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## Chapter 26 - How The Three Comrades Gained A Mighty Treasur

IT was a bright, crisp winter's day when the little party set off from Bordeaux on their journey to Montaubon, where the missing half of their Company had last been heard of. Sir Nigel and Ford had ridden on in advance, the knight upon his hackney, while his great war-horse trotted beside his squire. Two hours later Alleyne Edricson followed; for he had the tavern reckoning to settle, and many other duties which fell to him as squire of the body. With him came Aylward and Hordle John, armed as of old, but mounted for their journey upon a pair of clumsy Landes horses, heavy-headed and shambling, but of great endurance, and capable of jogging along all day, even when between the knees of the huge archer, who turned the scale at two hundred and seventy pounds. They took with them the sumpter mules, which carried in panniers the wardrobe and table furniture of Sir Nigel; for the knight, though neither fop nor epicure, was very dainty in small matters, and loved, however bare the board or hard the life, that his napery should still be white and his spoon of silver.

There had been frost during the night, and the white hard road rang loud under their horses' irons as they spurred through the east gate of the town, along the same broad highway which the unknown French champion had traversed on the day of the jousts. The three rode abreast, Alleyne Edricson with his eyes cast down and his mind distrait, for his thoughts were busy with the conversation which he had had with Sir Nigel in the morning. Had he done well to say so much, or had he not done better to have said more? What would the knight have said had he confessed to his love for the Lady Maude? Would he cast him off in disgrace, or might he chide him as having abused the shelter of his roof? It had been ready upon his tongue to tell him all when Sir Oliver had broken in upon them. Perchance Sir Nigel, with his love of all the dying usages of chivalry, might have contrived some strange ordeal or feat of arms by which his love should be put to the test. Alleyne smiled as he wondered what fantastic and wondrous deed would be exacted from him. Whatever it was, he was ready for it, whether it were to hold the lists in the court of the King of Tartary, to carry a cartel to the Sultan of Baghdad, or to serve a term against the wild heathen of Prussia. Sir Nigel had said that his birth was high enough for any lady, if his fortune could but be amended. Often had Alleyne curled his lip at the beggarly craving for land or for gold which blinded man to the higher and more lasting issues of life. Now it seemed as though it were only by this same land and gold that he might hope to reach his heart's desire. But then, again, the Socman of Minstead was no friend to the Constable of Twynham Castle. It might happen that, should he amass riches by some happy fortune of war, this feud might hold the two families aloof. Even if Maude loved him, he knew her too well to think that she would wed him without the blessing of her father. Dark and murky was it all, but hope mounts high in youth, and it ever fluttered over all the turmoil of his thoughts like a white plume amid the shock of horsemen.

If Alleyne Edricson had enough to ponder over as he rode through the bare plains of Guienne, his two companions were more busy with the present and less thoughtful of the future. Aylward rode for half a mile with his chin upon his shoulder, looking back at a white kerchief which fluttered out of the gable window of a high house which peeped over the corner of the battlements. When at last a dip of the road hid it from his view, he cocked his steel cap, shrugged his broad shoulders, and rode on with laughter in his eyes, and his weatherbeaten face all ashine with pleasant memories. John also rode in silence, but his eyes wandered slowly from one side of the road to the other, and he stared and pondered and nodded his head like a traveller who makes his notes and saves them up for the re-telling.

"By the rood!" he broke out suddenly, slapping his thigh with his great red hand, "I knew that there was something a-missing, but I could not bring to my mind what it was."

"What was it then?" asked Alleyne, coming with a start out of his reverie.

"Why, it is the hedgerows," roared John, with a shout of laughter. "The country is all scraped as clear as a friar's poll. But indeed I cannot think much of the folk in these parts. Why do they not get to work and dig up these long rows of black and crooked stumps which I see on every hand? A franklin of Hampshire would think shame to have such litter upon his soil."

