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Chapter 11 - How A Young Shepherd Had A Perilous Flock

BLACK was the mouth of Twynham Castle, though a pair of torches burning at the further end of the gateway cast a red glare over the outer bailey, and sent a dim, ruddy flicker through the rough-hewn arch, rising and falling with fitful brightness. Over the door the travellers could discern the escutcheon of the Montacutes, a roebuck gules on a field argent, flanked on either side by smaller shields which bore the red roses of the veteran constable. As they passed over the drawbridge, Alleyne marked the gleam of arms in the embrasures to right and left, and they had scarce set foot upon the causeway ere a hoarse blare burst from a bugle, and, with screech of hinge and clank of chain, the ponderous bridge swung up into the air, drawn by unseen hands. At the same instant the huge portcullis came rattling down from above, and shut off the last fading light of day. Sir Nigel and his lady walked on in deep talk, while a fat under-steward took charge of the three comrades, and led them to the buttery, where beef, bread, and beer were kept ever in readiness for the wayfarer. After a hearty meal and a dip in the trough to wash the dust from them, they strolled forth into the bailey, where the bowman peered about through the darkness at wall and at keep, with the carping eyes of one who has seen something of sieges, and is not likely to be satisfied. To Alleyne and to John, however, it appeared to be as great and as stout a fortress as could be built by the hands of man.

Erected by Sir Balwin de Redvers in the old fighting days of the twelfth century, when men thought much of war and little of comfort, Castle Twynham had been designed as a stronghold pure and simple, unlike those later and more magnificent structures where warlike strength had been combined with the magnificence of a palace. From the time of the Edwards such buildings as Conway or Caernarvon castles, to say nothing of Royal Windsor, had shown that it was possible to secure luxury in peace as well as security in times of trouble. Sir Nigel's trust, however, still frowned above the smooth-flowing waters of the Avon, very much as the stern race of early Anglo-Normans had designed it. There were the broad outer and inner bailies, not paved, but sown with grass to nourish the sheep and cattle which might be driven in on sign of danger. All round were high and turreted walls, with at the corner a bare square-faced keep, gaunt and windowless, rearing up from a lofty mound, which made it almost inaccessible to an assailant.

Against the bailey-walls were rows of frail wooden houses and leaning sheds, which gave shelter to the archers and men-at-arms who formed the garrison. The doors of these humble dwellings were mostly open, and against the yellow glare from within Alleyne could see the bearded fellows cleaning their harness, while their wives would come out for a gossip, with their needlework in their hands, and their long black shadows streaming across the yard. The air was full of the clack of their voices and the merry prattling of children, in strange contrast to the flash of arms and constant warlike challenge from the walls above.

"Methinks a company of school lads could hold this place against an army," quoth John.

"And so say I," said Alleyne.

"Nay, there you are wide of the clout," the bowman said gravely. "By my hilt! I have seen a stronger fortalice carried in a summer evening. I remember such a one in Picardy, with a name as long as a Gascon's pedigree. It was when I served under Sir Robert Knolles, before the days of the Company; and we came by good plunder at the sacking of it. I had myself a great silver bowl, with two goblets, and a plastron of Spanish steel. Pasques Dieu! there are some fine women over yonder! Mort de ma vie! see to that one in the doorway! I will go speak to her. But whom have we here?"

"Is there an archer here hight Sam Aylward?" asked a gaunt man- at-arms, clanking up to them across the courtyard.

"My name, friend," quoth the bowman.

"Then sure I have no need to tell thee mine," said the other.

"By the rood! if it is not Black Simon of Norwich!" cried Aylward. "A mon coeur, camarade, a mon coeur! Ah, but I am blithe to see thee!" The two fell upon each other and hugged like bears.

"And where from, old blood and bones?" asked the bowman.

"I am in service here. Tell me, comrade, is it sooth that we shall have another fling at these Frenchmen? It is so rumored in the guard-room, and that Sir Nigel will take the field once more."

"It is like enough, mon gar., as things go."

"Now may the Lord be praised!" cried the other. "This very night will I set apart a golden ouche to be offered on the shrine of my name-saint. I have pined for this, Aylward, as a young maid pines for her lover."

"Art so set on plunder then? Is the purse so light that there is not enough for a rouse? I have a bag at my belt, camarade, and you have but to put your fist into it for what you want. It was ever share and share between us."

