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THE BELLS OF RYE

Also by Richard Church

DOG TOBY

DOWN RIVER

FIVE BOYS IN A CAVE

RICHARD CHURCH

THE BELLS OF RYE

THE JOHN DAY COMPANY · NEW YORK

★

FIRST AMERICAN EDITION
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“God save England, and the Town of Rye”

—Rye Custumal or Manor Roll

THE BELLS OF RYE

I. THE KING IS DEAD!

JOHN FINCH stood with his mother, looking over the town wall from the highest point of the town of Rye. They were staring anxiously out to sea, at midday on the 22nd of June, 1377. The sunlight dazzled their eyes, and Anna Finch put up her clasped hands as a shield, for she was bareheaded. The water out in the open Channel, glimpsed between the shingle banks that shone like two vast polished bones, leaped and glittered under the sun.

"This is not a happy birthday for you, son," said the mother, turning to the boy at her side. "But now you are thirteen, and that will put you soon with the men. Your father has seen to that."

She returned to her study of the distant Channel. John did the same, and some minutes passed before he replied. "He has made me as good an archer as any man in Rye."

"At a short range," his mother added dryly.

"That will soon be put right," he said. He spoke angrily, resenting his mother's snub. But she put a hand on his shoulder and his anger vanished.

"Too soon, John, too soon, I fear."

"Why, Mother? What do you fear?"

"This harrying of the Norman fleet, even if it is successful, will bring trouble. Why can't men live peacefully? The King is old, and he is losing his wisdom after

reigning over England and Gascony for fifty years. He claims the throne of France; and see what follows! Fire and slaughter on both shores of the Channel, as if the ravages of the Black Death were not enough!"

"But we can't let the French land in our county of Kent, Mother. Think what they did at Winchelsea before I was born."

"Yes, the year your father and I were married, with Sir John Buckingham's consent. He was your father's liege lord and master of the King's Defenses. Can you expect me to forget that terrible scene? It haunts me still, and now I fear it may come to Rye."

"Because we are undefended, Mother?"

The boy spoke with knowledge. He could look down to the harbor and see the whole of the King's fleet of small revenue ships, known as "tramelers," drawn up the runways for repair and overhaul. They could take no part, with their speed and quick maneuver, in the battle which the Cinque Ports Fleet of heavier vessels must now be fighting in mid-Channel. Suppose there should be some treachery at work?

The question tormented him because he knew of certain people in Rye who could not be trusted. He had overheard his father, Robert Finch, talking recently with the Italian Signor Peter Barde, who represented the Florentine banks interested in the trading of wine and wool between Kent and the Continent. The two men had spoken with anxiety about the King's tax on the wine, one barrel in ten, and of the efforts of the Bordeaux merchants to evade it. The Frenchmen would like to get rid of that tax, and their agent in Rye was likely to act accordingly,

against the King's interest. His name was Raymon Tarys.

John's father had seen him in conversation again and again with some of the ship captains of Sandwich and Winchelsea. It was known that of late years, during the lawlessness following the ravages of the Black Death which swept away over half the population of England, the sailors of these two ports had become little better than pirates.

John told his mother about this conversation between his father and the Italian, but she did not listen. The silence in the Channel worried her. Again shading her eyes with her clasped hands, she studied the stretch of distant water beyond the shingle banks. Nothing there: no sign of the battle, which had begun early in the day when the fleets sighted each other in mid-Channel opposite Rye Harbor. Striving for position, the ships had worked their way eastward on the incoming tide, toward the Straits and the dangerous Goodwin Sands. She knew that certain vessels, still harbored at Sandwich, might then join the battle. But on which side?

"It *can't* happen! It must *not* happen!" she cried suddenly.

"Why, Mother, what do you mean?"

John's voice was so manly that his mother turned to him, confessing her fears.

"Rye lies open, John. With the fighting ships, and most of our men, drifting up Channel, we have little defense here. Look at the King's vessels, drawn up ashore! The Normans have many. Another fleet could sail across, behind the battle, and attack us."

"You need not fear, Mother," said John. "There are

the old men left, and I will lead the boys of Rye, since I am First Archer among them."

His mother smiled.

"Of course, John! And also, the authority of the King still carries through the land, and western France. Though he is old, he can command respect abroad."

Their talk was interrupted by the sudden clatter of a horse's hoofs on the stone setts of Watchbell Street. Anna Finch turned and saw the horseman draw rein at the churchyard gate, where the Mayor of Rye, Simon Lonsforde, and the King's Bailiff, Richard Baddyng, stood with their silvered heads close together in grave consultation. She saw the horseman lean down, speaking urgently and gesticulating with his riding whip. Then he galloped off again, clattering down past the church and through the town, startled citizens gathering and running behind him.

"John, what is it? What news?" Anna Finch urged the boy with her clenched fist pressed into his back. "Run! Find out what has happened to the fleet. Are the French . . ."

But her agonized question remained unspoken, the words trailing away into silence. She watched, open-mouthed, as the Mayor ran up the path between the yews and gravestones, grabbing at the sexton as he passed the old man at work scything the long grass.

John Finch obeyed and raced along Watchbell Street, one among several neighbors who appeared from the fine houses newly built there. But before the boy reached the churchyard, the great bell began tolling.

At the sound of that iron tongue, deep and heavy with

omen, Anna Finch bowed her head and drew her shawl over her hair, a gesture of despair. She believed the English ships had suffered defeat. Turning to the narrow view of the open sea, she thought she saw the topmast of a vessel; then another, and another, making toward the harbor. These must be the survivors limping home. Would her husband, master of the five ships from Rye, be among them?

But she was wrong. The bell was not tolling for the defeat of the English. A man was shouting something. He was the town crier, hurrying and puffing up the steep lane from the town, swinging his handbell, tinkling it absurdly against the solemn, slow boom of the tenor bell from the church tower.

"The King!" he wheezed, gasping for breath. "The King! The King is dead!"

Anna Finch heard. The words sank into her heart, loaded with warning. She stared out to sea, half blinded by the news. The hulls of the incoming ships were already above the horizon.

II. SOUND THE ALARM

THE CITIZENS were still out in the streets as evening approached. The tolling had just stopped, and the silence within the church tower was even more ominous than the suspense between the strokes of the minute bell, sixty every hour since the coming of the news of the King's death.

"On Midsummer Day!" said the Mayor to the vicar, the Reverend William Outry. "A bad sign, I fear—a bad sign!"

"Master Lonsforde, we must not allow that! Pagan superstition! The Speaker, as they have lately called the royal chairman of the King's Parliament in his Palace at Westminster, had nothing to say on that score. The King may have died on Midsummer Day, God rest his soul; but it might well be pointed out that young King Richard assumed the throne on that same Midsummer Day!"

This pompous bit of argument was allowed, though the Mayor added, "Aye, but who advises our young Lord, the boy King Richard? Will it still be that woman Alice Perrers, who worked such greedy mischief with the old King?"

"Carefully, good Mayor," whispered the King's Bailiff,

Richard Baddyngge, placing a white, beringed hand on the parson's sleeve. "Not before his Reverence."

He turned to greet the wife of the commander of the Rye ships of war, Mistress Anna Finch, who with her son John had entered the Mayor's parlor in the Town Hall behind the church.

She had just left the city wall, exhausted by the vigil kept since midday.

"Master Baddyngge," she said, her voice weary but urgent, "these ships gathering in the entrance to the Guildford Marsh are not ours. That I would swear. Ours are large vessels. And these display no colors. What does it mean? Can the Normans have heard already of the King's death? Or do they come behind the French battle fleet, knowing it will have drawn off our fighting ships up Channel?"

It was not the King's Bailiff who answered. Before he could speak, the Mayor turned on him.

"There, sir, you see how it is! We pay our taxes regularly, but what do we get in return? As Mayor of Rye I have to think first of the safety of our town. And what do I see? Our men are in the Channel, away fighting the Normans. The Royal ships are drawn up, defenseless, in our harbor, the crews drinking in the taverns."

Master Baddyngge looked at the Mayor sadly. He saw a nervous, frightened man. But he had to appease him and give him courage if possible, not only because of his office as Mayor, but also because he was a rich wool merchant, old and shrewd, of great power in the locality, with the authority and wealth to arm a strong force of pikemen and archers, those temporary foot soldiers who

had played so brave a part in the long, wasteful wars in France.

"Your Worship," he said, deliberately calm, "whatever may come to us in these troubled days after the King's death, we must do our duty. The plague has robbed England of two thirds of its men. But it has done the same in France, and everywhere else where the wars have raged. You know well enough that these problems of shortage, in fighting men and artisans, have been put before Parliament at Westminster by the burgesses of England. Promises have been made by the King's officers, and these promises will be kept. But first, all Englishmen must unite for victory."

"Ah, always tomorrow, always hope deferred," cried old Simon Lonsforde. "We have been at it too long to deceive each other, Master Baddyng. It is here and now that we are in need. Whatever the shortage of men, to-day's concern is for the defense of Rye, our homes, families." He paused, and added with emphasis, striking a fist into the palm of the other hand, "And our warehouses loaded with the new shearing of wool!"

These last words, spoken so loudly as the Mayor led the way back along Watchbell Street to the City Wall, were heard by a newcomer, the Italian agent and member of the Florentine banking family of Bardi. He joined the party as it left the small square in front of the Market Hall.

