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Chapter 19 - Chapter XIX How There Was Stir At The Abbey Of St. Andrews

THE prince's reception-room, although of no great size, was fitted up with all the state and luxury which the fame and power of its owner demanded. A high dais at the further end was roofed in by a broad canopy of scarlet velvet spangled with silver fleurs-de-lis, and supported at either corner by silver rods. This was approached by four steps carpeted with the same material, while all round were scattered rich cushions, oriental mats and costly rugs of fur. The choicest tapestries which the looms of Arras could furnish draped the walls, whereon the battles of Judas Maccabaeus were set forth, with the Jewish warriors in plate of proof, with crest and lance and banderole, as the naive artists of the day were wont to depict them. A few rich settles and bancals, choicely carved and decorated with glazed leather hangings of the sort termed orbasane, completed the furniture of the apartment, save that at one side of the dais there stood a lofty perch, upon which a cast of three solemn Prussian gerfalcons sat, hooded and jesseled, as silent and motionless as the royal fowler who stood beside them.

In the centre of the dais were two very high chairs with dorserets, which arched forwards over the heads of the occupants, the whole covered with light-blue silk thickly powdered with golden stars. On that to the right sat a very tall and well formed man with red hair, a livid face, and a cold blue eye, which had in it something peculiarly sinister and menacing. He lounged back in a careless position, and yawned repeatedly as though heartily weary of the proceedings, stooping from time to time to fondle a shaggy Spanish greyhound which lay stretched at his feet. On the other throne there was perched bolt upright, with prim demeanor, as though he felt himself to be upon his good behavior, a little, round, pippin faced person, who smiled and bobbed to every one whose eye he chanced to meet. Between and a little in front of them on a humble charette or stool, sat a slim, dark young man, whose quiet attire and modest manner would scarce proclaim him to be the most noted prince in Europe. A jupon of dark blue cloth, tagged with buckles and pendants of gold, seemed but a sombre and plain attire amidst the wealth of silk and ermine and gilt tissue of fustian with which he was surrounded. He sat with his two hands clasped round his knee, his head slightly bent, and an expression of impatience and of trouble upon his clear, well-chiselled features. Behind the thrones there stood two men in purple gowns, with ascetic, clean-shaven faces, and half a dozen other high dignitaries and office-holders of Aquitaine. Below on either side of the steps were forty or fifty barons, knights, and courtiers, ranged in a triple row to the right and the left, with a clear passage in the centre.

"There sits the prince," whispered Sir John Chandos, as they entered. "He on the right is Pedro, whom we are about to put upon the Spanish throne. The other is Don James, whom we purpose with the aid of God to help to his throne in Majorca. Now follow me, and take it not to heart if he be a little short in his speech, for indeed his mind is full of many very weighty concerns."

The prince, however, had already observed their entrance, and, springing to his feet, he had advanced with a winning smile and the light of welcome in his eyes.

"We do not need your good offices as herald here, Sir John," said he in a low but clear voice; "these valiant knights are very well known to me. Welcome to Aquitaine, Sir Nigel Loring and Sir Oliver Buttethorn. Nay, keep your knee for my sweet father at Windsor. I would have your hands, my friends. We are like to give you some work to do ere you see the downs of Hampshire once more. Know you aught of Spain, Sir Oliver?"

"Nought, my sire, save that I have heard men say that there is a dish named an olla which is prepared there, though I have never been clear in my mind as to whether it was but a ragout such as is to be found in the south, or whether there is some seasoning such as fennel or garlic which is peculiar to Spain."

"Your doubts, Sir Oliver, shall soon be resolved," answered the prince, laughing heartily, as did many of the barons who surrounded them. "His majesty here will doubtless order that you have this dish hotly seasoned when we are all safely in Castile."

"I will have a hotly seasoned dish for some folk I know of," answered Don Pedro with a cold smile.

"But my friend Sir Oliver can fight right hardily without either bite or sup," remarked the prince. "Did I not see him at Poitiers, when for two days we had not more than a crust of bread and a cup of fowl water, yet carrying himself most valiantly. With my own eyes I saw him in the rout sweep the head from a knight of Picardy with one blow of his sword."