"Nay, friend, it is not the Frenchman's gold, but the Frenchman's blood that I would have. I should not rest quiet in the grave, coz, if I had not another turn at them. For with us in France it has ever been fair and honest war--a shut fist for the man, but a bended knee for the woman. But how was it at Winchelsea when their galleys came down upon it some few years back? I had an old mother there, lad, who had come down thither from the Midlands to be the nearer her son. They found her afterwards by her own hearthstone, thrust through by a Frenchman's bill. My second sister, my brother's wife, and her two children, they were but ash-heaps in the smoking ruins of their house. I will not say that we have not wrought great scath upon France, but women and children have been safe from us. And so, old friend, my heart is hot within me, and I long to hear the old battle-cry again, and, by God's truth I if Sir Nigel unfurls his pennon, here is one who will be right glad to feel the saddle-flaps under his knees."

"We have seen good work together, old war-dog," quoth Aylward; "and, by my hilt! we may hope to see more ere we die. But we are more like to hawk at the Spanish woodcock than at the French heron, though certes it is rumored that Du Guesclin with all the best lances of France have taken service under the lions and towers of Castile. But, comrade, it is in my mind that there is some small matter of dispute still open between us."

"Fore God, it is sooth!" cried the other; "I had forgot it. The provost-marshal and his men tore us apart when last we met."

"On which, friend, we vowed that we should settle the point when next we came together. Hast thy sword, I see, and the moon throws glimmer enough for such old night-birds as we. On guard, mon gar.! I have not heard clink of steel this month or more."

"Out from the shadow then," said the other, drawing his sword. "A vow is a vow, and not lightly to be broken."

"A vow to the saints," cried Alleyne, "is indeed not to be set aside; but this is a devil's vow, and, simple clerk as I am, I am yet the mouthpiece of the true church when I say that it were mortal sin to fight on such a quarrel. What! shall two grown men carry malice for years, and fly like snarling curs at each other's throats?"

"No malice, my young clerk, no malice," quoth Black Simon, "I have not a bitter drop in my heart for mine old comrade; but the quarrel, as he hath told you, is still open and unsettled. Fall on, Aylward!"

"Not whilst I can stand between you," cried Alleyne, springing before the Bowman. "It is shame and sin to see two Christian Englishmen turn swords against each other like the frenzied bloodthirsty paynim."

"And, what is more," said Hordle John, suddenly appearing out of the buttery with the huge board upon which the pastry was rolled, "if either raise sword I shall flatten him like a Shrovetide pancake. By the black rood! I shall drive him into the earth, like a nail into a door, rather than see you do scath to each other."

"Fore God, this is a strange way of preaching peace," cried Black Simon. "You may find the scath yourself, my lusty friend, if you raise your great cudgel to me. I had as lief have the castle drawbridge drop upon my pate."

"Tell me, Aylward," said Alleyne earnestly, with his hands outstretched to keep the pair asunder, "what is the cause of quarrel, that we may see whether honorable settlement may not be arrived at?"

The Bowman looked down at his feet and then up at the moons "Parbleu!" he cried, "the cause of quarrel? Why, mon petit, it was years ago in Limousin, and how can I bear in mind what was the cause of it? Simon there hath it at the end of his tongue."

"Not I, in troth," replied the other; "I have had other things to think of. There was some sort of bickering over dice, or wine, or was it a woman, coz?"

"Pasques Dieu! but you have nicked it," cried Aylward. "It was indeed about a woman; and the quarrel must go forward, for I am still of the same mind as before."

"What of the woman, then?" asked Simon. "May the murrain strike me if I can call to mind aught about her."

"It was La Blanche Rose, maid at the sign of the 'Trois Corbeaux' at Limoges. Bless her pretty heart! Why, mon gar., I loved her."

"So did a many," quoth Simon. "I call her to mind now. On the very day that we fought over the little hussy, she went off with Evan ap Price, a long-legged Welsh dagsman. They have a hostel of their own now, somewhere on the banks of the Garonne, where the landlord drinks so much of the liquor that there is little left for the customers."

"So ends our quarrel, then," said Aylward, sheathing his sword. "A Welsh dagsman, i' faith! C'etait mauvais goot, camarade, and the more so when she had a jolly archer and a lusty man-at-arms to choose from."

