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## Chapter 27 - How Rodger Club-Foot Was Passed Into Paradise

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IT was evening before the three comrades came into Aiguillon, There they found Sir Nigel Loring and Ford safely lodged at the sign of the "Baton Rouge," where they supped on good fare and slept between lavender-scented sheets. It chanced, however, that a knight of Poitou, Sir Gaston d'Estelle, was staying there on his way back from Lithuania, where he had served a term with the Teutonic knights under the land-master of the presbytery of Marienberg. He and Sir Nigel sat late in high converse as to bushments, outfalls, and the intaking of cities, with many tales of warlike men and valiant deeds. Then their talk turned to minstrelsy, and the stranger knight drew forth a cittern, upon which he played the minne-lieder of the north, singing the while in a high cracked voice of Hildebrand and Brunhild and Siegfried, and all the strength and beauty of the land of Almain. To this Sir Nigel answered with the romances of Sir Eglamour, and of Sir Isumbras, and so through the long winter night they sat by the crackling wood-fire answering each other's songs until the crowing cocks joined in their concert. Yet, with scarce an hour of rest, Sir Nigel was as blithe and bright as ever as they set forth after breakfast upon their way.

"This Sir Gaston is a very worthy man," said he to his squires as they rode from the "Baton Rouge." "He hath a very strong desire to advance himself, and would have entered upon some small knightly debate with me, had he not chanced to have his arm-bone broken by the kick of a horse. I have conceived a great love for him, and I have promised him that when his bone is mended I will exchange thrusts with him. But we must keep to this road upon the left."

"Nay, my fair lord," quoth Aylward. "The road to Montaubon is over the river, and so through Quercy and the Agenois."

"True, my good Aylward; but I have learned from this worthy knight, who hath come over the French marches, that there is a company of Englishmen who are burning and plundering in the country round Villefranche. I have little doubt, from what he says, that they are those whom we seek."

"By my hill! it is like enough," said Aylward. "By all accounts they had been so long at Montaubon, that there would be little there worth the taking. Then as they have already been in the south, they would come north to the country of the Aveyron."

"We shall follow the Lot until we come to Cahors, and then cross the marches into Villefranche," said Sir Nigel. "By St. Paul! as we are but a small band, it is very likely that we may have some very honorable and pleasing adventure, for I hear that there is little peace upon the French border."

All morning they rode down a broad and winding road, barred with the shadows of poplars. Sir Nigel rode in front with his squires, while the two archers followed behind with the sumpter mule between them. They had left Aiguillon and the Garonne far to the south, and rode now by the tranquil Lot, which curves blue and placid through a gently rolling country. Alleyne could not but mark that, whereas in Guienne there had been many townlets and few castles, there were now many castles and few houses. On either hand gray walls and square grim keeps peeped out at every few miles from amid the forests while the few villages which they passed were all ringed round with rude walls, which spoke of the constant fear and sudden foray of a wild frontier land. Twice during the morning there came bands of horsemen swooping down upon them from the black gateways of wayside strongholds, with short, stern questions as to whence they came and what their errand. Bands of armed men clanked along the highway, and the few lines of laden mules which carried the merchandise of the trader were guarded by armed varlets, or by archers hired for the service.

"The peace of Bretigny hath not made much change in these parts," quoth Sir Nigel, "for the country is overrun with free companions and masterless men. Yonder towers, between the wood and the hill, mark the town of Cahors, and beyond it is the land of France. But here is a man by the wayside, and as he hath two horses and a squire I make little doubt that he is a knight. I pray you, Alleyne, to give him greeting from me, and to ask him for his titles and coat-armor. It may be that I can relieve him of some vow, or perchance he hath a lady whom he would wish to advance."

"Nay, my fair lord," said Alleyne, "these are not horses and a squire, but mules and a varlet. The man is a mercer, for he hath a great bundle beside him."