"The rogue got between me and the nearest French victual wain," muttered Sir Oliver, amid a fresh titter from those who were near enough to catch his words.

"How many have you in your train?" asked the prince, assuming a graver mien.

"I have forty men-at-arms, sire," said Sir Oliver.

"And I have one hundred archers and a score of lancers, but there are two hundred men who wait for me on this side of the water upon the borders of Navarre."

"And who are they, Sir Nigel?"

"They are a free company, sire, and they are called the White Company."

To the astonishment of the knight, his words provoked a burst of merriment from the barons round, in which the two kings and the prince were fain to join. Sir Nigel blinked mildly from one to the other, until at last perceiving a stout black-bearded knight at his elbow, whose laugh rang somewhat louder than the others, he touched him lightly upon the sleeve.

"Perchance, my fair sir," he whispered, "there is some small vow of which I may relieve you. Might we not have some honorable debate upon the matter. Your gentle courtesy may perhaps grant me an exchange of thrusts."

"Nay, nay, Sir Nigel," cried the prince, "fasten not the offence upon Sir Robert Briquet, for we are one and all bogged in the same mire. Truth to say, our ears have just been vexed by the doings of the same company, and I have even now made vow to hang the man who held the rank of captain over it. I little thought to find him among the bravest of my own chosen chieftains. But the vow is now nought, for, as you have never seen your company, it would be a fool's act to blame you for their doings."

"My liege," said Sir Nigel, "it is a very matter that I should be hanged, albeit the manner of death is somewhat more ignoble than I had hoped for. On the other hand, it would be a very grievous thing that you, the Prince of England and the flower of knighthood, should make a vow, whether in ignorance or no, and fail to bring it to fulfilment."

"Vex not your mind on that," the prince answered, smiling. "We have had a citizen from Montauban here this very day, who told us such a tale of sack and murder and pillage that it moved our blood; but our wrath was turned upon the man who was in authority over them."

"My dear and honored master," cried Nigel, in great anxiety, "I fear me much that in your gentleness of heart you are straining this vow which you have taken. If there be so much as a shadow of a doubt as to the form of it, it were a thousand times best--"

"Peace! peace!" cried the prince impatiently. "I am very well able to look to my own vows and their performance. We hope to see you both in the banquet-hall anon. Meanwhile you will attend upon us with our train." He bowed, and Chandos, plucking Sir Oliver by the sleeve, led them both away to the back of the press of courtiers.

"Why, little coz," he whispered, "you are very eager to have your neck in a noose. By my soul! had you asked as much from our new ally Don Pedro, he had not baulked you. Between friends, there is overmuch of the hangman in him, and too little of the prince. But indeed this White Company is a rough band, and may take some handling ere you find yourself safe in your captaincy."

"I doubt not, with the help of St. Paul, that I shall bring them to some order," Sir Nigel answered. "But there are many faces here which are new to me, though others have been before me since first I waited upon my dear master, Sir Walter. I pray you to tell me, Sir John, who are these priests upon the dais?"

"The one is the Archbishop of Bordeaux, Nigel, and the other the Bishop of Agen."

"And the dark knight with gray-streaked beard? By my troth, he seems to be a man of much wisdom and valor."

"He is Sir William Fenton, who, with my unworthy self, is the chief counsellor of the prince, he being high steward and I the seneschal of Aquitaine."

"And the knights upon the right, beside Von Pedro?"

"They are cavaliers of Spain who have followed him in his exile. The one at his elbow is Fernando de Castro, who is as brave and true a man as heart could wish. In front to the right are the Gascon lords. You may well tell them by their clouded brows, for there hath been some ill-will of late betwixt the prince and them. The tall and burly man is the Captal de Buch, whom I doubt not that you know, for a braver knight never laid lance in rest. That heavy-faced cavalier who plucks his skirts and whispers in his ear is Lord Oliver de Clisson, known also as the butcher. He it is who stirs up strife, and forever blows the dying embers into flame. The man with the mole upon his cheek is the Lord Pommers, and his two brothers stand behind him, with the Lord Lesparre, Lord de Rosem, Lord de Mucident, Sir Perducas d'Albret, the Souldich de la Trane, and others. Further back are knights from Quercy, Limousin, Saintonge, Poitou, and Aquitaine, with the valiant Sir Guiscard d'Angle. That is he in the rose-colored doublet with the ermine."

