Illustrated by The Kinneys

SIR NIGEL

By A. CONAN DOYLE

CHAPTER XII.—Continued.

Edith pouted like a naughty child. "We are man and wife in the eyes of God. Soon also we shall be wedded before all the world. We do but wait until next Monday when Paul's brother who is a priest at St. Albans, will come to wed us. Already a messeneger has sped for him, and he will come, will he not, dear love?"

"He will come," said the master of Shalford, still with his eyes fixed upon the silent Nigel.

"It is a lie; he will not come," said a voice from the door.

It was the old priest, who had followed the others as far as the threshold.

"He will not come," he repeated as he advanced into the room. "Daughter, my daughter, hearken to the words of one who is indeed old enough to be your earthly father. This lie has served before. He has ruined others before you with it. The man has no brother at Saint Albans. I know his brothers well, and there is no priest among them. Before Monday, when it is too late, you will have found the truth as others have done before you. Trust him not, but come with us!"

Paul de la Fosse looked up at her with a quick smile and patted the hand upon his shoulder.

"Do you speak to them, Edith," said he.

Her eyes flashed with scorn as she surveyed them each in turn, the woman, the youth and the priest.

"I have but one word to say to them," said she. "It is that they go hence and trouble us no more. Am I not a free woman? Have I not said that this is the only man I ever loved? I have loved him long. He did not know it, and in despair he turned to another. Now he knows all and never again can doubt come between us. Therefore I will stay here at Shalford and come to Cosford no more save upon the arm of my husband. Am I so weak that I would believe the tales you tell against him? Is it hard for a jealous woman and a wandering priest to agree upon a lie. No, no, Mary, you can go hence and take your cavalier and your priest with you, for here I stay, true to my love and safe in my trust upon his honor!"

"Well spoken, on my faith, my golden bird!" said the little master of Shalford. "Let me add my own word to that which has been said. You would not grant me any virtue in your unkindly speech, good Lady Mary, and yet you must needs confess that at least I have good store of patience, since I have not set my dogs upon your friends who have come between me and my ease. But even to the most virtuous there comes at last a time when poor human frailty may prevail, and so I pray you to remove both yourself, priest and your valiant knight errant, lest perhaps there be more haste and less dignity when at last you do take your leave. Sit down, my fair love, and let us turn once more to our supper." He motioned her to her chair, and he filled her wine-cup as well as his own.

Nigel had said no word since he had entered the room, but his look had never lost its set purpose, nor had his brooding eyes ever wandered from the sneering face of the deformed master of Shalford. Now he turned with swift decision to Mary and to the priest.

"That is over," said he in a low voice. "You have done all that you could, and now it is for me to play my part as well as I am able. I pray you, Mary, and you, good father, that you will await me outside."

"Nay, Nigel, if there is danger—"

"It is easier for me, Mary, if you are not there. I pray you to go. I can speak to this man more at my ease."

She looked at him with questioning eyes and then obeyed.

Nigel plucked at the prist's gown.

"I pray you, father, have you your book of offices with you?"

"Surely, Nigel, it is ever in my breast."

"Have it ready, father!"

"For what, my son?"

"There are two places you may mark; there is the service of marriage and there is the prayer for the dying. Go with her, father, and be ready at my call."

He closed the door behind them and was alone with this ill-matched couple. They both turned in their chairs to look at him, Edith with defiant face, the man with a bitter smile upon his lips and malignant hatred in his eyes.

"What," said he, "the knight errant still lingers? Have we not heard of his thirst for glory? What new venture does he see that he should tarry here?"

Nigel walked to the table.

"There is no glory and little venture," said he; "but I have come for a purpose and I must do it. I learn from your own lips, Edith, that you will not leave this man."

"If you have ears you have heard it."

"You are, as you have said, a free woman, and who can gainsay you? But I have known you, Edith, since we played as boy and girl on the heather-hills together. I will save you from this man's cunning and from your own foolish wickedness."

"What would you do?"

"There is a priest without. He will marry you now. I will see you married ere I leave this hall."

"Or else?" sneered the man.

"Or else you never leave this hall alive. Nay, call not for your servants or your dogs! By saint Paul, I swear to you that this matter lies between us three, and that if any fourth comes at your call you, at least, shall never live to see what comes of it! Speak then, Paul of Shalford! Will you wed this woman now, or will you not?"

