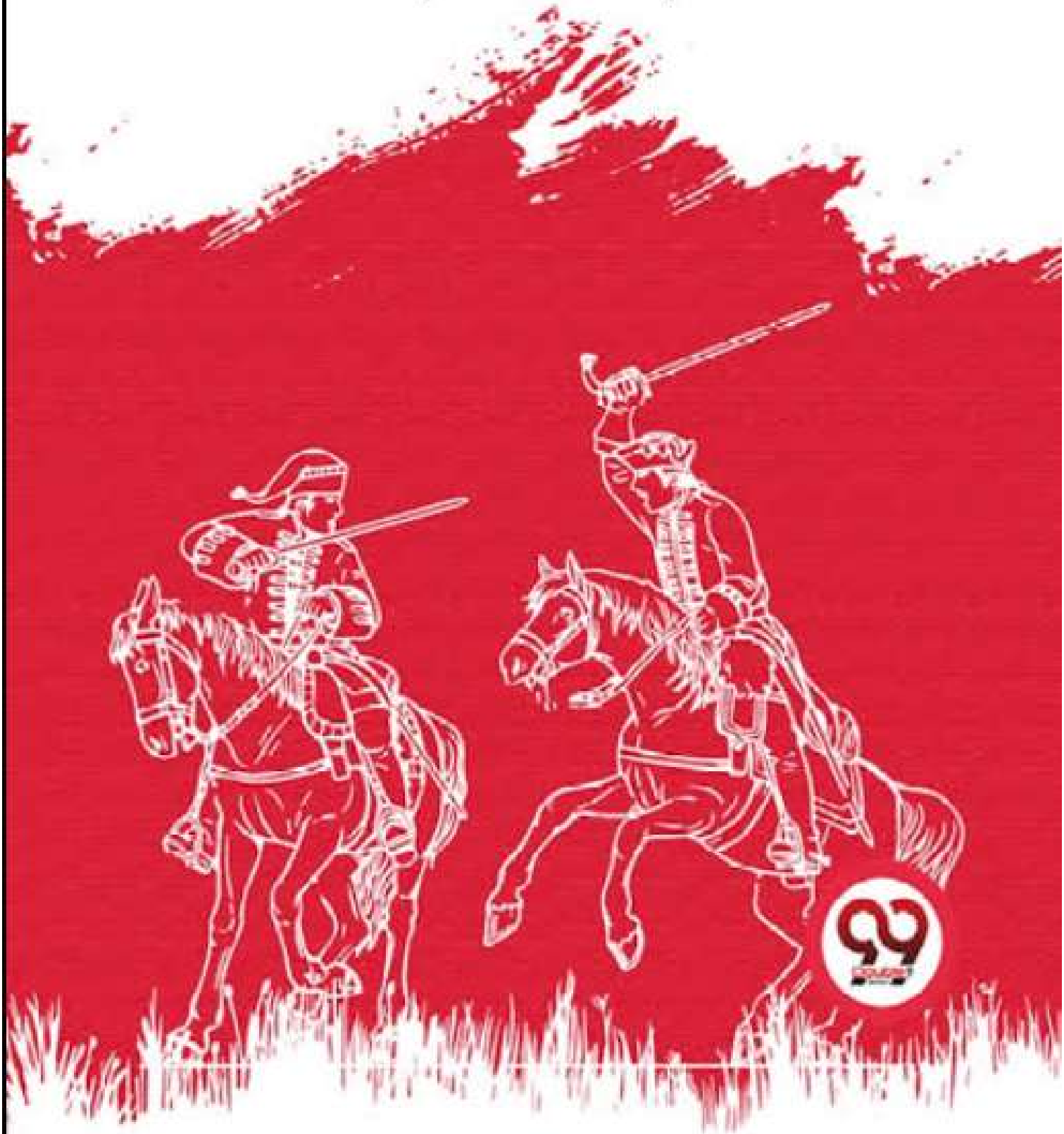
St. George For England

By G. A. Henty



CHAPTER I: A WAYFARER

It was a bitterly cold night in the month of November, 1330. The rain was pouring heavily, when a woman, with child in her arms, entered the little village of Southwark. She had evidently come from a distance, for her dress was travel-stained and muddy. She tottered rather than walked, and when, upon her arrival at the gateway on the southern side of London Bridge, she found that the hour was past and the gates closed for the night, she leant against the wall with a faint groan of exhaustion and disappointment.

