

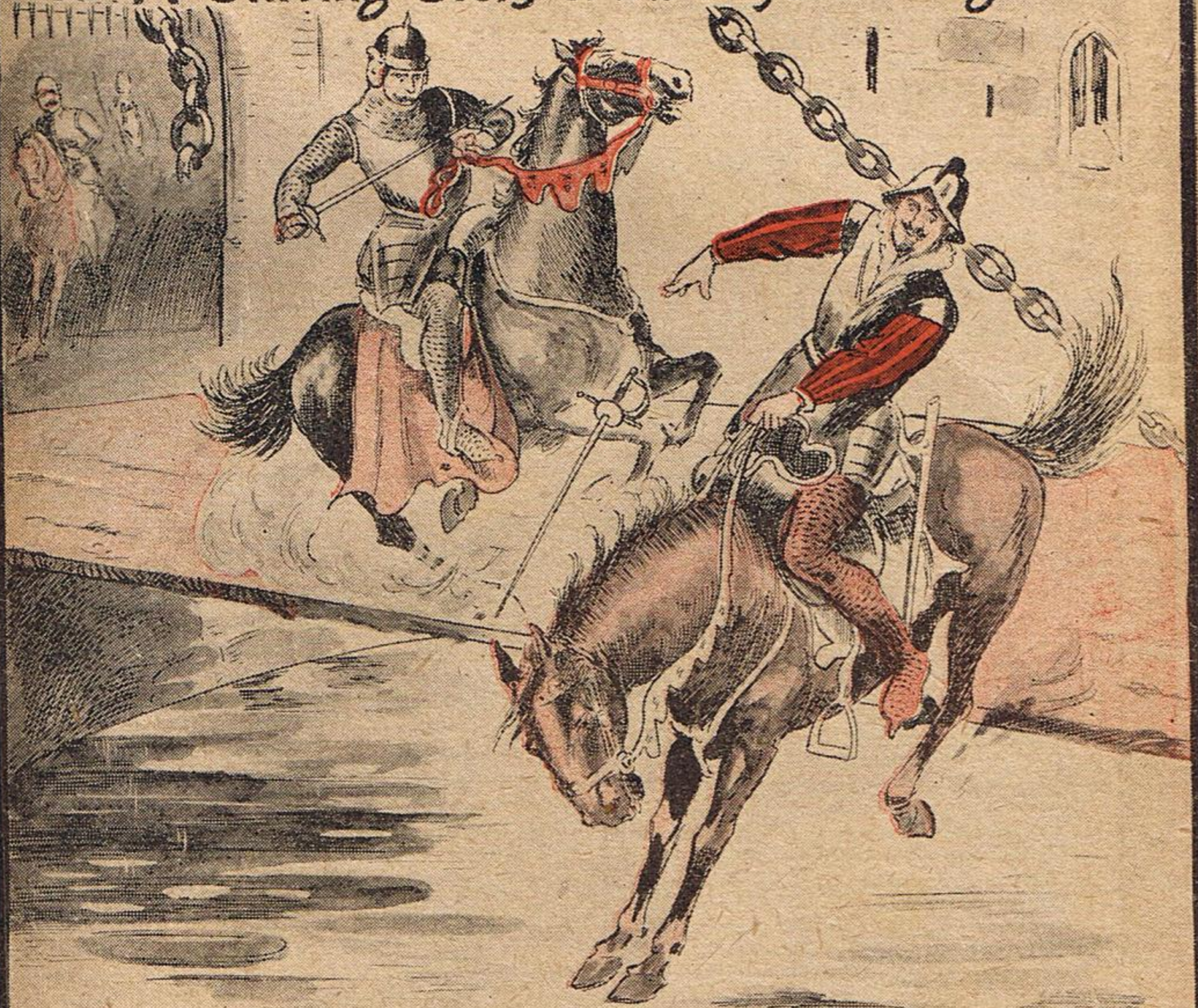
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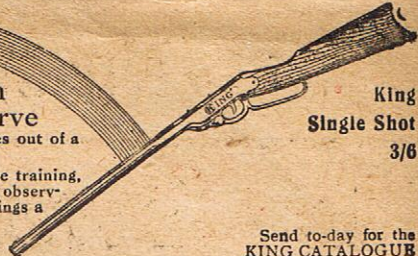


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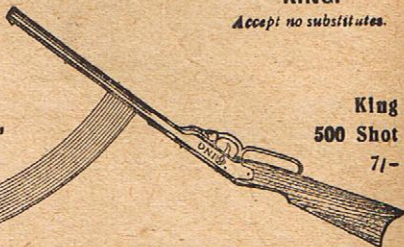


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#### THE ATTACK ON THE INN.

The bright moonlight of a fine, clear night in summer shone across a street in London town, throwing into bold relief the figure of the burly night-watchman as he walked in the middle of the cobble-paved way.

"Near twelve, and a fine night!" he called, and his bellowing voice went rumbling round roofs and gables.

When the sound died away, it seemed as if the silence was of a deeper quality than before. Into this deeper silence the quickly-nearing galloping of horses broke with furious clamour. The startled watchman had barely time to retreat to a friendly doorway for shelter when a knight, fully armed, came clattering along the street, closely followed by a cavalcade of shouting men.

The first rider drew rein sharply at the door of the White Lion Inn, and beat furiously on the panels with the head of his battle-axe. Casements were flung open, nightcapped heads appeared along each side of the street, and questions were bawled in scores of voices.

Mine host of the inn jerked out his head angrily.

"What want you, roysterers?" he demanded. "What mean you, disturbing honest folk thus?"

"Open! Open, sirrah!" cried the knight, ceasing his knocking. "Open! Canst thou not see that 'tis a matter of life and death with me? Open, in the King's name, before these ruffians are upon me, or I will split the door!"

He raised the axe to deal another crashing blow at the stout oak, ig-

noring the troop of men who had followed him. As the landlord drew in his head, minded to open the door, five of the men charged at the solitary knight. One with a swinging sweep of his halbert sent the knight's weapon spinning from his hand.

Will Fitzjohn turned to face his foes, two swords clanging on the steel of his mail shirt as he turned. His own sword leapt out, and one of the blades flew high above its owner's head, the other snapped between point and hilt.

The solitary knight's sword was a blade of the famous Toledo steel, of wonderful temper and toughness, and as he defended himself desperately it flashed amongst the medley of weapons and steel caps like a flash of light. The mounted men endeavoured to close with Fitzjohn, but they could not pass the length of that lightning sword.

Two more horsemen, riding leisurely, now reined up on the edge of the disturbance, watching the struggle.

The knight's tall figure made him a good mark for attack, and only his consummate skill as a swordsman saved him from being quickly overpowered by his nine assailants. Two of them he had already put out of action, and so hot was the combat that none of them heard some one within the inn drawing back the heavy bolts of the door.

Swerving round too suddenly, Fitzjohn's horse stumbled and fell beneath him. He recovered his feet, still sword in hand, and tried to get his back to the wall. A quick clamour of blows was rained on his mail, his



blade, and the fluted Milan steel of his visor. A wound on his shoulder weakened him, and a heavy blow on the head sent him reeling backwards. As he fell, one of the men dismounted to secure him, and their leader shouted:

"Gon de Brissac wins! Open, landlord, in the name of the Cardinal!"

The door, that had been opened ever so little, was reclosed with a bang.

"Gramercy!" cried one of the two newcomers. "Can we stand by and see the knight butchered? Are we going to let a foreign knave pink an Englishman, Guy, my boy?"

"Not so!" cried the other. "We don't know what the quarrel is, but it will keep our muscles in practice if we give this brave fellow a little help. Have at them!"

Springing from their horses, cloaks wrapped round their left arms and swords in their right hands, the two plunged into the melee, striking out with cool dexterity. Guy Hathersden beat down the first man that opposed him, and Henry Wilton brought down his blade on the French knight's helmet with such force that Gon de Brissac staggered back like a drunken man. In a trice Will Fitzjohn was afoot again.

"Twas well done, friends," he said. "I shall owe you for that. If you will help me to get inside the inn, and have five minutes' talk with some one there, it may be a good night's work for you."

"Good or not, 'tis a merry one!" cried Wilton, plying his blade with reckless humour. "Now for the door, Guy, and let our friend get in whilst we keep these fellows busy."

Fitzjohn attacked the door again, but even as he belaboured it, it was suddenly opened, and eager hands drew him within. Before it could be closed there was a great rush of the French knight's men, and the two cavaliers had plenty to do to guard themselves and prevent the entrance being forced.

"Stand aside!" roared Gon de Brissac, angrily. "This is no concern of yours, interferers. We are Cardinal's men, and the knight, with sundry low companions, is seeking to ruin our master. Stand aside, and let us follow him!"

"Not so, good Brissac!" said Guy, grimly, with a flourish of his sword.

"Cardinal's or King's men are all one to us when we see a gentleman set upon by nine cowards. No, we prefer to give him time to breathe."

The Frenchman paused, irresolute, for a moment. Then he waved back his men.

"As you please, fools!" he said. "I have help on the way, that must soon be here, and then you may find time to repent your obstinacy. You shall not escape the Cardinal, even if you escape me."

"We have no quarrel with Wolsey," said Henry Wilton. "We are only freelances who love fair play, and if the knight has reasonable designs on the Cardinal, he will get no further aid of us. But we gave him our word that we would let him have a breathing time, and that we will do."

"That is chivalrous, forsooth!" said De Brissac. "But whilst we delay here, they may be making their escape at the back. And all we want are certain papers they possess. We care little for their lives. And here are the rest of my men. Now, stand out of the way, or take the consequences."

A dozen men-at-arms, afoot, had forced their way through the curious crowd that blocked the streets, and the whole force advanced upon the inn door.

"I am minded to see the end of this," said Guy to his friend. "How if we join De Brissac? We may be able to see that the knight has a fair chance. And Wolsey is powerful."

"And a bad enemy," said Wilton. "I am with you."

They stood back, and De Brissac's men belaboured the door. It held firm, and all seemed strangely quiet within the house.

"Let go at the oak, Guy," said Wilton. "The birds have flown safe enough."

The two joined at the onslaught, and under the crashing blows of battle-axes the beams cracked, the panels split, the splinters flew, and the bolts and bars jarred and loosened.

Crash, crash! Under one of Wilton's heavy blows the main timber gave way, the lock-case fell shattered to the floor, and the door was open.

With an ugly rush the Cardinal's men pushed past the free-lances and dashed into the dark passage, the



screams of frightened maidservants heralding their entry. Guy and Wilton dashed in after them, followed by the watchman and some of the bolder spirits in the crowd.

"I trust we gave him time enough," said Guy Hathersden. "If he has not got clear by now, 'tis not our fault. Ah!"

His exclamation was caused by another sudden crashing and uproar of sound proceeding from the dark interior—a sound of heavy bodies falling, of woodwork splintering and breaking, a perfect babel of cries and imprecations, and the clash of steel on steel.

"Come on!" cried Guy. "There is hot work doing there, and more in this night's business than we imagined."

They ran quickly down the passage, others close behind them, gained the foot of the stairs, and began to ascend. Half-way up Guy stopped suddenly and threw himself back, laughing immoderately.

"By our Lady, this is good!" he cried.

To explain his amusement, we must relate how Will Fitzjohn and his friends in the inn had made use of the brief time at their disposal.

## CHAPTER II.

### A USEFUL LANDLORD.—THE GAP IN THE STAIRS.

Some time before the attack on the inn two men were sitting in an upper room, talking earnestly. Their names were John Gillian and Andrew Slead, who were both friends of Will Fitzjohn—friends, although but men in his service, for every one who was not an enemy of jovial Will was his friend. They were waiting for him, though they did not expect him to come with quite so much noise. A sum of money lay spread out on the coverlet of the undisturbed bed.

"That," said John Gillian, "is our means of defence—that, and the sword of Toledo steel, and our wits. We shall need them all before we reach the coast, unless we get away to-night unsuspected."

"Are you so sure, friend Gillian," asked Slead, "that the King of France will pay our master well for these letters of the Cardinal that he hopes to purloin? Why not take the shorter way of giving them direct into Henry's hands?"

"Not so short and easy, seeing with what a cloud of Wolsey's spies Henry is surrounded," said Gillian. "And if I understood our master aright, the point of the whole matter is this—that Louis shall have seen the letters. He will make sure that they are sent to Henry, and then the fat will be in the fire, and we shall see the downfall of my Lord Wolsey, and Fitzjohn will come into his own lands and rights again."

"I cannot see, for the life of me," said Slead, with a queer expression lurking round the corners of his unpleasant mouth, "that our undertaking is so hazardous. Fitzjohn will come here as an ordinary, belated guest. We have secured this room, overlooking the river, and our boat is lying snugly ready in the shadow of the house. We have but to go down the rope and make our escape. Once on the river our way is clear."

"I wish it were so simple as that," said Gillian, shaking his head. "Look you, Andrew Slead—it is like this. Will Fitzjohn is suspected already, hence his sudden haste to act. The letters may be missed any moment and a hue and cry raised. There is a Frenchman in the Cardinal's service—Gon de Brissac by name—whom our master once offended deeply, and he is sure to be put on our track. Then Wolsey has other enemies on the watch, and if Gon de Brissac is after us, they will suspect something very near the truth, and join in the hunt for their own purposes. The King himself may have spies at work, too. King Charles of Spain has sent a man over here—one Don Sigiente, as noiseless and tireless as a shadow—and if we are hunted, he will be sure to be of the pack. I tell you, all depends on Fitzjohn reaching here unseen. If not, a few yards start on the water will not avail us much, and we shall be three runaways, with heavy prices on our heads, most likely."

"And where shall we land if we are pursued?" asked Andrew Slead.



"Hard by the boat steps we wot of," said John Gillian. "From there a lane runs out into the open country by the Till Brook, and I have it in mind that the old monastery there will make a good hiding-place. When the searchers have gone further afield we can come out and pursue our journey. But hark! Dost hear that? Fitzjohn, by all the saints, with the hue-and-cry hard at his heels! Now, unless we can get him inside quickly, we are undone!"

Then came the challenge at the door, the opening of the window in the next room as the landlord put out his head, and the smashing blows of Will's battle-axe. And then the roar of Gon de Brissac's voice above the tumult.

"That's the Cardinal's Frenchman sure enough," said John Gillian. "And methinks mine host was awake and about very rapidly. I should not be surprised if the fellow was listening at our keyhole. And now he's going down to open the door to all and sundry. We must stop that. Only Fitzjohn must be let in."

As he spoke he opened the chamber door and peered into the dark well of the stairway.

"Landlord," he called. "A word with you. Come up here a few minutes."

Boniface, his fat cheeks blanched with fear, obeyed.

"Gentlemen," he spluttered, "what can I do for you? If you want me to stand siege to a riot like this, I cannot please you. Hark to that wood-chopper belabouring my best front door, sirrahs! And if you have any idea of escaping from the window without first settling your scores, I would warn you not. Faith, as the door must be opened, you shall go down and do it yourselves."

"Thank you much, landlord," said John Gillian, Slead laughing maliciously. "You are somewhat too knowing and suspicious. We are desperate men, in danger of death, and not overburdened with riches. Some day we will return and pay you well, but not to-day."

"A murrain on ye!" cried Boniface. "Pay ye shall, and now, or— Help! help!"

His cry was drowned by the uproar outside as he was seized by Gillian and Slead and dragged into the cham-

ber. One of them slipped a rolled kerchief into his mouth and effectually gagged him. In a trice he was bound to the foot of the bed.

"Now," said Gillian, "I have a plan. I will go down and let our master in at the right moment, while you must be cutting out the ends of three or four of the stairs, half-way up. The wood is dry and near rotten, and when our friends the enemy come up they will go down—into the pantry. That will give us some time. And what lights there are we must put out. Now to work."

Leaving the infuriated and frightened but helpless landlord a prisoner, they were quickly downstairs, and Slead was attacking the dry, worn boards of the stairway with his dagger. John Gillian blew out a lamp and a rushlight that two of the serving-maids carried, and going to the door softly drew back the bolts, listening meantime to the clamour outside. He was on the point of opening when De Brissac shouted victoriously, and back went the main bolt. Then the two freelances interfered, and Gillian was able to let his master in safely.

In a few words each explained the situation, and the hands of knight and retainer grasped in the darkness. The door re-secured, they went up the stairs carefully. By this time Slead had done his work, and the steps they had to leap over were only held up by a few splinters.

"Now we had better get in the boat," said Gillian.

"Marry, not yet," said Fitzjohn. "Tis a great idea of yours, John, and stiff and sore as I am. I must stop and see the fun. 'Twill be a run on the pantry, forsooth! And here they come. 'Quiet' is the word! I only hope the two brave fellows who befriended me have saved their skins."

Flushed with anger at the delay, Gon de Brissac and his following burst in, and after hastily searching the lower rooms came rushing for the stairs. The three watchers on the landing above held their breaths.

Up they came, crowding together, and so hurriedly that there was no drawing back. A splutter of smashing, splitting wood, a crashing, a jangle of armour and weapons, and a



wild chorus of yells of astonishment and rage. The foremost man was nearly at the top of the prepared steps before he burst through, and so the whole troop fell through the gap into the dark cellar beneath, landing uninvited in cans of milk and great dishes of fresh butter. An indescribable scene of confusion followed as the exasperated men found their feet in the darkness, and discovered that the cellar door was bolted on the outside, and the gap in the stairs was too high to be reached.

Will Fitzjohn, who loved a joke, clapped Gillian soundly on the back.

"I thank thee, John, for this sight. It hath done me good," he said. "Now we will go."

"But first take the key within and lock up mine host," said Gillian.

As soon done as said, and the three men swung themselves down the rope into the boat. Fitzjohn took the tiller ropes and Slead and Gillian the oars. A few vigorous pulls and the boat shot out of the shadow of the inn into the white sheen of the moonlight on the open river.

"I would have given somewhat to stay and see our friends' faces when they burst into the chamber and find only mine host, bound and gagged, with his red eyes bulging from his fat face!" said the knight, laughing. "Well, friends, do we land at the steps, or go further on?"

"I would I were sure the landlord did not overhear us," said Gillian. "But we must risk that, and land. They know we are on the water now, and will soon be after us, therefore let us get on dry land. And your shoulder, knight, needs a little careful attention before we go much further. This way, Andrew."

They soon reached the damp, moss-grown steps, and letting the boat go adrift, sprang ashore. Hurrying on, they gained the shelter of a churchyard, and here they halted whilst Gillian, deft as a physician and gentle as a woman, dressed Fitzjohn's wound and bound it up. It caused more delay than expected, and the sky grew pale with nearing dawn.

"We must be going, and putting our best legs first," said Gillian. "'Tis a good hour's walk to the brook."

"I wish I had arranged to have horses waiting for us," said Fitzjohn. "But I have not your head, John. Do you know the old monastery that you spoke of?"

"Well," said Gillian. "'Tis a most decrepit yet large ruin out in the fields. Haunted it is at times, and shunned by most folk. The Rudbury Sye wood adjoins it, and the moat yet takes water from the Till Brook. If we can but gain it unknown, we are safe."

They hurried on through the cool fresh air of dawn, and were at last at the brookside, near the wooden bridge. Not far away rose the grey ruins of the monastery, hedged about by giant oaks. But as they stepped on the bridge a shrill cry of "Tally-ho!" broke out behind them. They were pursued by a troop of mounted men!