Edith was on her feet with outstretched arms between them. "Stand back, Nigel! He is small and weak. You would not do him a hurt! Did you not say so this very day? For God's sake, Nigel, do not look at him so! There is death in your eyes."

"A snake may be small and weak, Edith, yet every honest man would place his heel upon it. Do you stand back yourself, for my purpose is set."

"Paul!" she turned her eyes to the pale sneering face. "Bethink you, Paul! What matter to you whether it be now or on Monday? I pray you, dear Paul, for my sake let him have his way! Your brother can read the service again if it so pleases him. Let us wed now, Paul, and then all is well."

He had risen from his chair, and he dashed aside her appealing hands. "You foolish woman," he snarled, "and you, my savior of fair damsels, who are so bold against a cripple, you have both to learn that if my body be weak there is the soul of my breed within it! To marry because a boasting, ranting, country Squire would have me do so—no, by the soul of God, I will die first! On Monday I will marry, and no day sooner, so let that be your answer."

"It is the answer that I wished," said Nigel, "for indeed I see no happiness in this marriage, and the other may well be the better way. Stand aside, Edith!" He gently forced her to one side and drew his sword.

De la Fosse cried aloud at the sight. "I have no sword. You would not murder me?" said he, leaning back with haggard face and burning eyes against his chair. The bright steel shone in the lamp-light. Edith shrank back, her hand over her face.

"Take this sword!" said Nigel, and he turned the hilt to the cripple. "Now!" he added, as he drew his hunting knife, "Kill me if you can, Paul de la Fosse, for as God is my help I will do as much for you!"

The woman, half swooning and yet spellbound and fascinated, looked on at that strange combat. For a moment the cripple stood with an air of doubt, the sword grasped in his nerveless fingers. Then as he saw the tiny blade in Nigel's hand the greatness of the advantage came home to him, and a cruel smile tightened his loose lips. Slowly, step by step he advanced, his chin sunk upon his breast, his eyes glaring from under the thick tangle of his brows like fires through the brushwood. Nigel waited for him, his left hand forward, his knife down by his hip, his face grave, still and watchful.

Nearer and nearer yet, with the stealthy step and then with a bound and a cry of hatred and rage Paul de la Fosse had sped his blow. It was well judged and well swung, but point would have been wiser than edge against that supple body and those active feet. Quick as a flash, Nigel had sprung inside the sweep of the blade, taking a flesh wound on his left forearm, as he pressed it under the hilt. The next instant the cripple was on the ground and Nigel's dagger was at his throat.

"You dog!" he whispered. "I have you at my mercy! Quick ere I strike, and for the last time! Will you marry or no?"

The crash of the fall and the sharp point upon his throat had cowed the man's spirit. He looked up with a white face and the sweat gleamed upon his forehead. There was terror in his eyes.

"Nay, take your knife from me!" he cried. "I cannot die like a calf in the shambles."

"Yes, yes, I will wed her! After all she is a good wench and I might do worse. Let me up! I tell you I will marry her! What more would you have?"

Nigel stood above him with his foot upon his misshapen body. He had picked up his sword, and the point rested upon the cripple's breast.

"Nay, you will bide where you are! if you are to live—and my conscience cries aloud against it—at least your wedding will be such as your sins have deserved. Lie there, like the crushed worm that you are!" Then he raised his voice. "Father Athanasius!" he cried. "What ho! Father Athanasium!"

The old priest ran to the cry, and so did the Lady Mary. A strange sight it was that met them now in the circle of light, the frightened girl, half unconscious against the table, the prostrate cripple, and Nigel with foot and sword upon his body.

"Your book, father!" cried Nigel. "I know not if what we do is good or ill; but we must wed them, for there is no way out."

But the girl by the table had given a great cry and she was clinging and sobbing with her arms round her sister's neck.

"Oh, Mary, I thank the Virgin that you have come! I thank the Virgin that it is not too late! What did he say? He said that he was a de la Fosse and that he would not be married at the sword-point. My heart went out to him when he said it. But I am I not a Butteshorn, and shall it be said that I would marry a man who could be led to the altar with a knife at his throat? No, no, I see him as he is! I know him now, the mean spirit, the lying tongue! Can I not read in his eyes that he has indeed deceived me, that he would have left me as you say that he has left others? Take me home, Mary, my sister, for you have plucked me back this night from the very mouth of Hell!"

And so it was that the master of Shalford, livid and brooding, was left with his wine at his lonely table, while the golden beauty of Cosford, hot with shame and anger, her fair face wet with tears, passed out safe from the house of infamy into the great calm and peace of the starry night.