After remaining, as if in doubt, for some time, she feebly made her way into the village. Here were many houses of entertainment, for travelers like herself often arrived too late to enter the gates, and had to abide outside for the night. Moreover, house rent was dear within the walls of the crowded city, and many, whose business brought them to town, found it cheaper to take up their abode in the quiet hostels of Southwark rather than to stay in the more expensive inns within the walls. The lights came out brightly from many of the casements, with sounds of boisterous songs and laughter. The woman passed these without a pause. Presently she stopped before a cottage, from which a feeble light alone showed that it was tenanted.

She knocked at the door. It was opened by a pleasant-faced man of some thirty years old.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I am a wayfarer," the woman answered feebly. "Canst take me and my child in for the night?"

"You have made a mistake," the man said; "this is no inn. Further up the road there are plenty of places where you can find such accommodation as you lack."

"I have passed them," the woman said, "but all seemed full of roisterers. I am wet and weary, and my strength is nigh spent. I can pay thee, good fellow, and I pray you as a Christian to let me come in and sleep before your fire for the night. When the gates are open in the morning I will go; for I have a friend within the city who will, methinks, receive me."

The tone of voice, and the addressing of himself as good fellow, at once convinced the man that the woman before him was no common wayfarer.

"Come in," he said; "Geoffrey Ward is not a man to shut his doors in a woman's face on a night like this, nor does he need payment for such small hospitality. Come hither, Madge!" he shouted; and at his voice a woman came down from the upper chamber. "Sister," he said; "this is a wayfarer who needs shelter for the night; she is wet and weary. Do you take her up to your room and lend her some dry clothing; then make her a cup of warm posset, which she needs sorely. I will fetch an armful of fresh rushes from the shed and strew them here: I will sleep in the smithy. Quick, girl," he said sharply; "she is fainting with cold and fatigue." And as he spoke he caught the woman as she was about to fall, and laid her gently on the ground. "She is of better station than she seems," he said to his sister; "like enough some poor lady whose husband has taken part in the troubles; but that is no business of ours. Quick, Madge, and get these wet things off her; she is soaked to the skin. I will go round to the Green Dragon and will fetch a cup of warm cordial, which I warrant me will put fresh life into her."

So saying, he took down his flat cap from its peg on the wall and went out, while his sister at once proceeded to remove the drenched garments and to rub the cold hands of the guest until she recovered consciousness. When Geoffrey Ward returned, the woman was sitting in a settle by the fireside, dressed in a warm woolen garment belonging to his sister.

Madge had thrown fresh wood on the fire, which was blazing brightly now. The woman drank the steaming beverage which her host brought with him. The colour came faintly again into her cheeks.

"I thank you, indeed," she said, "for your kindness. Had you not taken me in I think I would have died at your door, for indeed I could go no further; and though I hold not to life, yet would I fain live until I have delivered my boy into the hands of those who will be kind to him, and this will, I trust, be tomorrow."

"Say nought about it," Geoffrey answered; "Madge and I are right glad to have been of service to you. It would be a poor world indeed if one could not give a corner of one's fireside to a fellow-creature on such a night as this, especially when that fellow creature is a woman with a child. Poor little chap! He looks right well and sturdy, and seems to have taken no ill from his journey."

"Truly, he is well and sturdy," the mother said, looking at him proudly; "indeed I have been almost wishing today that he were lighter by a few pounds, for in truth I am not used to carry him far, and his weight has sorely tried me. His name is Walter, and I trust," she added, looking at the powerful figure of her host, "that he will grow up as straight and as stalwart as yourself." The child, who was about three years old, was indeed an exceedingly fine little fellow, as he sat, in one scanty garment, in his mother's lap, gazing with round eyes at the blazing fire; and the smith thought how pretty a picture the child and mother made. She was a fair, gentle-looking girl some two-and-twenty years old, and it was easy enough to see now from her delicate features and soft shapely hands that she had never been accustomed to toil.

"And now," the smith said, "I will e'en say good night. The hour is late, and I shall be having the watch coming along to know why I keep a fire so long after the curfew. Should you be a stranger in the city, I will gladly act as your guide in the morning to the friends whom you seek, that is, should they be known to me; but if not, we shall doubtless find them without difficulty."

So saying, the smith retired to his bed of rushes in the smithy, and soon afterwards the tired visitor, with her baby, lay down on the rushes in front of the fire, for in those days none of the working or artisan class used beds, which were not indeed, for centuries afterwards, in usage by the common people.

In the morning Geoffrey Ward found that his guest desired to find one Giles Fletcher, a maker of bows.