### CHAPTER III.

#### FRESH FOES.—THE HOLLOW TREE.

"Now, a thousand maledictions on that prying landlord!" said Gillian. "He heard us mention the ruin, and here is Gon de Brissac close upon us! And yonder, if I mistake not, comes another troop on our track."

"That will be Don Sigiente," said Fitzjohn. "He has spies everywhere, and will have learned what is afoot. And I fancy those two who befriended me in the street are with the Frenchman. No doubt he has talked them over to his service. This looks bad for us now, John."

"Yet I despair not," said Gillian. "I know this neighbourhood well. If we can but reach yonder clump of oaks we may yet trick them all. This is no time for your sword, knight, but for my cunning."

"So it seems," replied the knight, regretfully. "Lead on."

They dashed across the bridge, skirted a field, and reached the welcome cover of a hedge, that sheltered them nearly all the way to the group of noble oaks for which they were making. Looking back from this point of vantage, they could plainly see their foes racing along.



"A close race!" said Slead, pointing back. "The Spaniard is endeavouring to get to the bridge before the Cardinal's men. There is no love lost between them, I trow."

It was indeed a race—a stern struggle. The brook was deep here, and now in flood, and both parties of horsemen were straining every nerve to reach the bridge first. Nearer and nearer they drew, their paths converging. The earth flew in dusty puffs from the hoofs of the horses. Gon de Brissac, having the advantage of the start, was leading, but Don Sigiente, on a magnificent black horse, rapidly drew up to the Frenchman. It was now neck and neck. As Don Sigiente reached the end of the bridge, by a supreme effort De Brissac charged straight into him. The horses crashed together, both coming down, and the hand-rail of the bridge snapped off with the sudden shock. Steeds and riders were at once precipitated into the turbulent flood.

Gon de Brissac managed to grasp the woodwork and hang on grimly, his horse being swept from under him, whilst Sigiente came gasping to the surface lower down, and pulled himself out by the aid of a projecting tree.

The troops halted, laughing at their leaders, and a truce was called.

"We can't all cross over together," said Guy Hathersden to the Frenchman. "To take turns will be quicker in the end. We will go first, and the others can follow when they have recovered their drenched leader. The quarry is out of sight already, you see. They will be well hidden in the ruins by now."

All that was said was quite audible to the fugitives.

"Not so," said John Gillian, "though it is well that you should so think, my fine friends. This way, comrades, and not a word or a sound."

He went round the largest tree of the group, and suddenly disappeared. It was hollow—a staunch old monarch of the woods—and although the opening was so narrow that it was difficult for the knight to squeeze through, there was ample room in the dry, dark interior. And as the opening faced westward, away from the brook and the ruin, it seemed a safe hiding-place.

The nine horsemen, including Brissac and the two freelances, were soon at the clump of oaks. Here, as luck would have it, they dismounted, and consulted amongst themselves.

"We had best tether our horses here," said Henry Wilton, "and leave a man to guard them. 'Eight of us will be few enough to go thoroughly over the ruins.'"

"Yes—six within and two to guard the drawbridge," said Gon de Brissac. "Leonard can stay with the horses, for they will be no use to us inside. In faith, when we have lain hands on the knaves, we had better keep them within and prepare to stand a siege. This Spanish hound will not let us get clear without a struggle, and with only an equal force, and hampered with prisoners, we should fare ill in a fight. So be ready, Leonard, and when you hear a double blast on the bugle, do you mount and ride to my lord the Cardinal, and bring help. Confound these foreign spies! We shall have the whole countryside up."

"I understand," said Leonard.

The Cardinal's men left their horses and hastened towards the monastery. Leaving two to guard the rotting drawbridge, the other six disappeared within the ruins. At the same moment Don Sigiente and his eight men drew rein at the clump of oaks, and saw how things stood.

The Spanish knight had recovered from his sudden dousing, and laughed gaily.

"Por Dios!" he said to Leonard, "but your master is foolish! Not counting you, he has but eight men to guard three prisoners. The game is ours. We will tie up our steeds here, and quietly wait De Brissac coming out. It is kind of him to be so courteous as to save us more trouble. Adios for the moment, señor!"

Leonard, looking to his saddle-girth, chuckled to himself as the Spaniard and his men strolled towards the ruins and exchanged bantering greetings with the sentries at the moat. The minutes passed quickly, but no sign or sound came from the ruins. Now and then a steel cap appeared on the walls, and an arm or weapon waved reassuringly.

Nearly half an hour had gone when John Gillian crept out carefully and



reviewed the situation. Going back as silently, he whispered to the others:

"It is time we were going. We may not get another chance."

"How? We should be seen, of a surety. This Leonard is on guard."

"Yet now is our time, or never?" said Gillian. "We are quite two hundred yards from the ruin, and here are good horses ready. That means a start it would be foolish to throw away. And the odds are that we shall be discovered here, soon or late. As to the sentry, leave him to me. Come on."

Leonard was startled by a sound behind him, and turned to face the three men. Before he could give the alarm John Gillian said:

"Don't move, sirrah! We are resolute, and three blades will be in you if you make a sound. We are going to steal a mount apiece, and want you to help us."

The soldier stared, nonplussed.

"You can do naught else," pursued John, coolly. "If you betray us, you would give us into the hands of the Spaniard, and how would that serve your master? How would that help the Cardinal? Come, now, unloose a trio of steeds."

Leonard, seeing the force of the argument, unwillingly complied.

"Now, comrades," said Gillian, "take each a horse by the bridle, and walk towards the bridge, keeping in the cover of this clump of trees as much as possible. Once on the bridge, mount, and ride for the wood. I will follow, but first I have a little more to do. Stay not to ask questions."

"You are a wonderful fellow, John," said the knight, as he and Sleed moved away. "Tarry not too long."

Gillian looked at his knife and then at Leonard.

"This is a very sharp tool, and just what I need," he said. "Watch me."

He stood behind the nearest horse, slipped the blade under the saddle-strap, and gave a quick, shearing cut. Another at the bridle-rein, and the things fell limp and loose.

"You would prevent pursuit?" said Leonard. "I am armed, remember."

"Raise the alarm, then, and give us into the hands of your master's enemies!" said Gillian, going on with

his work. "Yes, I fancy there will need to be a visit to a saddler's before you come in sight of us again."

Saddle after saddle, bridle after bridle, he cut loose. Now but two remained uncut. Suddenly Leonard gave a cry. Gillian had been seen by one of the Spaniard's men, and several were running towards the oaks. Two more swift slashes—two more, and his work was done. Just as Leonard, thinking it as well to capture at least one of the trio, rushed towards him, John Gillian leapt on the horse he had chosen and spurred away, sending back a loud laugh of good-humoured triumph.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### AT CLOSE QUARTERS.—THE BURNT BRIDGE.

The Spaniards ran a short way after him, and one shot a quarrel that whizzed uncomfortably past his head; but John was going strong, and soon outdistanced all pursuit. As he galloped over the bridge and turned off for the wood, he cast a glance behind, and saw Gon de Brissac's men emerging helter-skelter from the postern of the monastery. Soon he overtook his comrades, and at the tale he told jolly Fitzjohn was convulsed with mirth.

"Faith," said he, "your wit gives me more good than my swordsmanship; and I am longing to have more exercise out of that, for since the Irish war and the campaign in Flanders I've been like a fish out of water. We shall beat the motley crowd that are after us yet, my merry John. Gadzooks! To be at the oaks now, and hear them roundly abusing each other and venting their spleen on that poor Leonard! 'Twould be better than a play!"

"We shall laugh with yet greater ease when once we have the letters safely across the water," said Andrew Sleed.

"True," said Gillian, soberly.

The trio cantered on along the brook side, over a stretch of open ground, and then entered the wood by a bridle-path. Well within the cover of the trees, they halted, and, resting, made



a simple meal of the provender Slead had brought in his wallet. It was noon when they mounted again and rode off, shaping their course round to the southward, and towards the coast. After an hour's journey they heard the sounds of a party coming through the wood.

"Pursued again?" exclaimed Fitzjohn. "They have lost no time."

They drew rein, and Slead climbed a tall tree. From its leafy vantage-point he had a good view around, and was soon down again.

"'Tis the Cardinal's man, De Brissac," he reported. "He has about a dozen men with him now. We must have been seen coming into this part of the wood, for they are spreading out like the beaters at a hunt. They will sight us in ten minutes if we stay here."

"Bad news," said John Gillian. "We must retreat before them as carefully as we can, and keep on the alert. The wood is a long one, and neither we nor they can travel fast in it."

"At any cost, we must reach Rudbury Sye before nightfall if we are to keep our horses and get any sleep," said Fitzjohn. "I know an innkeeper there who owes me a service, and he will put us up and ask no questions."

"Let us be going, then," said Gillian—"though, from our late experience, we ought to be careful of inns."

Until the middle of the afternoon they kept ahead, but by then they were hot, tired, and thirsty, and their animals in as bad a plight.

"We must push on to the river and give them a drink, and ourselves, too, at the wooden bridge," said the knight.

"And the more need, by the Rood," said Gillian, "since our foes have got wind of us. Can't you hear them coming, hard a-pelt?"

"'Twas that half-witted yokel we passed," said Slead. "He has spoken of us. Forward!"

John Gillian relapsed into silence, his honest face wearing a preoccupied expression.

"It would be glorious!" he said, presently. "There is no other crossing for a good distance. It is in flood, too, with the heavy rains up country, and the timber will be fairly dry yet,

after the long drought and with this hot sun."

"What mean you?" asked the knight.

"Why, only this," replied Gillian. "I have flint and steel on me, and the bridge over the river is wooden. They cannot cross anywhere else for miles each way, and ford or swim they cannot, for the violence of the flood. We will burn the bridge behind us, friends, and gain a little rest and respite. What say you?"

"A bold thing to do, but I like the thought," said Fitzjohn. "We shall need to be quick, for they are close on us."

As the knight spoke the three horsemen galloped clear of the wood and bore down on the bridge.

"Now for the trick!" said Gillian.

He dismounted at the further end, got under the lee of the dry, rickety structure, and struck flint and steel repeatedly. He got a spark at last, and fired the tinder, and with its flare lit a little heap of dried grass against the woodwork. A flame leapt up—a pale red tongue of flame, looking very queer in the full light of day—and seized on the ready timber. In a very short time wreathing sheets of fire were curling over the end of the bridge. A cloud of pungent smoke arose, and the doomed beams cracked and charred.

Not satisfied, Gillian patiently set to work and lit it in another place, and another. That done, although Gon de Brissac and his cavalcade were now out of the trees and thundering down upon the smoking bridge, he coolly mounted his horse and joined his waiting companions, who sat watching.

"Now we had best go," he said.

"Not yet!" cried Fitzjohn, fingering his sword-hilt. "I must see how they fare. My blade may be needed yet."

Their pursuers swept down at full speed, their leader apoplectic with rage at the bold stratagem.

"You shall smart for this, knaves!" he cried, forcing his horse on the bridge.

"Cross at your peril!" shouted Fitzjohn. "It will not bear your weight. And if you do cross, by chance, I am ready for you!"

De Brissac hesitated a moment, and his men, reining in their steeds, drew back from the drifting smoke. But



just then there was a wild "Halloa!" behind them, and another troop came out of the wood, hot on the trail, Don Sigiente leading. Seeing them, the Frenchman grew reckless.

"Over the bridge!" he shouted. "I will not be beaten a third time! 'Twill bear yet, but not for long. Over! Over, I say! Let the Spaniard follow if he can!"

Some of his men hung back; some could not make their horses face the fire.

"A murrain on ye, do!ts!" cried De Brissac, who was not short of courage. "If ye won't come, I will go alone. Now, who follows?"

He put spurs to his horse, making the animal spring forward with the cruel pain, and right on the bridge he went, in the teeth of the curling flames. Three were as daring as himself, and were close behind. They reached the middle of the span, half-choked with the pungent smoke; then—crash!

The frail structure had burnt so far as to be unable to bear their united weight. It broke asunder, and horses, riders, and blazing beams were thrown into the strong flood. There was a hissing, and spluttering, and splashing, and the standing fragments of the bridge were still red with fire.

One of the men, struck by a falling log, and stunned, was washed away by the turbulent current and drowned. De Brissac and the other two, with the help of their comrades, were saved, faring no worse than a fright and a wetting.

As they crawled out, soaked, helmetless, ridiculous, Don Sigiente and his troop wheeled round and cantered away north, bound for the bridge at Croud, five miles off.

Will Fitzjohn, with great gusto, roared across the river:

"By my halidom, De Brissac, but this is a great day! Never since I was in Ireland have I seen such doings. I wish you better luck next time! If you care not to follow the Spaniard, there is a ferry at Staford, as far the other way. You are a poor hand at your business, or you would not have let so many get wind of it. Look behind you."

The Cardinal's man turned, to see three men, armed for stern fighting, and mounted on steeds that looked nothing for pace, but showed signs of good staying power, riding towards the burnt bridge.

"Yonder is Luke Thorpe, a most pertinacious King's man, determined to capture us himself," pursued the knight. "Put him off the scent, if you can. And till our next meeting, De Brissac, au revoir!"

With this, the three fugitives swung round and started off at a swinging pace, resolved to make the most of the time they had now gained. Gon de Brissac and his troop, after a brief delay, decided for the ferry, and thitherwards also turned Luke Thorpe and his men.

Rustics and yeomen, leisurely working in fields by the riverside, wondered what was afoot—whether there was a rebellion or an invasion. Many, hearing that it was a man-hunt, shook their heads sagely, and said it would soon be over, there were so many on the track.

But honest John Gillian thought otherwise, having a shrewd idea that their very number would aid the escape of his master. Whilst the hunters were yet going diverse ways to bridge and ferry, the hunted men were interviewing the innkeeper at Rudbury. They had had a long, hard ride, and needed food, and drink, and sleep, and before dawn—before any of their pursuers could have time to overtake them or get news of them—they must be saddled again and beginning another stage of their adventurous southward journey.

## CHAPTER V.

### A TRAITOR'S PRICE.

Quietly, with many whispered cautions to the landlord of the inn, the trio of pilgrims mounted and rode off in the cool night under the stars and moon. Dawn was already tinging the sky-line, but still it was dark enough to travel without fear of being recognized. In no mood for talk, they rode



on in silence. Whenever they met wayfarers—belated roysterers or early clodhoppers—they drew rein in the nearest friendly shadow, and waited until the road was clear again.

Morning found them not far from Stafford. There was a fair being held in the village, and the roads gave promise of being busy. The travellers decided to rest and hide until dusk, in a ferny hollow between high banks—a waste piece of ground. Fitzjohn—too notable a figure, and ever too ready with the soldier's argument of cold steel—remained to look after the animals, whilst John Gillian and Andrew Slead went different ways to the village to procure food. Going separately, they were not so likely to be suspected. After parting with Gillian at a cross lane, Slead quickened his pace, an unpleasant smile wrinkling his features, and a hoarse, dry chuckle rattling in his throat.

"'Tis odds on some of them having crossed by the ferry, and having reached here," he muttered to himself. "If so, I shall be in luck. This fools' chase has gone quite far enough for me, and I have no mind to be strung up at the finish. If money is to be made by giving information, the sooner the better, say I."

When he reached the village green, which was now alive and noisy with jugglers, gipsies, quacks, play-actors, mountebanks, pedlars, and villagers, a company of horsemen were saddling at the door of the Green Vine. Their leader chuckled a pert serving-maid under the chin, and, turning round as he laughed at her saucy remonstancé, caught sight of Andrew Slead.

"What!" he roared. "By the fleur-de-lys, I have seen that varlet before! He was at the bridge. Seize him! Don't let him slip away this time. Where one is, the others can't be far off."

"No need to secure me," said Andrew, stepping up to Gon de Brissac before any one could lay hands on him. "'Twas you I sought."

"Aha! A pretty story, forsooth! The trapped bird is very clever!"

"Indeed, sir knight, you wrong me. I was looking for you. I am afoot, and unarmed, and my sole wish is to deliver up these men—Will Fitzjohn and

John Gillian—to justice. I take it that you want to hand them over to the Cardinal?"

"Of a surety, sirrah," said Gon de Brissac, grimly. "So you have come to betray your friends and to save your own sorry skin? Can you lead us to them at once?"

"That I can—at a price."

"Oho! At a price! Listen to the knave! Well, thy terms?"

"First, a guarantee of my liberty and safety; second, a promise of employment in the Cardinal's service; last, a payment of fifty gold nobles."

"You pitch your requirements high!" said Gon de Brissac. "And what if I give you nothing but a good trouncing, and you find yourself in the stocks or the pillory?"

"Then you will know nothing, sir knight. Not a word will you get out of me, by fair means or foul, except at my price. Bethink you. My figure is none too high for what you will get for the capture."

"You are a clever scoundrel," said the knight. "Out with your knowledge now, and no more nonsense."

"Your promise," urged Slead. "Your promise first!"

"Go to! Lead on to the hiding-place, knave!"

"Your promise!" persisted the traitor. "See, yonder comes Luke Thorpe, the King's spy. Shall I sell my secret to him?"

"Lead on!" cried the knight. "I accept your terms. You shall be paid your full and due price, on my honour as a gentleman. Landlord, a horse for this friend of mine, quickly."

Andrew Slead was soon mounted, and under his guidance the troop of free-and-easy martialists rode out of the village, jesting and laughing. At a discreet distance, suspecting that they were keen on the trail, Luke Thorpe and his men followed. And skulking along behind walls and hedgerows, as fast as he dare go, went John Gillian. He had reached the village soon after Slead, and had seen, from some way off, the latter's action. He stuck to the rear of the pursuers, and came up to the edge of the dingle as Gon de Brissac's men dismounted, and, leading their horses, surrounded the hollow. Wriggling along the ground under cover of some low



bushes, John Gillian reached a point where he could see right into and across the hollow, and yet remain himself unseen.

Two horses were leisurely cropping the grass, but Fitzjohn was not visible. The French knight's men swarmed all over the hollow, but found no one.

"He has heard us. He is hidden," said Slead, edging away from the men-at-arms.

"You will keep near me, knave!" cried De Brissac, warningly. "If you have misled us, so that your friends may gain time, it will go hard with you. Go carefully, men, and let not the fellow escape. If he so much as moves a finger, let drive! And the two we are after—dead or alive, we must have them."

The soldiers, enjoying the hunt, thoroughly explored the hollow, forming themselves in a circle and gradually converging upon the great tree that stood in the middle of the grassy space at the bottom. The search proved in vain, and hope revived in John Gillian's heart. Fitzjohn was certainly not there. Once more, obeying Gon de Brissac's angry orders, the men went over the ground, but without result. On Andrew Slead's face grew a look of fear, and a chill of dismay seized him. He again endeavoured to sink away, but the knight saw him.

"Hold this churl!" he cried. "I thought he would want to take to his heels. Now, my fine traitor, you shall be paid your price. Bring here the ropes we had for securing our prisoners."

"But I left the knight here," said Slead, wriggling ineffectually in the the firm grasp of two soldiers. "And these are two of our horses."

"I doubt it not, most clever scant-o'-grace," said De Brissac, calmly ferocious. "Nor do I doubt it that the men we seek are far enough by now. They may be masquerading as Punchinellos on the village green whilst we are fooling here. And you want to leave us, to chuckle over our discomfiture, indeed? String him up to this oak, my merry men. There will be meat for the ravens before long, and at least one of the three precious vagabonds will be laid by."

The knight was wound up to a high pitch of fury, and was ready for any

cruel deed. Sir Henry Wilton and Guy Hathersden, who were with him, protested against his summary action, but he ignored them, and repeated his grim order.

