tello, with the chivalry of Asturias, Toledo, Leon, Cordova, Galicia and Seville and the knights of France and Aragon. If you will take my rede, you will come to a composition with them, for they will give you such terms as you have given me."

"Nay, by Saint Paul, it were pity if so many brave men, were drawn together and no little deed of arms come of it. Ha! William, they advance upon us, and by my soul it is a sight worth coming over the seas to witness."

As he spoke the two wings of the Spanish host, consisting of the Knights of Calatrava on the one side and of Santiago on the other , came swooping swiftly down the valley, while the main body followed more slowly behind. The vanguard halted a long bow-shot from the hill, and with waving spears and vaunting shouts challenged their enemies to come forth, while two cavaliers, pricking forward from the glittering ranks, walked their horses slowly between the two arrays with targets braced and lances in rest like the challengers in a tourney.

"By Saint Paul!" cried Sir Nigel, with his eye glowing like an ember, "these appear to be two very worthy and debonair gentlemen. I do not call to mind when I have seen any people who seemed of so great a heart and so high of enterprise. We have our horses, Sir William: shall be not relieve them of any vow which they may have upon their souls?"

Felton's reply was to bound upon his charger, and to urge it down the slope, while Sir Nigel followed not three spear's-lengths behind him. It was a rugged course, rocky and uneven, yet the two knights, choosing their men, dashed onwards at the top of their speed, while the gallant Spaniards flew as swiftly to meet them. The one to whom Felton found himself opposed was a tall stripling with a stag's head upon his shield, while Sir Nigel's man was broad and squat, with plain steel harness, and a pink and white torse bound round his helmet. The first struck Felton on the target with such force as to split it from side to side, but Sir William's lance crashed through the camail which shielded the Spaniard's throat, and he fell, screaming hoarsely, to the ground. Carried away by the heat and madness of fight, the English knight never drew rein, but charged straight on into the array of the Knights of Calatrava. Long time the silent ranks upon the hill could see a swirl and eddy deep down in the heart of the Spanish column, with a circle of rearing chargers and flashing blades. Here and there tossed the white plume of the English helmet, rising and falling like the foam upon a wave, with the fierce gleam and sparkle ever circling round it, until at last it had sunk from view, and another brave man had turned war to peace.

Sir Nigel, meanwhile, had found a foeman worthy of his steel, for his opponent was none other than Sebastian Gomez, the picked lance of the monkish Knights of Santiago, who had won fame in a hundred bloody combats with the Moors of Andalusia. So fierce was their meeting that their spears shivered up to the very grasp, and the horses reared backwards until it seemed that they must crash down upon their riders. Yet with consummate horsemanship they both swung round in a long curvet, and then plucking out their swords they lashed at each other like two lusty smiths hammering upon their anvil. The chargers spun round each others, biting and striking, while the two blades wheeled and whizzed and circled in gleams of dazzling light. Cut, parry, and thrust followed so swiftly upon each others that the eye could not follow them, until at last coming thigh to thigh, they cast their arms around each other and rolled off their saddles to the ground. The heavier Spaniard threw himself upon his enemy, and pinning him down beneath him raised his sword to slay him, while a shout of triumph rose from the ranks of his countrymen. But the fatal blow never fell, for even as his arm quivered before descending, the Spaniard gave a shudder, and stiffening himself, rolled heavily over upon his side, with the blood gushing from his arm-pit and from the slit of his vizor. Sir Nigel sprang to his feet with his bloody dagger in his left hand and gazed down upon his adversary, but the fatal and sudden stab in the vital spot, which the Spaniard had exposed by raising his arm, had proved instantly mortal. The Englishman leaped upon his horse and made for the hill, at the very instant that a yell of rage from a thousand voices and the clang of a score of bugles announced the Spanish onset.

CHAPTER XVII.