"I know him well," the smith said. "There are many who do a larger business, and hold their heads higher; but Giles Fletcher is well esteemed as a good workman, whose wares can be depended upon. It is often said of him that did he take less pains he would thrive more; but he handles each bow that he makes as if he loved it, and finishes and polishes each with his own hand. Therefore he doeth not so much trade as those who are less particular with their wares, for he hath to charge a high price to be able to live. But none who have ever bought his bows have regretted the silver which they cost. Many and many a gross of arrowheads have I sold him, and he is well-nigh as particular in their make as he is over the spring and temper of his own bows. Many a friendly wrangle have I had with him over their weight and finish, and it is not many who find fault with my handiwork, though I say it myself; and now, madam, I am at your service."

During the night the wayfarer's clothes had been dried. The cloak was of rough quality, such as might have been used by a peasant woman; but the rest, though of sombre colour, were of good material and fashion. Seeing that her kind entertainers would be hurt by the offer of money, the lady contented herself with thanking Madge warmly, and saying that she hoped to come across the bridge one day with Dame Fletcher; then, under the guidance of Geoffrey, who insisted on carrying the boy, she set out from the smith's cottage. They passed under the outer gate and across the bridge, which later on was covered with a double line of houses and shops, but was now a narrow structure. Over the gateway across the river, upon pikes, were a number of heads and human limbs. The lady shuddered as she looked up.

"It is an ugly sight," the smith said, "and I can see no warrant for such exposure of the dead. There are the heads of Wallace, of three of Robert Bruce's brothers, and of many other valiant Scotsmen who fought against the king's grandfather some twenty years back. But after all they fought for their country, just as Harold and our ancestors against the Normans under William, and I think it a foul shame that men who have done no other harm should be beheaded, still less that their heads and limbs should be stuck up there gibbering at all passers-by. There are over a score of them, and every fresh trouble adds to their number; but pardon me," he said suddenly as a sob from the figure by his side called his attention from the heads on the top of the gateway, "I am rough and heedless in speech, as my sister Madge does often tell me, and it may well be that I have said something which wounded you."

"You meant no ill," the lady replied; "it was my own thoughts and troubles which drew tears from me; say not more about it, I pray you."

They passed under the gateway, with its ghastly burden, and were soon in the crowded streets of London. High overhead the houses extended, each story advancing beyond that below it until the occupiers of the attics could well-nigh shake hands across. They soon left the more crowded streets, and turning to the right, after ten minutes walking, the smith stopped in front of a bowyer shop near Aldgate.

"This is the shop," he said, "and there is Giles Fletcher himself trying the spring and pull of one of his bows. Here I will leave you, and will one of these days return to inquire if your health has taken ought of harm by the rough buffeting of the storm of yester-even."

So saying he handed the child to its mother, and with a wave of the hand took his leave, not waiting to listen to the renewed thanks which his late guest endeavoured to give him.

The shop was open in front, a projecting penthouse sheltered it from the weather; two or three bows lay upon a wide shelf in front, and several large sheaves of arrows tied together stood by the wall. A powerful man of some forty years old was standing in the middle of the shop with a bent bow in his arm, taking aim at a spot in the wall. Through an open door three men could be seen in an inner workshop cutting and shaping the wood for bows. The bowyer looked round as his visitor entered the shop, and then, with a sudden exclamation, lowered the bow.

"Hush, Giles!" the lady exclaimed; "it is I, but name no names; it were best that none knew me here."

The craftsman closed the door of communication into the inner room. "My Lady Alice," he exclaimed in a low tone, "you here, and in such a guise?"

"Surely it is I," the lady sighed, "although sometimes I am well-nigh inclined to ask myself whether it be truly I or not, or whether this be not all a dreadful dream."

"I had heard but vaguely of your troubles," Giles Fletcher said, "but hoped that the rumours were false. Ever since the Duke of Kent was executed the air has been full of rumours. Then came news of the killing of Mortimer and of the imprisonment of the king's mother, and it was said that many who were thought to be of her party had been attacked and slain, and I heard—" and there he stopped.

CHAPTER II: THE HUT IN THE MARSHES

A week later a party of knights and court gallants, riding across the fields without the walls, checked their horses to look at a struggle which was going on between two parties of boys. One, which was apparently the most powerful, had driven the other off from a heap of rubbish which had been carried without the walls. Each party had a flag attached to a stick, and the boys were armed with clubs such as those carried by the apprentice boys. Many of them carried mimic shields made of wood, and had stuffed their flat caps with wool or shavings, the better to protect their heads from blows. The smaller party had just been driven from the heap, and their leader was urging them to make another effort to regain it.