"True, old lad. And it is as well that we can compose our differences honorably, for Sir Nigel had been out at the first clash of steel; and he hath sworn that if there be quarrelling in the garrison he would smite the right hand from the broilers. You know him of old, and that he is like to be as good as his word."

"Mort-Dieu! yes. But there are ale, mead, and wine in the buttery, and the steward a merry rogue, who will not haggle over a quart or two. Buvons, mon gar., for it is not every day that two old friends come together."

The old soldiers and Hordle John strode off together in all good fellowship. Alleyne had turned to follow them, when he felt a touch upon his shoulder, and found a young page by his side.

"The Lord Loring commands," said the boy, "that you will follow me to the great chamber, and await him there."

"But my comrades?"

"His commands were for you alone."

Alleyne followed the messenger to the east end of the courtyard, where a broad flight of steps led up to the doorway of the main hall, the outer wall of which is washed by the waters of the Avon. As designed at first, no dwelling had been allotted to the lord of the castle and his family but the dark and dismal basement storey of the keep. A more civilized or more effeminate generation, however, had refused to be pent up in such a cellar, and the hall with its neighboring chambers had been added for their accommodation. Up the broad steps Alleyne went, still following his boyish guide, until at the folding oak doors the latter paused, and ushered him into the main hall of the castle.

On entering the room the clerk looked round; but, seeing no one, he continued to stand, his cap in his hand, examining with the greatest interest a chamber which was so different to any to which he was accustomed. The days had gone by when a nobleman's hall was but a barn-like, rush-strewn enclosure, the common lounge and eating-room of every inmate of the castle. The Crusaders had brought back with them experiences of domestic luxuries, of Damascus carpets and rugs of Aleppo, which made them impatient of the hideous bareness and want of privacy which they found in their ancestral strongholds. Still stronger, however, had been the influence of the great French war; for, however well matched the nations might be in martial exercises, there could be no question but that our neighbors were infinitely superior to us in the arts of peace. A stream of returning knights, of wounded soldiers, and of unransomed French noblemen, had been for a quarter of a century continually pouring into England, every one of whom exerted an influence in the direction of greater domestic refinement, while shiploads of French furniture from Calais, Rouen, and other plundered towns, had supplied our own artizans with models on which to shape their work. Hence, in most English castles, and in Castle Twynham among the rest, chambers were to be found which would seem to be not wanting either in beauty or in comfort.

In the great stone fireplace a log fire was spurting and crackling, throwing out a ruddy glare which, with the four bracket-lamps which stood at each corner of the room, gave a bright and lightsome air to the whole apartment. Above was a wreath-work of blazonry, extending up to the carved and corniced oaken roof; while on either side stood the high canopied chairs placed for the master of the house and for his most honored guest. The walls were hung all round with most elaborate and brightly colored tapestry, representing the achievements of Sir Bevis of Hampton, and behind this convenient screen were stored the tables dormant and benches which would be needed

for banquet or high festivity. The floor was of polished tiles, with a square of red and black diapered Flemish carpet in the centre; and many settees, cushions, folding chairs, and carved bancals littered all over it. At the further end was a long black buffet or dresser, thickly covered with gold cups, silver salvers, and other such valuables. All this Alleyne examined with curious eyes; but most interesting of all to him was a small ebony table at his very side, on which, by the side of a chess-board and the scattered chessmen, there lay an open manuscript written in a right clerky hand, and set forth with brave flourishes and devices along the margins. In vain Alleyne bethought him of where he was, and of those laws of good breeding and decorum which should restrain him: those colored capitals and black even lines drew his hand down to them, as the loadstone draws the needle, until, almost before he knew it, he was standing with the romance of Garin de Montglane before his eyes, so absorbed in its contents as to be completely oblivious both of where he was and why he had come there.

He was brought back to himself, however, by a sudden little ripple of quick feminine laughter. Aghast, he dropped the manuscript among the chessmen and stared in bewilderment round the room. It was as empty and as still as ever. Again he stretched his hand out to the romance, and again came that roguish burst of merriment. He looked up at the ceiling, back at the closed door, and round at the stiff folds of motionless tapestry. Of a sudden, however, he caught a quick shimmer from the corner of a high-backed bancal in front of him, and, shifting a pace or two to the side, saw a white slender hand, which held a mirror of polished silver in such a way that the concealed observer could see without being seen. He stood irresolute, uncertain whether to advance or to take no notice; but, even as he hesitated, the mirror was whipped in, and a tall and stately young lady swept out from behind the oaken screen, with a dancing light of mischief in her eyes. Alleyne started with astonishment as he recognized the very maiden who had suffered from his brother's violence in the forest. She no longer wore her gay riding-dress, however, but was attired in a long sweeping robe of black velvet of Bruges, with delicate tracery of white lace at neck and at wrist, scarce to be seen against her ivory skin. Beautiful as she had seemed to him before, the lithe charm of her figure and the proud, free grace of her bearing were enhanced now by the rich simplicity of her attire.