"What is this, Madam?" he said to Anna Finch, stepping between her and John and putting an arm around the boy's shoulders. "Is the news true? Who started the rumor?"

"It is no rumor, Signor Barde," cried the angry woman. "I saw the ships at midday, and still nothing has been done. Nobody has listened to me until the Mayor suddenly became afraid for his warehouses."

"Ah, well," said the Italian, "that is why I am here, to help protect those warehouses. They hold the investment of our Florentine ducats too, Mistress Finch. But we value our families as well in Tuscany."

He closed his grip on John's shoulder and looked down at him kindly. Signor Barde was tall and fair-haired; still young, but stooping. His days were spent with accounts and his nights with scholarship, for he had caught the fever of the New Age that was beginning to dawn in Italy. He had met in London the poet and Collector of Customs, Geoffrey Chaucer, whose writing was giving a settled beauty and authority to that English tongue which the Italian still spoke with difficulty. But he recognized that Chaucer was doing for English what his own townsman Dante had done for the Tuscan tongue nearly a century earlier.

"If only men thought as you and I think, Mistress Finch," he said, as they hurried after the aldermen and the King's Bailiff, back to the viewpoint by the Wall, "there would be none of this warfare. They would recognize that mankind is pitiable enough, under the enmity of nature, in a savage universe—subject to disease, accident, and his own ignorance. But my pupil here will not agree, eh, John? You want the excitement, the adventure, such as we are likely to have tonight."

He called John his pupil because he had been teaching the boy Latin and Italian for the past year, in return for

the kindness shown by the parents to a foreigner lodged in a strange country.

Anna Finch was justified in her anger and impatience. The afternoon and early evening had passed and nothing done since the arrival of the news of the King's death. Those hours might have been profitably used for mustering what arms and men were available, as a precaution should the incoming ships be hostile.

Now it seemed that they were so. John's mother was right. They were not the home fleet returning after the sea fight. That battle was probably still raging up Channel, off the Foreland. These vessels were now gathered offshore, in such force that they took no pains to disguise themselves. Their Norman pennons were worn at every masthead, as the ships cruised up and down like a pack of hounds prowling in front of a fox's hole. Voices could even be heard, carried faintly on the warm evening air, to be silenced as the breeze from land freshened. They were the cries of the men in the bows as they shouted the plummet readings.

But now the alarm was raised, and the Mayor's entreaties were taken up by the King's Bailiff. He sent two messengers down to the harbor to instruct the crews of the King's tramelers to stand to. But those sailors were not fighting men and they were pitifully armed, with nothing but short swords, spears, and a few small bows. Already in the town the women were busy feathering what arrows could be spared from the stock kept for compulsory archery practice. In all, the defenses were feeble and the King's Bailiff knew it. Too late now to do anything to save the town. The Mayor, raging and shout-

ing, ran up and down, but he failed to make himself heard by the men down by the harbor. Citizens jostled him as they ran out of the houses in panic, to gather at this vantage point before fleeing across the marsh to Winchelsea. Some carried bedding, boxes, with garments and baskets of food. Among the children were those with kittens, puppies, dolls. One little girl was crying because her cat had leaped from her arms and disappeared among the graves in the churchyard. She ran madly about, calling it and sobbing, while her mother, with a baby in her arms, pursued her, leaving an old, blind grandfather who stood helpless in the street.

"You must go, Mistress Finch," urged the Italian, taking her by the arm. "And you, John—take your mother to safety. Find friends at Winchelsea. There is nothing to be done here except to try to negotiate with the Normans. I may have some influence there."

But John was reluctant. He ran off to the house on the cliff side of Watchbell Street and quickly returned with his bow, and a dagger at his belt, the gift from his father for the thirteenth birthday.

"I'm coming down to the harbor, signor," he said firmly.

To his surprise, the Italian showed a firmness and authority which he had to obey.

"You are going to do your duty, John. You have to get your mother and the children to safety. After that, if you can, you may return. But that is for your mother to decide. She may still need you in Winchelsea. Come now; no time to lose."

Mistress Finch meanwhile had gone home, but she

quickly reappeared with the two younger children, a boy and a baby girl, the young brother struggling with a basket of food and two blankets. The mother had strapped a bundle of clothes on her back and carried a leather sack, tied at the neck by a thong. It clanked as she walked, and its weight dragged at her shoulder.

"John!" she said, looking at him sadly. "We must stay together. I have locked up the house and told the women to follow us after they have collected their belongings. Let us go."

John hung his bow over his back and took the leather bag from his mother.

"What is this?" he demanded sulkily.

"We shall need money, John. Before this night is gone our home may be gone too. There is a gold cup and some silver spoons, all the jewels I inherited or had from your father. These may serve to keep us if we are left homeless."

She spoke bitterly, for she had known such troubles earlier in her life.

"You will find a boat at the landing stage below the town gate," said Signor Barde, overtaking them as they made their way among the fugitives down the narrow street from the church square. "I have arranged that. My servant is waiting there for you."

The poor mother, bowed with her burden, looked at him gratefully.

"Why are you so kind to us?" she asked. But the little girl had begun to cry, alarmed by the jostling of the crowd, and Mistress Finch, stooping to comfort her, did not see the smile with which the Italian turned to John.

Nor did she see the French wine merchant, Raymon Tarys, who stood at the window of his office counting heads as the townsfolk scrambled past. After noting how the port of Rye emptied itself of its people, he went through to the back of the house, opened a casement window overlooking the harbor and the sea, examined the wall-walk below, to make sure nobody was fleeing by that path.

Thus assured, he held up a lamp, the only one lighted in the dusk of that fatal summer evening, and signaled by passing his hand to and fro in front of the flame. This he repeated at intervals, until at last he saw a light from one of the ships. It repeated the movements made by the Frenchman's hand, flickering across the chilly gray water.

Then he closed the shutters, gathered certain papers which he concealed in the pockets of a cloak, and left the house. He carried no arms. He claimed to be a man of peace. Slowly he moved, against the pressure of the crowd, which was now thinning out, toward the harbor. He saw a number of drunken sailors staggering helplessly up and down, trying to sober themselves and sorting out their pitiable armory of pikes, bows, and short swords.

As he had previously arranged, he found a lantern set down behind the open door of a warehouse. Stepping inside, he waited, watching the antics of the sailors and noting the arrival of the Mayor, Bailiff and those men, old and a few young, who were staying to try to defend the town.

Darkness was falling. Raymon Tarys could still see the open Channel between two patches of pearl-gray mist

rising over the shingle banks that guarded the entrance to the harbor. The shapes of the King's vessels drawn up carelessly on the beach in front of the warehouses grew larger as the daylight failed.

Tarys found his tinderbox, struck the flint, and lit the lamp. He carried it out to the front, waving it to and fro, while he shouted to the defenders, "No use quarreling among yourselves, good friends. We must have light to see what is coming against us."

The townsmen were too busy, and too angry in their argument with the sailors, to suspect treachery as the Frenchman moved among them, steadily swinging his lantern to guide the invaders through the shallows, toward the landing stages of the harbor.

III. UNHOLY NIGHT

THE FLEET of ships which now stood off Rye Harbor had come up Channel from the Atlantic, after defeating the Earl of Pembroke off La Rochelle. He had sailed there to make a diversionary attack to lower the strength of the French vessels fighting near the Goodwin Sands.

The victors of La Rochelle, the French Admiral Jean de Vienne, and the Castilian Sanchez de Tovar, now relied on their agent in Rye, who had not failed them. They were strong in confidence, having defeated the English off the French coast. They did not know what was happening farther up Channel, where their largest and proudest ships were engaged. For years, the war had favored the French, and only the wine district around Bordeaux remained as part of the kingdom of the new boy king Richard II.

Triumph can breed mercy. It can also breed savagery, greed and lust. The French Admiral might have been tolerant, but his Spanish ally was new to the war and hungry for plunder, knowing the poverty of his own sailors and ill-provisioned ships. The easygoing Jean de Vienne did not want to endanger the Spanish alliance, and he gave way when the Spaniard demanded that the sacking of Rye should be thorough.

The sound of the tenor bell tolling floated out to sea

while the admirals were in conference that afternoon. As dusk fell and the breeze came off the land, the last few strokes of the bell sounded like a plea for mercy, betraying the helplessness of the suppliants. That only whetted the appetite of the invaders. Normans and Spaniards united in their eagerness for the kill.

The first signal came from northwest on the heights of the town, with the red sunset behind to make the lantern shine almost green, like an early evening star. The lookout men on the flagship watched it flicker, and were instructed to reply.

From that moment the fleet was busy preparing arms and assembling the smaller vessels in line, ready to enter the harbor with the troops transferred to them.

Moonlight followed the sunset and revealed the two humps of shingle through which the ships must be steered. After the hot day, the breeze off the land freshened; useless to the invaders. The smaller vessels, no larger than the English tramelers, put out sweeps and began to move in, to their creaking rhythm. The moonlight flashed on the dripping blades and stirred the water to phosphorescence. The vessels might have been pressing their way through a sea of heavy quicksilver rather than salt water.

The French and Spanish flagships stood offshore, stately in the moonlight, their sails furled. The sea was so calm that from time to time the proud vessels were reflected, the shuddering likenesses doubling their beauty.