"That is a gallant-looking lad, and a sturdy, my Lord de Vaux," a boy of about ten years of age said. "He bears himself like a young knight, and he has had some hard knocks, for, see, the blood is streaming down his face. One would scarcely expect to see these varlets of the city playing so roughly."

"The citizens have proved themselves sturdy fighters before now, my prince," the other said; "they are ever independent, and hold to their rights even against the king. The contingent which the city sends to the wars bears itself as well as those of any of the barons."

"See!" the boy interrupted, "they are going to charge again. Their leader has himself seized the flag and has swung his shield behind him, just as a knight might do if leading the stormers against a place of strength. Let us stop till we see the end of it."

With a shout of "Aldgate! Aldgate!" the leader of the assailants dashed forward, followed by his comrades, and with a rush reached the top of the heap.

"Well done!" the young prince exclaimed, clapping his hands. "See how he lays about him with that club of his. There, he has knocked down the leader of the defenders as if his club had been a battle-axe. Well done, young sir, well done! But his followers waver. The others are too strong for them. Stand, you cowards, rally round your leader!" and in his enthusiasm the young prince urged his horse forward to the scene of conflict.

But the assailants were mastered; few of them could gain the top of the heap, and those who did so were beaten back from it by the defenders. Heavy blows were exchanged, and blood flowed freely from many of their heads and faces, for in those days boys thought less than they do now of hard knocks, and manliness and courage were considered the first of virtues. Their leader, however, still stood his ground on the crest, though hardly pressed on all sides, and used his club both to strike and parry with a skill which aroused the warmest admiration on the part of the prince. In vain his followers attempted to come to his rescue; each time they struggled up the heap they were beaten back again by those on the crest.

"Yield thee prisoner," the assailants of their leader shouted, and the prince in his excitement echoed the cry. The lad, however, heard or heeded them not. He still kept his flag aloft in his left hand. With a sudden spring he struck down one of his opponents, plucked up their flag from the ground, and then fought his way back through his foes to the edge of the battleground; then a heavy blow struck him on the temple, and, still holding the flags, he rolled senseless to the foot of the heap. The defenders with shouts of triumph were rushing down when the prince urged his horse forward.

"Cease!" he said authoritatively. "Enough has been done, my young masters, and the sport is becoming a broil."

Hitherto the lads, absorbed in their strife, had paid but little heed to the party of onlookers; but at the word they at once arrested their arms, and, baring their heads, stood still in confusion.

"No harm is done," the prince said, "though your sport is of the roughest; but I fear that your leader is hurt, he moves not; lift his head from the ground." The boy was indeed still insensible. "My lords," the prince said to the knights who had now ridden up, "I fear that this boy is badly hurt; he is a gallant lad, and has the spirit of a true knight in him, citizen's son though he be. My Lord de Vaux, will you bid your squire ride at full speed to the Tower and tell Master Roger, the leech, to come here with all haste, and to bring such nostrums as may be needful for restoring the boy to life."

The Tower was but half a mile distant, but before Master Roger arrived Walter had already recovered consciousness, and was just sitting up when the leech hurried up to the spot.

"You have arrived too late, Master Roger," the prince said; "but I doubt not that a dose of cordials may yet be of use, for he is still dazed, and the blow he got would have cracked his skull had it been a thin one."

The leech poured some cordial from a vial into a small silver cup and held it to the boy's lips. It was potent and nigh took his breath away; but when he had drunk it he struggled to his feet, looking ashamed and confused when he saw himself the centre of attention of so many knights of the court.

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"What is thy name, good lad?" the prince asked.

"I am known as Walter Fletcher."

"You are a brave lad," the prince said, "and if you bear you as well as a man as you did but now, I would wish no better to ride beside me in the day of battle. Should the time ever come when you tire of the peaceable life of a citizen and wish to take service in the wars, go to the Tower and ask boldly for the Prince of Wales, and I will enroll you among my own men-at-arms, and I promise you that you shall have your share of fighting as stark as that of the assault of yon heap. Now, my lords, let us ride on; I crave your pardon for having so long detained you."