Andrew Slead trembled like a man with the ague. He would cheerfully have betrayed his friends to death, but a personal experience of the same medicine seemed not so pleasant. He pleaded for mercy, protested his good faith, whined like a beaten cur.

Gon de Brissac, his chagrin somewhat relieved by having a victim to vent his rage upon, roared with unfeeling mirth.

"Up with him, men!" he cried. "Let us see if he can kick his heels as well as he can work his lying tongue. It will be practice for us before we get hold of his friends. Gramercy, but what excuse have I? Plenty. Did I not lose two or three good men in that murderous inn? Up with him, shriven or unshriven, and let him have his reward! Didn't I promise him, on my honour, that I would pay him his price?"

As the rope tightened round the luckless wretch's neck, and was pulled suddenly, swinging him off his feet, his cries ceased abruptly. He dangled, a queerly-jerking figure, in the shadow of the great tree. Wilton and Hathersden turned away, and after a few coarse jests at his expense, the executioners followed. He heard, along with the horrible drumming in his ears, the clink-clank of their accoutrements as they rode off. He heard them shouting of what they had done to Luke Thorpe and his two men, and then an awful silence fell upon him. Life was cheap in Merrie England in the days of bluff King Hal.

For how long he swung there, suffering agony of body and terror of mind, he did not know, for unconsciousness soon intervened. It was not really very long, and he awoke presently to find himself lying on the grass, a dampness as of cold water on his face, and John Gillian bending over him, pouring fiery spirit down his throat.

When he tried to speak, John Gillian bade him keep silence.

"I know all, renegade!" he said, sternly. "Stand up—you are able



now—and listen to what I am going to tell you, Andrew Slead. I had my fears of you last night, for you talk in your sleep, and that was one reason why I wished us to go alone to the village. I saw you accost the knight, I followed you here, I heard all that was said, and saw you strung up. When they had all ridden away, I was in two minds as to whether it was worth while cutting down such a piece of carrion, but, as you see, I decided to loose you. I had rather not have the crime of letting you die for want of help upon my soul, and sooner or later you are bound to meet your deserters. But I have done with you from now, Andrew Slead. You are no friend of mine. Go your own way, and don't cross my path any more. And mark this well! If ever you try to betray us again, I will kill you like a noxious beast!"

Only too glad to escape so easily, both from vengeful foe and justly-angered friend, Andrew Slead slunk away without a word of gratitude.

"And now," said Gillian, "to find the knight."

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE DUEL.—THE ESCAPE.

John Gillian, after making sure that the Cardinal's men and the King's men were well out of the way, riding back towards the village, set to work to examine the ground carefully. Fitzjohn had promised to await the return of his companions, and the bold knight was a man of his word. He was also a lover of danger, and fond of using his sword, and not likely to have run away. He must have been surprised and taken prisoner and led away. His mount was the only horse missing. There were many hoofprints and footprints in the hollow, and one trail leading away from the hollow in an opposite direction to that in which lay the village. Fitzjohn was a prisoner, that was certain. Who could have taken him, unless Don Sigiente had chanced upon him? Gillian's heart sank. He had heard the knight tell of a quarrel he had had with the

wily Spaniard, and how the latter had been made to eat humble pie. And now his master was in the Spaniard's power, and the Spaniard would get the letters.

One thing that puzzled John Gillian was a knife-mark on the great oak in the middle of the hollow—a broad gash deep in the gnarled bark. He felt that this was the knight's doing, and had a meaning, but what it was he could not guess.

"Nothing to do but to follow," he said, ruefully. "Never shall it be said of John Gillian that he forsook a friend."

He picked the better of the two horses and led it out of the dingle. Crossing a piece of springy turf, he gained the main road, and trotted steadily southward, making for the nearest village of size.

It was late that night when they ambled, both horse and rider dead tired, into the hamlet of Little Waneleigh. A few inquiries on the way had been sufficient to assure him that he was on the right track. The horse had cast a shoe, and whilst he was having it replaced at the smith's forge he gleaned the information from that worthy that a knight and seven men, with a prisoner, had put up for the evening at the Black Dog Inn.

"And a right jovial knave seemed the prisoner, and a sour-faced foreigner was the knight," said the smith, as he beat the glowing iron and the sparks flew around like golden rain. "And, by the King's crown, Little Waneleigh is full to-night, for yonder come two more visitors—well-favoured gentlemen, too—and they are trying the Pig and Pipe across the way. Is there aught stirring, stranger, that you know of?"

"Nothing public, good smith," said Gillian, "that I have knowledge of. But you have made me most curious, and I must stay here overnight. As the inns may be full, where would you advise me to quarter myself and my horse?"

"With me, if you are not too proud," said the smith.

The matter was settled, and, fortified by an ample, if homely meal, Gillian sallied forth to do what he could for his friend. He knew for certain now who were the knight's captors,



and he knew who the two last-comers were. In the light of the hostelry lamp he had recognized them as the two swordsmen who had joined Gon de Brissac. Doubtless they had been disgusted by that bully's ways, had left him, and followed close on Gillian's heels. The village was full of foes now, but already John Gillian's fertile brain was busy with a scheme to get advantage out of that dangerous state of affairs.

There was no time to lose before the inns closed. He walked boldly into the Pig and Pipe—right into the best room—and exchanged greetings with the company. The two swordsmen looked at him curiously, but did not at first recognize him. After some casual gossip, he turned to Guy Hathersden and said, meaningly:

"Did you know, sir, that a Spanish knight is housed at the Black Dog, and has with him an English prisoner? Do you think it bearable that an honest Englishman should be thus harried about the country by a foreigner?"

"What! A prisoner? And by a Spaniard?" cried Guy. "Know you their names?"

"Will Fitzjohn and Don Sigiente," said Gillian.

The two men sprang to their feet.

"And you are one of his friends," said Sir Henry Wilton. "I remember seeing you at the bridge. A pretty kettle o' fish is this, I vow! And you want us to rescue your friend, sirrah? You fancied you might both escape in the confusion, eh? Well, it was a bold scheme, and one that I admire. But we have been with Gon de Brissac long enough to know your game, and we have decided to hunt you on our own account. Here you are to hand, and you can consider yourself our prisoner."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Guy Hathersden. "It might not be far wrong for us to use this man's help in securing the other. We may never have a better chance. He can try to carry his own idea out if he likes now we are forewarned. And, after all, if we can lay hands on Fitzjohn and the papers, we can let this witty fellow go free. Now is our time, for the

Spaniard and most of his dogs should be somewhat hazy and sleepy by this. Will you help us, sirrah?"

"That I will," said Gillian.

"And that we will, whatever the quarrel may be, if it be to help an Englishman against a foreigner!" shouted several of the company.

"Then soon there will be music on the night wind stealing!" laughed Sir Henry Wilton. "Good prisoner, I pledge you failure of your pretty plan in this tankard of prime hippocrass."

All drank to the toast, even John Gillian himself, and, the tankards drained, the three men, with a motley array of churls and serving-men at their heels, trooped out of the inn and down the village street to the Black Dog Inn.

They crowded in through the open doorway, thronged the passage, and peered into all the rooms. The landlord, frightened by their rough entry, retreated behind his jars and flagons, and asked their business meekly. They ignored him, having found Don Sigiente and his men, as well as the prisoner. They were all sitting round a table in a back room, the table set with pots and tankards. In front of the don stood a great wine-cup full to the brim. Fitzjohn, sitting, bound, near the window, was enduring the Spaniard's cowardly taunts as best he could.

Gillian, Wilton, and Guy Hathersden rushed in, and in an instant rapiers were out, and chaos and mad riot reigned.

Don Sigiente sprang to his feet and drew his long, thin blade, lunging fiercely at Guy Hathersden as the latter's sword flashed before him.

The others leapt up at that, more or less clumsily, according to the amount they had imbibed. The table was overturned, and pots, cups, and bottles flew in all directions. The don's great cup described a fine curve in air, and bestowed its red contents on one of his own men. The unfortunate individual looked ghastly, as though drenched in blood.

In the confusion John Gillian made his way to Will Fitzjohn's side and cut his bonds. The knight seized his own fine blade—which had been lying on the table for Sigiente to gloat over—and stood ready to plunge into the



fray. Gillian, whose quick eyes had taken the measure of the situation, restrained him.

"At your back," he said, "is only a lattice window, with the casement open and big enough to get through. If I could but put out the light, we might escape that way. I have it! Be ready, and when I spring up and seize this great pot of marjoram that stands on the window-ledge, do you thrust yourself out and make for the stables. I will follow, if I can."

"A desperate hazard, but I am ready for it—after I have reckoned with this Spanish hound," said Fitzjohn. "How came you here?"

"Too long a story," said Gillian. "One question, though, should we be parted. Have you the letters yet?"

"No," said Fitzjohn, with a smile. "They are in the tree in the hollow—the tree I marked for you."

Gillian was satisfied, and putting his back to the wall stood on the defensive. The confusion was somewhat abated now, and in the middle of the room—some one having dragged the overturned table aside—Guy Hathersden was holding the Spaniard at bay and preventing him reaching Fitzjohn.

"Back, men!" cried Don Sigiente. "Put down your blade, knight. I have no quarrel with you. Let me but have it out with this boorish churl and prisoner of mine. If I win, I have him; if he wins, let him have a round with yourself. Is it agreed, or think you he dare not?"

Fitzjohn's blood boiled at the sneering words and tone.

"I will teach you a lesson, don!" he cried, fiercely. "You shall eat your own words! I can deal with you. Let this be my affair, gentlemen. No need to make the room a shambles."

"Let it be so, then," said Guy, dropping his sword.

"Defend yourself!" cried Fitzjohn, crossing the don's blade. "And if you win, you can take me for a slave!"

"And let the fight be to the death!" shrieked the Spaniard, his face livid, his lips working with frenzy. The wine he had drunk had roused his fiery Southern blood and hate to a fierce heat of passion.

"Guard!" he shouted; and as the blades leapt hungry to the light, the duel began.

Soon the fight waxed fast and furious. Fitzjohn was a truly magnificent swordsman, cool, audacious, iron-nerved. His true Toledo blade was keen and strong, and at each encounter and thrust and parry proved itself the hardier weapon of the two. But the knight was rather stiff from his binding, and the wound in his shoulder was not yet well. The Spaniard's rapier, too, was of exquisite workmanship, and its owner skilled in the lore of steel. What he lacked in strength and daring he at first made up for in recklessness and rapidity.

Cut and parry and thrust—tierce, quarte—slash, hack, the blades crossed and rang, their shearing edges hissing as they slid along each other. Their blows clanged and clattered on breastplates and steel caps; they clashed angrily at each foiled stroke and counter-stroke.

Don Sigiente was the first to break through. He feigned a tierce thrust—between the ribs—and Fitzjohn, warding it off, felt next moment the touch of the keen point like a spark of fire on his arm. It was only a flesh wound, not deep, but it roused him, for the first time, to a sense of his danger. The Spaniard had death in his eyes. Only one of them would be alive when the duel was finished.

Gradually the Englishman's greater reserve of strength began to tell. The Spaniard was forced back on the defensive, and though his rapier yet gleamed wickedly, and was as cunning as a steel serpent, he was desperate and more rash. He felt that he was losing ground, and had met his match at last.

The onlookers drew long breaths as they realized that the duel was approaching its crisis. Men-at-arms, yokels, waiters, all stood silent, motionless, absorbed.

"A good time to adventure my plan," muttered Gillian. "But, be-shrew me, I would see the end of this!"

The eyes of the combatants were riveted together, every nerve and sense strained to the uttermost. A miscalculation, a slip of hand or foot, a moment's hesitation, and one would have glimpsed his last view of earth. Shrilly, in the quiet of the



room, the steels rang and hissed: the swift motion of them was dazzling to the eyes.

Don Sigiente, growing more desperate, and suddenly sick with despair, struck out fiercely and rashly, at the same moment kicking one of the fallen tankards towards Fitzjohn, hoping to startle him to a false move. The knight saw the dishonourable action, and shortened his blade's sweep.

Then, so quickly that the motion could scarcely be followed, he made his master-stroke. The rapier flew to meet it, but was useless against the force of that strong blow. With a sibilant shiver, the delicate bar of steel snapped at the hilt. Fitzjohn's sword, pressing resistlessly on, pierced the Spaniard to the heart.

He fell, and for a moment the silence in the crowded room was the silence of death.

"Now!" cried John Gillian, rising and seizing the great pot of marjoram, "Get behind me, Will, and make the best of the chance."

The watchers, uncertain what to do, stared at John in hesitation. With steady aim, he flung the huge pot, plant and all, at the solitary lamp that burned in a sconce on the wall, and shouted:

"To the door, comrade!"

The room was plunged into darkness and chaos. To the door, pell-mell, rushed all the men, drawing their weapons to bar the way of the prisoners, and the landlord's hoarse voice rose above the tumult, bawling for lights in the name of all the saints in the calendar.

Meantime, both Fitzjohn and Gillian were through the window and out in the garden, free once more.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE KNIGHT EXPLAINS.—THE BLOOD-HOUND.

"A mount, and away!" cried John Gillian at the stable door. "Lucky the ostler had not gone to bed. And here he comes. Sirrah, thy keys!"

Before the drowsy servant could gather his wits, John had snatched the

bunch of keys from his hand, and ignoring his protests, our heroes were quickly in possession of a good horse apiece. As the knight sprang upon his steed, John Gillian slammed the stable door behind him, locked it, and placed the keys in his jerkin. The ostler now rushed at him, but John was in the saddle too soon.

"That last little trick will delay them some time," he said, as, with the knight, he put his horse to the gallop, heading northward. "They will not come far after us afoot."

Glancing back over their shoulders, they saw a group of infuriated, gesticulating men in the village street, in the full glow of the lamp-light streaming from the open doorway of the inn.

"And now, friend in need, how came you to my rescue so happily?" asked Fitzjohn.

"'Tis simply told," answered Gillian; and as they rode along, flank by flank, he related the story of his doings since leaving his friend in the early morning.

"And, by the body o' me," he exclaimed, "I have left yonder honest smith without paying for his food or his services! Well, he must keep the horse. It will be a good bargain for him, after all."

"But a murrain on that Andrew Slead!" broke out Fitzjohn. "I could find it in me to wish you had left him swinging. Mercy is wasted on such scurvy dogs."

"Yet I could not bring myself to it," said Gillian. "To run him through in fair fight would give me much satisfaction, I vow, but I could not leave him there to die. And I have given him fair warning. And now let us find a by-path, for this main road will never do."

"And whither, after we have regained the packet?"

"Leave that until then," said John. "By we reach the dingle again and you have told me your story we shall be in need of a good sleep, and where shall we find a better spot?"

They rode on in silence through the summer night, making across country as well as they could by the waning light of the moon. At the top of the first long rise they paused to listen, and the regular sound of hoof-beats, faint, but unmistakable, is heard.



"They are on our track," said Gillian. "We must baffle them somehow, for we cannot go any further south without the papers. See, the road divides here. We will separate here, one taking each way, and riding on a little distance. Then we will leap the wall and come back to this spot over the fields. In this cove we can hide easily whilst they go past."

The stratagem seemed to answer well. At the fork of the road two of the pursuers sprang from their horses and examined the dry dust of the roadway. Puzzled by the traces of two isolated riders, they divided into two bodies, one taking each turn. The fugitives, now safely hid in the sheltering cove, waited until the last sound of the pursuit had died away in the distance, then took to the road once more. At the first cross-lane they turned off to the right. The daybreak neared.

They reached the dingle without mishap or interruption. The horses were tethered well out of sight of stray passers-by, and the two men sought a still more sheltered nook in which to obtain a necessary rest. They were both dog-tired, worn out with nearly twenty-four hours' continuous wakefulness and anxiety and open-air riding. They were nodding as they slipped off their saddles. But first the papers.

Fitzjohn put his hand into a slit high up in the oak tree. To his dismay, though his arm went in up to the elbow, he could not feel the packet. His groping fingers clutched empty air. The hollow in the trunk was evidently a large one, and the packet had fallen to the bottom, out of reach. They widened the opening with their knives, until Gillian could get his arm in up to the shoulder, but still in vain.

"Beshrew me, but I can do no more until I have had a sleep," said he. "The place is safe enough."

"So I thought when you both left me," said Fitzjohn. "And so it would have been had not that Spaniard I have settled chanced to ride past just when my horse whinnied. I had scarcely time to get my blade out and dodge behind this tree when I saw the foreigner and his seven men coming for me. Thoughts went like lightning through my brain. I should be captured by a man who hated me, and lose

the letters. And yet resistance was palpably useless. Then I saw this hole in the tree, slipped the packet in before they saw me, and turned to face them. They would have run me through without parley, I do believe, if I had not thrown down my blade and asked their business, saying that I didn't recognize them either as King's or Cardinal's men.

"Hand me those papers, whatever they may be," said Don Sigiente. "You don't trick me twice, senior."

"That I will not," said I.

"Why not? Caramba! Why not?"

"Because I have no papers, senior."

"Pretty story! Search the liar!"

"I was roughly handled, and very thoroughly searched, but of course in vain. The Spaniard was in a terrible rage.

"If you have them not, you know where they are, and I shall find means to wring the truth out of you," said he. "I am no trifter. Out with the truth!"

"I have given the letters into the hands of one of my friends," said I, feigning reluctance. "They have both gone on by way of West Hide and Croud, leaving me here with the horses to rest awhile and get my wound well. As they will have got fresh mounts by this, they will take some catching. So you can do your worst!"

"Sigiente believed the tale.

"Then we will start at once," he said. "We shall overtake them, fear not. Mount your horse, and come with us. Lest you should not like our company on the road, we will bind you to the saddle. I have a fancy that you will be of great use to us as a decoy when we come near your friends; and also, I have a quarrel of my own with you."

"There was nothing to do but comply in silence, and we rode away, I hoping, yet hardly daring to hope, that I should see you again soon. And so to Little Waneleigh, and the Black Dog, and the fatal duel. You are a cunning rogue, John Gillian, and henceforth I count you my friend and equal, as man to man. However this adventure may end, we will share equally in the fruits of it. And now to sleep."

"Ay, to sleep," said Gillian, drowsily.



The interest of the soldier's tale had kept them awake, but, the tale ended, their weary eyelids closed, and in a few seconds they were asleep on a mossy bank, well concealed by a thick fringe of blackberry brambles.

Sir William Fitzjohn—to give him the full title he so seldom heard, and little cared for—was the first to wake. He lifted his head drowsily, listening in a dreaming sort of way; then all at once his lethargy vanished. He shook Gillian cautiously.

"Od's daggers, John!" he whispered. "We have spoilt all by our slumber! Look there!"

The sun was now high, his golden beams piercing the canopy of leaves and lighting up the secluded hollow. Peering through the bushes, the two men saw a sight that made them grasp their sword-hilts with the desperation of despair.

Six men were standing near the hollow tree, holding animated converse. One was Luke Thorpe, the King's spy, and with him were two men-at-arms, and a forest-keeper, or reeve, with two attendants clad in Lincoln green. One of the latter held a straining bloodhound by the collar.

"'Tis in the King's name, I tell you," Thorpe was saying, impatiently. "Loose the dog, man!"

"I like not risking Brutus, Master Thorpe," the reeve said. "The knaves may be lying hid not many paces off, with knives drawn, and 'tis a valuable dog."

"They are not here now," said Luke Thorpe. "They are not fools. Put the dog on the trail, now he has smelt something of their former presence here, and let us be after them."