XIII.

How the Comrades Journeyed Down the Old, Old Road.

And now the season of the moonless nights was drawing nigh and the King's design was ripe. Very secretly his preparations were made. Already the garrison of Calais, which consisted of five hundred archers and two hundred men-at-arms, could, if forewarned, resist any attack made upon it. But it was the King's design not merely to resist the attack, but to capture the attackers. Above all it was his wish to find the occasion for one of these adventurous passages of arms which had made his name famous throughout Christendom as the very pattern and leader of knight-errant chivalry.

But the affair wanted careful handling. The arrival of any reinforcements, or even the crossing of any famous soldier, would have alarmed the French and warned them that their plot had been discovered. Therefore it was in twos and threes in the creyers and provision ships which were continually passing from shore to shore that the chosen warriors and their squires were brought to Calais There they were passed at night through the water gate into the castle where they could lie hidden, unknown to the townspeople, until the hour for action had come.

Nigel had received word from Chandos to join him at "The Sign of the Broom-Pod" in Winchelsea. Three days before hand he and Aylward rode from Tilford all armed and ready for the wars. Nigel was in hunting-costume, blithe and gay, with his precious armor and his small baggage trussed upon the back of a spare horse which Aylward led by the bridle. The archer had himself a good black mare, heavy and slow, but strong enough to be fit to carry his powerful frame. In his brigandine of chain mail and his steel cap, with straight strong sword by his side, his yellow long-bow jutting over his shoulder, and his quiver of arrows supported by a scarlet baldric, he was such a warrior as any knight might well be proud to have in his train. All Tilford trailed behind them, as they rode slowly over the long slope of heath land which skirts the flank of Crooksbury Hill.

At the summit of the rise Nigel reined in Pommers and looked back at the village behind him. There was the old dark manor-house, with one bent figure leaning upon a stick and gazing dimly after him from beside the door. He looked at the high-pitched roof, the timbered walls, the long trail of swirling blue smoke which rose from the single chimney, and the group of downcast old servants who lingered at the gate, John the cook, Weathercote the minstrel, and Red Swire the broken soldier. Over the river amid the trees he could see the grim gray towers of Waverley, and even as he looked, the iron bell, which had so often seemed to be the hoarse threatening cry of an enemy, clanged out its call to prayer. Nigel doffed his velvet cap and prayed also—prayed that peace might remain at home and good warfare, in which honor and fame should await him, might still be found abroad. Then waving his hand to the people, he turned his horses's head and rode slowly eastward. A moment later Aylward broke from the group of archers and laughing girls who clung to his bridle and his stirrup straps, and rode on, blowing kisses over his shoulder. So at last the two comrades, gentle and simple, were fairly started on their venture.

There are two seasons of color in those parts: the yellow, when the country-side is flaming with the gorse blossoms, and the crimson, when all the long slopes are smoldering with the heather. So it was now. Nigel looked back from time to time, as he rode along the narrow track where the ferns and the ling brushed his feet on either side, and as he looked it seemed to him that wander where he might he would never see a fairer scene than that of his own home. Far to the westward, glowing in the morning light, rolled billow after billow of ruddy heather land, until they merged into the dark shadows of Woolmer Forest and the pale clear green of the Buster chalk downs. Never in his life had Nigel wandered far beyond these limits, and the woodlands, the down and the heather were dear to his soul. It gave him a pang in his heart now as he turned his face away from them; but if home lay to the westward, out there to the eastward was the great world of adventure, the noble stage where each of his kinsmen in turn had played his manly part and left a proud name behind.

How often he had longed for this day! And now it had come with no shadow cast behind it. Dame Ermyntrude was under the King's protection. The old servants had their future assured. The strife with the monks of Waverley had been assuaged. He had a noble horse under him, the best of weapons, and a stout follower at his back. Above all he was bound on a gallant errand with the bravest knight in England as his leader. All these thoughts surged together in his mind, and he whistled and sang, as he rode, out of the joy of his heart, while Pommers sidled and curvetted in sympathy with the mood of his master. Presently, glancing back, he saw from Aylward's downcast eyes and puckered brow that the archer was clouded with trouble. He reined his horse to let him come abreast of him.