Two large ships were towed by the tramelers, the towropes dipping and slapping the water in rhythm with the towers. Lifeboats put down from the ships still anchored in the roads, and soldiers piled into them. Like a swarm

of water beetles they bobbed over the sea, catching up with and passing the slowly moving vessels. They were the first to pass the shingle banks and enter the harbor. All lights in the town were dead but for one lantern swinging to and fro. The invaders steered for that.

Meanwhile, the King's Bailiff and Signor Barde, conferring on the quay, succeeded in getting the few men of the town and the handful of sailors together. Weapons were sorted out and distributed.

"I should not be doing this," said the Italian. "I am a neutral, sent to guard the Florentine banking interests. We have loans with French and Spaniard too! I shall have to disappear before they land."

"That is a new term, surely," growled the old Englishman. "Neutral? That is no Christian word."

"Christians use many non-Christian words, sir," said Barde, handing a sword to a young inland farmer who had been given a platoon of the town volunteers. "Our religion is less able than our moneybags to prevent war and disaster."

He looked around, and then confident that he was not overheard, he added, speaking close to the Bailiff's ear, "I'll go now. But give me an intelligent fellow to help me. This lad will serve. Yes, and a fisherman too, who can row a boat."

The lad was John Finch, who had seen his mother and the two younger children out of the town, safely on their way to Winchelsea. He had found the boat already full of neighbors waiting to put off from the rear of the inland town, to creep under the shore below the Udimore peninsula and across to Winchelsea behind the cover of

the right-hand shingle bank. Then he begged his mother's permission to return. She hesitated in anguish for a moment; but there was no time for her to speculate on the danger, the boy's age, the ordeal ahead.

"Your father is out there, John. What am I to do without you both? But you must follow his example. Go then—but come back to me, son; come back to me!"

She was weeping, yet trying not to weep, as he saw her handed down into the boat after the children and the cumbersome luggage. He saw her white face turned up to him as the boatmen pushed off from the shore. The moonlight gleamed in her eyes and showed John the courage there.

"I'll come back, Mother," he cried. "And Father too."

His prophecy was only half true; but neither he nor his mother knew that. So confidently did the boy's words ring through the silver night that Anna Finch took heart again. She called out, but the boy had already doubled back into the town, eager to rejoin his tutor. He ran along the lower road, dodging the last of the refugees, whose retreat had now left Rye almost uninhabited, its wealth open to the invaders, and any local marauder who might have decided that such an opportunity was worth the risk of remaining to wait upon events.

Thus John was at hand when Signor Barde asked for a boatman. The tutor was surprised and alarmed at seeing the boy. His mind worked quickly, however. His plan was to draw John away from the obvious dangers of the quayside when the invaders should land, but not to let him feel humiliated by being treated as a child. "I have a responsible job for you, John," he said. "You know that

I must not take part in this. My duty is to my banking house." He chuckled. "But there is one thing I intend to do before I fly to safety. You can help me."

Meanwhile, the young farmer who overheard this conversation volunteered his services.

"But can you row a boat?" said Barde. "I want a man who knows every inch of the harbor and the shore."

The man grinned.

"I know that too, master. We farmers are often down this way when the Customs man isn't about."

"Good. Then pass your command to some other stout fellow and come with me." Barde turned to the King's Bailiff. "To our next meeting, sir. I hope to put in one good stroke before that! Come now, John."

As he hurried off toward a warehouse somewhat removed from the others along the water front, he stopped and frowned. He had seen the man from Bordeaux, and the swinging lantern.

"Nothing like audacity and bluff," he said. "But too late now. Besides, that will serve my purpose. See, John, two of their bigger ships are being towed in. Why should not you and I account for one of those before the night is out?"

"How do you mean, sir?"

John could not believe him: but the suggestion was instantly followed up by the quick-witted Italian. Seizing the boy by the arm, he ran around to the side of the warehouse and stopped at a small door. Producing a key and turning it in the clumsy lock, he spoke to his assistants.

"This place is filled with bales of wool and barrels of

tallow. There's a trolley inside which we can use. I want to get a small boatload down to the water and put aboard a skiff. But we must work quickly, John."

"But what's this for?"

"You'll see. Come now, no time to lose!"

He disappeared into the dark interior and lit a lantern hung behind the door. Its light shone smokily in competition with a beam of cold moonlight slanting through the gap between the closed great doors in the front wall of the wooden building.

"Look, farmer! You go down and find two boats. The boy and I will bring the trolley down. Give us a whistle from time to time; though we should see you clearly enough by this moonlight."

The man ran off without replying, and Signor Barde turned to John.

"Heavy work, my boy. Don't overdo it. A little at a time."

He took down an ax from the frame of tools on the wall beside the door and broached first a barrel of tallow and then several bales of wool.

John meanwhile found the trolley, a low, flat vehicle, crude but strong. He lugged it forward and helped his tutor to heave the broken bales. Then came the heavier job of hoisting the barrel of tallow. The trolley creaked under the burden as the barrel, raised by levering with two iron bars, was pushed and guided into place.

The axles of the trolley shrieked as the gasping couple began to push it out into the open.

"One moment; we don't want to attract too much attention. Don't forget, John, that I'm not supposed to be

taking part in this affair. But your people are my friends, and I am only human. Besides, what I am doing will balance what that Bordeaux agent is doing to help the French. He's thinking of the benefits to his masters if England becomes French and wine duties are abolished. I'm thinking of—"

But he was interrupted by an outcry from the distant landing stage along the harbor. The first boatload of invaders had landed. Blows were heard; shrieks of pain and rage, men's voices encouraging one another.

Barde dipped a handful of wool in the tallow and quickly greased the wheels. The trolley slid noiselessly down to the water's edge.

"Now where is he?"

Barde shaded his eyes from the glare of the moon and gave a low whistle. Out of the night a shadow appeared, followed by a second. It was the farmer, pulling one boat and towing another. He brought them in expertly.

"Heh, master! That good enough for you, or would you want a deep-sea mariner?"

His cool cheerfulness made the Italian congratulate himself on having chosen the right man.

"You English!" he said, almost enviously. "But we've little time; the French have landed, and I suspect Spaniards too. If that be so, then heaven help Rye. Those people have the Moorish blood, and that is crueler than a tiger's!"

The fight was spreading. Boat after boat reached the shore, spilling its company to outnumber the defenders.

"If only they don't see us!" gasped the Italian, struggling with the weight of the barrel as he and the farmer

heaved it into the second boat assisted by John, who obeyed the order to tip it up, to scoop out the contents and spread the fat over a bundle of brushwood and dead tamarisk which Barde had snatched up on the way from the warehouse.

But as the fighting quickened, under the sudden awakening of the English sailors to the danger of events, new arrivals from the ships began to spread the combat, and individuals here and there went searching for firmer grip on the entrance to the town. One of them, running eastward, approached.

He was not followed but could be seen and heard, for the moonlight flashed on his breastplate and helmet. He would be a knight and a commander, for his helmet was plumed and he carried a sword, holding it above his head as though it were a torch to show him the way to his booty.

"Ah!" said the farmer, turning and resting his hands on the end of the trolley, leaning back and laughing up at the sky. His teeth and eyes flashed. Without looking down, he put out an arm and pushed the boy aside.

"Back, young master. This is not your place yet. Stay there, and if he cuts me down, jump to the boat and push off."

The French knight saw them, paused, then with a hunter's cry came running. John watched the farmer reach to the barrel and grasp a handful of soft tallow. The Italian shook a sleeve loose and grasped a hidden dagger, but hesitantly, thinking of his difficult position as a neutral. He had no need to worry. The young farmer, though heavily built, moved like a wildcat as the knight ran at

him. Stepping aside and freeing his arm, he flung the tallow squarely into the man's face. It entered where no blade could reach, running past the nose-guard and spreading out behind the visor.

The knight was momentarily blinded. He stumbled and brought his sword down helplessly, slashing the air.

What happened next was too quick for the two on-lookers to see. The farmer jumped and broke through the unguarded range of the sword. There was a flash of light as the sword rose again, a snort of pain and rage from the farmer. Then the Frenchman was seized around the waist, lifted and crashed down. His sword was in the farmer's hands. It drove through its owner's body below the breastplate. The struggle was over.

The farmer drew out the dripping blade, wiped it on a tuft of wool, and said coolly, "The devil! He got me on the leg as I jumped!"

So he had. Blook was flowing from the man's thigh.

Quickly the Italian went to work. Twisting a hank of wool into a rope, he undid the breeches and exposed the cut. He tied the rope tight around the thigh above the cut and then bandaged the wound with the sleeve of his own shirt, which he ripped out with his dagger.

"Now then, can you row us, or are you weak?"

The farmer grinned, and did not even limp as he stepped down into the boat and took the oars.

"These are my own boats," he said. "I keep them to fetch the sheep home from the hilltops! So now I'll have a nip of brandy. We all will!"

After that ministration, in which John was allowed to take part owing to special circumstances, they con-

tinued to load up the towed boat as Barde instructed: first the touchwood, then the tallow and a loose mound of raw wool. With the job completed, the loaded boat made a pretty picture in the moonlight, bright as a bridal barge.

"They'll see that, master," said the farmer. He crawled forward to the locker in the bow of his boat and found a sheet of tarred canvas. He threw it over the white mound of wool, and in doing so, caught his leg against the gunwale.