But the islanders were ready and eager for the encounter. With feet firmly planted, their sleeves rolled back to give free play to their muscles, their long yellow bow-staves in their left hands, and their quivers slung to the front, they had waited in the four-deep harrow formation which gave strength to their array, and yet permitted every man to draw his arrow freely without harm to those in front.

On swept the Spaniards, over the level and up to the slope, ere they met the blinding storm of the English arrows. Down went the whole ranks in a whirl of mad confusion, horses plunging and kicking, bewildered men falling, rising, staggering on or back, while ever new lines of horsemen came spurring through the gaps and urged their chargers up the fatal slope. All around him, Alleyne could hear the stern, short orders of the master-bowmen, while the air was filled with the keen twanging of the strings and the swish and patter of the shafts. Right across the foot of the hill there had sprung up a long wall of struggling horses and stricken men, which ever grew and heightened as fresh squadrons poured on the attack. So for five long minutes the gallant horsemen of Spain and of France strove ever and again to force a passage, until the low wailing note of a bugle called them back, and they rode slowly out of bow-shot, leaving their best and their bravest in the ghastly, blood-mottled heap behind them.

But there was little rest for the victors. Whilst the knights had charged them in front, the slingers had crept round upon either flank and had gained a footing upon the cliffs and behind the outlying rocks. A storm of stones broke suddenly upon the defenders, who, drawn up in lines upon the exposed summit, offered a fair mark to their hidden foes. Johnston, the old archer, was struck upon the temple and fell dead without a groan, while fifteen of his bowmen and six of the men-at-arms were struck down at the same moment. The others lay on their faces to avoid the deadly hail, while at each side of the plateau a fringe of bowmen exchanged shots with the slingers and crossbowmen among the rocks, aiming mainly at those who had swarmed up the cliffs and bursting into laughter and cheers when a well-aimed shaft brought one of their opponents toppling down from his lofty perch.

"By Saint Paul!" quoth Sir Nigel, plucking the patch from his eye, "I think that I am now clear of my vow, for this Spanish knight was a person from whom much honor might be won. Indeed, he was a very worthy gentleman, of good courage, and great hardiness, and it grieves me that he should have come by such a hurt."

"Nigel!" cried Sir Simon Burley, ling up with consternation upon his "Aylward tells me that there are ten score arrows left in all their See! they are springing from their and cutting their sollerets that they rush upon us. Might we not even make a retreat?"

"My soul will retreat from my first!" cried the little knight. "Here am, and here I bide, while God gives strength to lift a sword."

"And so say I!" shouted Sir throwing his mace high into the air catching it again by the handle.

"To your arms, men!" cried Sir "Shoot while you may and then out and let us live or die together!"

Then uprose from the hill in the Calabrian valley a sound such as has been heard in those parts before, nor again, until the streams which amid the rocks had been frozen by four hundred winters and thawed by many returning springs. Deep and and strong it thundered down the the fierce battle-call of a warrior race, last stern welcome to who so should with them in that world-old game the stake is death. Thrice it swelled and thrice it sank away, echoing and verberating amidst the crags. Then set faces, the Company rose up among storm of stones, and looked down upon thousands who sped swiftly up the against them. Horse and spear had set aside, but on foot, with sword and tle-axe, their broad shields slung in of them, the chivalry of Spain rushed the attack.