"Thou foolish old John!" quoth Aylward. "You should know better, since I have heard that the monks of Beaulieu could squeeze a good cup of wine from their own grapes. Know then that if these rows were dug up the wealth of the country would be gone, and mayhap there would be dry throats and gaping mouths in England, for in three months' time these black roots will blossom and snoot and burgeon, and from them will come many a good ship-load of Medoc and Gascony which will cross the narrow seas. But see the church in the hollow, and the folk who cluster in the churchyard! By my hill! it is a burial, and there is a passing bell!" He pulled off his steel cap as he spoke and crossed himself, with a muttered prayer for the repose of the dead.

"There too," remarked Alleyne, as they rode on again, "that which seems to the eye to be dead is still full of the sap of life, even as the vines were. Thus God hath written Himself and His laws very broadly on all that is around us, if our poor dull eyes and duller souls could but read what He hath set before us."

"Ha! mon petit," cried the bowman, "you take me back to the days when you were new fledged, as sweet a little chick as ever pecked his way out of a monkish egg. I had feared that in gaining our debonair young man-at-arms we had lost our soft-spoken clerk. In truth, I have noted much change in you since we came from Twynham Castle."

"Surely it would be strange else, seeing that I have lived in a world so new to me. Yet I trust that there are many things in which I have not changed. If I have turned to serve an earthly master, and to carry arms for an earthly king, it would be an ill thing if I were to lose all thought of the great high King and Master of all, whose humble and unworthy servant I was ere ever I left Beaulieu. You, John, are also from the cloisters, but I trow that you do not feel that you have deserted the old service in taking on the new."

"I am a slow-witted man," said John, "and, in sooth, when I try to think about such matters it casts a gloom upon me. Yet I do not look upon myself as a worse man in an archer's jerkin than I was in a white cowl, if that be what you mean."

"You have but changed from one white company to the other," quoth Aylward. "But, by these ten finger-bones! it is a passing strange thing to me to think that it was but in the last fall of the leaf that we walked from Lyndhurst together, he so gentle and maidenly, and you, John, like a great red-limbed overgrown moon-calf; and now here you are as sprack a squire and as lusty an archer as ever passed down the highway from Bordeaux, while I am still the same old Samkin Aylward, with never a change, save that I have a few more sins on my soul and a few less crowns in my pouch. But I have never yet heard, John, what the reason was why you should come out of Beaulieu."

"There were seven reasons," said John thoughtfully. "The first of them was that they threw me out."

"Ma foi! camarade, to the devil with the other six! That is enough for me and for thee also. I can see that they are very wise and discreet folk at Beaulieu. Ah! mon ange, what have you in the pipkin?"

"It is milk, worthy sir," answered the peasant-maid, who stood by the door of a cottage with a jug in her hand. "Would it please you, gentles, that I should bring you out three horns of it?"

"Nay, ma petite, but here is a two-sous piece for thy kindly tongue and for the sight of thy pretty face. Ma foi! but she has a bonne mine. I have a mind to bide and speak with her."

"Nay, nay, Aylward," cried Alleyne. "Sir Nigel will await us, and he in haste."

"True, true, camarade! Adieu, ma cherie! mon coeur est toujours a toi. Her mother is a well-grown woman also. See where she digs by the wayside. Ma foi! the riper fruit is ever the sweeter. Bon jour, ma belle dame! God have you in his keeping! Said Sir Nigel where he would await us?"

"At Marmande or Aiguillon. He said that we could not pass him, seeing that there is but the one road."

"Aye, and it is a road that I know as I know the Midhurst parish butts," quoth the bowman. "Thirty times have I journeyed it, forward and backward, and, by the twang of string! I am wont to come back this way more laden than I went. I have carried all that I had into France in a wallet, and it hath taken four sumpter-mules to carry it back again. God's benison on the man who first turned his hand to the making of war! But there, down in the dingle, is the church of Cardillac, and you may see the inn where three poplars grow beyond the village. Let us on, for a stoup of wine would hearten us upon our way."