"But these are their horses, and not long since hard ridden," said one of the men in green. "And what means this hacked and chipped hole in the tree?"

"That I will find out if I have to cut the oak down," said Luke Thorpe. "As to the horses, their riders may have been here, but they would be dolts to remain. Let go the dog, sirrah, in the King's name! Look how he strains to be off."

"That is because he is strong on the scent," replied the reeve. "Depend upon it, they are not far away."

"Loose him, timid!" cried the King's man. "What are a dozen dogs to the King's business?"

Thus urged, the reeve reluctantly gave the signal, and his man let go the animal's collar. The great brute, nose to earth, gave tongue at once, and went loping over the sward, straight towards the spot where the fugitives were hidden. The reeve gave a shout, and unslinging his long bow as he ran, followed, and the others were close behind.

"We must settle the brute first, come what may," said Fitzjohn. "One good stroke ought to finish him, and then we must climb out of the hollow."

As the bloodhound's nose appeared in an opening in the bramble bushes the knight's sword flashed quickly. John Gillian's also reached him, and Brutus rolled over dead, with scarcely a sound.

"A bad day for Brutus!" said Gillian.

Next moment they were scrambling up the bush-grown bank for dear life. An arrow whizzed past Fitzjohn's head, missing only by an inch; another passed Gillian so near that he felt the draught of its flight, and heard the whirr of it like an angry hornet in his ear. They reached the top safely, and then a lucky thing happened.

A large section of the bank side, loosened by their frantic struggles, broke and slid back—a veritable landslide on a small scale. Our heroes, being topmost, saved themselves by clinging to the roots of a tree; the pursuers found their footing give way and were swept back, rolling over and over in the dry earth and prickly brambles. They were not seriously hurt, but the delay gave the fugitives a little more time—a chance to get a good start.

Yet they did not take advantage of the chance.



## CHAPTER VIII.

BETWEEN TWO FIRES.—GON DE BRISSAC  
IS USEFUL.

Fitzjohn gave utterance to maledictions low but deep as he clung to the gnarled roots of the tree, for across the very field upon whose edge they were, a troop of seven horsemen were galloping. Already they had heard the disturbance in the hollow, and swung along easily, laughing and shouting. Too well did the hunted men know the newcomers. Don Sigiente's men had not been thrown off the track, after all, and were bent on avenging their master. And with them, in quest of further sport, came Wilton and Guy Hathersden. Six foes on foot below, seven on horseback above!

"Well, we have had three stirring days," said Fitzjohn.

"And I am not so sure that the stirring times are over yet," said John Gillian. "We may hold out awhile, and if we can manage until nightfall we may escape again."

"How, in the name of St. George?"

"Why, just this. We can surrender ourselves to either party. They are fairly equal, and neither will give way. Leave it to me."

The riders were soon at the edge of the hollow, and dismounted. The two hunted men crouched under the roots of the big tree. Luke Thorpe and his following were already halfway up the crumbling slope when they caught sight of the six newcomers at the top. This was John Gillian's chance.

"My very good friends, above and below," he said, raising his voice, "I pray you to keep your distance. We do not desire your company. And I give you both this warning—if either of you advance to take us, we will at once surrender to the other party. Fixed as we are, that will be easy."

"By the Cardinal's frock," cried Sir Henry Wilton, with a huge laugh, "you are the right sort of man for your present occupation! Well, comrades, we shall have to camp here and wait awhile, that's clear. Bring out the venison pasty."

As though made hungry by the allusion, Luke Thorpe and the reeve came to a similar decision, and sat down to

a rough-and-ready meal in the hollow. When they had done, the reeve showed that he had been exercising his somewhat cumbrous wits.

"Master Thorpe," he said, "if only because these men have killed Brutus, I will help you to lay hands on them. Do you stay here with your men and mine, and keep a strict watch, whilst I go to the village. I will bring back as many sturdy fellows as I can, and we will baffle the soldiers and have these troublesome knaves secure before compline, fear not."

Our friends could not hear this, but they saw the reeve hasten away, and guessed for what purpose.

"I like not that," said the knight. "We are only putting off the evil hour. Why not give ourselves up to the swordsmen above? The two freelances, at least, would befriend us if they knew all my story."

"Perhaps so; but not the Spaniard's men," said Gillian. "As to doing no good by waiting, there I think otherwise. An hour may bring us a good chance. A fight between our foes would please me best, and there will almost surely be a tough struggle if the reeve returns with enough men. When they are fully occupied with each other we may move."

It was weary work waiting. The sun passed the zenith, flooded the hollow with light, and began his decline. Both parties of foes were watchful of the fugitives and of each other. With a portion of the food in John Gillian's wallet, the two men crouched uncomfortably under the tree roots made a meal of sorts, but were parched for need of a drink.

The reeve was much longer than he had intended, and it was near angelus when he arrived with his fresh men. They numbered twenty-five—all stout, hearty fellows—and this gave Luke Thorpe thirty, all told. He divided them into three parties—ten to creep round the hollow to the right and ten to the left, and so to take the Spaniard's men, if possible, by surprise. The remaining ten were to guard the foot of the slope until this had been effected, and then to charge up and secure the fugitives. The horsemen, having seen this new force arrive, though not aware of how it was divided, made ready for a desperate



effort to seize the hunted men. Mounted, with swords drawn, the odds did not trouble them in the least.

Fitzjohn and Gillian, crouching in the shadows, listened intently to every sound, their weapons ready. With every moment of delay their chances increased. Very slowly the two groups of men crept round the hollow, and were almost upon the horsemen before they were discovered. As a riot of shouts broke out, the ten men below began to climb the slope. Several of those above leapt down into the bushes to escape the horses. It seemed that our friends must be captured this time.

Suddenly the wild galloping of recklessly-spurred horses came from the lower entrance to the hollow, and a troop of martialists, lances and swords waving, burst into the dingle, forcing their way through shrub and undergrowth. Foremost amongst them—for there was yet just sufficient light—Gillian recognized the red face of Gon de Brissac.

"Gon de Brissac!" the French knight shouted. "Gon de Brissac wins! Ride down the scurvy hinds!"

"A Brissac! A Brissac!" his men cried as they charged headlong upon the astonished Luke Thorpe and his raw recruits.

"Now is our time!" cried Gillian, excitedly. "This way—to the right! 'Twill go hard with us if we cannot shift for ourselves in all this mad bluster."

They rushed out of their hiding-place, any sound they made now drowned in the general uproar of the conflict that was raging about them. Men were fighting wildly on the level sward, amongst the brambles on the slope, and along its upper edge, and scarcely knew for what they were striving, or could tell friend from foe.

And right into the melee now came Wilton and Hathersden, leaping their steeds down the declivity, their five men close behind them. They passed close to our heroes without seeing them.

"Gadzooks!" Wilton was saying, "but it is an altogether fine evening! What in the name of Mary is Gon de Brissac doing here?"

"That's beyond me," said Hathersden. "But there's one thing I very

much fear—that in all this turmoil our two clever rascals will contrive to absent themselves."

Brissac's presence can be quickly explained. After his exploit of hanging Andrew Slead, the French knight had received reinforcements and searched the neighbourhood frantically. Returning to Ruddbury Sye late that afternoon, disappointed, he had seen the reeve and his gathering marching to the hollow, had divined that they were on the track of the fugitives, and had promptly followed and joined in the fray.

"If they do not get away, they will not be worth their salt," said Wilton. "And that being so, why stay here? Let us get out into the open, and leave all these fools to their folly. Then, if the foxes come out, we shall be able to lay them by the heels quickly. It is no honour fighting a crowd of yokels."

"Morbleu, most excellent!" said Hathersden; and the cavalcade made the best of their way out of the dingle.

"Good for us that we heard that," said Fitzjohn.

The hunted men were meeting but indifferent luck so far. A dozen enemies were close about them, and others closing in. Here and there rival foes were clashing pike on sword, bill on rapier, axe on armour. Time and time again, aided by the confusion and the growing dusk, Fitzjohn and Gillian gained a yard or two, and escaped capture by a hair's-breadth. At last they reached the level grass in front of the great tree, and hiding behind a thick bush prepared to dash across to the other side for life and liberty. No one was between them and the spot they wished to reach. Would they gain it unseen?

No. There was a shout, and a rush of men behind them. They were discovered.

"Now or never!" said Gillian. "Up the tree! 'Tis our only chance."

They had the start across the opening by a dozen yards. A forester and a man-at-arms were behind them, and Gon de Brissac himself saw them and charged furiously down.

"Across to yonder side!" shouted Gillian, and darted into the shadow behind the great tree. A hand in the slit, a foot, and he was up. Fitzjohn



followed, both being made agile by desperation.

Hearing John's shout, their nearest pursuers swerved from the direct line, thinking to cut them off, and so did not see the stratagem. The two climbed as high as they could, and took breath again. It was a very leafy tree, and they were not likely to be seen.

"Indeed," whispered John Gillian, "if we have patience to wait, we are safe, and shall be able to resume our journey to-morrow. They will soon get tired of looking for us and of mauling each other. It is fortunate that we were driven up here."

By midnight the hunt was over. The hunters had become convinced that their quarry had got clear away, and the dingle, save for the reeve and a couple of men who had made a fire, was deserted.

"They will give up the watch by morning," said Fitzjohn. "And I hope they will be tired before then, for my throat is as dry as a flour-bin."

Alas! for the frailty and futility of human hope! With dawn came Luke Thorpe and two woodmen armed with axes. The King's man was resolved to find out the mystery of the slit in the oak. He pointed to it, not knowing that our heroes were hidden in its branches.

"Cut me that tree down," he said; and the axes got to work.

## CHAPTER IX.

### A CLEVER TRICK.—A STERN CHASE.

Not a word could the hidden men utter, so overcome were they with surprise at the new turn of events. If Luke Thorpe could have been made aware of their thoughts concerning him and his highly inconvenient curiosity, his ears would doubtless have tingled uncomfortably.

It was evident that he intended to investigate the oak thoroughly. The woodmen plied their axes with rapidity and skill. The tree was jarred in every bough and fibre, and the two men had to hang on grimly to prevent being thrown off. It seemed cer-

tain that they would have to come down, and the packet would be discovered. Time passed, and a great inroad was made into the stout trunk. It vibrated horribly with each successive stroke. At last Gillian could stand the strain no longer.

"This will not do," he said. "We must be going. I have looked round, and all is in our favour."

"How?" asked Fitzjohn. "It looks very black to me."

"Black it surely will be if we stay here. As yet they are not half-way through, and the tree will stand long enough if not molested further. We must jump down whilst we can give them a surprise, and run for yonder two horses. Only Luke and the reeve rode here, luckily for us. Once in the saddle, we can laugh at them."

"But the papers, John?"

"Art thou dull, sir knight?" asked Gillian. "When they see us, they will leave off hatching at this poor tree, and the papers will be snug enough till we can come back for them. And now to stretch our cramped legs. This way down, and carefully, for we want to keep sound limbs."

They worked themselves along a bough until they were near to the trunk, then, each nerving himself for the effort, they let themselves down by the arms as low as possible. The distance they had to drop was fully ten feet. They were on the side of the tree furthest from their unsuspecting enemies. They let go together.

The earth was soft and powdery, and they were actually down, had recovered their balance, and were running towards the two grazing horses before they were seen. Luke Thorpe was the first to get his senses in working order.

"Ha!" he cried. "After them, lads! Stop them! Try a cast with the axe, good Ben! So that is the mystery of the tree. No need to do any more cutting now. 'Sdeath! The knaves will escape us yet!"

He was right. They had a good start, and made good use of it. One of the woodmen sent his axe flying after them, in obedience to Luke's order, and the ugly missile went straight for John Gillian. He looked round, and sprang aside just in time to avoid it. A few more agile sprints,



and they had gained the horses, were mounted, and away.

Several arrows were sent after them by their irate foes on foot, but no harm was done. They were free, horsed, thundering right merrily across country, taking hedges and ditches joyously, their thirst now almost forgotten.

"How now, friend?" asked John Gillian, as they reached a high-way well out of sight of the running men, and drew rein to consider their plans. "Is it fated that we are ever to be taken?"

"Never will I despair again," said Fitzjohn. "And yet, friend, this cannot be our luck always. We are tired, hungry, and thirsty, and the country all around us may be infested with enemies. Where is Gon de Brissac, and the Spaniard's men, and those two jolly freelances?"

"Od's daggers, but you are a Job's comforter!" said Gillian. "Yet, gad-zooks, you are right! Here come some of the individuals you have named, if I mistake not, and in hot haste, too. We must move again."

A party of horsemen had just emerged from the yard of a large farmhouse near the roadside—a party of about a dozen—and were coming on at a swinging gallop. There was the glitter of steel about them, and the armour and helmet of the leader shone like a moving speck of fire in the sunlight. A shout went up from this cavalcade as the hunted men dashed away. Fitzjohn glanced back over his shoulder.

"'Tis Gon de Brissac," he said. "We don't want to be served like Andrew Slead, and the odds are too heavy for a fight. On, friend Gillian, on!"

No urging needed Gillian. The animals fairly flew, striking up clouds of dust with every pounding hoofbeat. Fields, gates, trees, hedges slid rapidly past. Neck by neck the horses raced along. Fresher than the steeds of Gon de Brissac, they gained for a time, increasing their lead. It was a question now, barring accidents, of the staying power of the horses.

On, on went the tearing chase. It was a hot day, and the pitiless sunlight glared fiercely on roadway and countryside. There was no shadow, no shelter; no pause, no breathing-

time. The pace was the pace that kills, and before long the horses showed signs of distress, and took wind laboriously. Grim, implacable, both pursuers and pursued kept on.

At a cross-road, nearly riding down a ragged mendicant who shouted maledictions they heard not, our heroes turned off abruptly to the right. The red roofs of the village of Low Clune glowed in the sunlight, and beyond rose the cool green of a well-wooded hill. There, ahead, was shade, water, and a chance to outwit the relentless trackers. One more spurt, one supreme effort, and they would gain the shelter of the trees well in time.

They dashed through the quiet hamlet, and scattering a wildly-clucking flock of poultry on the village green, dropped into a canter as they mounted the bridle-path into the cool wood. They were under the rustling canopy of leaves before Gon de Brissac thundered into Low Clune. Leaping from their saddles, they led the exhausted animals to a little brook beside the path, and quenched their own thirst as well. Then, having no more present use for the brave creatures that had served them so well, they left them, and plunged amongst the trees.

"That water was nectar," said Gillian. "I feel a new man. Now we must go warily. Here is another brook. We will wade some distance in it, so that there may be no trace of us. Then we will strike out for the other side of the wood, and look out for a suitable hiding-place. It is folly to go far in the open as yet."

"You would make a good forester, John," laughed the knight. "Hark! They are on the bridle-path! Let them come! I fancy we are safe enough at present."

Their success so far had made Fitzjohn, once so dubious, jubilant again. He would not have felt so secure, however, could he have seen another troop of horsemen who were at that very moment, riding soberly towards the village. This troop branched off to the left before they reached the houses, taking a lane that wound round the wooded hill.

"We shall get them right surely," said one of these. "They are sure to go through the wood whilst Gon de Brissac and his men are looking for them."



The speaker was Guy Hathersden. The Spaniard's men, bent on avenging their late master, had gladly taken service under the two freelances.

Meantime, leaving Gon de Brissac's men searching frantically and fruitlessly in the dense wood, the runaways made their way out to the other side. There was an open patch of ground, then an orchard and a farmhouse. The house was silent, no yokels were about, and there was a large granary attached. Why not hide there?

The two men raced across the open, climbed the ladder to the left, drew it up after them, and closed the door. Thinking that at last they were safe, they threw themselves down for a needed rest. With the ladder in, and so no visible means of access to the granary, who would suspect their whereabouts?

But from a bend in the lane half a mile away Guy Hathersden's keen eyes had detected the two moving figures, and had seen where they disappeared. Some time later, just as a couple of Gon de Brissac's martialists showed themselves at the edge of the wood, the seven troopers reined up their horses under the granary door, and Sir Henry Wilton cried, humorously:

"Good day, friends! It has been a long hunt, but I think we have you at last. It will do our eyes good to see such admirable fellows again. We will do you no harm, though these five followers of the late Don Sigiente are somewhat angry. Come down with you both, and the quicker the better!"

## CHAPTER X.

### WHEN FOES FALL OUT.

Cautiously the rough door opened, and John Gillian's head appeared.

"'Tis easy enough to see us, sir soldier," he said, "but as to coming down, that is another matter. We are quite comfortable as we are, thank you all the same."

"But man," cried Guy Hathersden, impatiently, "ye are run to earth! We are bound to have you, soon or late, if we have to starve you out. And

we could bring you out by main force, if we wished, if you do not choose to hand us the State papers that so many folk are after."

"Good friend, I know you mean us no harm, and that you once aided the knight my master, and are but seeking to advantage yourselves by forestalling some of the others, but I tell you we are very snug up here, and here we will stay. As to the papers, we have none."

The troop below laughed loud and long at this speech of John Gillian's.

"A pretty story, forsooth!" said Wilton. "We believe you, of course—to be excellent romancers! What is your object in thus defying us?"

Fitzjohn had now joined Gillian, and it was his turn to smile.

"You will soon see," he said. "I like not to provoke strife, but, fixed as we are, I see no other way."

Then raising his powerful voice, he called out:

"Help! Help! Louis of France and the Cardinal! Help!"

The effect of this strange cry was quickly apparent. The two followers of Gon de Brissac, who were watching the scene, at once knew that they had been forestalled by other searchers, but that it was not yet too late. They answered the appeal by winding a blast on a bugle-horn. The French knight, with his full force, would soon be on the scene.

"By Leo X.," said Wilton, "you are a pair of clever knaves!"

"Clever or not, they will fall into our hands or those of the Cardinal's," said Guy Hathersden. "And I do not feel like surrendering the quarry, to that French bravo. Pshaw! We are seven good men—see, he has only a dozen. We will stand here, under the lee of the granary; 'twill be a good place. And I fancy our prisoners will not jump down whilst the fighting is on—if fighting there need be. Gon de Brissac is a knight, after all, and he may admit our right of prior capture."

"That he will not, from all I know of him," said Wilton. "And here he comes, riding as though ten thousand furies were behind him."

That was how De Brissac felt. Beaten and outwitted at every turn in this strange man-hunt, he was worked up into furious passion. At the head



of his dozen troopers, he charged headlong upon the little group reined up with their backs to the wooden building.

"Here comes a madman!" cried Wilton, flourishing his blade in the sunlight. "Hold, De Brissac! Parley! We claim the rats in the granary as ours, for we discovered them first, and though we are ready to uphold our claim, we bear you no malice, and wish no warfare."

"For King and Cardinal!" shouted the irate knight. "Enough of your lawyer's chatter! Defend yourselves!"

"If you will have it, then," said Wilton, coolly; and urging his horse forward to meet the Frenchman, he dealt such a swiftly-whirling blow with his sword that Gon de Brissac's long lance was cut in twain. Another moment and swords were plying furiously on visors and mail—clanging, ringing, rattling merrily.

It was not easy to see which side would have the advantage. If Gon de Brissac had the most men, the others were fresher; if his were more fiery, the others were more resolute.

Soon two horses were down—one rider fighting afoot, and the other lying still, face upwards, having struck his last stroke on earth. He was one of the Frenchman's troop. Guy Hathersden received, very early in the struggle, a cut on the leg, that caused him to act on the defensive. Gon de Brissac was not finding Sir Henry Wilton such an easy prey as he expected, and both the knights were exchanging a fair number of cuts and bruises.