"How now, Aylward?" said he. "Surely of all men in England you and I should be the most blithe this morning, since we ride forward with all hopes of honorable advancement. By Saint Paul! ere we see these heather hills once more we shall either worshipfully win worship, ere we shall venture our persons in the attempt. These be glad thoughts, and why should you be downcast?"

Aylward shrugged his broad shoulders, and a wry smile dawned upon his rugged face. "I am indeed as limp as a wetted bowstring," said he. "It is the nature of a man that he should be sad when he leaves the woman he loves."

"In truth, yes!" cried Nigel, and in a flash the dark eyes of Mary Butteshorn rose before him, and he heard her low, sweet, earnest voice as he had heard it that night when they brought her frailer sister back from Shalford Manor, a voice which made all that was best and noblest in a man thrill within his soul. "Yet, bethink you, archer, that what a woman loves in man is not his gross body, but rather his soul, his honor, his fame, the deeds with which he has made his life beautiful. Therefore you are winning love as well as glory when you turn to the wars."

"It may be so," said Aylward; "but indeed it goes to my heart to see the pretty dears weep, and I would fain weep as well to keep them company. When Mary—or was it Dolly?—nay, it was Martha, the red-headed girl from the mill—when she held tight to my balderic it was like snapping my heart-string to pluck myself loose."

"You speak of one name and then of another," said Nigel. "How is she called then, this maid whom you love?"

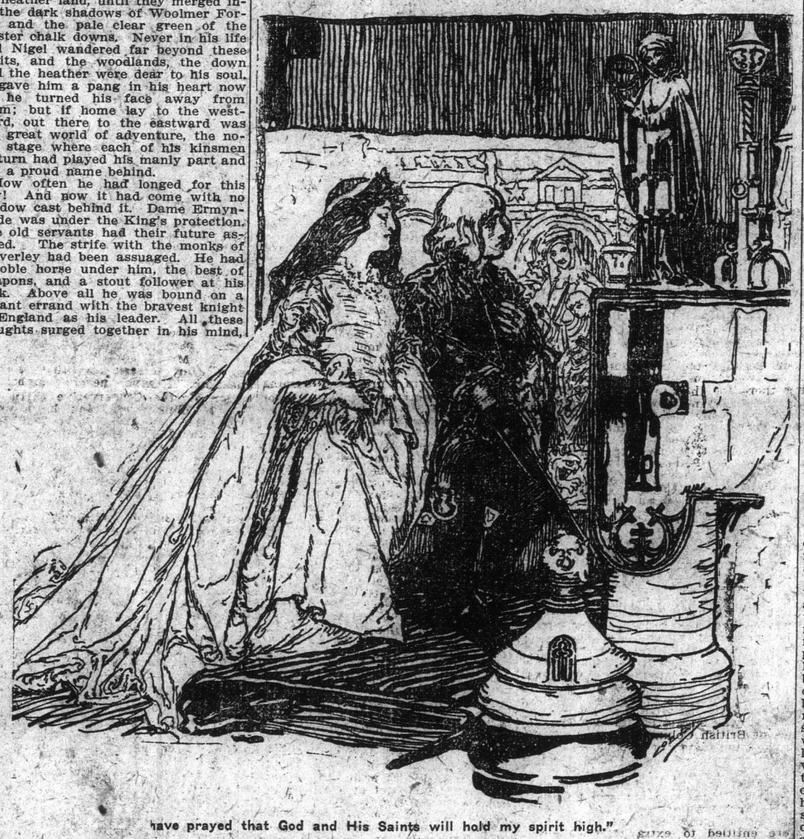
Aylward pushed back his steel cap and scratched his bristling head with some embarrassment. "Her name," said he, "is Mary Dolly Martha Susan Jane Cicely Theodosia Agnes Johanna Kate."

Nigel laughed as Aylward rolled out this prodigious title. "I had no right to take you to the wars," said he; "for by Saint Paul! it is very clear that I have widowed half the parish. But I saw your aged father the franklin. Bethink you of the joy that will fill his heart when he hears that you have done some small deed in France, and so won honor in the eyes of all."

"I fear that honor will not help him to pay his arrears of rent to the sacrist of Waverley," said Aylward. "Out he will go on the roadside, honor and all, if he does not find ten nobles by next Epiphany. But if I could win a ransom or be at the storming of a rich city, then indeed the old man would be proud of me. Thy sword must help my spade, Samkin," said he as he kissed me goodbye. Ah! it would indeed be a happy day for him and for all if I could ride back with a saddle-bag full of gold pieces, and, please God, I shall dip my hand in somebody's pocket before I see Crooksbury Hill once more!"