The highway had lain through the swelling vineyard country, which stretched away to the north and east in gentle curves, with many a peeping spire and feudal tower, and cluster of village houses, all clear cut and hard in the bright wintry air. To their right stretched the blue Garonne, running swiftly seawards, with boats and barges dotted over its broad bosom. On the other side lay a strip of vineyard, and beyond it the desolate and sandy region of the Landes, all tangled with faded gorse and heath and broom, stretching away in unbroken gloom to the blue hills which lay low upon the furthest sky-line. Behind them might still be seen the broad estuary of the Gironde, with the high towers of Saint Andre and Saint Remi shooting up from the plain. In front, amid radiating lines of poplars, lay the riverside townlet of Cardillac--gray walls, white houses, and a feather of blue smoke.

"This is the 'Mouton d'Or,' " said Aylward, as they pulled up their horses at a whitewashed straggling hostel. "What ho there!" he continued, beating upon the door with the hilt of his sword. "Tapster, ostler, varlet, hark hither, and a wannion on your lazy limbs! Ha! Michel, as red in the nose as ever! Three jacks of the wine of the country, Michel--for the air bites shrewdly. I pray you, Alleyne, to take note of this door, for I have a tale concerning it."

"Tell me, friend," said Alleyne to the portly red-faced inn-keeper, "has a knight and a squire passed this way within the hour?"

"Nay, sir, it would be two hours back. Was he a small man, weak in the eyes, with a want of hair, and speaks very quiet when he is most to be feared?"

"The same," the squire answered. "But I marvel how you should know how he speaks when he is in wrath, for he is very gentle-minded with those who are beneath him."

"Praise to the saints! it was not I who angered him," said the fat Michel.

"Who, then?"

"It was young Sieur de Crespigny of Saintonge, who chanced to be here, and made game of the Englishman, seeing that he was but a small man and hath a face which is full of peace. But indeed this good knight was a very quiet and patient man, for he saw that the Sieur de Crespigny was still young and spoke from an empty head, so he sat his horse and quaffed his wine, even as you are doing now, all heedless of the clacking tongue." And what then, Michel?"

"Well, messieurs, it chanced that the Sieur de Crespigny, having said this and that, for the laughter of the varlets, cried out at last about the glove that the knight wore in his coif, asking if it was the custom in England for a man to wear a great archer's glove in his cap. Pardieu! I have never seen a man get off his horse as quick as did that stranger Englishman. Ere the words were past the other's lips he was beside him, his face nigh touching, and his breath hot upon his cheeks. 'I think, young sir,' quoth he softly, looking into the other's eyes, 'that now that I am nearer you will very clearly see that the glove is not an archer's glove.' 'Perchance not,' said the Sieur de Crespigny with a twitching lip. 'Nor is it large, but very small,' quoth the Englishman. 'Less large than I had thought,' said the other, looking down, for the knight's gaze was heavy upon his eyelids. 'And in every way such a glove as might be worn by the fairest and sweetest lady in England,' quoth the Englishman. 'It may be so,' said the Sieur de Crespigny, turning his face from him. 'I am myself weak in the eyes, and have often taken one thing for another,' quoth the knight, as he sprang back into his saddle and rode off, leaving the Sieur de Crespigny biting his nails before the door. Ha! by the five wounds, many men of war have drunk my wine, but never one was more to my fancy than this little Englishman."

"By my hilt! he is our master, Michel," quoth Aylward, "and such men as we do not serve under a laggart. But here are four deniers, Michel, and God be with you! En avant, camarades! for we have a long road before us."

At a brisk trot the three friends left Cardillac and its wine-house behind them, riding without a halt past St. Macaire, and on by ferry over the river Dorpt. At the further side the road winds through La Reolle, Bazaille, and Marmande, with the sunlit river still gleaming upon the right, and the bare poplars bristling up upon either side. John and Alleyne rode silent on either side, but every inn, farm-steading, or castle brought back to Aylward some remembrance of love, foray, or plunder, with which to beguile the way.