It surely could not last long, this mad turmoil of clanging blows, hoarse shouts, pounding horse-hoofs, and hammered armour, without numbers beginning to tell. Despite the skill and valour of the two freelances, they began to feel hard pressed. Eagerly watching from the loft, Will Fitzjohn could stand it no longer.

"Body o' me, Gillian," he cried, "I am for below, to lend a hand at the game! Help me with the ladder. If we have to be taken, I may as well get a bit of exercise first."

John Gillian could at that moment find no sufficient reason to defer his companion, and in a trice the ladder was down, and Fitzjohn, sword in

hand, plunged into the fray, fighting alongside Guy and Wilton. He took the brunt of De Brissac's attack at once, and the French knight was only saved from his heavy arm by a desperate rush of his own men.

Two of the defenders and two of the assailants were down now, and counting Fitzjohn, the odds were ten to six. But the six never lost heart a moment. They laughed and jested as they thrust and parried, their blades whirling and flashing merrily in the sunlight, and Fitzjohn's great voice ever and anon roaring out above all else.

"Beautifully done!" he cried, to one of Wilton's strokes. "And clever of you, Guy, boyee! By the Cardinal's hat, we will tire them out yet!"

But the conflict was not over so soon. Gon de Brissac and his men were not sportsmenlike. They fought to kill. Tired of a frontal attack which seemed of no avail against the superb defence of the three invincible swords, they separated. Six kept up the direct onslaught, engaging the defenders' attention; the other four rode off, two on each side, with the intention of coming round by the sides of the granary and taking their opponents in flank.

"The sun is going down; it will soon be twilight," said John Gillian to himself. "It is time we were going, if I can but get Fitzjohn to leave his favourite amusement again. Howbeit, I will try the effect of these sacks first."

Honest John had been thoroughly investigating the granary, and had found, not only a way of escape, but several sacks that had once held flour, and had not been over well shaken. Armed with one of these sacks, holding it mouth downwards, but closed, he opened the door wide, and, lying flat on the floor, leaned out. In the heat of the fight the six defenders had moved a little way out from the ladder, and their enemies had a chance to take them in the rear.

Unsuspecting of any action on Gillian's part, Gon de Brissac's men met just under the door. John Gillian seized the opportune moment, and dropped his sack right over the head of one of the riders. Another looked up at that, astonished, but before he



could move. John had lowered another sack upon him. As the men were riding with their arms down, the sacks slipped well over their shoulders.

Their comrades, whilst they were struggling furiously with the sacks, glanced upwards, to see John Gillian convulsed with mirth. When the two men were released they were pitiable objects, yet their comrades could not help laughing in their turn. The irritating flour had got inside their helmets, filling their eyes and half smothering them. They were like millers in armour. Gon de Brissac would be short of their aid for a little time, at any rate.

And Gon de Brissac himself, at this very juncture, rashly daring to press too strongly forward, had received a home-thrust from Fitzjohn's practised, tireless hand. He reeled, and would have fallen from his saddle had not one of his men saved him, and the shout of laughter at the exploit of the flour-sacks stayed his foe's sword. It was not a fatal wound, but enough to put him out of the combat.

"And now, friend," called Gillian, "leave sword-play for awhile. We have made the fray more even, I fancy. Come up here, and take breath."

Fitzjohn saw his companion's face, and read more in it. He suddenly ran out of the struggling group, and before he could well be stayed was up the ladder and in the granary once more. A vigorous pull, and the ladder was up after him.

"And now?" he asked.

"I have loosened these three planks at the other end of the loft," said John Gillian. "We have only to let ourselves down quietly, and make a bold bid for freedom on foot. They are not likely to suspect or to hear us, for though the fight will not be so furious, they will soon be at it again."

The programme was quickly carried out, and the fugitives reached earth safely. Keeping in the shadow of the empty farmhouse, they ran lightly over the untilled land. Lucky it was for them that the farm was thus deserted.

They gained a long field adjoining an overgrown orchard. As they hurried along in the shade of the privet hedge, the clash and clatter of steel

on steel was still distinctly audible. Suddenly it ceased, and a medley of incoherent shouts came on the evening air.

"They have been round the granary and found the ladder. They will be after us!" cried Gillian. "Fool that I was not to hide the ladder! On! on! We must cross the orchard without them getting sight of us."

## CHAPTER XI.

### THE HELP OF SIMON HAYES.—IN THE MILL-RACE.

Into the neglected, weed-grown planting under the shadow of the apple trees they dashed headlong. It was growing hazy with nearing dusk, and they had every hope of being able to baffle their pursuers again in the dark. Their plan was to procure food and drink somewhere, horses if possible—though their funds were running low—and then double back, avoiding villages, towards the hollow where the all-important papers were yet securely hidden.

Fields, copses, lanes they passed, and the pursuers did not come in sight. At the door of a solitary cottage on the edge of a dark common they felt that they could not go any further. They were tired out. John Gillian knocked boldly on the door. The inmate of the cottage, a burly, pleasant-faced ploughman, opened to them. Seen against the flickering glow of the freshly-kindled rushlight, his form seemed huge and uncouth.

"Friend," said Gillian, "can you find bite and sup for two worn-out travellers? We can pay."

"Marry, and come in, and be welcome to a meal," said the ploughman, after looking at them closely. "Ye have an honest as well as a tired appearance. The women folk be away, but I will do the best I can."

He brought out a huge piece of cold meat, with bread and cheese, and a tankard of home-brewed ale, setting it before them somewhat awkwardly. In those days even the common labourers were well paid and well fed.

He regarded them quizzically as they ate.



"I will be straight with you, guests," he said, at last. "Are you not the two men for whom such a hue and cry was raised at Little Waneleigh, where a Spanish knight was neatly pinked?"

"We are," said Fitzjohn, after a little thought. "I was the one who fought with him. Now you know, is it in your mind to inform upon us, neighbour?"

"Not I," said the ploughman. "What sort of man do you think me? I have heard that the Cardinal has some men on your track, and for that alone I would help you if I could."

"Then you are no favourer of Wolsey?"

"Marry, no. He is but a cunning schemer who seeks to gain overmuch power in England. Give me bluff King Hal's dominance, say I, for he is a fellow of sound sense, and a friend of the common folk."

"Then you will be doing him a good turn by helping us," said Gillian.

"We also are against the Papal Legate, and if we can but get safely out of the country with certain papers, we shall bring about his downfall."

"And some of those on our track are not so far behind us even now," added Fitzjohn. "Think you we shall be safe here, friend, what's-thy-name?"

"Simon Hayes," said the labourer. "Yes, you will be safe here, I fancy. But lest you fear, I will go out and stand at the gate awhile. Eat and rest in peace, and if they come I will give you warning."

"'Tis good of you, good Simon, for we are dog-tired, I vow," said Gillian.

Their host went out, closing the door behind him, and leaned idly upon the garden gate, seemingly indifferent to everything, but very much on the alert. Not a sound escaped his keen hearing—the lowing of cattle in distant pasturages and byres, the chirp and hum of insects, the steady rustling of the wind in the treetops around the solitary cottage.

Satisfied at last that no pursuit was coming this way, he turned about, striding back towards the door. His hand was almost upon the latch when he stopped, listening. The sound of nearing horse-hoofs beating rapidly

upon the dusty road broke into the other sounds.

He stepped swiftly within. One on each side of the table, lying back in the oaken chairs, the two tired men were both asleep. They woke at his entrance, and sprang up, hands to weapons.

"There are travellers coming, and in a hurry," said Simon. "I can hear four or five horses, or my skill is at fault. Get you to the back door, ready to strike out across the common if they should chance to desire to enter. In that case I will try to come and guide you, for there are dangerous, swampy places to pass. Should I not be able to come, make as straight a course as you can for the light you will see—'tis burning in the house of my brother James, who keeps the mill on the stream. Yet I do not think they will stay here."

"You have our thanks, good Simon," said Gillian.

The cottager went back to the gate, reaching it just as a group of riders emerged from the purple shadows that were now dense on field and highway. He hoped they would dash past, but no such fortune. The horsemen were expert trackers, and overlooked nothing. There were five of them—Guy Hathersden, Henry Wilton, and three of the men who had served under Don Sigiente.

"We did well to let De Brissac's men take the other turn," said Guy. "This is just a likely lane, and a likely hut for our friends to shelter in. We will soon see. Good even, my cottager friend. Have you seen aught of two footsore wanderers this way?"

"Wayfarers are not so scarce that I take note of all," replied Simon, carelessly. "What kind of men are these that you are in search of, pray?"

"Ho, ho, my friend, you know too much already!" cried Wilton, springing out of the saddle. "Who told you we were searching for them? Come, let us pass within, and see for ourselves."

Moved by the point of the knight's ready sword, Simon drew back sullenly, as slowly as he dared, muttering:

"Firebrands and churls, to invade an honest man's house in this fashion! Go in, and find what you



can. I will stop here, and give you a free hand."

His real motive, of course, was to wait and slip round to join the fugitives at the back. Keen on the scent, four of the men burst in at the doorway, leaving one man, Leonard Hawke by name, to guard the horses.

As the searchers entered the first room the hunted men were hurriedly stepping out of the room beyond, having heard and recognized the voices of their enemies. Through the patch of tilled ground, through a gap in the currant-tree hedge, they broke, and there, running, Simon Hayes joined them.

"Quick, follow me!" he said. "This way!"

At that very moment a shrill whistle jarred the night air. Leonard Hawke had seen the cottager's action. There was shouting and bustle round the house, and Wilton cried out:

"The back way, all! The hound has tricked us!"

The three men needed no spurring on now. They raced along, Simon Hayes leading. After them came the hunters, afoot, eager and excited. But Simon knew the ground perfectly, and led on without hesitation, whereas the pursuers had to look to the path. After a hundred yards or so they turned back, disgusted, for their horses, having lost much valuable time.

The fugitives redoubled their efforts at that, and were more than half way across the common, and could hear the rush of the water in the mill-race before the dull pounding of hoofs resounded behind them. The river was expected to fall daily, and the mill, aglow with light, was working the night through.

For all their desperate endeavours, the five horsemen were almost upon them as they reached the bank of the dammed-up mill-water. The flood was pouring heavily down the sluice to the humming, undershot wheel. It gleamed faintly between the fringing willows that overhung it.

"No time to rouse the folks!" cried Gillian. "Let us take to the willows. We shall be hidden well there."

"And I will try and put them off the scent," said Simon. "They will scarce do me any damage."

He kept his ground on the bridge over the sluice, whilst John Gillian and Sir William Fitzjohn darted into the shadow of the willows, each climbing quickly into the bushy, leafy crown of an overhanging tree. There they clung, panting, for the moment safe.

The flushed riders dashed up furiously, and beset Simon with queries and angry threats. But he was stolidly defiant, and from the open doorway of the mill his brother James and two stalwart men emerged.

"Can I not come here for aid against robbers?" asked Simon Hayes, sarcastically.

"Would you fool us, knave?" cried Sir Henry Wilton. "You did not come alone. They are not far off. Spread out, all of you. Keep your eyes open."

The miller, astonished at the number of his strange visitors, was about to speak, when there was a splash in the sluice, a cry for help, and a dark object was for a moment seen gliding under the bridge, and on towards the humming, churning water-wheel. Then, before any one could take action, there was another cry, and John Gillian stood before them.

Will Fitzjohn had lost his foot and hand-hold on the tree by an incautious movement, and had fallen into the swiftly-flowing sluice! He was being swept, helpless, to his death under the mighty wheel. Even if he were not drowned, a single blow from one of those heavy paddles would beat the life out of him.

## CHAPTER XII.

### CAPTURED.—FITZJOHN'S STORY.

"Stop the wheel!" cried Gillian, frantically.

The miller took in the situation at once, and darted into the mill building. In a short time the great wheel slowed and stopped, and a man was sent to the floodgate above the sluice, to divert the water. Inch by inch the surface lowered, and the nine men, forgetting all enmity, prepared to



rescue the body. Sir Henry Wilton, who declared himself a good swimmer, was let down with a rope into the dark culvert leading to the wheel.

"It is possible that the iron bars fixed across to keep back drifting boughs and logs may have caught and held him," said the miller. "Jack says there is no sign of him about the wheel or the pond."

The miller's idea was correct. When swept down, Fitzjohn did not lose his wits. Keeping himself as rigid as possible, he slipped safely under the bridge without grazing either side; then he struck out with all his force, fighting against the strong current.

He could only reduce his speed a little, but that was something gained. He was driven with a fearful shock against the row of iron bars, and had the water been an inch higher, would have gone over them to a fearful fate.

As it was, he stood in the darkness, clutching the iron bars with grim determination, deafened by the roar of the flood, and struggling hard to regain his breath. And he was there when Sir Henry Wilton, wading and splashing, groped his way towards him in the black culvert. As they touched each other, Wilton gave a start. Fitzjohn spoke first.

"No bones broken, friend! But get me out of here. 'Tis wet and weary work waiting."

The other's laugh rang and rumbled in the hollow space.

"Come out with you, then!" he cried. "Stick to me, and come on. The water is low enough to walk. And now we have you at last, 'tis likely we are to keep you."

"It is most probable," said Fitzjohn, lugubriously.

Once the two were safely back on dry ground the sluice was opened again, the water rushed in, and the mill began to throb and hum with work. Much precious time had already been lost.

The fugitives were captured at last, there was no doubt of that, and even John Gillian made up his mind to accept the inevitable. The miller and his men had no mind to interfere or to match themselves against the five well-armed martialists, and Simon

Hayes, seeing all his efforts on behalf of our heroes of no avail, took his way back, slowly and thoughtfully, to his lonely cottage across the common.

His dripping garments drying, together with those of Henry Wilton's, by the miller's hospitable fireside, Sir William Fitzjohn made up his mind to a course of action he had long foreseen as a forlorn chance.

"Friend Gillian," said he, "the time has come to speak openly to these brave fellows, and try to get them on our side. It is well that they are our captors, and not De Brissac or Luke Thorpe."

"I am not so sure that we could not contrive to escape again," said John Gillian, with a sly twinkle in his eye. "But have it your own way. I feel tired out. And these are, as you say, brave men—persevering, capable, and, as we have just had proof, charitable to a foe in distress."

"It will need to be a strange tale to bring us over to your aid, and to turn us against King and Cardinal," said Sir Henry Wilton. "And these men of Don Sigiente's, though now in our service, will not be so easily won."

"Yet if I can show how the Cardinal, for pure spite and the furtherance of his unscrupulous greed, has injured innocent men, and has, moreover, sent messages to Pope Leo X. that no loyal subject of King Henry could send, will not that shake your resolve, knight?" asked Fitzjohn. "You are honourable gentlemen—can you act in the service of one who knows not real honour?"

Wilton was more moved by this than he cared to show.

"I will not yet answer," he replied. "Make good your words."

"Morbleu!" cried Guy Hathersden, smacking his sheathed sword violently on the table, and frightening the cat that was dozing beneath almost into a fit. "Morbleu! but if this man's story be true, he is safe from me. I have had much doubt of Wolsey's doings for some years."

Fitzjohn's face was already smiling, and John Gillian beamed with satisfaction.

"Go on with your tale," said Wilton, curtly.



"I will," said Fitzjohn. "It amounts to this. The Cardinal has robbed my father of a fortune that was left to him by Lord Haltoun of Beauclere — left to him because, although a common knight, he had the good, or bad, luck to marry a great lady. You may all perhaps remember the stir that was made over the marriage of Lady Beauclere's cousin?"

His hearers nodded, and Guy Hathersden started, a new light in his eyes.

"The same name!" he muttered.

"As I said," continued Fitzjohn, "Wolsey robbed my father of this fortune by legal quibbles and other tricks. Then the lands on which stands our castle at Bindon adjoin some of his own, and bar the way to a good trout stream. My father refused the beggar's price he offered for this land, and even the higher price he came to later on, but Wolsey was not to be beaten. A law action on some obscure question was begun, and though my father fought his hardest, the whole force of the Legate's wealth and influence was too much for him. Also it went against him that his views on religion were not popular—he was a Lollard. In the end, the Cardinal won, and added the desired estate to his already vast possessions. My father died, a ruined and stricken man, leaving me to poverty and a useless knighthood. At his bedside, young as I was then, I vowed to humble the proud Cardinal to the dust; and John Gillian, my playmate then and my staunch friend now, vowed to help me. So also did one other, Andrew Sled by name, who has proved a traitor.

"Pretending ignorance of the Cardinal's ill-will, I took service under him. Perhaps it eased his conscience a little to take pity on me. As the years passed, I got very high in his esteem, and secured John Gillian a place near me. Then I watched Wolsey's letters, waiting for a chance to expose him to the King by exhibiting his treasonable messages to the Pope, that I might strike him down utterly. The chance came at last, after I had let many promising letters go by. I expected the letters being sent on a certain day, and warned Gillian and Sled to be ready for flight, as we had

long arranged. I seized four missives, and hastened to join my friends, so that we could take them to France and put them direct into the hands of King Louis. He will be certain to send them to Henry, and Henry, furious at Louis having seen them, will end the Cardinal's career in a moment. Also we thought, being in France, we should be well out of the way of trouble, and might enlist in one of the Free Companies in the south-west provinces.

"I reached the White Lion Inn, but the letters were missed too soon, and Gon de Brissac was quickly put on my track by Wolsey, whose acute mind doubtless penetrated my plot at once. Others got wind of the affair, too, and spies are clever at putting two and two together. The rest you know."

"If all that be true," said Sir Henry Wilton, slowly, "I admit that I can no longer aid the Cardinal, or try to thwart your scheme. But the proofs—the proofs!"

"You have my word, knight—my solemn word—that everything that I have spoken is the truth," said Will Fitzjohn.

"And mine," added John Gillian.

"Gramercy, but I believe it," cried the man named Leonard. "The tale rings true, and Don Sigiate, I will maintain, was fairly fought, and met his end through his own undue passion."

"But proofs — proofs!" repeated Wilton.

"That is where I cannot do more than stake my word at present," said Will Fitzjohn. "The four letters will bear my last part out, but for the rest, I am dependent upon papers that are either at Bindon Castle or in Wolsey's possession."

"Till I can see them, then, I must decline to assist you," said Sir Henry Wilton, firmly. "It would be both unfair and very rash to go against the Lord Cardinal on hearsay alone."



## CHAPTER XIII.

## THE VOW OF THE SWORDSMEN.—THE TRAITOR AGAIN.

Guy Hathersden was the first to break the silence.

"Would you not take my word in evidence?" he asked. "I know now that what Sir William Fitzjohn has told us is a true tale. Had I known his full name sooner, and that his father was connected with the Beauclere affair, I would not have stirred a step in this pursuit, unless it had been to have baffled the Cardinal."

"Heaven be praised for this!" cried John Gillian.

"I must take the word of two honest men," said Sir Henry Wilton. "If you assure me, Guy, I am convinced."

"It was just after we came back from the Irish wars that I heard the full truth of the story," said Guy Hathersden. "And it was proved to me, too. Popular as the Cardinal is with many, and generous as he is with his wealth, he has not been over-honest in his methods of acquiring riches. I know of others he has robbed as shamefully as our friend Fitzjohn."

"Then," said Wilton, deliberately. "I am no longer a friend of Wolsey, but an enemy. From this moment it shall not be said that I lifted a hand to help the thieving son of an Ipswich butcher. And more—I am with you, good sirs, and will help to see you safe to France."

"Stap me, that's honest talk!" roared Fitzjohn.