And now arose a struggle so fell, so so evenly sustained, that even now memory of it is handed down amongst Calabrian mountaineers, and the ill-ed knoll is still pointed out by fathers their children as the "Altura de los sos," where the men from across the fought the great fight with the of the south. The last arrow was shot, nor could the slingers hurl stones, so close were friend and foe. side to side stretched the thin line of English, lightly armed and quick-while against it stormed and raged pressing throng of fiery Spaniards and gallant Bretons. The clink of sword-blades, the dull thudding of blows, the panting and gasping of and wounded men, all rose together a wild, long-drawn note, which upwards to the ears of the wondering peasants who looked down from the of the cliffs upon the swaying turmoil the battle beneath them. Back and ward reeled the leopard banner, borne up the slope by the rush weight of the onslaught, now downwards again as Sir Nigel, and Black Simon, with their veteran at-arms, flung themselves madly into fray. Alleyne, at his lord's right found himself swept hither and thither the desperate struggle, exchanging thrusts one instant with a Spanish lier, and the next torn away by the of men and dashed up against some antagonist. To the right Sir Oliver, ward, Hordle John, and the bowmen the Company fought furiously against monkish Knights of Santiago, who led up the hill by their prior—a great-chested man, who wore a brown habit over his suit of mail. Three he slew in three giant strokes, but Oliver flung his arms round him, and two, staggering and straining, reeled wards and fell, locked in each grasp, over the edge of the steep which flanked the hill. In vain his stormed and raved against the thin which marred their path; the sweet Aylward and the great axe of John ed in the forefront of the battle and jagged pieces of rock, hurled by strong arms of the bowmen, crashed hurtled amid their ranks. Slowly gave back down the hill, the archers hanging upon their skirts, with a litter of writhing and twisted figures mark the course which they had At the same instant the Welshmen the left, led on by the Scotch earl, charged out from among the rocks sheltered them, and by the fury of outfall had driven the Spaniards in of them in headlong flight down the In the centre only things seemed going ill with the defenders. Black was down—dying, as he would wish to died, like a grim old wolf in its lair a ring of his slain around him. Twice Nigel had been overborne, and twice leyne had fought over him until he staggered to his feet once more. Bray senseless, stunned by a blow from mace, and half of the men-at-arms littered upon the ground around him. Nigel's shield was broken, his crest his armor cut and smashed, and the torn from his helmet; yet he sprang and thither with light foot and hand, engaging two Bretons and a Spaniard at the same instant thrusting, ing, dashing in, springing out—while leyne still fought by his side, with a handful of men the fierce which surged up against them. Yet would have fared ill with them had the archers from either side closed in the flanks of the attackers, and them very slowly and foot by foot the long slope, until they were on plain once more, where their fellows already rallying for a fresh assault.

But terrible indeed was the cost which the last had been repelled. Of three hundred and seventy men who held the crest, one hundred and seven two were left standing, many of were sorely wounded and weak from of blood. Sir Oliver Buttesthorn, Richard Causton, Sir Simon Burley, Sir Simon, Johnston, a hundred and archers, and forty-seven men-at-arms fallen, while the pitiless hail of was already whizzing and piping once about their ears, threatening every stant to further reduce their number

Sir Nigel looked about him at his tered ranks, and his face flushed with soldier's pride.

"By St. Paul!" he cried, "I have in many a little bickering, but never that I would be more loth to have than this. But you are wounded, Alleyne

"It is nought," answered his stanching the blood which dripped a sword-cut across his forehead.

"These gentlemen of Spain seem most courteous and worthy people. I that they are already forming to this debate with us. Form up the two deep instead of four. By my some very brave men have gone among us. Aylward, you are a trusty dier, for all that your shoulder has felt accolade, nor your heels worn gold spurs. Do you take charge of right; I will hold the center, and you, Lord of Angus, the left."

"Ho! for Sir Samkin Aylward!" a rough voice among the archers, and roar of laughter greeted their new

"By my hilt!" said the old bowman, never thought to lead a wing in a en field. Stand close, camarades, for these finger-bones! we must play the this day."

"Come hither, Alleyne," said Sir walking back to the edge of the which formed the rear of their "And you, Norbury," he continued, oning to the squire of Sir Oliver, also come here."

The two squires hurried across to and the three stood looking down the rocky ravine which lay a hundred fifty feet beneath them.

"The prince must hear of how are with us," said the knight. er onfall we may withstand, but they many and we are few, so that the must come when we can no longer line across the hill. Yet if help brought us we might hold the crest comes. See yonder horses which among the rocks beneath us?"

"I see them my fair lord."

"And see yonder path which winds the hill upon the further valley?"

"I see it."

"Were you on those horses, and