"There is the smoke from Bazas, on the further side of Garonne," quoth he. "There were three sisters yonder, the daughters of a farrier, and, by these ten finger-bones! a man might ride for a long June day and never set eyes upon such maidens. There was Marie, tall and grave, and Blanche petite and gay, and the dark Agnes, with eyes that went through you like a waxed arrow. I lingered there as long as four days, and was betrothed to them all; for it seemed shame to set one above her sisters, and might make ill blood in the family. Yet, for all my care, things were not merry in the house, and I thought it well to come away. There, too, is the mill of Le Souris. Old Pierre Le Caron, who owned it, was a right good comrade, and had ever a seat and a crust for a weary archer. He was a man who wrought hard at all that he turned his hand to; but he heated himself in grinding bones to mix with his flour, and so through over-diligence he brought a fever upon himself and died."

"Tell me, Aylward," said Alleyne, "what was amiss with the door of yonder inn that you should ask me to observe it."

"Pardieu! yes, I had well-nigh forgot. What saw you on yonder door?"

"I saw a square hole, through which doubtless the host may peep when he is not too sure of those who knock."

"And saw you naught else?"

"I marked that beneath this hole there was a deep cut in the door, as though a great nail had been driven in."

"And naught else?"

"No."

"Had you looked more closely you might have seen that there was a stain upon the wood. The first time that I ever heard my comrade Black Simon laugh was in front of that door. I heard him once again when he slew a French squire with his teeth, he being unarmed and the Frenchman having a dagger."

"And why did Simon laugh in front of the inn-door!" asked John.

"Simon is a hard and perilous man when he hath the bitter drop in him; and, by my hilt! he was born for war, for there is little sweetness or rest in him. This inn, the 'Mouton d'Or,' was kept in the old days by one Francois Gourval, who had a hard fist and a harder heart. It was said that many and many an archer coming from the wars had been served with wine with simples in it, until he slept, and had then been stripped of all by this Gourval. Then on the morrow, if he made complaint, this wicked Gourval would throw him out upon the road or beat him, for he was a very lusty man, and had many stout varlets in his service. This chanced to come to Simon's ears when we were at Bordeaux together, and he would have it that we should ride to Cardillac with a good hempen cord, and give this Gourval such a scourging as he merited. Forth we rode then, but when we came to the Mouton d'Or, Gourval had had word of our coming and its purpose, so that the door was barred, nor was there any way into the house. 'Let us in, good Master Gourval!' cried Simon, and 'Let us in, good Master Gourval!' cried I, but no word could we get through the hole in the door, save that he would draw an arrow upon us unless we went on our way. 'Well, Master Gourval,' quoth Simon at last, 'this is but a sorry welcome, seeing that we have ridden so far just to shake you by the hand.' 'Canst shake me by the hand without coming in,' said Gourval. 'And how that?' asked Simon. 'By passing in your hand through the hole,' said he. 'Nay, my hand is wounded,' quoth Simon, 'and of such a size that I cannot pass it in.' 'That need not hinder,' said Gourval, who was hot to be rid of us, 'pass in your left hand.' 'But I have something for thee, Gourval,' said Simon. 'What then?' he asked. 'There was an English archer who slept here last week of the name of Hugh of Nutbourne.' 'We have had many rogues here,' said Gourval. 'His conscience hath been heavy within him because he owes you a debt of fourteen deniers, having drunk wine for which he hath never paid. For the easing of his soul, he asked me to pay the money to you as I passed.' Now this Gourval was very greedy for money, so he thrust forth his hand for the fourteen deniers, but Simon had his dagger ready and he pinned his hand to the door. 'I have paid the Englishman's debt, Gourval!' quoth he, and so rode away, laughing so that he could scarce sit his horse, leaving mine host still nailed to his door. Such is the story of the hole which you have marked, and of the smudge upon the wood. I have heard that from that time English archers have been better treated in the auberge of Cardillac. But what have we here by the wayside?"