"Then let us take a solemn vow," said Guy Hathersden, quietly. "These with us are brave and smart fellows, and can ride a horse and handle a sword with the best. We will make ourselves a brotherhood."

The three martialists declared their readiness at once, having been much impressed by the jovial knight's story, and all seven men stood up solemnly in a circle, their seven swords raised aloft.

"Hold a moment!" said John Gillian. "Think well what ye are doing. Ye are arraying yourselves against the power and cunning of the strongest man in England, and also, for a time, against the King, or at least his spies.

And even success may mean exile for a while. Think well."

"We have made up our minds," said Guy, decisively. "We never draw back from an honest purpose because of difficulties and dangers. And France is a pleasant land for a soldier to pass away his exile. And this is our vow:

"Brothers of the Sword! We hereby pledge each other, one and all, upon our sacred honour to stand by each other through good or ill fortune until France be gained safely or death overtake us. And in particular do we pledge ourselves to aid Sir William Fitzjohn in his purpose and protect him in person. And this vow we seal with our lips upon our trusty blades! So be it! And death to him who fails to keep his word and honour!"

As the last words left his lips, each of the seven men raised his sword and kissed it on the hilt. And so was formed the Brotherhood of the Sword.

"And now," said Wilton, "what shall be our next move? Could we not see these treasonable letters of Wolsey's?"

"Our next move must be to get the said letters into our hands again," said John Gillian, with a merry twinkle in his eyes. "They are at present inside an old oak tree in the dingle where you so nearly trapped us before. Had not Fitzjohn left them there, they would have fallen into Don Sigiente's hands."

And Gillian related briefly the story of their adventures around the old tree. Loud and long laughed the five men, to whom it was all news.

"Marry, but 'tis as good as a play!" cried Sir Henry Wilton. "Well, 'tis plain we must be in the saddle early, so the more rest we get to-night the better. That pestering French knight may be after us before long, and I don't think Luke Thorpe will be far behind."

"And from what we heard at Low Clune," said Guy, "I fancy a cousin of Don Sigiente's—Don Sancho by name—will soon be on our track."

"By the Rood!" cried Fitzjohn, his strong voice filling the room, "it is well we have gained help for our cause! It is like to be a tough undertaking even now. Here we are, tired



out. Not very far off Gon de Brissac's troop are looking for us. Somewhere between here and the dingle Luke Thorpe is on our trail. Anywhere about we may meet Don Sancho with a prime gang of cutthroats. And, to mend matters, I shall be very much astonished if my lord the Cardinal, seeing how things are going, does not put an additional force in the field at a moment's notice. So we have some merry and lively work before us, gentlemen."

"With our number, I doubt not the result," said John Gillian. "And now I advise rest, and a start in the dawn. Good miller, right well will we pay you for room to stretch our tired limbs. Ah!"

He started forward. The others followed his gaze. A dull, white object, seen only for a moment, vanished from outside the window. It was a human face! They were spied upon; their loud talk had been overheard. With one accord they rushed to the doorway and out into the night. A dark figure moved in the denser shadow of the mill wall.

"There's the eavesdropper! There's the cullion!" cried Gillian. "He must not escape!"

Gillian, Leonard, Wilton, and Guy raced after him at once. He kept close to the mill, seeking what shelter he could find. Fitzjohn and the others, seeing this, turned back and ran the other way round. At the door of the shed abutting over the wheel the pursued man heard them coming to meet him, hesitated, tried the unlocked wooden door, opened it, and darted within. Too late! The trackers were close upon his heels, and followed him in. He retreated to the furthest corner, slipped on the damp stones, clutched wildly at the revolving wheel, and fell headlong to his fate in the foaming water. A shriek of fear, a quickly-stifled cry, and all was over.

Again the wheel was stopped, and this time it had claimed a victim. With long hooks they drew out from under it a mangled body. A cry of astonishment burst from Fitzjohn and Gillian.

"Andrew Slead!" they exclaimed, simultaneously.

He it was. Not satisfied with his first effort to betray his friends, and

tempted by the reward offered for their discovery by Luke Thorpe, he had tracked them down, and was intending to betray them again.

"The traitor! The ingrate!" said Gillian, wrathfully. "And after I had saved his miserable life!"

"He is dead enough now, and that is justice," said Fitzjohn, turning the body over. "But what's this? Blood on his belt-knife, and on this riding-whip! Run round to the stables, Leonard, and see if the horses are safe. I fear foul play."

Leonard rushed off, and quickly returned.

"Bad news! Maledictions on the carrion!" he shouted. "The wretch has hitched his own mount to the stable door, and then knifed all in the stable! They are all as dead as worried dormice, the miller's two as well as our five."

"Sdeath! Then we are stranded. Ten thousand thunders! A pretty penny we shall have to pay now, by criss-cross!" cried Will Fitzjohn.

"The sooner we are away from here the better for our healths," said Wilton. "We don't know what accomplices this fellow may have had, nor how near our foes may be."

"It is my thought also that we move," said John Gillian.

Determined not to be caught unawares, the Brotherhood of the Sword acted upon the idea at once. The miller was paid handsomely for his loss and his trouble, and the seven men, tired as they were, marched off into the night. Guided by his directions, they made for the hamlet of Richerchlose, where, towards daybreak, they knocked up mine host of the Taberd.

Four hours' sleep, a hearty meal, and a wash, and they were new men. The hamlet was searched for mounts, but could only furnish three sorry nags.

"And these look as though they couldn't carry the weight of their own woes, let alone a mountain of flesh like Fitzjohn!" said Guy Hathersden. "Well, 'tis plain we must go on foot—at least, until we come to a better spot than this."

The seven men started at once in the direction of Low Clune. They crossed the common, avoiding Simon



Hayes's cottage, and came in sight of the deserted farm where they had waged fight with Gon de Brissac, by compline. They were tramping along the side of a field, in full view of the house, when a warning shout was raised. Before they could take cover, half a dozen men rushed out of the house and towards the outbuildings. One man, not so agile as the others, lagged behind.

"Gon de Brissac himself, by my halidame!" cried Will Fitzjohn. "He has done well to get over his trouncing so quickly. They must have made this house their headquarters."

"Forward!" cried John Gillian. "They are running for the stables yonder, and we are almost as near as they are. A dash for it, and the horses are ours!"

#### CHAPTER XIV

##### A FOILED FRENCHMAN.—A TIRELESS ENEMY.

The eager men charged forward, leaping over fences and ditches. Guy Hathersden, too hurried, stumbled at a broken railing, and fell face downward into a nettle-grown hollow. He was too angry, and the rest too earnest to be amused by the misadventure, and he was afoot again instantly, with smarting hands and cheeks, and dashing after his comrades.

It was a race—an almost neck-and-neck race. As the swordsmen sprang over the low farmyard wall, not a dozen paces from the stable doors, Gon de Brissac's hirelings were about the same distance off. But the latter's weakness was telling upon him; he had stopped, holding his sides, and one of his men with him.

"On!" cried Gillian, excitedly. "There are not a dozen of them!"

"We will deal with them—you and I, Wilton," said Fitzjohn. "You others get the horses out and saddled. The game is ours already."

As the French knight's men came on with an ugly rush, the tried blades of the two gallant swordsmen flashed out. The rush was suddenly checked, despite the odds being eight to two. The hirelings had had experience of

those two blades before, and hung back, hesitating. Meantime, Gillian and the rest were busy in the stables.

"These might be a pack of craven-hearts, forsooth!" cried the jovial Fitzjohn. "Come on! Let us try our steels for a joust or two. It is good exercise for the arm muscles. See, my blade is at your services."

Gon de Brissac recovered somewhat, raved at his men, but still they hesitated. Another man, buckling on armour, came running out of the house to join in the fray, but the attack was delayed until too late. There had been twelve good horses in the stalls, and now seven of them, fully saddled, were outside, and five of them had riders. Of the five left within, not one would be ridden until fresh harness could be got. John Gillian had repeated the trick that had served him so well at the hollow tree near the ruined monastery.

Leonard and Guy, swords out, urged their new steeds forward. Wilton and Fitzjohn slipped behind them and mounted. Then all seven faced about, and with a ringing cheer put their horses at the farmyard wall. Gon de Brissac, apoplectic with rage, roared out fluent curses in choice French.

Taken by a sudden after-thought, Fitzjohn dropped behind as the others cleared the wall, and urged his prancing mount close up to the angry knight. His sword flashed—a master stroke—and Gon de Brissac's helmet, but loosely put on, went clanging on the cobble-stones. The language evoked by this act was frightful. As he turned and galloped after his friends, Fitzjohn laughed:

"It is a rare sight for the damosels who thought thee so young, is thy bald pate, sir meddler!"

"Neatly done, but it will make him a worse enemy than before," said Guy Hathersden.

"What care I?" said the jolly knight. "Such as he are better as enemies than friends."

Now the troop galloped along in the dusk, light of heart once more, singing snatches of song. Through the copse path they went, clattered through Low Clune, and pounded merrily along the King's highway. At a wayside hostelry they got refreshment for man and beast, and learnt



items of news that sobered their mood somewhat; then out again they went into the night. Their course was now shaped towards the dingle where the papers were hidden, and they were all resolved, as they raced on under the flickering stars of a velvet sky, to get the letters out of the oak before dawn. For this purpose Gillian had procured a stout axe from the innkeeper. Once they secured the papers again it would be oh, for the sunny south, the coast, a ship, and la belle France; and then, confusion to my lord the Cardinal.

The news that had damped their spirits and made them busy with thought was this—Luke Thorpe was at Ruddbury Sye, together with a knight named Sir Thomas Dene, who was also in the King's service, and a following of about twenty men. He had spies all over the neighbourhood. Don Sanchos, breathing fire and slaughter, was at or near Waneleigh, with half that number, systematically searching the countryside. And some one of influence—some great man—Wolsey himself, it was rumoured—was either on the way towards or had already arrived at Bindon Castle with a large retinue.

"By my faith," said John Gillian, "they are all around us! Whichever way we stir we shall encounter some of them. They cannot fail, before long, to hear of our adventures at the mill and the farm, and of our attempt to buy horses. Even the procuring of this hatchet may bring a hornets' nest about our ears."

"But the worst of all is the coming of the Cardinal," said Fitzjohn. "We might baffle all the rest, but him not so easily. He will read the design of all our movements just from hearing of them. I know him, and am compelled to admire his brain, much as I hate him. And there is this to be remembered, also—there are papers at Bindon Castle, I doubt not, that would prove his villainy, and make good my claim to my rightful title and estates."

"But would you have us lay siege to a castle, friend, with our scanty force?" asked Wilton.

"Not so; but granted that Wolsey has not yet reached the place, it would be easy to gain an entrance, for it has

been much neglected of late, and is cared for only by three old servitors, so I have heard. I would risk much for those scrolls and deeds, yet I like not to endanger others."

"Tush, man!" cried Guy Hathersden. "What of our vow? Are we not Brothers of the Sword? Your wishes are ours. First we will get hold of these letters, then we will ride hard for Bindon Castle, and having done our best will hope to get there before my lord Legate."

"I devoutly hope so," said John Gillian. "And there is this advantage on our side—that though our way lies right between Luke Thorpe and Don Sanchos, we are about as far from Bindon as Wolsey's town house is. He will not hurry, with a retinue, and a day's start would not forestall us."

"That is good," assented Fitzjohn, cheery once more. "I believe we shall do it. And here we are at the dingle. Softly, now, lest that pertinacious Luke should have left any one on sentry duty. One of us had better remain up here on guard. Now for the axe."

Leonard elected to stay by the horses and keep a good look-out. The other six plunged into the darkness of the hollow and made for the oak tree, finding it easily. Though cut half-way through, it still stood erect and strong. With a jest at the memory of their last sight of the spot, John Gillian lifted the axe aloft. His brawny arms whirled, the sharp iron came down, the chips flew. He aimed at the slit, widening and deepening it, and when he paused for breath, Fitzjohn took up the axe. The slit grew wider and lower, and Fitzjohn said:

"We ought to get at the papers soon. 'Twill be a very cavern of an opening!"

But neither the woodcutters at work nor Leonard on the watch were aware of a man lying under a bush not a dozen paces from the oak who was watching their movements and listening to their conversation. He had heard them approach the dingle, had hastily secreted himself, and was now reaping the reward of his patience. Still as a log, lying in a dense shadow, his presence was utterly unsuspected.

"There, that will do," said Gillian at last. "Now for the packet!"



He slipped his arm into the wide opening right up to the shoulder. When he withdrew it, a sealed parcel was in his hand. The letters were recovered!

"Od's daggers, sirrah, but that is luck!" cried Fitzjohn, over-loudly. "Now to saddle and off, and success to our ride to Bindon! With your help, good friends, we shall win yet. Down with the Cardinal! And I will pledge you all in a bumper of hippocrass at the first inn we clap eyes on!"

They turned about and scrambled out of the hollow. The unseen watcher muttered to himself:

"So ho! They have made friends with those two freelances and their following. And the letters were in the tree all this time. Am I so very clever, to have scented a mystery, and lain in wait for their return every day, off and on, and yet never searched that slit myself? However, I know two things—they ride to Bindon, and they will stay to drink success to their plan at the first inn on the way. Let me think. That will be the Flagon, at Hurlam. Good! The Flagon shall be our next meeting-place, my merry gentlemen."

As the sound of their horses' hoofs on the turf denoted that the swordsmen were mounted and riding off, the spy crawled out from under the bush and stretched his cramped limbs. He then hurried away towards the village.

Soon after daybreak, two men, at the head of a troop of twenty well-armed, well-mounted wearers of the King's uniform, rode out from Rudbury Sye. One of the two leaders was a gaunt, grim-faced knight named Sir Richard Dene; the other was the man who had spied upon our heroes. His name was Luke Thorpe.

## CHAPTER XV.

### A FINGER-END.—AT THE FLAGON.

Meantime the seven swordsmen were cheerily trotting along their way. Secure, they imagined, of several hours' freedom from molestation, they did not hurry, but beguiled the journey with quip and jest and lively laughter. The fresh air of the

morning was cool and invigorating, and they felt full of confidence. At the porch of the Flagon, in the one wide, grass-grown street of straggling Hurlam, they drew rein at last.

"In here," said Fitzjohn. "We will drink a stoup apiece to our success."

The inmates of the rest-house had but just bestirred themselves. The ostlers bustled about, the serving-maids eyed the riders saucily, and mine host came to the door rubbing his fat hands together. All seven men trooped in, obtained a room for themselves, and after it had been swept out, sat down and stretched their tired legs under the long table.

Their long wakefulness and the morning air told upon them. After some talk they began to nod drowsily, gazing at each other between half-closed eyelids before the tankards were empty.

"Body o' me!" cried John Gillian, who was sitting with his back to the open window overlooking the bowling-green. "It is a sound sleep that would do me most good. Yet I would rather we were a little further on our journey. Let us see the letters, Fitzjohn, and ascertain if they have got much damage from the stay in the old oak."

"Here they are," said the jovial knight, fetching the packet out of his jerkin and placing it on the board. "They are as good as new. But for one or two specks of brown dirt you would say they had been in my holding all the time."

"It is a small packet of paper to bring about the downfall of so great a man as my Lord Wolsey, or to risk our tough hides for," mused Sir Henry Wilton. "Why not let the King see them direct, instead of trying to take them out of the country? Would he not be moved as much?"

"I am not sure," answered Fitzjohn. "He might, or he might not. But once let him know that Louis of France has seen them, he could not, for very shame, keep Wolsey in his service. If he saw them alone, the Cardinal might, with his oily tongue, righten himself in Henry's esteem. And small as the packet is, what would not Gon da Brissac, or Don



Sanchos, or Luke Thorpe give to possess it this very moment?"

None of the drowsy men knew that at that precise instant the last-mentioned of their foes was close at hand—was just outside the open window, peering in through the thick mantle of ivy that overgrew one side of the casement. This foe had lost no time. His men had already surrounded the house, and he had spoken to the landlord and brought him over to his aid.

Here was an opportunity not to be missed. He could reach the table by an effort, and to secure the coveted packet would be even better than securing the men. As Fitzjohn's hand went towards the letters to pick them up, Luke Thorpe bent forward, thrusting his long arm over Gillian's shoulder. The prize was almost within his grasp.

But leaning forward, he had cast a shadow into the room even before John Gillian was aware of his action. Fitzjohn's blade flashed out of its sheath, and rose and fell—chop!—on the table. Luke Thorpe saw the flash of the steel, and snatched away his hand.

It was all done so quickly that no one saw the severance, but close beside the cut that the sword made in the table was the first joint of a human finger! Swiftly as the spy had drawn back, Fitzjohn's blade was swifter, and had taken toll. An instant's hesitation on either side, and the letters would have been lost, or a hand would have graced the board.

The King's man, furious at his misadventure, drew his own sword, and stood in full view of the open window.

"Butchering cullions!" he shouted, livid with pain and rage. "Surrender, in the King's name! You are trapped at last. I have the house surrounded, and you cannot escape. Throw down your arms, if you value your lives! Surrender, I say!"

"Never!" roared Fitzjohn, pocketing the letters. "Never!"

The King's man raised a silver whistle to his lips and blew a shrill blast upon it. Before the swordsmen had time to burst out through the window he was joined by Sir Richard Dene and seven stout men-at-arms.

"Surrender, friends!" cried the knight—a grey-haired, wiry-looking

soldier. "I wish you no harm, for you are all tough fellows, but your time has come. My men are all around you, and if you show fight we shall have no mercy for such outlaws."

"Being a soldier and a gentleman, I am not used to being addressed thus," said Sir Henry Wilton. "If for no other reason than your insolence, I would not surrender. What! You think you can save yourselves the trouble of overmastering us? Not so. You must win what you take!"

"Yes, my fine popinjays and grizzled gallants," laughed Will Fitzjohn, "if you want us so pressingly, pray come in and take us! We are waiting. Only I warn you that our blades are of good steel and in skilful hands. Pray enter, gentlemen!"

The jovial soldier of fortune took off his helmet and made a sweeping, mocking bow of invitation. But the nine men outside hesitated. Not one of them cared to be the first to face those seven ready swords.

"We must have a little patience," muttered Luke Thorpe to his comrade. "When they are driven out from within, we can take them here in the open easily."

"In that case," said John Gillian, "we will bid you farewell for awhile."

Springing forward, he shut the casement with a bang, and hasped it.

"Where now?" asked Fitzjohn.

"To some upper room," said Gillian. "Our only hope is to stand a siege."

"To what good will that tend?" asked Leonard.

"Why," said John Gillian, "it will go hard with us if we cannot get hold of some provender for a day or two. And delay is in our favour. Don Sanchos and De Brissac will get to hear of this, and they will be buzzing around Luke's men like a lot of wasps. Then will be our chance to escape yet once more."

"Good for you, boyee!" cried Fitzjohn. "Betwixt my sword and your brains, friend Gillian, we shall go far. Come on, then!"

He flung the door wide open, to find the passage full of staring men and maids, the shifty-eyed landlord standing near the bar, and Dene's men clustering in both back and front doorways. Straight across the stone-



flagged passage was the foot of the stairs.

"Up, my merry men!" cried Fitzjohn. "I will take the rearguard."

Mine host stepped forward angrily as the seven men rushed clattering up the creaking stairway, Fitzjohn last. Sir Richard Dene's men came jostling along the passage, and a crash of breaking glass heralded the forceful entry of the knight himself, with the others outside, into the room the swordsmen had left.

"Down with the scurvy varlets!" shouted Sir Richard, waving his sword, but not venturing on the stairs himself.