"Ah, curse you!" he groaned. But in an instant he mastered the pain and limped back to his place in the other boat. "Now, master," he said, "for your orders. This young mariner can pull an oar."

The boat was broad, and John sat beside him, pressed against the unwounded leg. The boy grasped the oar with two hands and warily watched his companion, to keep time in pulling.

The boat moved out, the slack rope took up and the other boat turned, like a patient old horse, dipping its nose at the first tug, then settling down to follow.

Once or twice the farmer muttered a curse and groaned as he pulled. The Italian, muffled in a cloak, studied him anxiously, but the farmer made no other sign of discomfort. He even clapped John on the back after they had been rowing for some minutes.

"Good lad," he whispered. "You can handle a boat, eh?"

He did not know that the boy's father was admiral of the vessels fighting up Channel. John looked at him coolly, but he had to admire such indifference to pain.

"Was that quite fair?" he asked.

"Eh?"

"Throwing the tallow in his eyes?"

The farmer chuckled. "Fair? There's only one thing fair in a fight. Get your blow in first and follow it with a second."

The boy was prepared to challenge this, but Signor Barde interrupted. "Quiet now. Keep close to the shingle; it throws a shadow, thank God! We sneak out after the two ships have passed and attack the second. If it burns, it will block the passage for the other."

He pointed toward the Channel. Half a dozen smaller vessels were now well forward and separating out, ready to tie up at the quays. The two ships, under tow, moved in proudly, their rear towers exaggerated in height by the moonlight. The first had a lantern swinging astern. Suddenly the swinging stopped and small boats roped alongside began to pull back, bringing the ship to a halt.

The second ship followed suit and rested in midwater between the two shingle banks, leaving way on each beam for a few more small trawlers to pass her. She carried no lights.

A few minutes later, the guiding boats drew in to both ships. Lamps flashed, voices muttered, men tumbled down rope ladders into the boats. This activity went on for so long that a traffic was set up between the ships and shore, transporting men. "They must be leaving none aboard," said Signor Barde. He was almost invisible to the others, so neatly were they covered under the shadow of the bank, beneath a projecting tongue of shingle.

The wash from the French and Spanish vessels and the

turn of the tide lapped at the bows of the two boats. The land breeze made a faint music over the bluff. There was no other nearby sound.

The noise of battle came across the water, a confusion of cries, thuds, footwork. Lights in the town had been put out, but suddenly, after a louder outcry of voices and a burst of terrified shrieking, fire broke out. The watchers in the boat, under the northern lea of the shingle, looked back to the town and saw the flames spreading along the sea front, taking the warehouses one by one and breaking up to join new outbursts from the hillside. The uproar increased as more foreigners landed.

John shivered and hid his face in his hands. He thought of his mother, his brother and baby sister, and thanked God that they were safely away until his father should return.

"Now," said Signor Barde, "all are gone, it seems. We'll creep up by the stern, tie the fireboat under the shelter of the tower, and row off to make our way back here and along the bank toward Winchelsea."

The farmer hesitated and was about to speak, but the Italian read his mind and spoke for him.

"Yes, I know! The price of your boat, sir. When all this is over, we will arrange with the goldsmith in Winchelsea to repay you. And there will be some profit in it too, for your aid and courage. I shall not forget that."

"As you will, sir," said the farmer. "And you'll be good enough to pay the barber to look to my leg? It grows damnable stiff, I can tell you! I am Adam Cogger of Stone-cum-Ebony."

After this bit of bargaining, he turned to the job of

bringing the boats out into the Channel. Happily, the breeze dropped and a slight mist rose up from below the moon, veiling the brightness. Unobserved, and unheard because the two oars were now muffled in wads of wool, the boats slowly approached the darkened ship. All was quiet there now. Most of the crew must have landed with the soldiers, eager for loot.

"She is a dromond," whispered Barde, "a ship built for war. Ah, so I thought! Italian! See her name!"

They were near enough to read the letters, carved and painted in weathered gold right across the stern beneath the long row of square portholes: *Godesknight of Genoa*.

"That is it," said the Italian. "Built originally for the protection of the wine ships and captured by the Spaniards when blown southward out to sea after the great storms ten years ago. This will be her last voyage, with our help."

He directed the movement of the boats by hand, motioning this way and that.

"Ship your oar," whispered the farmer to John as they floated under the towering poop of the *Godesknight of Genoa*. It stretched above them like a roof, and the rudder, with its great chains, hung as huge as a barn door.

The Italian worked quickly. Leaning over the stern, he pulled in the second boat and urged it in as far as possible, in front of the ship's rudder and alongside the shapely planks rising from the keel. He tied it up with wet ropes to the rudder and a mooring ring in the hull.

"Now, keep us steady! Cast off, and I'll edge alongside."

This was done, but the creaking of the boats as they

rubbed against each other was so loud that it emphasized the sudden silence fallen over the battle on the water front. It also threatened to warn the watch on deck. But nobody stirred. The officers must have been confident of their safety.

Signor Barde leaned over, struck tinder and flint, set fire to a few twigs, and thrust them down into the bundle of loose kindling beneath the tallow. It almost exploded into flame, and the two oarsmen had to thrust their boat away, mount their oars, and row astern with all their strength. The farmer groaned and cursed, but he pulled so fiercely that the boat swung around and would have turned out alongside the ship, clearly lit up by the blaze from the fireboat.

Fortunately, some minutes passed before anybody aboard saw the flames beneath the poop, and during this pause, the boy exerted himself so successfully that the boat was headed off again, turning back from the ship and making for the shelter of the shingle bank.

There they lay hidden, to peer around the bluff and watch the result of their handiwork. The flames were now enveloping the poop and roaring up past the towering quarter-deck. They licked into the wide, square port-holes and set fire to the cabins. Cries of alarm mingled with the rattle of buckets and chains, as the few members of the crew tried vainly to stop the fiend so suddenly come aboard. Within a quarter of an hour the whole ship was in flames, burning like a resin torch. The crew was jumping into the water, some swimming ashore, others being picked up by comrades from the fleet. The roar and

crackle of the conflagration drowned all sounds from the town, where the fires along the front were dying down, except for that in the warehouse which had supplied the fuel for this adventure.

Fire ran up the shrouds and took the masts, throwing a pattern of flame reflections to the water, a cold and soundless beauty.

Signor Barde was trembling.

"I hate this," he murmured. "A handsome ship destroyed. I have no love for such foul business—war, death and destruction. But men force each other to such madness. Who profits in the end?"

"That's the way things are, master," said the farmer. "It's like the weather, sometimes fair, sometimes foul. But we have to bend to it."

John was conscious of being violently hungry. His back was strained after that last effort to row as vigorously as the wounded farmer. He stared at the blazing ship, his heart beating so loudly that he could almost hear it above the crackle and crashing of the beams and the hissing as flying particles hit the water.

Efforts were being made to draw the first ship nearer to the shore, away from the sparks and embers. Hope of saving the victim was abandoned, as it quickly burned down to the water's edge, turning and drifting on the ebb tide out toward the Channel. Then suddenly, with a roar of rage, it lunged forward and went down, like an elephant kneeling. The sea flashed and foamed, and for a few moments it was on fire. Then it recovered, folded itself over the disaster, and the first galleon floated alone

except for the swarm of rowing boats searching around for the last survivors.

“Now for Winchelsea,” whispered Signor Barde. “We’ll move slowly along the shingle. They will be occupied for some time out there in the harbor.”

IV. THE RAPE OF THE BELLS

OF COURSE the neighboring countryside was roused. Abbot Hamo of Battle Abbey, a powerful soldier-priest who had royal authority to maintain an armed retinue, now summoned his men and advanced on Winchester. During this march through the night, a French scout was captured by some farming folk at Brede and brought to the Abbot. The prisoner confessed that the invaders intended to stay indefinitely, on the understanding that certain forces from London and Yarmouth would come to join them in cutting off the bases of the fleet of the Cinque Ports. One of these ports, Sandwich, little more than a nest of pirates, had long had a feud with the fishermen of Yarmouth, and the two ports lost no opportunity of attacking each other. The London force represented the merchants who resented paying one barrel of wine in ten as customs duty to the Crown. If France and England were united under one king, this duty would disappear. The late King Edward having failed to unify the kingdoms, it was now time to back the King of France in that purpose.

Abbott Hamo heard this explanation of the plans for treachery and countertreachery. He smiled grimly, and was courteous enough to protect the prisoner by sending

him on oath and under escort up to Battle Abbey for sanctuary.

Thus it was that a troop of Normans and Spaniards, arriving before Winchelsea next day in a couple of trawlers, saw the new town on the hill shining like the Promised City. But it also shone with breastplates, suits of armor, sword blades and spearheads—a formidable sight.

The would-be plunderers thought again, and decided to sail back to their fellows at Rye. There they learned that the Prior of Lewes had also assembled a force of fighting men, to defend Rottingdean. This militant monk had said, "I need not redeem that which is not lost," which was as good as shaking a mailed fist under the nose of the newcomers. His words were also intended as a snub to the men of Rye, who had surrendered during the night in order to save the town from total destruction.