Walter was some days before he could again cross London Bridge to inform his friend Geoffrey of the honour which had befallen him of being addressed by the Prince of Wales. During the interval he was forced to lie abed, and he was soundly rated by Master Giles for again getting into mischief. Geoffrey was far more sympathetic, and said "Well, Walter, although I would not that Gaffer Giles heard me say so, I think you have had a piece of rare good fortune. It may be that you may never have cause to recall the young prince's promise to him; but should you some day decide to embrace the calling of arms, you could wish for nothing better than to ride behind the Prince of Wales. He is, by all accounts, of a most noble and generous disposition, and is said, young as he is, to be already highly skilled in arms. Men say that he will be a wise king and a gallant captain, such a one as a brave soldier might be proud to follow; and as the king will be sure to give him plenty of opportunities of distinguishing himself, those who ride with him may be certain of a chance of doing valorous deeds. I will go across the bridge tomorrow, and will have a talk with Master Fletcher. The sooner you are apprenticed, the sooner you will be out of your time; and since Madge married eight years since I have been lonely in the house and shall be glad to have you with me."

Geoffrey Ward found his friend more ready to accede to his request, that Walter should be apprenticed to him, than he had expected. The bowyer, indeed, was a quiet man, and the high spirits and somewhat turbulent disposition of his young charge gave him so much uneasiness, that he was not sorry the responsibility of keeping him in order should be undertaken by Geoffrey. Moreover, he could not but agree with the argument, that the promise of the Prince of Wales offered a more favourable opportunity for Walter to enter upon the career of arms and so, perhaps, someday to win his way back to rank and honours than could have been looked for. Therefore, on the following week Walter was indentured to the armourer, and, as was usual at the time, left his abode in Aldgate and took up his residence with his master. He threw himself with his whole heart into the work, and by the time he was fifteen was on the way to become a skilful craftsman. His frame and muscles developed with labour, and he was now able to swing all save the very heaviest hammers in the shop. He had never abated in his practice at arms, and every day when work was over, he and his master had a long bout together with cudgel or quarterstaff, sword or axe; Walter of course used light weapons, but so quick was he with them that Geoffrey Ward acknowledged that he needed to put out all his skill to hold his own with his pupil. But it was not alone with Geoffrey that Walter had an opportunity of learning the use of arms. Whenever a soldier, returned from the wars, came to have a weapon repaired by the armourer, he would be sure of an invitation to come in in the evening and take a stoup of ale, and tell of the battles and sieges he had gone through, and in the course of the evening would be asked to have a bout of arms with the young apprentice, whom Geoffrey represented as being eager to learn how to use the sword as well as how to make it.

Thus Walter became accustomed to different styles of fighting, but found that very few, indeed, of their visitors were nearly so well skilled with their arms as his master. Some of the soldiers were mortified at finding themselves unable to hold their own with a boy; others would take their reverses in good part and would come again, bringing with them some comrade known to be particularly skilled with his weapons, to try the temper of the armourer's apprentice. At the age of fifteen Walter had won the prize at the sports, both for the best cudgel play and the best sword-and-buckler play among the apprentices, to the great disgust of many who had almost reached the age of manhood and were just out of their time.

CHAPTER III: A THWARTED PLOT

A boat was rowing rapidly down the stream. It had passed the village of Chelsea, and the men were doing their best to reach their destination at Westminster before nightfall. Two men were rowing; in the stern sat a lady with a girl about eleven years old. A woman, evidently a servant, sat beside the lady, while behind, steering the boat, was an elderly retainer.

"It is getting dark," the lady said; "I would that my cousin James had not detained us so long at Richmond, and then after all he was unable to accompany us. I like not being out on the river so late."

"No, indeed, my lady," the woman replied; "I have heard tell lately much of the doings of the river pirates. They say that boats are often picked up stove in and broken, and that none know what had become of their occupants, and that bodies, gashed and hewn, are often found floating in the river.

"How horrible," the girl said; "your tale makes me shiver, Martha; I would you had said nothing about it till we were on land again.

"Do not be afraid, Edith," the lady said cheerfully; "we shall soon be safe at Westminster."

There were now only two or three boats to be seen on the river. They were nearing the end of their journey now, and the great pile of the Abbey could be seen through the darkness. A boat with several men in it was seen rowing across the river towards the Lambeth side. It was awkwardly managed.

"Look out!" the steersman of the boat coming down stream shouted; "you will run into us if you don't mind."

An order was given in the other boat, the men strained to their oars, and in an instant the boat ran with a crash into the side of the other, cutting it down to the water's edge. For a minute there was a wild scene of confusion; the women shrieked, the watermen shouted, and, thinking that it was an accident, strove, as the boat sank from under them, to climb into that which had run them down. They were speedily undeceived. One was sunk by a heavy blow with an oar, the other was stabbed with a dagger, while the assailants struck fiercely at the old man and the women.