Luke Thorpe, more practical, cried quickly:

"Back to the doors, some of you! Guard the rear and the front of the house, and watch the upper windows!"

Obedying the knight's injunction, half a dozen men, vociferating volubly, went blundering up the stairs after the hunted swordsmen. The staircase was narrow—so narrow that two people could scarcely ascend it abreast—and near the top it took a sharp, sudden turn. In that dim angle, where each stair thinned off to nothing at the inner end, one man could do battle with a hundred.

This was Fitzjohn's post. His keen sword was ready, and when the foremost enemy appeared, the trusty blade whirled and flashed and descended. The other's weapon clattered and slithered downstairs, and the man, caught across the breastplate by the full force of the blow, lost his balance. Throwing out his arms to save himself, he clutched two of his fellows and brought them down with him. The three were flung, with irresistible impact, upon the three behind, and the whole six—a frenzied, struggling, shouting mass of humanity—went thundering down the stairs and rolled violently into the passage, sweeping the cautious King's knight off his feet. As he fell, his head dropped nicely into a bucketful of water that an ostler had left near the door, and he received the full benefit of its cooling contents.

"'Tis indeed a hot morning or I should marvel at your choice of liquor, sir knight!" said Will Fitzjohn, who had adventured halfway down to see

the full effect of his lucky stroke. A couple of arrows flew, but he was back again in safety as they quivered in the wainscot.

## CHAPTER XVI.

## THE HOLE IN THE WALL.—THE RACE TO BINDON CASTLE.

"The first skirmish is ours, friend Gillian," he said. "I think we are safe for awhile."

"And for more than a while, if a plan that I have just concocted can be carried out," said John Gillian. "Hold the stairs, and let me have a free hand, without asking questions, and I promise you all to see Bindon."

"We will hold the stairs, fear not," cried Fitzjohn. "Sir Richard Dene's ardour is somewhat cooled already, I vow, and his hirelings will be chary of coming up here uninvited."

The boast was no vain one. The men-at-arms had had enough of stairway fighting for the time being, and both Sir Richard Dene and Luke Thorpe, thinking their quarry run to earth and safely cornered, decided to lodge at the inn for the day and night, and trust to hunger and thirst doing their work.

Placing sentries at front and at back of the inn and at the foot of the stairs, they sought to kill time by drinking mine host's best brew in the large room. The landlord was irate enough at the invasion of his house and the loss of the upper rooms, but Luke Thorpe flourished his authority and Sir Richard Dene flourished his money, and the bar was thronged with curious village folk, who must needs spend, so he held his peace.

"At the most, good landlord," cried the King's man, "we will relieve you of our presence by to-morrow. They will come to their senses by then, I can assure you."

Luke Thorpe reckoned without taking John Gillian's wit into account. Whilst the soldiers were carousing confidently below, their enemies above were preparing to leave the inn. The Flagon was an old building, adjoining old buildings on each side, and the



upper walls were in a decrepit condition. John Gillian went the round of the rooms, tapping all the walls, and discovered two, as he expected, that were merely lath and plaster.

"These will soon be broken through," he said to Guy Hathersden. "Nor need we make much noise over it. Then our way out will be clear."

"But what of the people in the next house?" asked Guy. "And if they do not give the alarm, we shall be in the street without horses."

"Whoever the neighbours are, it will go ill with us if my tongue or your swords can't quiet them," quoth Gillian. "As to horses, the Flagon stables are not large enough for ours and theirs, so some will be housed at the Willow Tree further up the road. We are not known there. What easier than to help ourselves?"

"And when are we to make the attempt?"

"As soon as it is dark, and before the folk retire to bed," said Gillian. "I would not disturb their sleep."

The day passed without any noteworthy incident until the middle of the afternoon, and the fugitives, though taking turns to watch the stairs, took as much rest and sleep as they could. Just as the heat of the day began to abate somewhat, there was the clatter of a cavalcade in the street, a noisy entry into the inn, and an altercation in the passage.

One rough voice roared out above all the others, and the listeners on the stairs knew at once whose it was.

"Gon de Brissac!" whispered Gillian. "That is good! There will be one foe less outside whilst he stops here, and whilst the tumult lasts we can be pulling the wall down. 'Twill be dusk soon."

"And 'tumult' is hardly the word for it!" laughed Will Fitzjohn. "Hearken to them!"

The uproar was prodigious. Sir Richard Dene had imbibed not wisely but too well, and he was always quarrelsome in his cups. Luke Thorpe resented the French knight's interference, and Gon de Brissac himself was furious with rage to think that he had been forestalled.

Words ran high. The King's men ordered the Cardinal's retainers out of the inn; De Brissac swore that he

would sack the place if turned out; and the landlord, between his desire to please his guests and welcome the newcomers, was at his wit's end.

"Make thyself scarce, thou fat, limping loon!" hiccoughed Sir Richard Dene. "Run, waddle, amble, crawl out of my sight, thou addle-pated Frenchman! Vanish, or I will baptize thee in this good liquor!"

Gon de Brissac replied with a furious oath, his hand on his sword-hilt, and before Luke Thorpe could stop him the drunken knight lurched forward and dashed the contents of a foaming tankard full in the Frenchman's red face.

Swords and daggers were out instantly, and an indescribable riot began—a free fight between the rival factions—during which the lower rooms of the inn were made a scene of wreckage. The Cardinal's men fought the more fiercely, but their opponents were the more numerous and in possession, and gradually drove them towards the door. It was a close-quarters, vindictive struggle, and more than one man was laid stiff and stark upon the sanded floor before the melee was over.

And meantime the neglected prisoners upstairs were working hard, unheard. Whilst the row was at its height, a tidy-sized hole was made in the lath and plaster wall of one of the bedrooms, and they were ready for flight.

"First we will rig up a barricade on the stairs," said thoughtful John Gillian. "Then we will fasten the door of this room on the inside."

Beds, tables, chairs, boxes—everything movable—was seized and fixed in position. The stairway was completely blocked, and the room door was held fast by a great heap of heavy furniture within.

"Now for the adventure!" said Fitzjohn.

One by one the seven men stepped through the hole in the wall, finding themselves in an empty bedroom. The door of it was unsecured, and in single file they stepped out, and went cautiously and silently down the dim staircase of the quiet house. They went slowly both because of caution and because it was growing dusk. Fortune favoured them beyond their



wildest hopes. The large room, or kitchen, into which they stepped was entirely deserted. A pan of porridge was bubbling on the fire, and half-eaten pieces of bread and cheese lay on the rough table.

"The house folks are all out at the front, looking on at the fight in the inn," said Guy. "We are in luck's way. But there is no time to be lost."

The back door opened upon a cobbled yard, divided from the inn yard by a high wall. A gateway out of this opened upon a dark alley that ran parallel to the high road. In less time than it can be told, the seven men were running down the alley, and were soon in the village street. Protected by the gathering darkness and the interest still attracted by the uproar within the Flagon, they reached the Willow Tree safely. Claiming to be some of Sir Richard Dene's men, who had come for their horses, they were soon mounted again. Tossing some coins to the ostlers, they started off, throwing caution to the winds.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### FITZJOHN'S SWORD GLEAMS.—THE DRAW-BRIDGE BREAKS.

Surely their troubles were over for a little while now! Surely their escape might not be noticed for hours! It was not to be. They were not clear of the village when they met a madly-galloping cavalcade of about a dozen men. Seen even in the dusk, they looked a gang of villainous cutthroats. Our friends would have passed them, but one of the riders threw his horse almost upon its haunches, and called a halt.

"Madre de Dios!" he shouted. "These are the very men we seek—seven of them, as we heard yester eve. They have escaped all the others. Seize them, dead or alive!"

"Don Sanchos, by the Rood!" said Sir Henry Wilton. "What say you, friends?"

"I'm for fight, but I will please Gillian, and run for it," said Fitz-

john. "Our horses are fresh, and theirs are blown."

The Spaniard's men tried to close upon their enemies, but the seven swordsmen broke through their line with a rush, and got clear away, pounding along for all they knew in the direction of Bindon. Don Sanchos, spoiling the night air with fearful imprecations, followed at their heels as fast as his tired animals could go. On through the night pursued and pursuers went, but at daybreak Don Sanchos was out of sight.

A rest, food and drink for man and beast at the first inn, and our friends were in the saddle again, hopeful of success at last. But before noon, having obtained fresh horses somewhere, and spurring them on unmercifully, Don Sanchos came within sight once more. Both parties put their hardest into the race, and over the drowsy countryside, quivering under the heat of the unclouded sun, the mad pursuit went on. On they tore, Don Sanchos now gaining, now losing ground, and at last the grim towers of Bindon Castle were visible in the distance, as the fugitives topped a long hill. As Fitzjohn raised in his saddle, pointing exultantly, one of the men gave a low cry, lurched forward, and fell heavily from the saddle.

John Gillian, who was nearest, was afoot and beside the fallen man instantly.

"Sunstroke," he said, looking up at his companions, after a brief examination. "This is a pretty to do, with that Spanish hound coming up the hill!"

"It is clear we cannot leave him," said Guy Hathersden, "and yet he may be hours before he recovers—if he recovers at all."

"If he recovers at all," said Gillian, his hand over the man's heart. "'Tis a bad case, forsooth. My advice is to leave him by the wayside, well hidden by yonder bushes, and take his horse along with us. We can leave word in Bindon village for the chirurgeon to go and attend to him. We cannot wait here."

"I am of your idea," said Fitzjohn. "To leave him in the shade will be the best we can do for him."

The others agreeing, this was done, and the troop, now six only, were in



the saddle again, and galloping down the hill before Don Sanchos, hot and furious, reached the top. Through the sultry afternoon, along the wide valley, by highway and lane and bridle-path, the stern pursuit went on, Sanchos slowly but surely gaining. As our friends dashed into the one long, straggling street of Bindon the Spaniard and his hirelings were within speaking distance, and lashing their horses on unmercifully. A burly man-at-arms, on a raking chestnut mare, was leading by several yards.

"Od's daggers, but I will stop him!" cried Fitzjohn, glancing over his shoulder. "Do you leave a message for the physician, Gillian—leave it with the smith yonder—and I will keep them busy."

He wheeled round as he spoke, and met the man-at-arms in full career, before the latter realized his intention or had time to draw his weapon. A flash of steel, a ringing stroke, another and another, and horse and rider went down in a struggling heap. And the man would never breathe again. Fitzjohn drew back, unhurt, as the rest of the Spaniard's troop dashed up. Some threw their steeds back on their haunches in time, but five of them came to grief over the fallen horse and man.

"Better have let us alone, senor," said Fitzjohn, as he turned and rode hard after his companions.

John Gillian had fulfilled his errand meantime, and the six men were quickly racing up the approach to the old castle.

All was quiet. The drawbridge was down, and there was no sign of life about the place save a curl of smoke rising from one of the chimneys. They had reached their goal in time. An effort, and they would be in and in possession, and Don Sanchos would be baffled.

Over the drawbridge, noting the gleam of deep water in the wide moat, the horsemen went carefully. An old man—the gate porter, who had been dozing in the archway, suspecting nothing untoward this hot evening—came forward with angry protests, but the six men were already masters of the place.

"Down with the portcullis!" cried Gillian. "I tell you, friend, we mean

no harm, but we must keep these bandits out."

The Spaniard's troop were already at the end of the drawbridge, and Don Sanchos was boiling with rage.

"The portcullis will not come down, sirrahs," said the porter, shaking his head. "It is broken, and we have had no orders to repair it."

"Up with the bridge, then, or they will be in!" said Gillian.

"Alas! one of the chains is even now at the blacksmith's, having new links put in," the porter said. "But fear not. The bridge itself is rotten, and if they crowd on it, 'twill snap like touchwood."

"Then I will keep the gate," said Fitzjohn, who still had his trusty sword in his right hand. "Give me all the room you can, for there is only striking space for one man here. I am longing for a little more practice at fencing."

"Have it your own way," muttered John Gillian, "but I shall not be far behind you."

Don Sanchos, calling upon his men to follow him, now set his horse at the bridge.

"Have a care, sir knight!" said Fitzjohn, mockingly. "The timber is none too strong, and though you doubtless need a wash, you might not relish one in the moat."

"Look to yourself, braggart!" cried Don Sanchos. "I will soon settle with you! Stay back, men, whilst I make crows-meat of this glib-tongued runaway! Now!"

He urged his steed forward, bending low, eye along sword edge. Cutthroat and bravo, he was a skilled hand with a blade, and not short of reckless courage. Will Fitzjohn waited his onset coolly, making a splendid picture as he sat there upon his horse, the late afternoon sunlight filling the archway, and throwing up every detail of immobile man and animal into bold relief. As the Spaniard reached him, Fitzjohn's right arm went up, the horse swerved, and the sword of Toledo steel gleamed like a bar of silver in the sunlight.

Down came the gleaming steel, but quickly as it flashed the Spaniard's blade flashed to meet it, and diverted the blow. The crossing edges bit and hissed along each other: as they



parted and met again, rapidly and furiously, a fire of sparks glittered from them.

Now began a game of skill between two masters of the art of swordsmanship. Hand for hand and eye for eye, they seemed well matched in force and keen quickness. Each plied the other with a steady rain of blows and thrusts; each parried the blows and thrusts of the other with consummate deftness and certainty. Their horses, prancing and curveting to every move in the game, danced to the music of the ringing steel. The issue seemed even, but John Gillian, watching intently for some minutes, let his features relax into a smile.

"Tis not Don Sanchos I would care to change places with," he said, turning to his anxious-faced companions. "See how Fitzjohn plays with him! Look at that! Not half the stroke he could have dealt! It will soon be over, and Don Sanchos will trouble us no more. Ah, did I not tell you?"

"Gramercy, 'twas a master-stroke!" cried Wilton.

Fitzjohn, biding his time, had caught the angry Spaniard momentarily off his guard, and lunged out with his shining bar of sharp Toledo steel at his foe's sword-arm. The Spaniard's blade fell from his hand as he staggered back from that stern blow, making his horse retreat also. Two—three backward steps the animal made, slipped on the edge of the creaking bridge, and fell headlong into the slimy water of the moat, carrying its wildly-shouting rider with it to its unexpected bath. Fitzjohn at once backed his steed into the arch of the gateway.

"Good don," he cried, mockingly, to the floundering knight, who was endeavouring to keep out of the way of the frightened, struggling horse, "I trust you are enjoying your swim this hot day! The water may not be over-

clean, but at such short notice I could not have it any better. If it suits you, make all speed out, and I will be most joyful to repeat the dose."

The brothers of the sword joined in uproarious mirth at this sally, and Don Sanchos, as he was helped out by his men, spluttering the foul ooze and slime out of his mouth, was in a paroxysm of uncontrollable rage.

"Charge over the bridge!" he cried, his voice a hoarse scream. "Charge! Hew the rogues down!"

"Let them come!" said John Gillian. "No need to waste strength or steel on them. The timbers are dry-rotten, and will let them in. My one fear whilst you and the drenched rat yonder were hammering each other on the bridge was that it would not hold together long enough."

Fitzjohn drew back at that, and the six men stood waiting. On came the dozen riders in a compact mass, dashing upon the drawbridge helter-skelter, and after them, on foot, the infuriated knight.

A thunderous trampling, a hollow, resounding clatter of pounding hoofs, and the cavalcade were on the long timbers of the old and decrepit bridge. It creaked, it groaned, it split; it gave way and listed to one side, and then, with a sudden, dramatic effect, it snapped right across, and precipitated horses and riders en masse into the flooded moat.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### THE NEWCOMERS.—THE SIEGE.

Two of the nearest riders made a desperate effort to gain footing on the fragment of the drawbridge that projected from the gateway, but in vain. Down they went with the others into the wild chaos of horses and men



struggling in the vile water. Don Sanchos, drawing back at the last moment, managed to save himself from a second immersion, and so was able to help some of his men to climb out of danger. These helped others, but when the work of rescue was done the troop was smaller by two than before the rash charge. And the horses were still in the moat.

"I like not to see the poor beasts struggling so," said Fitzjohn. "Cannot we get them out?"

"If we have any long planks, surely," said John Gillian. "What can you find us, porter?"

"Just what you want," said the old man. "I have some long timbers in the courtyard that will more than reach across. If these be let down, they will make a sloping way up which the horses can walk. And good it is that we have plenty of provender and fodder, if so be we must stand a siege, as seems likely, judging by your ways of going on, most impertinent strangers."

"Put a check on thy babbling tongue, old Curiosity," cried Will Fitzjohn, "and show us these timbers."

The planks were found and placed in position, and one by one, as the noble animals grasped the situation, the dozen horses were coaxed up the steep slope and led through the archway into the courtyard. The Spaniard and his men watched the operations sullenly, without attempting to hinder or interfere, but showed no signs of leaving the spot. A crowd of villagers and peasants were around them now, noisily inquisitive, and Don Sanchos was soon in close conversation with the armourer and blacksmith.

"A siege it will be, I fear," said Guy Hathersden. "We are a very

weak garrison, especially if the don enlists the village in his service."

"But still we shall render a good account of ourselves," replied Fitzjohn. "I know Bindon Castle, and it will go very hard with us if we cannot hold it until a good chance of escape offers. We have John Gillian with us, and his cunning head is worth a dozen."

"If we have only Don Sanchos to deal with, I fear not," said Gillian. "But by to-morrow or the day after there may be others camped outside—not to mention the Cardinal. However, here we are, tired and thirsty, and night coming on. Let us have speech with the garrulous porter again, and find out our resources."

This sound advice was followed. The night passed without adventure or alarm, and, excepting to the two men who took turn at sentry duty on the wall, the rest under a roof proved very welcome to the fugitives. Except the aged porter and his wife, there were no inmates of the castle, and there was no lack of food and water for men and horses.

Morning broke with a cloudy sky and a summer shower, and up till noon nothing untoward happened. The Spaniard and his reduced troop—a dejected band on foot—went round the castle several times, but found no vulnerable place to assault. The moat was everywhere wide and deep and well flooded, and the walls were strong and high. There were not many such castles neglected.

By noon John Gillian had repaired the portcullis and it was in working order. The little garrison were in the archway of the gate tower inspecting it, when a sudden outbreak of shouting in the village took them to the top of the wall. From there they had a wide view of the green plain, the clustering houses of Bindon, and the open



space before the castle. Into this open space a troop of about thirty men were riding, pennons fluttering from their lances, and their leader resplendent in gay attire. And hard on their heels, a sober contrast, rode Luke Thorpe and Sir Richard Dene, with their men.

"Od's bodikins! Whom have we here?" said Fitzjohn. "This first knight is not the Cardinal, that is certain, fat as he is. And that helmet, with visor down to hide his face, goes not well with that fancy garb."

"Marry, but I am nonplussed!" cried John Gillian. "He has a good retinue, and is doubtless the one of whom we heard rumour, and he is evidently in league with Luke Thorpe and that braggart Dene. Friends, we are run to earth at last, I do fear, and must prepare for a sorry time."

"We are Erothers of the Sword," said Sir Henry Wilton. "We shall quit ourselves like men. Let no more be said of that."

"It is good to hear such words," said Fitzjohn, much moved. "The siege of Bindon Castle is like to be well remembered."

There was nothing to do but examine the defences carefully, take turns at sentry, and wait for developments. The newcomers, who had pack-mules with them, set up a large tent in view of the gate, but just outside bowshot, and made a camp. After a sharp passage of words, they appeared to make friends with Don Sanchos, and the whole assembly of men—now sixty strong—prepared to lay siege to the castle. A cordon of sentries, within speaking distance of each other, was drawn around the walls, and the horses were kept near the camp, ready saddled. Several arrows and quarrels were let fly at the battlements, partly to get bowshot distance and partly to test the garrison.