Nigel shook his head, for indeed it seemed hopeless to try to bridge the gulf between them. Already they had made such good progress along the bridle-path through the heather that the little hill of Saint Catharine and the ancient shrine upon its summit loomed up before them. Here they crossed the road from the south to London, and at the crossing two wayfarers were waiting who waved their hands in greeting, the one a tall, slender, dark woman upon a white jennet, the other a very thick red-faced old man, whose weight seemed to curve the back of the stout gray cob which he bestrode.

"What how, Nigel!" he cried. "Mary has told me that you make a start this morning, and we have waited here this hour and more on the chance of seeing you pass. Come, lad, and have a last stoup of English ale, for many a time amid the sour French wines you will long for the white foam under your nose, and the good homely twang au chevalier." Then for one moment they fell into each other's arms and with kiss upon kiss, a loving man and a tender woman, they swore their troth to each other. But the old knight was calling impatiently from below and together they hurried down the winding path to where the horses waited under the sandy bluff.



"have prayed that God and His Saints will hold my spirit high."

As far as the Shalford crossing Sir John rode by Nigel's arm, and many were his last injunctions which he gave him concerning woodcraft, and great his anxiety lest he confuse a spray with a brocket, or either with a hind. At last when they came to the reedy edge of the Wey the old knight and his daughter reined up their horses. Nigel looked back at them ere he entered the dark Chantry woods, and saw them still gazing after him and waving their hands. Then the path wound amongst the trees and they were lost to sight; but long afterwards when a clearing exposed once more the Shalford meadows Nigel saw that the old man upon the gray cob was riding slowly toward Saint Catharine's Hill, but that the girl was still where he had seen her last, leaning forward in her saddle and straining her eyes to pierce the dark forest which screened her lover from her view. It was but a fleeting glance through a break in the foliage, and yet in after days of stress and toil in far distant lands it was that one little picture—the green meadow, the reeds, the slow blue-winding river, the eager bending graceful figure upon the white horse—which was the clearest and the dearest image of that England which he had left behind him.

But if Nigel's friends had learned that this was the morning of his leaving, his enemies too were on the alert. The two comrades had just emerged from the Chantry woods and were beginning the ascent of that curving path which leads upward to the old Chapel of the Martyr when with a hiss like an angry snake a long white arrow streaked under Pommers and struck quivering in the grassy turf. A second whizzed past Nigel's ear, as he tried to turn; but Aylward struck the great war-horse a sharp blow over the haunches, and it had galloped some hundreds of yards before its rider could pull it up. Aylward followed as hard as he could ride, bending low over his horse's neck while arrows whizzed all around him.

"By Saint Paul!" said Nigel, tugging at his bridle and white with anger, "they shall not chase me across the country as though I was a frighted doe. Archer, how dare you to lash my horse when I would have turned and ridden in upon them?"

"It is well that I did so," said Aylward, "or by these ten finger-bones! our journey would have begun and ended on the same day. As I glanced round I saw a dozen of them at the least amongst the brushwood. See now how the light glimmers upon their steel caps yonder in the bracken under the great beech-tree. Nay, I pray you, my fair lord, do not ride forward. What chance has a man in the open against all these who lie at their ease in the underwood? If you will not think of yourself, then consider your horse, which would have a cloth-yard shaft feathered in its hide ere it could reach the wood."

Nigel chafed in impotent anger "Am I to be shot at like a popinjay at a fair, by any reaver or outlaw that seeks a mark for his bow?" he cried. "By Saint Paul! Aylward, I will put on my harness and go further into the matter. Help me to untruss, I pray you!"

"Nay, my fair lord, I will not help you to your own downfall. It is a match with cogged dice betwixt a horseman on the moor and archers amid the forest. But these men are no outlaws, or they would not dare to draw their bows within a league of the sheriff of Guildford."

"Indeed, Aylward, I think that you speak truth," said Nigel. "It may be that these are the men of Paul de la Fosse of Shaltford, whom I have given little cause to love me. Ah! there is indeed the very man himself."

They sat their horses with their backs to the long slope which leads up to the old chapel on the hill. In front of them was the dark ragged edge of the wood, with a sharp twinkle of steel here and there in its shadows which spoke of these lurking foes. But now there was a long moot upon a horn, and at once a score of russet-clad bowmen ran forward from amid the trees, spreading out into a scattered line and closing swiftly in upon the travelers. In the midst of them, upon a great gray horse, sat a small misshapen man, waving and cheering as one sets hounds on a badger, turning his head this way and that as he whooped and pointed, urging his bowmen onward up the slope.