At this moment, however, a third boat made its appearance on the scene, its occupants uttering loud shouts. As they rowed towards the spot their approach was heralded by a shower of arrows. Two of the ruffians were struck—one fell over mortally wounded, the other sank down into the boat.

"Row, men, row," their leader shouted, "or we shall all be taken."

Again seizing their oars, the rowers started at full speed towards the Lambeth shore. The arrows of their pursuers still fell among them, two more of their number being wounded before they reached the opposite shore. The pursuit was not continued, the newcomers ceasing to row at the spot where the catastrophe had taken place. Walter stood up in the boat and looked round. A floating oar, a stretcher, and a sheepskin which had served as a cushion, alone floated.

Suddenly there was a choking cry heard a few yards down stream, and Walter leapt into the river. A few strokes took him to the side of the girl, and he found, on throwing his arm round her, that she was still clasped in her mother's arms. Seizing them both, Walter shouted to his comrades. They had already turned the boat's head, and in a minute were alongside.

It was a difficult task to get the mother and child on board, as the girl refused to loose her hold. It was, however, accomplished, and the child sat still and quiet by Walter's side, while his comrades endeavoured to stanch the blood which was flowing from a severe wound in her mother's head. When they had bound it up they rubbed her hands, and by the time they had reached the steps at Westminster the lady opened her eyes. For a moment she looked bewildered, and then, on glancing round, she gave a low cry of delight at seeing her child sitting by Walter's side.

On reaching the steps the boys handed her over to the care of the watermen there, who soon procured a litter and carried her, she being still too weak to walk, to the dwelling of the Earl of Talbot, where she said she was expected. The apprentices rowed back to London Bridge, elated at the success of their enterprise, but regretting much that they had arrived too late to hinder the outrage, or to prevent the escape of its perpetrators.

Walter on his return home related the whole circumstance to his master.

"I would you had told me, Walter," the latter said, "since we might have taken precautions which would have prevented this foul deed from taking place. However, I can understand your wanting to accomplish the adventure without my aid; but we must think now what had best be said and done. As the lady belongs to the court, there is sure to be a fine pother about the matter, and you and all who were there will be examined touching your share of the adventure, and how you came to be upon the spot. The others will, of course, say that they were there under your direction; and we had best think how much of your story you had better tell."

"Why should I not tell it all?" Walter asked indignantly.

"You should never tell a lie, Walter; but in days like these it is safer sometimes not to tell more than is necessary. It is a good rule in life, my boy, to make no more enemies than may be needful. This knight, who is doubtless a great villain, has maybe powerful friends, and it is as well, if it can be avoided, that you should not embroil yourself with these. Many a man has been knocked on head or stabbed on a dark night, because he could not keep his tongue from wagging. 'Least said, the sooner mended,' is a good proverb; but I will think it over tonight, and tell you in the morning."

When they met again in the workshop the armourer said: "Clean yourself up after breakfast, Walter, and put on your best clothes. I will go with you before the mayor, and then you shall tell him your story. There is sure to be a stir about it before the day is done. As we walk thither we can settle how much of your story it is good to tell."

On their way over the bridge Geoffrey told Walter that he thought he had better tell the whole story exactly as it had occurred, concealing only the fact that he had recognized the knight's face. "You had best too," he said, "mention nought about the white cloak. If we can catch the man of the hut in the swamp, likely enough the rack will wring from him the name of his employer, and in that case, if you are brought up as a witness against him you will of course say that you recognize his face; but 'tis better that the accusation should not come from you. No great weight would be given to the word of a 'prentice boy as against that of a noble. It is as bad for earthen pots to knock against brass ones, as it is for a yeoman in a leathern jerkin to stand up against a knight in full armour.

"But unless the lady knows her enemy she may fall again into his snares.

"I have thought of that," Geoffrey said, "and we will take measures to prevent it."

"But how can we prevent it?" Walter asked, surprised.

"We must find out who this knight may be, which should, methinks, not be difficult. Then we will send to him a message that his share in this night's work is known to several, and that if any harm should ever again be attempted against the lady or her daughter, he shall be denounced before King Edward himself as the author of the wrong. I trust, however, that we may capture the man of the swamp, and that the truth may be wrung from him."

By this time they had arrived at the Guildhall, and making their way into the court, Geoffrey demanded private speech with the Lord Mayor.

"Can you not say in open court what is you business?" the Lord Mayor asked.

"I fear that if I did it would defeat the ends of justice."