"Ah, you start," said she, with the same sidelong look of mischief, "and I cannot marvel at it. Didst not look to see the distressed damosel again. Oh that I were a minstrel, that I might put it into rhyme, with the whole romance--the luckless maid, the wicked socman, and the virtuous clerk! So might our fame have gone down together for all time, and you be numbered with Sir Percival or Sir Galahad, or all the other rescuers of oppressed ladies."

"What I did," said Alleyne, "was too small a thing for thanks; and yet, if I may say it without offence, it was too grave and near a matter for mirth and raillery. I had counted on my brother's love, but God has willed that it should be otherwise. It is a joy to me to see you again, lady, and to know that you have reached home in safety, if this be indeed your home."

"Yes, in sooth, Castle Twynham is my home, and Sir Nigel Loring my father, I should have told you so this morning, but you said that you were coming thither, so I bethought me that I might hold it back as a surprise to you. Oh dear, but it was brave to see you!" she cried, bursting out a-laughing once more, and standing with her hand pressed to her side, and her half-closed eyes twinkling with amusement. "You drew back and came forward with your eyes upon my book there, like the mouse who sniffs the cheese and yet dreads the trap."

"I take shame," said Alleyne, "that I should have touched it."

"Nay, it warmed my very heart to see it. So glad was I, that I laughed for very pleasure. My fine preacher can himself be tempted then, thought I; he is not made of another clay to the rest of us."

"God help me! I am the weakest of the weak," groaned Alleyne. "I pray that I may have more strength."

"And to what end?" she asked sharply. "If you are, as I understand, to shut yourself forever in your cell within the four walls of an abbey, then of what use would it be were your prayer to be answered?"

"The use of my own salvation."

She turned from him with a pretty shrug and wave. "Is that all?" she said. "Then you are no better than Father Christopher and the rest of them. Your own, your own, ever your own! My father is the king's man, and when he rides into the press of fight he is not thinking ever of the saving of his own poor body; he recks little enough if he leave it on the field. Why then should you, who are soldiers of the Spirit, be ever moping or hiding in cell or in cave, with minds full of your own concerns, while the world, which you should be mending, is going on its way, and neither sees nor hears you? Were ye all as thoughtless of your own souls as the soldier is of his body, ye would be of more avail to the souls of others."

"There is sooth in what you say, lady," Alleyne answered; "and yet I scarce can see what you would have the clergy and the church to do."

"I would have them live as others and do men's work in the world, preaching by their lives rather than their words. I would have them come forth from their lonely places, mix with the borel folks, feel the pains and the pleasures, the cares and the rewards, the temptings and the stirrings of the common people. Let them toil and swinken, and labor, and plough the land, and take wives to themselves----"

"Alas! alas!" cried Alleyne aghast, "you have surely sucked this poison from the man Wicliffe, of whom I have heard such evil things."

"Nay, I know him not. I have learned it by looking from my own chamber window and marking these poor monks of the priory, their weary life, their profitless round. I have asked myself if the best which can be done with virtue is to shut it within high walls as though it were some savage creature. If the good will lock themselves up, and if the wicked will still wander free, then alas for the world!"

Alleyne looked at her in astonishment, for her cheek was flushed, her eyes gleaming, and her whole pose full of eloquence and conviction. Yet in an instant she had changed again to her old expression of merriment leavened with mischief.

"Wilt do what I ask?" said she.

"What is it, lady?"

"Oh, most ungallant clerk! A true knight would never have asked, but would have vowed upon the instant. 'Tis but to bear me out in what I say to my father."

"In what?"

"In saying, if he ask, that it was south of the Christchurch road that I met you. I shall be shut up with the tire-women else, and have a week of spindle and bodkin, when I would fain be galloping Troubadour up Wilverly Walk, or loosing little Roland at the Vinney Ridge herons."