"Draw them on, my fair lord! Draw them on until we have them out on the down!" cried Aylward, his eyes shining with joy. "Five hundred paces more, and then we may be on terms with them. Nay, linger not, but keep them always just clear of arrow-shot until our turn has come."

Nigel shook and trembled with eagerness, as with his hand on his sword-hilt he looked at the line of eager, hurrying men. But it flashed through his mind what Chandos had said of the cool head which is better for the warrior than the hot heart. Aylward's words were true and wise. He turned Pommers' head therefore, and amid a cry of derision from behind them the comrades trotted over the down. The bowmen broke into a run, while their leader screamed and yawed more madly than before. Aylward cast many a glance at them over his shoulder.

"Yet little farther! Yet a little farther still!" he muttered. "The wind is towards them and the fools have forgot that I can overshoot them by fifty paces. Now, my good lord, I pray you for one instant to hold the horses, for my weapon is of more avail this day than thine can be. They may make sorry cheer ere they gain the shelter of the wood once more."

He had sprung from his horse, and with a downward wrench of his arm and a push with his knee he slipped the string into the upper nock of his mighty war-bow. Then a flash he notched his shaft and drew it to the pile, his keen blue eyes glowing fiercely behind it from under his knotted brows. With thick legs planted sturdily apart, his body laid to the bow, his left arm motionless as wood, his right bunched into a double curve of swelling muscles as he stretched the white well-waxed string, he looked so keen and fierce a fighter that the advancing line stopped for an instant at the sight of him. Two or three loosed off their arrows, but the shafts flew heavily against the head wind, and snaked along the hard turf some score of paces short of the mark. One only, a short bandy-legged man, whose squat figure spoke of enormous muscular strength, ran swiftly in and then drew so strong a bow that the arrow quivered in the ground at Aylward's very feet.

"It is Black Will of Lynchmere," said the bowman. "Many a match have I shot with him, and I know well that no other man on the Surrey marches could have sped such a shaft. I trust that you are houseled and shriven, Will, for I have known you so long that I would not have your damnation upon my soul.

He raised his bow as he spoke, and the string twanged with a rich deep musical note. Aylward leaned upon his bow-stave as he keenly watched the long swift flight of his shaft, skimming smoothly down the wind.

"On him, on him! No, over him, by my hilt!" he cried. "There is more wind than I had thought. Nay, nay, friend, now that I have the length of you, you can scarce hope to loose again."

Black Will had notched an arrow and was raising his bow when Aylward's second shaft passed through the shoulder of his drawing arm. With a shout of anger and pain he dropped his weapon, and dancing in his fury he shook his fist and roared curses at his rival.

"I could slay him; but I will not, for good bowmen are not so common," said Aylward. "And now, fair sir, we must on, for they are spreading round on either side, and if once they get behind us, then indeed our journey has come to a sudden end. But ere we go I would send a shaft through yonder horseman who leads them on."

"Nay, Aylward, I pray you to leave him," said Nigel. "Villain as he is, he is none the less a gentleman of coat-armor, and should die by some other weapon than thine."

"As you will," said Aylward, with a clouded brow. "I have been told that in the late wars a French prince and baron has not been too proud to take his death wound from an English yeoman's shaft, and that nobles of England have been glad enough to stand by and see it done."

Nigel shook his head sadly. "It is sooth, you say, archer, and indeed it is no new thing, for that good knight Richard of the Lion Heart met his end did Harold the Saxon. But this is a private matter, and I would not have you draw your bow against him. Neither can I ride at him myself, for he is weak in body, though dangerous in spirit. There, we will go upon our way, since there is neither profit nor honor to be gained, nor any hope of advancement."

Aylward, having unstrung his bow, had remounted his horse during this conversation, and the two rode swiftly past the little squat Chapel of the Martyr and over the brow of the hill. From the summit they looked back. The injured archer lay upon the ground, with several comrades gathered in a knot around him. Others ran aimlessly up the hill, but were already far behind. The leader sat motionless upon his horse, and as he saw them look back he raised his hand and shrieked his curses at them. An instant later the curve of the ground had hid them from view. So, amid love and hate, Nigel bade adieu to the home of his youth.