Retiring with the chief magistrate into an inner room, Geoffrey desired Walter to tell his story. This he did, ending by saying that he regretted much that he had not at once told his master what he had heard; but that, although he deemed evil was intended, he did not know that murder was meant, and thought it but concerned the carrying off of some damsel, and that this he had intended, by the aid of his comrades, to prevent.

"You have done well, Master Walter, since that be your name," the magistrate said. "That you might have done better is true, for had you acted otherwise you might have prevented murder from being done. Still, one cannot expect old heads upon young shoulders. Give me the names of those who were with you, for I shall doubtless receive a message from Westminster this morning to know if I have heard aught of the affair. In the meantime we must take steps to secure these pirates of the marsh. The ground is across the river, and lies out of my jurisdiction."

"It is for that reason," Geoffrey said, "that I wished that the story should be told to you privately, since the men concerned might well have sent a friend to the court to hear if aught was said which might endanger them."

"I will give you a letter to a magistrate of Surrey, and he will despatch some constables under your guidance to catch these rascals. I fear there have been many murders performed by them lately besides that in question, and you will be doing a good service to the citizens by aiding in the capture of these men.

CHAPTER IV: A KNIGHT'S CHAIN

The following morning Walter put on the sober russet dress which he wore on Sundays and holidays, for gay colours were not allowed to the apprentices, and set out for Westminster. Although he endeavoured to assume an air of carelessness and ease as he approached the dwelling of Earl Talbot, he was very far from feeling comfortable, and wished in his heart that his master had accompanied him on his errand. Half a dozen men-at-arms were standing on the steps of the mansion, who looked with haughty surprise at the young apprentice.

"Dame Alice Vernon has sent to express her desire to have speech with me," he said quietly, "and I would fain know if she can receive me."

"Here, Dikon," one of the men cried to another within the hall. "This is the lad you were sent to fetch yesterday. I wondered much who the city apprentice was, who with such an assured air, marched up to the door; but if what thou sayest be true, that he saved the life of Dame Vernon and her little daughter, he must be a brave lad, and would be more in place among men and soldiers than in serving wares behind the counter of a fat city tradesman.

"I serve behind no counter," Walter said indignantly. "I am an armourer, and mayhap can use arms as well as make them."

There was a laugh among the men at the boy's sturdy self-assertion, and then the man named Dikon said: "Come along, lad. I will take you to Dame Vernon at once. She is expecting you; and, my faith, it would not be safe to leave you standing here long, for I see you would shortly be engaged in splitting the weasands of my comrades."

There was another roar of laughter from the men, and Walter, somewhat abashed, followed his conductor into the house. Leading him through the hall and along several corridors, whose spaciousness and splendour quite overpowered the young apprentice, he handed him over to a waiting woman, who ushered him into an apartment where Dame Vernon was reclining on a couch. Her little daughter was sitting upon a low stool beside her, and upon seeing Walter she leapt to her feet, clapping her hands.

"Oh! mother, this is the boy that rescued us out of the river."

The lady looked with some surprise at the lad. She had but a faint remembrance of the events which occurred between the time when she received a blow from the sword of one of her assailants and that when she found herself on a couch in the abode of her kinsman; and when she had been told that she had been saved by a city apprentice she had pictured to herself a lad of a very different kind to him who now stood before her.

Walter was now nearly sixteen years old. His frame was very powerful and firmly knit. His dark brown hair was cut short, but, being somewhat longer than was ordinary with the apprentices, fell with a slight wave back on his forehead. His bearing was respectful, and at the same time independent. There was none of that confusion which might be expected on the part of a lad from the city in the presence of a lady of rank. His dark, heavy eyebrows, resolute mouth, and square chin gave an expression of sternness to his face, which was belied by the merry expression of his eyes and the bright smile when he was spoken to.

"I have to thank you, young sir," she said, holding out her hand, which Walter, after the custom of the time, raised to his lips, bending upon one knee as he did so, "for the lives of myself and my daughter, which would surely have been lost had you not jumped over to save us.

"I am glad that I arrived in time to be of aid," Walter said frankly; "but indeed I am rather to be blamed than praised, for had I, when I heard the plotting against the safety of the boat, told my master of it, as I should have done, instead of taking the adventure upon mine own shoulders, doubtless a boat would have been sent up in time to prevent the attack from taking place. Therefore, instead of being praised for having arrived a little too late, I should be rated for not having come there in time."

Dame Vernon smiled.