"I shall not answer him if he ask."

"Not answer! But he will have an answer. Nay, but you must not fail me, or it will go ill with me."

"But, lady," cried poor Alleyne in great distress, "how can I say that it was to the south of the road when I know well that it was four miles to the north."

"You will not say it?"

"Surely you will not, too, when you know that it is not so?"

"Oh, I weary of your preaching!" she cried, and swept away with a toss of her beautiful head, leaving Alleyne as cast down and ashamed as though he had himself proposed some infamous thing. She was back again in an instant, however, in another of her varying moods.

"Look at that, my friend!" said she. "If you had been shut up in abbey or in cell this day you could not have taught a wayward maiden to abide by the truth. Is it not so? What avail is the shepherd if he leaves his sheep."

"A sorry shepherd!" said Alleyne humbly. "But here is your noble father."

"And you shall see how worthy a pupil I am. Father, I am much beholden to this young clerk, who was of service to me and helped me this very morning in Minstead Woods, four miles to the north of the Christchurch road, where I had no call to be, you having ordered it otherwise." All this she reeled off in a loud voice, and then glanced with sidelong, questioning eyes at Alleyne for his approval.

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

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

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

"It was for that very reason that my father willed that I should come forth into the world at my twentieth year," said Alleyne.

"Then your father was a man of good counsel," said she, "and you cannot carry out his will better than by going on this path, where all that is noble and gallant in England will be your companions."

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

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

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

"On citole, flute and rebeck."

"Good! You can read blazonry?"

"Indifferent well."

"Then read this," quoth Sir Nigel, pointing upwards to one of the many quarterings which adorned the wall over the fireplace.

"Argent," Alleyne answered, "a fess azure charged with three lozenges dividing three mullets sable. Over all, on an escutcheon of the first, a jambe gules."

"A jambe gules erased," said Sir Nigel, shaking his head solemnly. "Yet it is not amiss for a monk-bred man. I trust that you are lowly and serviceable?"

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

"Canst carve too?"

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

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

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

"It is of import," said he, "for I love to keep my hair well ordered, seeing that the weight of my helmet for thirty years hath in some degree frayed it upon the top." He pulled off his velvet cap of maintenance as he spoke, and displayed a pate which was as bald as an egg, and shone bravely in the firelight. "You see," said he, whisking round, and showing one little strip where a line of scattered hairs, like the last survivors in some fatal field, still barely held their own against the fate which had fallen upon their comrades; "these locks need some little oiling and curling, for I doubt not that if you look slantwise at my head, when the light is good, you will yourself perceive that there are places where the hair is sparse."

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

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

"Modesty and a humble mind," said she, "are the very first and rarest gifts in page or squire. Your words prove that you have these, and all the rest is but the work of use and time. But there is no call for haste. Rest upon it for the night, and let your orisons ask for guidance in the matter. We knew your father well, and would fain help his

son, though we have small cause to love your brother the Socman, who is forever stirring up strife in the county."

"We can scarce hope," said Nigel, "to have all ready for our start before the feast of St. Luke, for there is much to be done in the time. You will have leisure, therefore, if it please you to take service under me, in which to learn your devoir. Bertrand, my daughter's page, is hot to go; but in sooth he is over young for such rough work as may be before us."

"And I have one favor to crave from you," added the lady of the castle, as Alleyne turned to leave their presence. "You have, as I understand, much learning which you have acquired at Beaulieu."

"Little enough, lady, compared with those who were my teachers."

"Yet enough for my purpose, I doubt not. For I would have you give an hour or two a day whilst you are with us in discoursing with my daughter, the Lady Maude; for she is somewhat backward, I fear, and hath no love for letters, save for these poor fond romances, which do but fill her empty head with dreams of enchanted maidens and of errant cavaliers. Father Christopher comes over after nones from the priory, but he is stricken with years and slow of speech, so that she gets small profit from his teaching. I would have you do what you can with her, and with Agatha my young tire-woman, and with Dorothy Pierpont."

And so Alleyne found himself not only chosen as squire to a knight but also as squire to three damosels, which was even further from the part which he had thought to play in the world. Yet he could but agree to do what he might, and so went forth from the castle hall with his face flushed and his head in a whirl at the thought of the strange and perilous paths which his feet were destined to tread.