When, however, the Spaniards found that they were being withheld from their prey, they grew restive and were ready to quarrel with their Norman ally. This persuaded the French admiral Jean de Vienne to look with suspicion on the proposed help from London and Yarmouth. The whole of Kent and East Sussex appeared to be rallying to protect their towns and countryside. He decided to appease the Spaniards and to punish the English for their growing resistance. He gave the order to fire the town of Rye.

The destruction began as soon as the reconnaissance parties returned. They all brought the same story, of increasing resistance, and anger against the people who had surrendered Rye after too short and feeble a fight.

The day was hot, and toward noon a stiff breeze began

to blow off the sea. The invaders worked quickly and systematically from their base on the quays and in the vessels. They intended to avenge the destruction of the *Godsknight of Genoa*, the fine Italian ship with an English name. And they would use the same weapon—fire! But they added something more. First they worked their way up through the streets, entering the houses and plundering. Fortunately, the townsfolk were gone, some to Winchelsea, others out into the countryside across the marsh and the hills by Aldington and Lymne, beyond the old Rhea Wall built by the Romans to keep the sea off the fertile marsh.

A few townsfolk, obstinate because they were not allowed to take their movable property with them, had remained indoors. Nothing saved them. The old men were slaughtered, and the women taken down to the ships. More than sixty townsfolk were killed and their bodies consumed in the fires that followed.

The sea breeze carried the flames up the narrow streets. By five o'clock in the afternoon most of the town was in ashes. The gaunt tower built by William, Earl of Kent, two hundred years earlier, stood up from the smoking ruins. So did the crumbling walls of the church and its headless tower. The valuable lead had been stripped from its roof, rolled up and trundled down to the harbor.

As dusk fell, a body of Normans re-entered the town, picking their way carefully up the middle of the street to the church, wincing as the hot stones scorched their feet. They formed a chain from the well near the church and passed buckets of water by hand, to douse the last flickerings of fire at the base of the church tower, through

the doorless gap in the brickwork and the curtains of steam.

Gradually the fallen bells were cooled. One by one they were lifted and dragged on the fishermen's trolleys brought up from the harbor. The last to be lifted was the great tenor bell, whose voice had floated over the sea in the mournful warning the day before. It was too heavy for the trolleys to carry. A platform was improvised, on log rollers cut from a couple of pine trees at the head of the graveyard. Gradually the monster was eased toward the slope and then allowed to rumble down to the harbor, under the restraint of ropes held by soldiers backing up the hill.

Imprecations and cries of horror could be heard coming from the natives who dared come near enough to witness the sacrilege. But the Normans were now thoroughly roused by their own blood lust and anger at their failure to take further advantage of the town's surrender. The hopes of uniting with the treacherous forces of London and Yarmouth were dashed. The tight little army of the Abbot of Battle was already advancing from Winchelsea after being rowed over the inlet to Udimore. It was time for the invaders to depart.

As day died, with rising mists of pearl over the sea, and the eastern promise of moonrise fifty minutes later than on the previous night of disaster, the foreign fleet set sail, carrying away the Bells of Rye and the valuable lead from the church roof, leaving the ruined tower to smolder in the moonlight and the incoming tide to rise and welter over the sunken *Godesknight of Genoa*.

V. THE FLAMES DIE DOWN

WITH the departure of the fleet, the little boat lurking for nearly twenty-four hours in the shingle creek put out, so that its crew might watch the enemy ships pass through the gap and dwindle on the open sea. The one flagship towered over the trimclers, and the moonlight flashed on her sails as they bellied out before the land breeze. A flock of white birds with an eagle in their midst—that is how the fleet looked, peaceful and fairylike. Signor Barde stared at them and grimaced.

“Ah! Murder and destruction!” he muttered. “Who would think it? Sailing home so innocently! Why do men do these things, John?”

The farmer glanced at him and grinned. “’Tis all in a lifetime, master. We be poor Christian mortals. And I reckon I’ll be one with a mighty stiff leg tomorrow.” His grin broke into a chuckle. “But I made him pay for that cut, poor devil!”

With that he took both oars, bidding the boy move to the back of the boat, beside the Italian. “You’ve done enough for one night’s outing, lad. I’m used to this game.”

John Finch was not sorry. That pull from the burning ship to the shelter of the creek, during those moments of terror, had nearly broken his back. He was desperately

hungry and sleepy and could not keep his body from shaking and shivering.

"Here, John," said Signor Barde, handing him a mug with a small ration of stale drinking water from the keg in the locker, "our friend is right. Let go now and sleep." He took off his cloak and put it around the boy, who sat swaying and nodding to the motion of the boat as the farmer began to pull steadily up the main creek toward Winchelsea.

John, half asleep but too excited and weary to drop off completely, was conscious of the movement; the cloud-like marshland on one hand, the shingle bank on the other, drifting past in silence, sometimes a mooring post looming up and falling astern, or a distant tree wading low down across the marsh. The sounds of the dying fires grew fainter and fainter. The horror of the past day might have been no more than a dream.

"Ill-gotten gains," said the Italian, half to himself. "They come to nothing in the end. We can't live that way. Far better to have order, good credit and good faith, as we bankers try to establish in this savage world. If men live like animals, they will die like animals."

"True enough, master," said the man at the oars. "But we made a good job of the *Godesknight of Genoa!*"

John heard no more. He was asleep, leaning against his tutor. He woke when the boat bumped against the landing stage below Winchelsea. The farmer had found the last clear approach, for the odd collection of wherries and skiffs which had carried the fugitives from Rye now lay nosing each other off the jetties.

A hum of voices rose from the quay, like the sound of a beehive at night. People were gathered there, sleeping amid their bundles, superintended by a beadle from the town and a couple of watchmen wearing badges with the coat of arms of the Alard family. One of the Alards, in the reign of Edward II, had been the first Englishman ever to have the title of Admiral. The family had played a leading part in the life of Winchelsea for more than a hundred years.

The present head of that family, Sir Stephen Alard, stood on the quay instructing the refugees where best to place themselves for the night. As disputes arose, he was appealed to, for he was a man with an air of authority; big, red-bearded, a sea captain.

He saw the boat creep in among the moorings and noted how well it was handled. Its occupants found him confronting them when they landed.

"Who are you?" he began, suspicious of such latecomers; but instantly he recognized John and Signor Barde.

"Why, boy, your mother has bidden me look out for you. She is safely disposed at our house, but there will be no sleep for her tonight until she knows of your safety. You had better go up to the town and show yourself. It's early years for you to be in the battle front."

"I'm a trained archer, sir!"

Stephen Alard laughed aloud and clapped the boy so heartily on the back that the poor fellow, unsteady with sleep, hunger and thirst, stumbled forward against the wounded leg of the farmer, who winced and groaned.

"Why, man, what ails you?" roared Captain Alard.

“And what’s your name and place? We can trust no late-comers.”

“The fleet has gone, sir,” said the farmer, “and so has Rye! The old town is but a heap of ashes. And they’ve stolen the bells. We saw them rolled down Mermaid Street to the burnt-out quay and taken aboard the flagship. That’ll pay for the *Godesknight of Genoa*!”

The farmer was now laughing, and he limped forward as the huge seaman turned aside to question Signor Barde.

“Look, sir! You ask me who I am. Rather ask our leader, who gave the orders!”

“I know him. But who are you? And what do you know about this easy surrender of the town? Are you a wine merchant’s man, one of the French employment?”

“No, sir. I got this cut on the leg from one of those knights, and I’d ask you for a good barber to attend to it before it turns bad on me. My name is Adam Cogger and I farm on the Isle of Oxney, beyond Stone-cum-Ebony. ’Tis good land there, and I’ll warrant my sheep are fatter than—”

“Enough, I see you’re honest stock, Cogger.”

“As honest as the rest, sir, but well-nigh crippled after our night’s business.”

“What business was that?”

The Italian now spoke, and told his own version of the story of the burning of the *Godesknight of Genoa* and the killing of the French warrior.

“But how did the fleet get through the narrows?” angrily demanded Sir Stephen Alard. He was not too

pleased about the slaying of a knight by an unarmed peasant. It was against the rules of chivalry and might lead to all kinds of disorders and the break-up of the feudal world.

"You'd best go up and seek out Solomon Thole, the barber and chirurgeon, though he may now be asleep in his house opposite the church. He's been up half the night seeing to those damaged in the flight from Rye. Off with you, man. We'll talk of traitors tomorrow, after you have slept."

Having dismissed Adam Cogger, he turned to Signor Barde.

"You, sir, may have some thoughts on this matter."

The Italian banker hesitated. He must not become too involved, on one side or the other, in these disastrous events. The Florentine banks and their rivals the banks of Lucca, all concerned in the English wool trade, were likely to lose a lot of money. But there was also heavy investment in the wine trade from Bordeaux, and Signor Barde dared not confess that he had seen the Bordeaux agent, Raymon Tarys, signaling with a lantern to the Norman ships.

"There are many interests at work, Sir Stephen," he said. "The truth is, that war and pillage are outdated now we have the science of sound banking to bring the trades of mankind into a unity. Why will not the peoples, and their kings also, learn this truth?"