"And the knights upon this side?"

"They are all Englishmen, some of the household and others who like yourself, are captains of companies. There is Lord Neville, Sir Stephen Cossington, and Sir Matthew Gourney, with Sir Walter Huet, Sir Thomas Banaster, and Sir Thomas Felton, who is the brother of the high steward. Mark well the man with the high nose and flaxen beard who hath placed his hand upon the shoulder of the dark hard-faced cavalier in the rust-stained jupon."

"Aye, by St. Paul!" observed Sir Nigel, "they both bear the print of their armor upon their cotes-hardies. Methinks they are men who breathe freer in a camp than a court."

"There are many of us who do that, Nigel," said Chandos, "and the head of the court is, I dare warrant, among them. But of these two men the one is Sir Hugh Calverley, and the other is Sir Robert Knolles."

Sir Nigel and Sir Oliver craned their necks to have the clearer view of these famous warriors, the one a chosen leader of free companies, the other a man who by his fierce valor and energy had raised himself from the lowest ranks until he was second only to Chandos himself in the esteem of the army.

"He hath no light hand in war, hath Sir Robert," said Chandos. "If he passes through a country you may tell it for some years to come. I have heard that in the north it is still the use to call a house which hath but the two gable ends left, without walls or roof, a Knolles' mitre."

"I have often heard of him," said Nigel, "and I have hoped to be so far honored as to run a course with him. But hark, Sir John, what is amiss with the prince?"

Whilst Chandos had been conversing with the two knights a continuous stream of suitors had been ushered in, adventurers seeking to sell their swords and merchants clamoring over some grievance, a ship detained for the carriage of troops, or a tun of sweet wine which had the bottom knocked out by a troop of thirsty archers. A few words from the prince disposed of each case, and, if the applicant liked not the judgment, a quick glance from the prince's dark eyes sent him to the door with the grievance all gone out of him. The younger ruler had sat listlessly upon his stool with the two puppet monarchs enthroned behind him, but of a sudden a dark shadow passed over his face, and he sprang to his feet in one of those gusts of passion which were the single blot upon his noble and generous character.

"How now, Don Martin de la Carra?" he cried. "How now, sirrah? What message do you bring to us from our brother of Navarre?"

The new-comer to whom this abrupt query had been addressed was a tall and exceedingly handsome cavalier who had just been ushered into the apartment. His swarthy cheek and raven black hair spoke of the fiery south, and he wore his long black cloak swathed across his chest and over his shoulders in a graceful sweeping fashion, which was neither English nor French. With stately steps and many profound bows, he advanced to the foot of the dais before replying to the prince's question.

"My powerful and illustrious master," he began, "Charles, King of Navarre, Earl of Evreux, Count of Champagne, who also writeth himself Overlord of Bearn, hereby sends his love and greetings to his dear cousin Edward, the Prince of Wales, Governor of Aquitaine, Grand Commander of--"

"Tush! tush! Don Martin!" interrupted the prince, who had been beating the ground with his foot impatiently during this stately preamble. "We already know our cousin's titles and style, and, certes, we know our own. To the point, man, and at once, Are the passes open to us, or does your master go back from his word pledged to me at Libourne no later than last Michaelmas?"

"It would ill become my gracious master, sire, to go back from promise given. He does but ask some delay and certain--conditions and hostages--"

"Conditions! Hostages! Is he speaking to the Prince of England, or is it to the bourgeois provost of some half-captured town! Conditions, quotha? He may find much to mend in his own condition ere long. The passes are, then, closed to us?"

"Nay, sire----"

"They are open, then?"