"It appears to be a very holy man," said Alleyne.

"And, by the rood! he hath some strange wares," cried John. "What are these bits of stone, and of wood, and rusted nails, which are set out in front of him?"

The man whom they had remarked sat with his back against a cherry-tree, and his legs shooting out in front of him, like one who is greatly at his ease. Across his thighs was a wooden board, and scattered over it all manner of slips of wood and knobs of brick and stone, each laid separate from the other, as a huckster places his wares. He was dressed in a long gray gown, and wore a broad hat of the same color, much weather-stained, with three scallop-shells dangling from the brim. As they approached, the travellers observed that he was advanced in years, and that his eyes were upturned and yellow.

"Dear knights and gentlemen," he cried in a high crackling voice, "worthy Christian cavaliers, will ye ride past and leave an aged pilgrim to die of hunger? The sight hath been burned from mine eyes by the sands of the Holy Land, and I have had neither crust of bread nor cup of wine these two days past."

"By my hilt! father," said Aylward, looking keenly at him, "it is a marvel to me that thy girdle should have so goodly a span and clip thee so closely, if you have in sooth had so little to place within it."

"Kind stranger," answered the pilgrim, "you have unwittingly spoken words which are very grievous to me to listen to. Yet I should be loth to blame you, for I doubt not that what you said was not meant to sadden me, nor to bring my sore affliction back to my mind. It ill becomes me to prate too much of what I have endured for the faith, and yet, since you have observed it, I must tell you that this thickness and roundness of the waist is caused by a dropsy brought on by over-haste in journeying from the house of Pilate to the Mount of Olives."

"There, Aylward," said Alleyne, with a reddened cheek, "let that curb your blunt tongue. How could you bring a fresh pang to this holy man, who hath endured so much and hath journeyed as far as Christ's own blessed tomb?"

"May the foul fiend strike me dumb!" cried the bowman in hot repentance; but both the palmer and Alleyne threw up their hands to stop him.

"I forgive thee from my heart, dear brother," piped the blind man. "But, oh, these wild words of thine are worse to mine ears than aught which you could say of me."

"Not another word shall I speak," said Aylward; "but here is a franc for thee and I crave thy blessing."

"And here is another," said Alleyne.

"And another," cried Hordle John.

But the blind palmer would have none of their alms. "Foolish, foolish pride!" he cried, beating upon his chest with his large brown hand. "Foolish, foolish pride! How long then will it be ere I can scourge it forth? Am I then never to conquer it? Oh, strong, strong are the ties of flesh, and hard it is to subdue the spirit! I come, friends, of a noble house, and I cannot bring myself to touch this money, even though it be to save me from the grave."

"Alas! father," said Alleyne, "how then can we be of help to thee?"

"I had sat down here to die," quoth the palmer; "but for many years I have carried in my wallet these precious things which you see set forth now before me. It were sin, thought I, that my secret should perish with me. I shall therefore sell these things to the first worthy passers-by, and from them I shall have money enough to take me to the shrine of Our Lady at Rocamadour, where I hope to lay these old bones."

"What are these treasures, then, father?" asked Hordle John. "I can but see an old rusty nail, with bits of stone and slips of wood."

"My friend," answered the palmer, "not all the money that is in this country could pay a just price for these wares of mine. This nail," he continued, pulling off his hat and turning up his sightless orbs, "is one of those wherewith man's salvation was secured. I had it, together with this piece of the true rood, from the five-and-twentieth descendant of Joseph of Arimathea, who still lives in Jerusalem alive and well, though latterly much afflicted by boils. Aye, you may well cross yourselves, and I beg that you will not breathe upon it or touch it with your fingers."