Sir Stephen Alard snorted and tugged at his red beard. "Beyond my understanding, sir, all that stuff of ledgers and loans and promises to pay. Men's hearts, and their

honor too, don't work by calculation, I tell you. I am a sailor, like my ancestors, and my science is navigation. Yes, and what I learn from the conduct of the sea, I apply to mankind. Both are unexpected, liable to sudden storm, dealers of death and destruction." He paused, and stared out into the moonlit night, where the wavelets came trembling in like silver chains of a necklace. His teeth flashed through his beard as he smiled and turned back to Signor Barde, who had been studying him slyly. "But both are the stuff of life, sir. We cannot leave them. Where else could we offer our service?"

This discussion might have gone on in spite of Signor Barde's wish to avoid it, had not a diversion brought it to an end. John Finch, still with the Italian cloak around his shoulders, suddenly collapsed. He had fallen asleep standing up, and was so far gone that he sank down, kneeling and then rolling over like a hedgehog, without waking himself.

"Why, boy, what's this?" said Sir Stephen.

"He's done a good night's work, sir," said Barde. "Without his aid good Adam Cogger could not have fired the flagship of the Spaniard."

"The Spaniard, was it? And did you have a hand there, my friend?"

Barde smiled discreetly. "I am a banker, sir. My task is to pour oil on troubled waters."

Sir Stephen Alard laughed as he stooped and took the boy up in his arms.

"Ah yes, I take you there; a true Florentine, a gentle race, never given to violence or the interruption of trade." He was still laughing as he walked off toward his house

within the town gate and bade the Italian follow, which that weary scholar was only too glad to do. He knew that behind the bluff manners of the English mariner lay a shrewd mind.

VI. A SHADOW AT MIDDAY

JOHN FITCH did not wake until noon next day. He opened his eyes, turned over and groaned. The stabbing pain in his back reminded him of that dash to get away from the burning *Godesknight of Genoa*.

He looked around and saw his mother sewing. She looked up when John groaned.

"What is it? Are you hurt, John? They did not tell me—"

"Nothing, Mother. I've been rowing hard. You heard what we did?"

"Yes, Signor Barde told me how you and a man from Oxney fired the Spanish flagship. Your father shall hear of this."

"I, Mother? But it was—"

He stopped. If Signor Barde had told the story thus, he must have a reason. But was it right to alter facts? And was it right to take the credit for plans and great deeds which were the work of somebody else? But he must not betray his tutor. He would wait and speak to Signor Barde; ask him to explain.

The thoughts stirred his sleepy brain. "What is it, Mother? What has happened to you all? These two days have gone—but is it two days?"

Mistress Finch put down her sewing on the bed which

filled the recess in the solar. This act drew John's attention, and he saw his baby sister asleep there, her face to the wall.

"This is the second day indeed," said John's mother. She rose and stood over him. He could see the misery and fear in her eyes. "What will the third day bring? Our city and our home are gone. Your father is at sea, and we have no news of the battle since it moved up Channel. How right the Italian is! He curses war because it breaks contracts and business plans. But it does more than that. It breaks the hearts of mothers and wives."

This made John impatient. He crawled up from the mattress of straw and sacking, winced as he stretched his limbs, and said, "Whatever it is, we can't let them beat us. Adam Cogger was the farmer's name—the man with us when we—who fired the big ship. He was a grand fellow. He slew the knight with one blow—and with the knight's own sword." He paused and frowned. "But I don't know about that handful of tallow. I told him about that, Mother, and he said a good man always had to get his blow in first."

"What *are* you trying to tell me, John?"

She never learned, because a serving woman appeared up the stepladder leading from the main hall and summoned them to the midday meal. John scrambled down that ladder like a young bear, forgetting his pains and stiff muscles. His mother followed, leaving the baby asleep.

The hubbub of voices, which had been a faint hum heard from the upstairs room, was now a steady din. The body of the hall was filled with retainers and soldiers in leather jerkins. Piled round the floor against the walls

were weapons and armor. The metal of breastplate, helmet and blade flashed somberly through the dim and smoky air.

The men were sitting at trestles of scrubbed boards, eating from wooden platters and drinking from plain mugs which serving women refilled with mild beer from large leather jugs. All were jovial. Nobody seemed to be concerned about the sacking of Rye, the loss of life, homes, and goods. Toasts were drunk by the soldiers to the women who waited on them. Jokes, shouts, laughter rose, as thick as the smoke in which they were born.

The noise and fumes lingered in the rafters among the beams of the roof and flickered in the rush of light and air beneath the open vent. A wide beam of sunshine stood like a rampart of gold slantwise from the open double doors of the hall, dividing the interior into two. At the end of the upper half, below the stairs from the solar which the Finches had left, ran a dais and a noble table of carved oak. Behind it hung a tapestry depicting a forest hunt, the work of the women of the Alard family carried on over several generations. The figures in it were as vivid as the living men sitting below it at the high table.

In the center, on a chair with a high ornamental back carved as two eagles with spread wings, sat Sir Stephen Alard. He was entertaining the Abbot of Battle and his officers. Mistress Alard had just appeared, down an opposite staircase leading to the other end of the dais, from another solar off the other flank of the hall. She graciously greeted Mistress Finch, who was her cousin, kissing her on both cheeks and leading her by the hand to a seat reserved between Sir Stephen and the Abbot.

John was given a place at the high table. Certainly it was at the far end, among some of the younger officers, but he was honored to be there, not a little proud of himself, though he was still worrying about that matter of being wrongly credited, along with Adam Cogger, of having fired the Spanish flagship. He hoped he wasn't sitting at the high table as a result of Signor Barde's version of the story. In fact, he was shocked, for he was not yet of an age fully to understand the needs of public diplomacy and politics. He saw the story as just being untrue. It didn't fit in with what he had seen of his tutor's conduct two nights ago; the energy, gay courage and daring.

"Come, boy," cried a lieutenant sitting opposite, "wake up now! You've left it late in the day to appear. Sleepy-eyed and dreaming still? That won't do! Hey there! Bring the young master a mug of ale; and you there, fetch him a platter—he has nothing here! Now, young warrior, look to it!"

John needed no second invitation. He had not eaten a meal at table for over two days. After the adventure, the excitement, and the long sleep of exhaustion he was ravenous. He attacked the slices of Southdown mutton and turnip and the hunk of oaten bread with such vigor that the men nearby broke into laughter; a loud cheer that stopped the conversation farther along the table caused the Abbot to notice the boy.

It was something to be noticed by the Abbot of Battle! He had been a friend of the late King Edward III. So much did the King love and trust him that he had given him permission to maintain a private army and to provide his men with suits of armor. This was granted too, in face

of the King's general policy of cutting down the strength of the great lords of England, and thus of strengthening the authority of the Crown.

There were many such prelates in the Church during the Middle Ages. Some of them were good men, deeply religious scholars, who saw that order could be kept and civilization spread only by a strong hand. So they made themselves priests first, and soldiers second. Others were little more than robber barons in priests' robes, using the Church as a cover for their own greed and love of power.

The Abbot of Battle was of the former kind. He was a scholar and an able soldier; but first he was a religious man who loved truth and justice. He believed that individual life was sacred. That is why he looked with quick interest when he saw John Finch being singled out by the men around the end of the table where the boy was devouring his meat like a young wolf.

The Abbot was bareheaded and close-cropped. He leaned forward, for he was shortsighted and had a habit of peering out at the world from prominent brown eyes that were deceptively sleepy. He was dressed like one of his junior lieutenants, in a leather jerkin. But hanging on a thin gold chain, linked close like snakeskin, was a plain ivory cross, which from time to time he fingered while his lips moved silently. They were firm, thin lips below a large, jutting nose. It was a sad, thought-racked face that sometimes lit up with a kindness not of this world. It was alight now, shining like the pastoral signet ring which glittered on his first finger.

"Who is this boy?" he whispered to Sir Stephen.

"Ask your neighbor, my lord Abbot."

The Abbot turned to Mistress Finch. "Can you tell me about this young glutton, madam?"

Mistress Finch told the story, so far as she had heard it from her son. The Abbot listened thoughtfully. He knew John's father, and spoke of him with such respect that the poor lady found her courage renewed. She was tempted to confess her misery, and how she had spent the night in prayer that would not come to life, so deeply was her faith wounded by this last evidence of the folly and brutality of men.

The Abbot turned half around and looked steadily at her. She felt the gaze of those brown eyes penetrating through her, reading the fear and despair in her mind. Then he spoke.

"Daughter! All this is the way of life in the world of men. There has never been, and never will be, the safety for which we crave. If it were so, we should have need of but a little faith to assure us that tomorrow can be made more comfortable than today. But as you know, we need a faith that is infinite to carry us beyond the mishaps, the evils of this world. It is not the only life. Worse may yet come to you here; but you will find courage. You *must* find courage."

He offered his hand, and she lowered her head and kissed the ring. He added, "I would like to say a word to that son of yours. He is likely to be a solace to you, and you should be thankful."

This intimate conversation was carried on amid the babble of talk along the table, the clinking of cups and platters, the coming and going of servants, and the steady hubbub of humanity in the body of the hall. John Finch

was aware, however, that he was being discussed. His own shyness sharpened his vision. He saw the glances thrown by his mother and the Abbot, and the appraisal by the latter.

He was so confused by this attention that at first he paid no heed to the young monk standing behind him and whispering over his shoulder. Then, with a sudden and shamefaced realization, he heard the man say that the Abbot wanted to speak to him before the Court of Inquiry sat. He did not know what that meant.