"Nay, sire, if you would but----"

"Enough, enough, Don Martin," cried the prince. "It is a sorry sight to see so true a knight pleading in so false a cause. We know the doings of our cousin Charles. We know that while with the right hand he takes our fifty thousand crowns for the holding of the passes open, he hath his left outstretched to Henry of Trastamare, or to the King of France, all ready to take as many more for the keeping them closed. I know our good Charles, and, by my blessed name-saint the Confessor, he shall learn that I know him. He sets his kingdom up to the best bidder, like some scullion farrier selling a glandered horse. He is----"

"My lord," cried Don Martin, "I cannot stand there to hear such words of my master. Did they come from other lips, I should know better how to answer them."

Don Pedro frowned and curled his lip, but the prince smiled and nodded his approbation.

"Your bearing and your words, Don Martin, are such I should have looked for in you," he remarked. "You will tell the king, your master, that he hath been paid his price and that if he holds to his promise he hath my word for it that no scath shall come to his people, nor to their houses or gear. If, however, we have not his leave, I shall come close at the heels of this message without his leave, and bearing a key with me which shall open all that he may close." He stooped and whispered to Sir Robert Knolles and Sir Huge Calverley, who smiled as men well pleased, and hastened from the room.

"Our cousin Charles has had experience of our friendship," the prince continued, "and now, by the Saints! he shall feel a touch of our displeasure. I send now a message to our cousin Charles which his whole kingdom may read. Let him take heed lest worse befall him. Where is my Lord Chandos? Ha, Sir John, I commend this worthy knight to your care. You will see that he hath refection, and such a purse of gold as may defray his charges, for indeed it is great honor to any court to have within it so noble and gentle a cavalier. How say you, sire?" he asked, turning to the Spanish refugee, while the herald of Navarre was conducted from the chamber by the old warrior.

"It is not our custom in Spain to reward pertness in a messenger," Don Pedro answered, patting the head of his greyhound. "Yet we have all heard the lengths to which your royal generosity runs."

"In sooth, yes," cried the King of Majorca.

"Who should know it better than we?" said Don Pedro bitterly, "since we have had to fly to you in our trouble as to the natural protector of all who are weak."

"Nay, nay, as brothers to a brother," cried the prince, with sparkling eyes. "We doubt not, with the help of God, to see you very soon restored to those thrones from which you have been so traitorously thrust."

"When that happy day comes," said Pedro, "then Spain shall be to you as Aquitaine, and, be your project what it may, you may ever count on every troop and every ship over which flies the banner of Castile."

"And," added the other, "upon every aid which the wealth and power of Majorca can bestow."

"Touching the hundred thousand crowns in which I stand your debtor," continued Pedro carelessly, "it can no doubt----"

"Not a word, sire, not a word!" cried the prince. "It is not now when you are in grief that I would vex your mind with such base and sordid matters. I have said once and forever that I am yours with every bow-string of my army and every florin in my coffers."

"Ah! here is indeed a mirror of chivalry," said Don Pedro. "I think, Sir Fernando, since the prince's bounty is stretched so far, that we may make further use of his gracious goodness to the extent of fifty thousand crowns. Good Sir William Felton, here, will doubtless settle the matter with you."

The stout old English counsellor looked somewhat blank at this prompt acceptance of his master's bounty.

"If it please you, sire," he said, "the public funds are at their lowest, seeing that I have paid twelve thousand men of the companies, and the new taxes--the hearth-tax and the wine-tax-- not yet come in. If you could wait until the promised help from England comes----"

"Nay, nay, my sweet cousin," cried Don Pedro. "Had we known that your own coffers were so low, or that this sorry sum could have weighed one way or the other, we had been loth indeed----"

"Enough, sire, enough!" said the prince, flushing with vexation. "If the public funds be, indeed, so backward, Sir William, there is still, I trust, my own private credit, which hath never been drawn upon for my own uses, but is now ready in the cause of a friend in adversity. Go, raise this money upon our own jewels, if nought else may serve, and see that it be paid over to Don Fernando."

"In security I offer----" cried Don Pedro.