"Now, God's blessing on your honest English voice!" cried the stranger, pricking up his ears at the sound of Alleyne's words. "Never have I heard music that was so sweet to mine ear. Come, Watkin lad, throw the bales over Laura's back! My heart was nigh broke, for it seemed that I had left all that was English behind me, and that I would never set eyes upon Norwich market square again." He was a tall, lusty, middle-aged man with a ruddy face, a brown forked beard shot with gray, and a broad Flanders hat set at the back of his head. His servant, as tall as himself, but gaunt and raw-boned, had swung the bales on the back of one mule, while the merchant mounted upon the other and rode to join the party. It was easy to see, as he approached, from the quality of his dress and the richness of his trappings, that he was a man of some wealth and position.

"Sir knight," said he, "my name is David Micheldene, and I am a burgher and alderman of the good town of Norwich, where I live five doors from the church of Our Lady, as all men know on the banks of Yare. I have here my bales of cloth which I carry to Cahors--woe worth the day that ever I started on such an errand! I crave your gracious protection upon the way for me, my servant, and my mercery; for I have already had many perilous passages, and have now learned that Roger Club-foot, the robber-knight of Quercy, is out upon the road in front of me. I hereby agree to give you one rose-noble if you bring me safe to the inn of the 'Angel' in Cahors, the same to be repaid to me or my heirs if any harm come to me or my goods."

"By Saint Paul!" answered Sir Nigel, "I should be a sorry knight if I ask pay for standing by a countryman in a strange land. You may ride with me and welcome, Master Micheldene, and your varlet may follow with my archers."

"God's benison upon thy bounty!" cried the stranger. "Should you come to Norwich you may have cause to remember that you have been of service to Alderman Micheldene. It is not very far to Cahors, for surely I see the cathedral towers against the sky-line; but I have heard much of this Roger Clubfoot, and the more I hear the less do I wish to look upon his face. Oh, but I am sick and weary of it all, and I would give half that I am worth to see my good dame sitting in peace beside me, and to hear the bells of Norwich town."

"Your words are strange to me," quoth Sir Nigel, "for you have the appearance of a stout man, and I see that you wear a sword by your side."

"Yet it is not my trade," answered the merchant. "I doubt not that if I set you down in my shop at Norwich you might scarce tell fustian from falding, and know little difference between the velvet of Genoa and the three-piled cloth of Bruges. There you might well turn to me for help. But here on a lone roadside, with thick woods and robber-knights, I turn to you, for it is the business to which you have been reared."

"There is sooth in what you say, Master Micheldene," said Sir Nigel, "and I trust that we may come upon this Roger Clubfoot, for I have heard that he is a very stout and skilful soldier, and a man from whom much honor is to be gained."

"He is a bloody robber," said the trader, curtly, "and I wish I saw him kicking at the end of a halter."

"It is such men as he," Sir Nigel remarked, "who give the true knight honorable deeds to do, whereby he may advance himself."

"It is such men as he," retorted Micheldene, "who are like rats in a wheat-rick or moths in a woolfels, a harm and a hindrance to all peaceful and honest men."

"Yet, if the dangers of the road weigh so heavily upon you, master alderman, it is a great marvel to me that you should venture so far from home."

"And sometimes, sir knight, it is a marvel to myself. But I am a man who may grutch and grumble, but when I have set my face to do a thing I will not turn my back upon it until it be done. There is one, Francois Villet, at Cahors, who will send me wine-casks for my cloth-bales, so to Cahors I will go, though all the robber-knights of Christendom were to line the roads like yonder poplars."

"Stoutly spoken, master alderman! But how have you fared hitherto?"

"As a lamb fares in a land of wolves. Five times we have had to beg and pray ere we could pass. Twice I have paid toll to the wardens of the road. Three times we have had to draw, and once at La Reolle we stood seer our wool-bales, Watkin and I, and we laid about us for as long as a man might chant a litany, slaying one rogue and wounding two others. By God's coif! we are men of peace, but we are free English burghers, not to be mishandled either in our country or abroad. Neither lord, baron, knight, or commoner shall have as much as a strike of flax of mine whilst I have strength to wag this sword."

"And a passing strange sword it is," quoth Sir Nigel. "What make you, Alleyne, of these black lines which are drawn across the sheath?"

"I cannot tell what they are, my fair lord."

"Nor can I," said Ford.