"But when?" he asked.

"You will see," said the monk. "But follow me now."

He half-lifted the boy over the bench, and then walked behind him with a friendly hand on his shoulder. John needed that help, for he was so nervous that his legs felt like jelly, and the scene before his eyes shifted and melted. He had never before seen the Abbot, but he had heard his father speak of him with awe, praising him as soldier, scholar and saint. This did not help John now. It only made things worse.

Then, still blind and confused, he stood before the great man. He moistened his lips, clasped and unclasped his hands, hung his head—and waited! He saw his mother. In dumb show, she was trying to let him know that he must go down on one knee. He did so, and felt the monk's hand on his shoulder increase its pressure, as though to say, "That's right."

At that same moment, the Abbot rose, took John by the arms, and lifted him to his feet. "No, boy, let me see your face."

The voice was quiet and grave. The priest and the boy

might have been alone together. The tone and the gesture put a solitude round them. The tumult in the hall died down. Everybody was curious to know why the Abbot was so openly honoring this child. The majority did not even know who the boy was.

"Yes, you are your father's son." The Abbot turned his head to John's mother, while standing with his hands under the boy's arms. "Mistress Finch, did I not say that you have cause to be thankful to heaven, whatever may befall, so long as you have this son in your keeping, and to your keeping?"

John's heart sank. He knew that the Abbot had the reputation of getting all news of the southern counties before even the Royal Court in Westminster received it. Did the Abbot know something about the sea battle, where Father was leading the fight against the French?

The great kindness in the Abbot's eyes and in the touch of his hands made the boy ashamed of his fears. He looked up, and the Abbot spoke directly to him.

"You have become a man, in courage if not in years. So you will continue. That is as your father would have wished."

"*Would* have, sir?"

The Abbot was silent again. He looked from mother to son, and hesitated. Then, suddenly turning to severity, he said almost harshly, "Later! That must be later. You shall stay to the Inquiry. You did a man's work in the night. Now you must share a man's judgment in the day."

He turned to Sir Stephen.

"Let the women retire and the Court be opened."

Sir Stephen Alard rose, stepped aside, bowed to the

Abbot, then to his wife and Mistress Finch. The ladies curtsied to him and to the Abbot and left by the farther staircase.

John watched his mother, and he saw how she moved as though carrying a heavy burden on her back. The stone staircase up the wall was open, and once she stumbled. He saw Lady Alard put out an arm to prevent her falling down into the body of the hall.

"Mother!" he cried.

His outburst was heard, although the folk below the dais were moving about, folding and carrying away the trestle tables and setting the benches in rows against the walls, to leave the center of the floor clear except for two benches placed below and before the dais. They looked diminutive alone there on the bare flagstones, which had been swept to remove the rushes, and the bones and scraps thrown down during the meal.

Mistress Finch paused after she had recovered her balance. She put out one hand against the wall and turned her head. She had heard John. He saw her smile sadly. Then she shook her head and resumed her way up to the door in the narrow balcony.

John found his throat tight, as though it had been seized. In that moment he knew his mother as he had never known her before. The weight of responsibility covered him; but it was like the weight of a man's suit of armor, and it gave him a sense of power and confidence.

VII. JUSTICE MISCARRIES

DURING the rearrangement of the furniture in the hall, the Abbot and Sir Stephen Alard retired into a small room on the ground floor, accompanied by a chaplain, a secretary, the vicars of Rye and Winchelsea, and a lawyer named Fletcher who was town clerk of Rye.

The heavy curtains had hardly dropped behind them when the King's Bailiff Richard Baddyng and the Mayor of Rye, Simon Lonsforde, entered the hall, followed by a number of Rye folk who had been scattered about the marsh and the hills. Men and women, with piteous children, all hungry and dirty, crowded into the hall, pressing through the groups of men-at-arms who stood about in the courtyard and the High Street.

The Mayor and Bailiff were immediately summoned into the room behind the curtain. The hungry latecomers among the crowd clamored for food, and the servants began to marshal them, a few at a time, to lead them to the great kitchen where the dishes had been taken.

This kindly act was interrupted by the return of the Abbot and his following. He leaned on Sir Stephen's arm, and thus persuaded him wordlessly into the chair.

"A priest does not sit in judgment," he said, after Sir Stephen was seated. "I will stand behind you, and you will be supported by the King's Bailiff and the Mayor, to left

and right. My secretary will observe and note the proceedings, and the town clerk will speak for those who cannot speak for themselves."

The town crier of Winchelsea, with his handbell fastened by a strap to his wrist, now stepped forward from another small group at the farther end of the dais, consisting of the Mayor and aldermen of Winchelsea. His bell summoned the crowd to silence. It was an uneasy silence, broken by cries of misery, hysteria, anger and the wailing of young children.

The bell rang again, with more authority, and the murmuring died down. For a few moments the crowd was as quiet as a painted picture; masses of dull color huddled round the bases of the walls, filling and overflowing the benches. The shaft of sunlight had shifted and a corner of it struck the dais and the recess near the doorway to the inner room.

John saw the agent from Bordeaux caught in that edge of the sunbeam. He recognized him but thought nothing of it. He had not understood what Signor Barde meant by that remark, "But that will serve my purpose," when the Frenchman was swinging the lantern to guide the fleet into Rye Harbor.

The agent, half hidden in the recess, stood behind the dais. He was able to observe the figures on it and all that happened in the body of the hall. One person he neglected to notice was John Finch, who had jumped down from the end of the dais and stood against the wall near the doorway to the inner room. The boy was thus only a few feet from the Frenchman, and could see the flash of those shrewd eyes and the play of the thin lips.

Sir Stephen Alard opened the proceedings by calling on the Mayor of Rye to speak. Nobody observed that meanwhile four of the men-at-arms had picked up their weapons and now stood on guard at the main doors.

The Mayor, on whose aged shoulders the burden of prosecution had been laid, raised his arm and called out in a quavering voice, "Citizens of Rye!"

Silence fell over the hall. Beyond, in the kitchens, people were talking amid a clatter of wooden and metal plates. "Call them in!" he cried, with a gesture toward the kitchen. Sir Stephen sat with his elbow in his hand, his head bent. The Abbot behind him to his right had one hand resting on the carved arm of the chair. The sunlight flashed on that finger ring which Mistress Finch had recently saluted so reverently.

Some minutes passed while the people eating in the kitchens were unwillingly hustled back into the Hall. Most of them were still eating, savagely attacking lumps of mutton held in their hands.

"First, we want the jurors of Rye to come forward. I see but two of them here, William Motoun and Robert Noldyn. We must all assemble for this court. Where are the others?"

A voice from the hall shouted angrily. "Aye! We could tell you, eh, friends? Did we not see good Master Stephen Cely embark with the Frenchmen? I'll wager he has good property in Normandy, though his warehouse here may be burned!"

This caused an outburst of several voices and the threat of a free fight. Fists were shaken, people were pushed, women screamed, children cried out.

The crier rang his bell lustily, and the old Mayor raised both arms. Sir Stephen still sat, sunk in thought, with his chin resting on his hand. The Abbot had not moved.

Order was more or less restored, and the noise sank to a murmur.

John felt his heart beating. The anger of a crowd is a terrifying monster, headless and limbless, like a flooding ocean. He was still nervous and taut after what he had seen and taken part in during the past two days. The world he had known and grown up in was shaken and tumbling around him. Anything might happen now. He wished his tutor were with him, or his father.

At that last wish for his father, he shuddered, and looked at the Abbot. A frown of inquiry and misgiving crossed his forehead. He looked from the Abbot to the man from Bordeaux, who so frequently consorted in business with Signor Barde. John saw him smiling, a flush in his leathery cheeks, his eyes glancing swiftly about, taking note of all that was happening in the hall.

John, hoping to hear news of Signor Barde, moved across, in front of the heavy curtain, and touched Raymond Tarys on the arm hidden beneath the cloak. He saw that within the shelter of this garment the Frenchman held a block of tablets on which he was noting names.

"Tell me, sir," said John, "where is Signor Barde?"

The agent was startled. He had been so intent on events in the hall that the boy had come unnoticed. "Ah, young man, I am glad to see you!" He smiled at John, shook back the cloak and put an arm round the boy's shoulders. It was a friendly gesture; but something in the way he smiled and spoke made John uncomfortable.

"We will talk of Signor Barde later. I have wanted to ask you. Did I not see you with him on the harbor front when the fighting began? But listen, they are shouting again!"

Indeed they were. The crowd was in a condition to be quickly roused. Somebody must be blamed for the shameless surrender of Rye. But one citizen protested, and his voice rose above the second outbreak of cries and groans, dominating and momentarily subduing it.

"No, your Worship! Look, my Lord Abbot. I saw with my own eyes how Stephen Cely, with Stephen Willes, James Hoppe and Walter Dulard, all honest burgesses, were taken down to the ships as hostages, spears at their backs. Aye, and poor James Hoppe was bleeding at the head and could not see. Dulard had him by the arm!"

"But they are four of our jurats!" cried the Mayor, turning to Sir Stephen. He was in despair, fearing that he would have to prosecute alone. .

"We must proceed, even so," said Sir Stephen Alard, suddenly sitting up and rapping the table with the handle of his poignard, which he snatched from the sheath.