And now the comrades were journeying upon that old, old road which runs across the south of England and yet never turns towards London, for the good reason that the place was a poor hamlet when first the road was laid. From Winchester, the Saxon capital, to Canterbury, the holy city of Kent, ran that ancient highway, and on from Canterbury to the narrow straits where, on a clear day, the farther shore can be seen. Along this track as far back as history can trace the metals of the west have been carried and passed the pack-horses which bore the goods which Gaul sent in exchange. Older than the Christian faith and older than the Romans, is the old road. North and south are the woods and the marshes, so that only on the high dry turf of the chalk land could a clear track be found. The Pilgrim's Way, it still is called; but the pilgrims were the last who ever trod it, for it was already of immemorial age before the death of Thomas a Becket gave a new reason why folk should journey to the scene of his murder.

From the hill of Weston Wood the travelers could see the long white band which dipped and curved and rose over the green downland, its course marked even in the hollows by the line of the old yew-trees which flanked it. Neither Nigel nor Aylward had wandered far from their own country, and now they rode with light hearts and eager eyes, taking note of all the varied pictures of nature and of man which passed before them. To their left was a hilly country, a land of rolling heaths and woods, broken here and there into open spaces round the occasional farmhouse of a franklin. Hackhurst Down, Dunley Hill, and Ranmore Common swelled and sank, each merging into the other. But on the right, after passing the village of Shere and the old church of Gomshall, the whole south country lay like a map at their feet. There was the high wood of the Weald, one unbroken forest of oak-trees stretching away to the South Downs, which rose olive-green against the deep blue sky. Under this great canopy of trees strange folk lived and evil deeds were done. In its recesses were wild tribes, little changed from their heathen ancestors, who danced round the altar of Thor, and well was it for the peaceful traveler that he could tread the high open road of the chalk land without no need to wander into so dangerous a tract, where soft slay, tangled forest and wild men all barred his progress.

But apart from the rolling country upon the left and the great forest-hidden plain upon the right, there was much upon the road itself to engage the attention of the wayfarers. It was crowded with people. As far as their eyes could carry they could see the black dots scattered thickly upon the thin white band, sometimes single, sometimes several breast, sometimes in moving cross, where a drove of pilgrims held together for mutual protection, or a nobleman showed his greatness by the number of retainers who trailed at his heels. At that time the main roads were very crowded, for there were many wandering people in the land. Of all sorts and kinds, they passed in an unbroken stream before the eyes of Nigel and of Aylward, alike only in the fact that one and all were powdered from their hair to their shoes with the gray dust of the chalk.

There were monks journeying from one cell to another, Benedictines with their black gowns looped up to show their white skirts, Carthusians in white, and pied Cistercians. Friars also of the three wandering orders—Dominicans in black, Carmelites in white and Franciscans in gray. There was no love lost between the cloistered monks and the free friars, each looking on the other as a rival who took from him the oblations of the faithful; so they passed on the high road as cat passes dog, with eyes askance and angry faces.

Then besides the men of the church there were the men of trade, the merchant in dusty broadcloth and Flanders hat riding at the head of his line of pack-horses. He carried Cornish tin, West-country wool, or Sussex iron if he traded eastward, or if his head should be turned westward then he bore with him the velvets of Genoa, the ware of Venice, the wine of France, or the armor of Italy and Spain. Pilgrims were everywhere, poor people for the most part, plodding wearily along with trailing feet and bowed heads, thick staves in their hands and bundles over their shoulders. Here and there on a gaily caparisoned palfrey, or in the greater luxury of a horse-litter, some West-country lady might be seen making her easy way to the shrine of Saint Thomas.

Besides all these a constant stream of strange vagabonds drifted along the road; minstrels who wandered from fair to fair, a foul and pestilent crew; jugglers and acrobats, quack doctors and tooth-drawers, students and beggars, free workmen in search of better wages, and escaped bondsmen who would welcome any wages at all. Such was the throng which set the old road smoking in a haze of white dust from Winchester to the narrow sea.

But of all the wayfarers those which interested Nigel most were the soldiers. Several times they passed little knots of archers or men-at-arms, veterans from France, who had received their discharge and were now making their way to their southland homes. They were half drunk all of them, for the wayfarers treated them to beer at the frequent inns and ale-stakes which lined the road, so that they cheered and sang lustily as they passed. They roared rude pleasantries at Aylward, who turned in his saddle and shouted his opinion at them until they were out of hearing.

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