The merchant chuckled to himself. "It was a thought of mine own," said he; "for the sword was made by Thomas Wilson, the armorer, who is betrothed to my second daughter Margery. Know then that the sheath is one cloth-yard, in length, marked off according to feet and inches to serve me as a measuring wand. It is also of the exact weight of two pounds, so that I may use it in the balance."

"By Saint Paul!" quoth Sir Nigel, "it is very clear to me that the sword is like thyself, good alderman, apt either for war or for peace. But I doubt not that even in England you have had much to suffer from the hands of robbers and outlaws."

"It was only last Lammastide, sir knight, that I was left for dead near Reading as I journeyed to Winchester fair. Yet I had the rogues up at the court of pie-powder, and they will harm no more peaceful traders."

"You travel much then!"

"To Winchester, Linn mart, Bristol fair, Stourbridge, and Bartholomew's in London Town. The rest of the year you may ever find me five doors from the church of Our Lady, where I would from my heart that I was at this moment, for there is no air like Norwich air, and no water like the Yare, nor can all the wines of France compare with the beer of old Sam Yelverton who keeps the 'Dun Cow.' But, out and alack, here is an evil fruit which hangs upon this chestnut-tree!"

As he spoke they had ridden round a curve of the road and come upon a great tree which shot one strong brown branch across their path. From the centre of this branch there hung a man, with his head at a horrid slant to his body and his toes just touching the ground. He was naked save for a linen under shirt and pair of woollen drawers. Beside him on a green bank there sat a small man with a solemn face, and a great bundle of papers of all colors thrusting forth from the scrip which lay beside him. He was very richly dressed, with furred robes, a scarlet hood, and wide hanging sleeves lined with flame-colored silk. A great gold chain hung round his neck, and rings glittered from every finger of his hands. On his lap he had a little pile of gold and of silver, which he was dropping, coin by coin, into a plump pouch which hung from his girdle.

"May the saints be with you, good travellers!" he shouted, as the party rode up. "May the four Evangelists watch over you! May the twelve Apostles bear you up! May the blessed army of martyrs direct your feet and lead you to eternal bliss!"

"Gramercy for these good wishes!" said Sir Nigel. "But I perceive, master alderman, that this man who hangs here is, by mark of foot, the very robber-knight of whom we have spoken. But there is a cartel pinned upon his breast, and I pray you, Alleyne, to read it to me."

The dead robber swung slowly to and fro in the wintry wind, a fixed smile upon his swarthy face, and his bulging eyes still glaring down the highway of which he had so long been the terror; on a sheet of parchment upon his breast was printed in rude characters:

ROGER PIED-BOT.

Par l'ordre du Senechal de Castelnaud, et de l'Echevin de Cahors, servantes fideles du tres vaillant et tres puissant Edouard, Prince de Galles et d'Aquitaine. Ne touchez pas, Ne coutez pas, Ne depechez pas.

"He took a sorry time in dying," said the man who sat beside him. "He could stretch one toe to the ground and bear him self up, so that I thought he would never have done. Now at last, however, he is safely in paradise, and so I may jog on upon my earthly way." He mounted, as he spoke, a white mule which had been grazing by the wayside, all gay with fustian of gold and silver bells, and rode onward with Sir Nigel's party.

"How know you then that he is in paradise?" asked Sir Nigel. "All things are possible to God, but, certes, without a miracle, I should scarce expect to find the soul of Roger Clubfoot amongst the just,"

"I know that he is there because I have just passed him in there," answered the stranger, rubbing his bejewelled hands together in placid satisfaction. "It is my holy mission to be a sompnour or pardoner. I am the unworthy servant and delegate of him who holds the keys. A contrite heart and ten nobles to holy mother Church may stave off perdition; but he hath a pardon of the first degree, with a twenty-five livre benison, so that I doubt if he will so much as feel a twinge of purgatory. I came up even as the seneschal's archers were tying him up, and I gave him my fore-word that I would bide with him until he had passed. There were two leaden crowns among the silver, but I would not for that stand in the way of his salvation."

"By Saint Paul!" said Sir Nigel, "if you have indeed this power to open and to shut the gates of hope, then indeed you stand high above mankind. But if you do but claim to have it, and yet have it not, then it seems to me, master clerk, that you may yourself find the gate barred when you shall ask admittance."