To these our friends made no response, keeping themselves silent and unseen.

No further action was taken that day, but just as night fell, to the astonishment of the curious villagers, another troop of soldiers rode up in haste.

"Gon de Brissac!" cried Gillian, peering through an arrow-slit in the wall. "I can't see his face, but I can hear his voice. He will be wanting to settle his feud with Sir Richard Dene, perchance."

Judging by the uproar that ensued, this seemed probable, but next morning discovered the whole of the besiegers, including the mysterious stranger of the closed visor, acting in unison.

"Well, they are all here, known and unknown," said Fitzjohn to himself. "Now to test our defences."

The first assault was made upon the gateway. Long and stout timbers were brought and pushed across the moat so as to rest on the remnants of the broken drawbridge, and in spite of the arrows the six defenders rained upon them the besiegers successfully accomplished this. No sooner were the planks firmly fixed, however, so that men could walk over, than Gillian and Wilton, exposing themselves to the arrows of the attackers, rolled some heavy stones to the edge of the wall and threw them over upon the new bridge.

Crash, crash went the ponderous missiles, and the timbers bent and snapped under the shock. Four of the planks were broken, and the fifth dislodged, and two men who had started to cross were precipitated into the water.

"One success to us!" cried Wilton, as he and Gillian sprang down to shelter from the shafts that were whizzing around them.



Another attempt was made in an hour, but was repulsed as easily, and an effort to swim the moat and climb the wall in another place was defeated by Fitzjohn's sword skill. Threemen that at length gained the wall top looked their last on earth, and no one dared to follow them. So the day passed. But what when the night came?

## CHAPTER XIX.

### THE GATE IS CARRIED.—THE FINAL STRUGGLE.

The besiegers were evidently disinclined to risk their skins in a night attack, for all was quiet until the dawn of the second day. Then, as soon as it was light enough to see clearly, the main body made a forward movement towards the castle. Along with them came a number of villagers, who appeared to be rolling freshly-felled trees before them.

"Now the siege draws to its close," said Guy Hathersden. "They are going to fill the moat up with these tree-trunks, and it will be little use throwing stones over them. And see how carefully each man carries a shield of some sort."

"They intend to go surely, if slowly," observed Fitzjohn. "Is there no hope for us—no way of escape, friend Gillian? I have found the papers I needed to complete the proof of the Cardinal's guilt, and to make my own title clear to my rightful heritage. It would seem ill to be baulked at the last."

"As yet I see no way," confessed Gillian. "All we can do is to fight, and see if the fortune of war puts a chance before us. Look! They are about to have speech with us."

One of the troopers, riding ahead, blew a shrill blast on a bugle as he ap-

proached the entrance. John Gillian and Fitzjohn stood on the wall, and the latter asked the rider what his message might be.

"What I have to say is quickly told," the man replied. "In the name of my master, who wishes to be called, for the nonce, the Unknown Knight, I demand the complete and immediate surrender of Bindon Castle. Yourselfs you must deliver up as prisoners, to be dealt with as he may see fit, and he will account obedience to this summons much in your favour. But failing obedience, he will take the castle by force, and the consequences thereof shall be upon your own heads. All present in our camp are under his leadership—Gon de Brissac, Don Sanchos, Sir Richard Dene, and the others. I call upon you, therefore, to surrender at once."

"We refuse, upon such terms," said Fitzjohn, curtly. "As honourable gentlemen, who have been hunted like beasts of prey by various crews of cut-throats and ruffians, we disdain to surrender unless your master—who can have no quarrel with us, having suffered no harm at our hands—will pledge us his word that our persons shall be inviolate from his motley tribe of assassins. If he pledge us that, he can have the castle. Go tell him our word."

"I was bidden to say," answered the messenger, "that he would grant no terms except those offered, and would brook no delay."

"Then waste no more time," cried Will Fitzjohn, angrily. "Tell your meddling unknown master that what he wants of us he must gain at the sword's point, and we scorn and defy him! Tell him we had as lief die fighting as by treachery."

"And tell him," added John Gillian, "that we fear no man and no men, least of all a bombastic buffoon who in-



terferes in quarrels not his own, and is so chary of his own hide that he comes at the rear of his varlets, instead of leading them! And tell him that the thing we fear most is that his helmet should slip off, for his face must surely be of an ugliness enough to scare the very saints, so well he guards it from view! Tell the lazy loon that."

"I will convey your answer," said the man, turning. "It will please my master, doubtless."

He had no need to repeat it, however, for the besieging force, with the Unknown Knight bringing up the rear, were well within range of sound, and John Gillian had shouted his scathing insult in no gentle voice.

"I heard," said the Unknown. "I shall not forget. If they are so obstinate, let them suffer the penalty. There is more in this business than I can yet well see, and I am resolved to fathom it. And 'twill be as fine a bit of rough sport as I have seen for many a long day. Forward, and force an entrance at any cost! And you, good Luke Thorpe, keep a watchful eye on De Brissac. He is a Cardinal's man, forsooth."

The party came on, carefully but resolutely, and kept up such a heavy rain of arrows upon the wall-top and the gate-towers that the villagers were able to bring up their supply of timbers undisturbed for the most part. Gillian got one or two shafts home, but dared not expose himself much, and the work went steadily on. The great tree-trunks were bound together with strong cords, and one by one lowered into the moat. A floating raft, reaching across, was soon made, and on this more long logs were placed, and still more, and there was no more trouble in spanning the first obstacle. Wilton and Leonard heaved several heavy stones over, but these merely lowered the raft a little, and

were soon pushed off, and out of the shower of arrows that assailed the two daring defenders Leonard received one in the left arm.

The old porter and his wife attended to the wound, and whilst it was being cleansed and bound up, the besiegers seemed strangely quiet. What were they going to do next?

"The porteuillis is strong, and they have no siege appliances," said Fitzjohn. "I wonder how they think to batter it in?"

The intentions of the attacking party were not long in showing themselves. The floating bridge finished to their satisfaction, the villagers retired to the camp, returning with a dozen long ladders. Some of these were roughly constructed, bearing marks of haste, but they were strong and serviceable. The plan was to attack the gateway and towers in a dozen places at once with these scaling-ladders. The assailants could portion off four men to each ladder easily, whilst they knew the defenders numbered only six. The end was in sight.

"Friends," said Fitzjohn, "I will make one last appeal. Gillian, I know, will not listen to reason, and leave me, but you four need not imperil your lives further. You have stood by me well so far, and truer and merrier gentlemen I never wish to know; but why not surrender at once, and save yourselves? For myself I care not."

The four men did not speak for a few moments. Then Sir Henry Wilton said:

"We are not the sort of scurvy knaves who leave their friends when in danger. We have taken a vow, and we are brothers. Die we must, some day. What odds? Let us die to-day, if it comes to that, fighting in a good cause."

"And so say I!" "And I!" "And I!" cried the others.



"Then to the walls!" cried Fitzjohn. "We will topple some of their precious ladders over, and then retire to the keep."

Some of the besiegers were nearly at the top already, and a wild scene of conflict ensued. Arrows and quarrels flew around as thickly as hail, and swords and battle-axes shone and smote ruthlessly. Three of the ladders were overturned and one was broken, and Fitzjohn drove back the men who were climbing a fourth. But up the remaining eight thirty men successfully mounted. The wall was lost and the gateway won. The defenders abandoned their positions and ran for the keep.

As they ran, the besiegers close on their heels, an arrow struck Guy Hathersden in the back, piercing him to the heart. He sank to the ground with a sharp cry. Leonard, pausing to glance at him, fell the next moment to Sir Richard Dene's sword. As the others crowded into the narrow doorway of the keep, Gillian leading, Wilton next, and Fitzjohn third, Don Sanchos pushed to the front and brought down the fourth man with a vicious stroke of his axe. The three survivors had not time to close the heavy door, and into the dark keep the victorious besiegers pursued them, eager to bring the struggle to a final issue.

"At last we have the rats in a hole!" shouted Gon de Brissac to his men, as he pushed his ponderous form through the doorway. "And see to it that we secure the chief of the varlets, Fitzjohn, at any cost! Haste! Haste!"

## CHAPTER XX.

AT BAY.—THE TRAP—STONE.—PRISONERS OF THE KING.—THE END.

The Cardinal's man was too hasty and too sanguine. The three desperate men that he thought within his grasp were not yet quite beaten. As they ran, panting, up the winding staircase in the thickness of the wall, Sir William Fitzjohn cried:

"Let me lead! I know a good place to stand!"

He led his companions up and up, past the second floor, to a third-storey chamber—a great space overgrown with moss and grasses, and open to the sky. One side of this space narrowed to a passage scarcely two feet in width, and in this cul-de-sac the fugitives came to a standstill. Voices, excited and confused, were rapidly nearing, and they would soon be discovered. Fitzjohn knelt down and felt along the lowest course of the stone wall.

"The stone in front of me—this one that reaches across the passage—is balanced on pivots," he explained. "This edge nearest us rests on a firm ledge, the other edge on—nothing. It is held secure by this strong wooden bar that projects from the wall. I have only to push this in—so!—and the trap is set. Whoever walks on the stone from the other side will go down, right through a gap in the wall, to one of the dungeons underground. My father's oldest servant told me of this, and showed me how it worked. Now we can but wait—and shall not wait long."

He had scarcely finished speaking and risen to his feet when the foremost pursuers burst into the roofless room and rushed towards the three men. Others came, pushing the first comers forward, but at sight of the three sharp swords barring the narrow



way, the crowd hesitated. Numbers would be no advantage there, and no man cared to throw himself into the breach. About a dozen paces from the trap-stone they stood, undecided, and the men at bay laughed grimly.

"Come, why hang back, men-hunters?" cried John Gillian. "You will surely be killed if you do come on, but that's your trade, forsooth! What! Frightened of three rusty blades?"

The men made an uneasy movement, and several took a step forward, but at this moment Gon de Brissac and his troop arrived. The Cardinal's man took in the situation quickly.

"Stay!" he shouted. "No need to waste a man over them. We have eight or nine good archers amongst us. We will wing them where they are! 'Twill be good enough for them!"

At his command nine of the men drew out their bows and fitted shafts to them.

"This is ill indeed," said Fitzjohn. "We have no shields, and our mail is hacked and loose. Let us rush out on them, leaping the stone. It will be a more honourable end.

The archers were pulling out their bows to shooting stretch already, but before a shaft could be loosened or a man could move, a voice from behind them—a great, strong, hearty voice—cried, commandingly:

"Hold!"

More men had crowded up the stairway and into the room, and at their head was the Unknown Knight—a stalwart, burly, broad-shouldered man, who spoke as one who must be obeyed. At the sound of his voice John Gillian started, and an expression of surprise, followed by a cunning smile and then by a look of abject fear, passed over his face.

"I will have no murder, Gon de Brissac!" went on the Unknown Knight, sternly. "Take your men in fair fight if you can. If yonder knight

will come out and meet you man to man, and beat you, he and his friends shall go free. I like their courage and determination well. But if you can beat him, he shall be your prisoner."

Gon de Brissac hesitated a moment, but Fitzjohn, sword in hand, stepped forward, clearing the trap-stone by a long stride, and faced him.

"I am ready," he said. "I thank you for the offer, Sir Unknown."

The Frenchman, though the gleam of the Toledo steel shone warningly in his eyes, was forced to the combat, and blade rang on blade at once in grim earnest. There was no doubt from the first who would be the victor. Fitzjohn fought with all the force he had, wasting neither time nor strength in fancy elegance of stroke or parry. He turned the heavy blows and fierce thrusts of the Cardinal's man with ease, and pressed him so sorely that after two wounds Gon de Brissac felt that his end was near. The fear made him reckless. Holding his own awhile, by a severe effort, he so moved that he was facing his own men, and Fitzjohn had his back to them. One of the men stood forward, with sword held before him. If he could but drive Fitzjohn back upon this blade, seemingly by accident, De Brissac thought, all might yet be well. The soldier, who understood his master well, waited in silent readiness to do his part.

But the unspoken stratagem was understood by others, too. Fitzjohn, noticing how near De Brissac was to the fatal stone, drew back, not wishing to force his enemy upon it. As he stepped backwards, the soldier behind lifted his outstretched blade a trifle higher, and moved expectantly.

"Ware treachery! Behind you!" cried the Unknown Knight, in anger. And John Gillian, the quaint look of fear yet on his face, called, sharply:



"Guard yourself, Fitzjohn! Drive the dog this way!"

Startled by the sudden double warning, Fitzjohn struck out forcefully. The shining bar of Toledo steel rasped and rang along the other blade, broke it near the hilt, and sent the remnant spinning from its owner's hand. A quick twist, and its keen point was at the Frenchman's throat. De Brissac recoiled, staggering back from the pursuing steel, and trod heavily on the trapstone.

The great slab gave way beneath his weight, turning swiftly on its pivots. With a wild cry of terror and a vain attempt to clutch the edges of the gap through which he fell, Gon de Brissac was hurled down to darkness and death!

For one brief moment there was deep silence in the roofless room. Then Fitzjohn leapt over the black chasm and joined his two companions. The three pulled the stone back to its place and, with the trap thus set again, waited. Don Sancho was the first to speak.

"It was not a fair victory, sire," he said, addressing the Unknown. "I claim the prisoners mine."

"I saw all," replied the masked knight, in his hearty voice. "De Brissac brought on his own death. Men, seize that traitor who would have struck a gallant knight in the back! Now I claim the prisoners mine. My three brave fellows, will you surrender to me? I make no promise of mercy, but shall please myself how I treat you."

A hasty refusal was on Fitzjohn's tongue, but Gillian checked him.

"Leave this to me," he said. "I will get you both well out of this plight. I have always managed to bring you out of trouble safely, have I not? Leave it to me, and agree with all I say."

"So be it!" Fitzjohn answered; and Sir Henry Wilton added, "But you will be a miracle-worker this time, if faith, if you succeed!"

John Gillian bent down, placed the wooden bar in its slot, fastening the stone carefully, and walked across the room.

"We surrender ourselves into your hands without conditions, your Majesty," he said. "To an Unknown Knight we would not have capitulated, but to King Henry we gladly give ourselves up, knowing his just judgment and good heart, and also because it is in his cause we have suffered."

"What, you know me?" asked the King, throwing back the visor of his helmet and laughing jovially. "How was it?"

"I knew your Majesty's voice at once. I heard it often at Windsor."

"Your ears have served you in good stead, friend what's-thy-name. Now tell me, if you can, how you got yourself and your friends, after so much blood-letting, into this predicament—through my service. There is plenty of time. You seem glib of tongue. Tell me your adventures. 'Twill be good hearing, I vow!"

"John Gillian is my name," that worthy replied, "and I am friend of this knight, Sir William Fitzjohn, in whose quarrel we are brothers. Yet his quarrel is with the Cardinal—hence Gon de Brissac's attentions—and to ruin Wolsey will be to rid your Majesty of a traitor. We have papers and letters that prove him a thief to his fellow-subjects, and an enemy of yourself and England. It is for these letters that we have been pursued so relentlessly, and have been in daily fear of our lives."

"Od's daggers!" cried King Henry.

"Had we not been clever fellows," pursued John Gillian, with a smile,



"we had been crows'-meat long enow! This is how we have fared, your Majesty."

He then related, with as few words as possible, the stirring history of the long man-hunt which had come to an end in Bindon Castle. King Henry listened attentively and approvingly, ever and anon bursting into fits of uproarious merriment as John told how the hunted men had foiled their foes again and again. When the tale was done, the King looked hard at the speaker.

"And what would you have done with the letters, had you escaped, friend, pray?" he asked.

"Brought them to your Majesty," answered John Gillian, without flinching. "What else could we do?"

"You took a strange way to find me!" said Henry.

"What else could we do?" said Gillian. "From the moment Fitzjohn secured them we have been, as I have told you, so sorely beset that our whole aim has been to guard our own skins. But when I heard your voice here, I knew our troubles were over. The letters are here, and I doubt not the knight will be glad to part with them."

Gillian's two companions had heard his clever speech with amaze, but saw that his was the only way, and the idea of getting the packet to France must be abandoned. Stepping forward, Sir William Fitzjohn said:

"Here are the letters written by Wolsey, your Majesty; and here are the papers which I have found in this castle, proving the wrong done to me by the Cardinal. The matter is now in your hands, sire."

King Henry took the packet, opened it, and examined the contents in silence. The smile faded from his face as he read, and his brow wrinkled to a stern frown. The men waiting around, friends and foes, watched him

eagerly. At last, still frowning, he fastened the packet and thrust it into his jerkin.

"Of these things I will think and decide at leisure," he said, slowly. "At present I will say no more. For the rest, my three good fellows, you are free either to take service under me or go your own ways. You may have been hasty and interfering in these matters of State, but you meant well, and have proved yourselves loyal subjects. As for these others, who have harried you so sadly, they can go free also, excepting the traitor we have a prisoner; but they must not strain my displeasure by further hostilities. You, Sir William Fitzjohn, shall decide this knave's fate."

"I had one request to make, sire, and now I have two," said Fitzjohn. "I wish to enter your service as soon as may be, and that you have already granted. Now I would ask of you the life of this man. He did but obey his master's unspoken command, and has no enmity for me. Let him go scatheless."

"Have your way, knight," said King Hal, who was a generous-minded man. "The varlet can go. And as the day is getting on, and venison pasty and good ale await us at the village inn, we may as well be moving hence. That is, after I have had word with this saucy dog again."

And the bluff monarch, trying to keep a stern face, pointed a fat forefinger at John Gillian, who cowered uncomfortably before him.

"I have pardoned you once, but I have still to judge you on another issue," said the King. "I remember too well how you spoke of me to the herald I sent to demand your submission. You it was, John Gillian, who called me a bombastic buffoon, indeed! I was chary of my hide, and a coward to boot, fersooth! You feared lest my helmet should fall off my ugly face!



I was a lazy loon, too! Deny it if you can. Tell me, John Gillian of the sharp tongue, whether my face affrights you now? Tell me how I ought to deal with you, sirrah!"

Gillian, wincing under the onslaught, cleared his throat resolutely. As well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, he reflected.

"I can tell you nothing more, sire, than I have already told," he answered, looking the King boldly in the face. "I am an honest man and a loyal subject, and what I said I said in ignorance. I spoke to a nameless person, and had you not been the King my words had stood. And I dare to add, your Majesty, that if I had been in your place and you in mine, you would have spoken every whit as sharply."

The bold speech suited the merry monarch well.

"By my halidom, John Gillian, I like your froward ways!" he cried. "Gramercy, 'tis not often I meet a

man so freely spoken. Pardon? You were never in danger, friend. Hold your peace! You and your comrades have given me the rarest two days' sport I ever had! Come with me, and let us attack the venison that awaits us."

The Spaniard, with the Frenchman's troop and the Cardinal's men, had all cleared away by this time, and our heroes, scarcely able as yet to realize the good fortune that had befallen them, joined the King's train of attendants and left the castle. Before nightfall Henry gave his promise to set Fitzjohn's affairs to rights, but bade them leave the greater matter of the Cardinal's position for him to deal with when he was ready.

And thus came to an end the stirring adventures in which Fitzjohn's sword and Gillian's skill had served each other so well.

As to how the King dealt with the Cardinal, that is told in the history books.

THE END.

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