"Tush! tush!" said the prince. "I am not a Lombard, sire. Your kingly pledge is my security, without bond or seal. But I have tidings for you, my lords and lieges, that our brother of Lancaster is on his way for our capital with four hundred lances and as many archers to aid us in our venture. When he hath come, and when our fair consort is recovered in her health, which I trust by the grace of God may be ere many weeks be past, we shall then join the army at Dax, and set our banners to the breeze once more."

A buzz of joy at the prospect of immediate action rose up from the group of warriors. The prince smiled at the martial ardor which shone upon every face around him.

"It will hearten you to know," he continued, "that I have sure advices that this Henry is a very valiant leader, and that he has it in his power to make such a stand against us as promises to give us much honor and pleasure. Of his own people he hath brought together, as I learn, some fifty thousand, with twelve thousand of the French free companies, who are, as you know very valiant and expert men-at-arms. It is certain also, that the brave and worthy Bertrand de Guesclin hath ridden into France to the Duke of Anjou, and purposes to take back with him great levies from Picardy and Brittany. We hold Bertrand in high esteem, for he has oft before been at great pains to furnish us with an honorable encounter. What think you of it, my worthy Captal? He took you at Cocherel, and, by my soul I you will have the chance now to pay that score."

The Gascon warrior winced a little at the allusion, nor were his countrymen around him better pleased, for on the only occasion when they had encountered the arms of

France without English aid they had met with a heavy defeat.

"There are some who say, sire," said the burly De Clisson, "that the score is already overpaid, for that without Gascon help Bertrand had not been taken at Auray, nor had King John been overborne at Poitiers."

"By heaven! but this is too much," cried an English nobleman. "Methinks that Gascony is too small a cock to crow so lustily."

"The smaller cock, my Lord Audley, may have the longer spur," remarked the Captal de Buch.

"May have its comb clipped if it make over-much noise," broke in an Englishman.

"By our Lady of Rocamadour!" cried the Lord of Mucident, "this is more than I can abide. Sir John Charnell, you shall answer to me for those words!"

"Freely, my lord, and when you will," returned the Englishman carelessly.

"My Lord de Clisson," cried Lord Audley, "you look some, what fixedly in my direction. By God's soul! I should be right glad to go further into the matter with you."

"And you, my Lord of Pommers," said Sir Nigel, pushing his way to the front, "it is in my mind that we might break a lance in gentle and honorable debate over the question."

For a moment a dozen challenges flashed backwards and forwards at this sudden bursting of the cloud which had lowered so long between the knights of the two nations. Furious and gesticulating the Gascons, white and cold and sneering the English, while the prince with a half smile glanced from one party to the other, like a man who loved to dwell upon a fiery scene, and yet dreaded least the mischief go so far that he might find it beyond his control.

"Friends, friends!" he cried at last, "this quarrel must go no further. The man shall answer to me, be he Gascon or English, who carries it beyond this room. I have overmuch need for your swords that you should turn them upon each other. Sir John Charnell, Lord Audley, you do not doubt the courage of our friends of Gascony?"

"Not I, sire," Lord Audley answered. "I have seen them fight too often not to know that they are very hardy and valiant gentlemen."

"And so say I," quoth the other Englishman; "but, certes, there is no fear of our forgetting it while they have a tongue in their heads."

"Nay, Sir John," said the prince reprovingly, "all peoples have their own use and customs. There are some who might call us cold and dull and silent. But you hear, my lords of Gascony, that these gentlemen had no thought to throw a slur upon your honor or your valor, so let all anger fade from your mind. Clisson, Captal, De Pommers, I have your word?"

"We are your subjects, sire," said the Gascon barons, though with no very good grace. "Your words are our law."

"Then shall we bury all cause of unkindness in a flagon of Malvoisie," said the prince, cheerily. "Ho, there! the doors of the banquet-hall! I have been over long from my sweet spouse but I shall be back with you anon. Let the sewers serve and the minstrels play, while we drain a cup to the brave days that are before us in the south!" He turned away, accompanied by the two monarchs, while the rest of the company, with many a compressed lip and menacing eye, filed slowly through the side-door to the great chamber in which the royal tables were set forth.