"Although you may continue to insist that you are to blame, this does not alter the fact that you have saved our lives. Is there any way in which I can be useful to you? Are you discontent with your state? For, in truth, you look as if Nature had intended you for a gallant soldier rather than a city craftsman. Earl Talbot, who is my uncle, would, I am sure, receive you into his following should you so choose it, and I would gladly pay for the cancelling of your indentures."

"I thank you, indeed, lady, for your kind offices," Walter said earnestly; "for the present I am well content to remain at my craft, which is that of an armourer, until, at any rate, I have gained such manly strength and vigour as would fit me for a man-at-arms, and my good master, Geoffrey Ward, will, without payment received, let me go when I ask that grace of him."

"Edith, go and look from the window at the boats passing along the river; and now," she went on, as the girl had obeyed her orders, "I would fain ask you more about the interview you overhead in the marshes. Sir William de Hertford told me of the evidence that you had given before the justice. It is passing strange that he who incited the other to the deed should have been by him termed 'Sir Knight'. Maybe it was merely a nickname among his fellows."

"Before I speak, lady," Walter said quietly, "I would fain know whether you wish to be assured of the truth. Sometimes, they say, it is wiser to remain in ignorance; at other times forewarned is forearmed. Frankly, I did not tell all I know before the court, deeming that peradventure you might wish to see me, and that I could then tell the whole to your private ear, should you wish to know it, and you could then bid me either keep silence or proclaim all I knew when the trial of these evil-doers comes on."

"You seem to me to be wise beyond your years, young sir," the lady said.

"The wisdom is not mine, lady, but my master's. I took counsel with him, and acted as he advised me.

"I would fain know all," the lady said. "I have already strange suspicions of one from whom assuredly I looked not for such evil designs. It will grieve me to be convinced that the suspicions are well founded; but it will be better to know the truth than to remain in a state of doubt."

"The person then was a knight, for I had seen him before when he came in knightly harness into my master's shop to have two rivets put into his hauberk. I liked not his face then, and should have remembered it anywhere. I knew him at once when I saw him. He was a dark faced knight, handsome, and yet with features which reminded me of a hawk."

Dame Vernon gave a little exclamation, which assured the lad that she recognized the description.

"You may partly know, lady, whether it is he whom you suppose, for he said that he would detain your boat so that it should not come along until dark, and, moreover, he told them that they would know the boat since you would be wrapt in a white mantle."

The lady sat for some time with her face hidden in her hands.

"It is as I feared," she said at last, "and it grieves me to the heart to think that one who, although not so nearly related in blood, I regarded as a brother, should have betrayed me to death. My mind is troubled indeed, and I know not what course I shall take, whether to reveal this dreadful secret or to conceal it."

"I may say, madam," Walter said earnestly, "that should you wish the matter to remain a secret, you may rely upon it that I will tell no more at the trial than I revealed yesterday; but I would remind you that there is a danger that the leader of yon ruffians, who is probably alone acquainted with the name of his employer, may, under the influence of the torture, reveal it."

"That fear is for the present past, since a messenger arrived from Kingston but a few minutes since, saying that yester-even, under the threat of torture, the prisoners had pointed out the one among their number who was their chief. This morning, however, it was found that the warder who had charge of them had been bribed; he was missing from his post, and the door of the cell wherein the principal villain had been immured, apart from the others, was opened, and he had escaped."

"Then," Walter said, "it is now open to you to speak or be silent as you will. You will pardon my forwardness if I say that my master, in talking the matter over with me, suggested that this evil knight might be scared from attempting any future enterprise against you were he informed that it was known to several persons that he was the author of this outrage, and that if any further attempts were at any time made against you, the proofs of his crime would be laid before the king."

"Thanks, good lad," the lady said, "for your suggestion. Should I decide to keep the matter secret, I will myself send him a message to that effect, in such guise that he would not know whence it comes. And now, I would fain reward you for what you have done for us; and," she went on, seeing a flush suddenly mount upon the lad's face, as he made a half step backwards, "before I saw you, had thought of offering you a purse of gold, which, although it would but poorly reward your services, would yet have proved useful to you when the time came for you to start as a craftsman on your own account; but now that I have seen you, I feel that although there are few who think themselves demeaned by accepting gifts of money in reward for services, you would rather my gratitude took some other form. It can only do that of offering you such good services that I can render with Earl Talbot, should you ever choose the profession of arms; and in the meantime, as a memento of the lives you have saved, you will, I am sure, not refuse this chain," and she took a very handsome one of gold from her neck; "the more so since it was the gift of her majesty, our gracious