"Small of faith! Small of faith!" cried the sompnour. "Ah, Sir Didymus yet walks upon earth! And yet no words of doubt can bring anger to mine heart, or a bitter word to my lip, for am I not a poor unworthy worker in the cause of gentleness and peace? Of all these pardons which I bear every one is stamped and signed by our holy father, the prop and centre of Christendom."

"Which of them?" asked Sir Nigel.

"Ha, ha!" cried the pardoner, shaking a jewelled forefinger. Thou wouldst be deep in the secrets of mother Church? Know then that I have both in my scrip. Those who hold with Urban shall have Urban's pardon, while I have Clement's for the Clementist--or he who is in doubt may have both, so that come what may he shall be secure. I pray you that you will buy one, for war is bloody work, and the end is sudden with little time for thought or shrift. Or you, sir, for you seem to me to be a man who would do ill to trust to your own merits." This to the alderman of Norwich, who had listened to him with a frowning brow and a sneering lip.

"When I sell my cloth," quoth he, "he who buys may weigh and feel and handle. These goods which you sell are not to be seen, nor is there any proof that you hold them. Certes, if mortal man might control God's mercy, it would be one of a lofty and God-like life, and not one who is decked out with rings and chains and silks, like a pleasure-wench at a kermesse.

"Thou wicked and shameless man!" cried the clerk. "Dost thou dare to raise thy voice against the unworthy servant of mother Church?"

"Unworthy enough!" quoth David Micheldene. "I would have you to know, clerk, that I am a free English burgher, and that I dare say my mind to our father the Pope himself, let alone such a lacquey's lacquey as you!"

"Base-born and foul-mouthed knave!" cried the sompnour. "You prate of holy things, to which your hog's mind can never rise. Keep silence, lest I call a curse upon you!"

"Silence yourself!" roared the other. "Foul bird!" we found thee by the gallows like a carrion-crow. A fine life thou hast of it with thy silks and thy baubles, cozening the last few shillings from the pouches of dying men. A fig for thy curse! Bide here, if you will take my rede, for we will make England too hot for such as you, when Master Wicliff has the ordering of it. Thou vile thief! it is you, and such as you, who bring an evil name upon the many churchmen who lead a pure and a holy life. Thou outside the door of heaven! Art more like to be inside the door of hell."

At this crowning insult the sompnour, with a face ashen with rage, raised up a quivering hand and began pouring Latin imprecations upon the angry alderman. The latter, however, was not a man to be quelled by words, for he caught up his ell-measure sword-sheath and belabored the cursing clerk with it. The latter, unable to escape from the shower of blows, set spurs to his mule and rode for his life, with his enemy thundering behind him. At sight of his master's sudden departure, the varlet Watkin set off after him, with the pack-mule beside him, so that the four clattered away down the road together, until they swept round a curve and their babble was but a drone in the distance. Sir Nigel and Alleyne gazed in astonishment at one another, while Ford burst out a-laughing.

"Pardieu!" said the knight, "this David Micheldene must be one of those Lollards about whom Father Christopher of the priory had so much to say. Yet he seemed to be no bad man from what I have seen of him."

"I have heard that Wicliff hath many followers in Norwich," answered Alleyne.

"By St. Paul! I have no great love for them," quoth Sir Nigel. "I am a man who am slow to change; and, if you take away from me the faith that I have been taught, it would be long ere I could learn one to set in its place. It is but a chip here and a chip there, yet it may bring the tree down in time. Yet, on the other hand, I cannot but think it a shame that a man should turn God's mercy on and off, as a cellarman doth wine with a spigot."

"Nor is it," said Alleyne, "part of the teachings of that mother Church of which he had so much to say. There was sooth in what the alderman said of it."

"Then, by St. Paul! they may settle it betwixt them," quoth Sir Nigel. "For me, I serve God, the king and my lady; and so long as I can keep the path of honor I am well content. My creed shall ever be that of Chandos:

" 'Fais ce que dois--adviegne que peut, C'est commande au chevalier.' "