"And the wood and stone, holy father?" asked Alleyne, with bated breath, as he stared awe-struck at his precious relics.

"This cantle of wood is from the true cross, this other from Noah his ark, and the third is from the door-post of the temple of the wise King Solomon. This stone was thrown at the sainted Stephen, and the other two are from the Tower of Babel. Here, too, is part of Aaron's rod, and a lock of hair from Elisha the prophet."

"But, father," quoth Alleyne, "the holy Elisha was bald, which brought down upon him the revilements of the wicked children."

"It is very true that he had not much hair," said the palmer quickly, "and it is this which makes this relic so exceeding precious. Take now your choice of these, my worthy gentlemen, and pay such a price as your consciences will suffer you to offer; for I am not a chapman nor a huckster, and I would never part with them, did I not know that I am very near to my reward."

"Aylward," said Alleyne excitedly, "This is such a chance as few folk have twice in one life. The nail I must have, and I will give it to the abbey of Beaulieu, so that all the folk in England may go thither to wonder and to pray."

"And I will have the stone from the temple," cried Hordle John. "What would not my old mother give to have it hung over her bed?"

"And I will have Aaron's rod," quoth Aylward. "I have but five florins in the world, and here are four of them."

"Here are three more," said John.

"And here are five more," added Alleyne. "Holy father, I hand you twelve florins, which is all that we can give, though we well know how poor a pay it is for the wondrous things which you sell us."

"Down, pride, down!" cried the pilgrim, still beating upon his chest. "Can I not bend myself then to take this sorry sum which is offered me for that which has cost me the labors of a life. Give me the dross! Here are the precious relics, and, oh, I pray you that you will handle them softly and with reverence, else had I rather left my unworky bones here by the wayside."

With doffed caps and eager hands, the comrades took their new and precious possessions, and pressed onwards upon their journey, leaving the aged palmer still seated under the cherry-tree. They rode in silence, each with his treasure in his hand, glancing at it from time to time, and scarce able to believe that chance had made them sole owners of relics of such holiness and worth that every abbey and church in Christendom would have bid eagerly for their possession. So they journeyed, full of this good fortune, until opposite the town of Le Mas, where John's horse cast a shoe, and they were glad to find a wayside smith who might set the matter to rights. To him Aylward narrated the good hap which had befallen them; but the smith, when his eyes lit upon the relics, leaned up against his anvil and laughed, with his hand to his side, until the tears hopped down his sooty cheeks.

"Why, masters," quoth he, "this man is a coquillart, or seller of false relics, and was here in the smithy not two hours ago. This nail that he hath sold you was taken from my nail-box, and as to the wood and the stones, you will see a heap of both outside from which he hath filled his scrip."

"Nay, nay," cried Alleyne, "this was a holy man who had journeyed to Jerusalem, and acquired a dropsy by running from the house of Pilate to the Mount of Olives,"

"I know not about that," said the smith; "but I know that a man with a gray palmer's hat and gown was here no very long time ago, and that he sat on yonder stump and ate a cold pullet and drank a flask of wine. Then he begged from me one of my nails, and filling his scrip with stones, he went upon his way. Look at these nails, and see if they are not the same as that which he has sold you."

"Now may God save us!" cried Alleyne, all aghast. "Is there no end then to the wickedness of humankind? He so humble, so aged, so loth to take our money--and yet a villain and a cheat. Whom can we trust or believe in?"

"I will after him," said Aylward, flinging himself into the saddle. "Come, Alleyne, we may catch him ere John's horse be shod."

Away they galloped together, and ere long they saw the old gray palmer walking slowly along in front of them. He turned, however, at the sound of their hoofs, and it was clear that his blindness was a cheat like all the rest of him, for he ran swiftly through a field and so into a wood, where none could follow him. They hurled their relics after him, and so rode back to the blacksmith's the poorer both in pocket and in faith.