This motion of authority, however, did not suppress the further outcry. The speaker was seized and hustled forward by the angry mob. John recognized him as Hugh Champney, a master carpenter, who sometimes took him out fishing: a fine, honest craftsman. Even now Champney looked calm, though he was bent forward by the self-appointed custodians who pushed him up to the foot of the dais, at the head of the space cleared of rushes.

"You plead for these runaways?" cried the Mayor, leaning forward and shaking his fist at the carpenter.

"I tell the truth," said the victim of the crowd.

"Who knows the truth?" said the King's Bailiff.

"I do, sir," said the carpenter, shaking off the three men who had thrust him to the front. He stood up, and raised his clenched fist. "I say it in God's name."

At this open defiance and bold statement, the mob again began to howl. Someone aimed a kick that sent Hugh Champney staggering forward, causing him to stumble against the dais.

This roused the mob still further. He was seized and tossed about, and blood ran down his head from a torn ear.

"Blasphemer!"

"Treacherous dog!"

"Take him out!"

Such were the cries heard above the din. "What have we begun, my Lord Abbot?" said Sir Stephen Alard, as the Abbot leaned over to speak to him.

The reply was drowned by the rising fury of the demented crowd. The carpenter, barely conscious under this rough handling, was hemmed in and carried out past the impassive guards. The noise was taken up by those outside who had been unable to push into the Hall. A minute passed, and then a roar went up, the snarling of blood lust. It told the people inside the hall that Hugh Champney had been hanged on the nearest tree.

A lull followed. The outrage against justice subdued the mob, at least for a few moments. The Mayor took advantage of the pause to step forward, seize the bell from the wrist of the crier, and to swing it vigorously.

"This is commendable!" he cried. "You will have the

traitors; but we must put them to the court, my friends. It must be legal. Justice must be seen to be done."

Sir Stephen and the Abbot still remained aloof, after a whispered conference together. They were waiting for the dangerous fires to die down, and they knew this would not happen until the mob had eased its guilty conscience by means of sacrifice. There had to be scapegoats. Nor was one victim enough after such an ignominious disaster—the almost total loss of Rye.

There followed a mockery of justice. People denounced each other, egged on by private hatreds and feuds. Evidence was faked, superstition and misunderstanding playing their parts in the accusations. The interrogations were frequently interrupted by blasts of rage from the crowd, hungry for more after the murder of Hugh Champney.

On these occasions, Sir Stephen Alard, stirred by disgust, intervened, but only to rap the table with his inverted poignard. The Abbot stood like a statue, his eyes half closed, his face a mask.

The afternoon dragged on, the bloodstained moments marked by the movement of the sunshaft through the open doors. It passed gradually over the crowd, as though to single out the next victims. In all, some dozen poor souls, three of them women, were fastened on, accused and condemned by show of hands and dragged out to execution and the horrible aftermath of quartering.

In the course of these proceedings, it was said that sixty citizens had lost their lives in the feeble and short-lived effort to withstand the invaders.

Only when the fury of the crowd had been appeased

and the outcries died down, did Sir Stephen and his party resume authority.

It began by Sir Stephen Alard suddenly rising while the Abbot held aloft the ivory cross. A chaplain stepped forward from the end of the table and lifted his arms to pronounce a blessing. Somewhere in the hall a woman was weeping, but nobody took notice of that. The noise died down.

"Citizens of Rye," said Sir Stephen. "It is not all defeat. No doubt great deeds were done. Some of them were seen to be done. The greatest of them was the burning of the Spanish flagship. We here, preparing the defense of Winchelsea, saw the fire and hoped that it signified the return of the fleet of the Five Ports after the battle. But our ships are still out there in the Channel, engaged with the enemy. There has been news of them."

John Finch, still standing beside the French agent, sick at heart and horrified by what he had witnessed during the afternoon, now woke from his stupor. News of the fleet meant news of his father.

John leaned forward and looked at the Abbot. But he learned nothing. He saw only the bowed head, the hand still holding the ivory cross at the end of the gold chain. The full, brown eyes were shut. The Abbot may have been praying. He may have been merely listening to the speech of the bluff sailor, Sir Stephen, anxious that he should not again arouse the passions of the unhappy citizens of Rye.

"It is good news," continued Sir Stephen Alard. "Our Lord Abbot has it from his messengers arrived from Sandwich. We have routed the French. A great wine ship, *La*

Seint Spirit of Lucebon, has been captured and brought into Sandwich. Our leader, Admiral Robert Finch, before he died compounded with the two admirals from Sandwich, those great gentlemen Sir Thomas Trivett and my Lord Darcy, that one half the merchandise be allotted to the boats of Rye and Winchelsea, short only of the Royal purchase. This will in some sort repay the rape of forty-two hogsheads of wine and other booty taken from the warehouses at Rye, as accounted by the trusted agent from Bordeaux. Is he present? Will he shew himself?"

Raymon Tarys stepped forward and bowed to the Bench. As he did so, John Finch realized the full meaning of Sir Stephen's last words. He had heard his father's name. Then a blankness clouded his mind and nerves, which were already overstrained by the events of the last two days and nights. Suddenly, somewhere inside his consciousness, he heard the slow, deep tolling of the tenor bell of Rye Church, the church that was a heap of ashes, and the bell now on its way to a harbor in Normandy. But he heard it booming, just as it had boomed for the death of the old King. It grew louder and louder. It shook the ground under his feet, and he fell in a dead faint.

VIII. THE ADMIRAL COMES HOME

JOHN FINCH recovered his senses, only to be ashamed. He told himself that he had behaved like a weakling and in the presence of Sir Stephen Alard, of the great Abbot of Battle, and the King's Bailiff, as well as the mayors, officers and citizens of the two towns which were the center of John's world.

He lay with his head in the lap of the young monk who had summoned him to the presence of the Abbot. His hair was wet, for a goblet of water had been dashed over his face. The monk had another in hand, waiting to offer it for John to drink. John still felt giddy and sick, but a draught of the cold water revived him and he was able to look around. He saw Sir Stephen and the Abbot standing over him, and he heard Sir Stephen say, "This damnable business was no scene for the lad: too raw a matter for one so young. Besides, his mother tells me that he went back into the town that night and did not come to Winchelsea until after the burning. What must he have seen, I wonder?"

John wanted to shout aloud, to answer that question, but still loyalty to his tutor held him back. Then again, he feared that nobody would believe such a story. A boy, still with the voice of a child, taking part with only two men in such a tremendous exploit, and bringing it off suc-

cessfully? In his weak state he doubted the story himself. Could it be these two limp arms that pulled the oar beside the wounded farmer, while Signor Barde crouched in the stern, his face hidden in his cloak, to avoid any possibility of recognition?

So John said nothing. He heard the Abbot reply.

“Do you not realize, Sir Stephen, that you spoke of his father’s death? That is what touched him. I have kept the news back, in the hope that it may be false. A slender hope! My messenger from Sandwich had details; how the enemy flung quicklime on the wind, blinding many of the crew of the Admiral’s ship before grappling and boarding. The enemy was finally beaten back and their own vessel captured, as you have told the citizens. But the news is that the Admiral was first blinded and then slain by a pike in the cut and thrust that followed. This was off the coast at Sandwich and the news was speedily brought ashore. Now, I fear, we must tell Mistress Finch.”

John heard this, though the Abbot had turned aside thinking the boy was still unconscious. The picture of a father blinded and then stabbed to death was printed for life on John’s mind. The reality of it brought him at once back to full awareness. He sat up, felt the floor with his hands, was assured of its firmness and struggled to his feet. The monk rose with him, supporting him under the arm that stretched out involuntarily toward the Abbot, who swiftly turned, to recognize that John had heard the news.

For an instant, the great soldier-priest and the boy looked at each other. Then the elder spoke, putting a

hand on John's head. "My son in Christ." He paused, and Sir Stephen Alard frowned with pity and embarrassment. "You now have heard. I fear there is little chance of this being mere rumor. My messengers are to be relied on. But I dared to hope, and to wait until the fleet returned. I must seek your mother. Will you come with me, since you are now head of the household?"

Sir Stephen Alard, less subtle in his handling of mankind, began to protest. He could not see that the Abbot was trying to ease the boy's sorrow by summoning his attention to a further demand on courage and recognition of a larger responsibility.

But while Sir Stephen was speaking, his wife and Mistress Finch appeared again, confident that the trial, with its angry disputes, false accusations and cruelty, was done with.

As the two ladies came slowly down the stone staircase by the farther wall, a cry went up outside. "Sail! Sail! The fleet is returning!" It was followed by a rush of these people still lingering in the hall. They blocked the doorway. The sentinels, no longer needed for duty, marshaled them into some sort of order with the butts of their pikes and followed them out like shepherds after a flock of sheep. The cries continued outside, dying away as the crowd moved to the open road outside the town gate, whence they could look along the inlet toward Rye Harbor and the smoking ruins above it, dominated by the skeleton of the church tower. Nobody knew how the news had come, but within a few minutes of that rumor, Signor Barde appeared, hurrying into the hall, dusty, stained with smoke and soot, but unperturbed.

John saw him but did not approach. He was watching his mother. He knew by the way she crept down the stairs that she was carrying a foreboding of grief. His own was enough, but he had taken to heart the Abbot's last words about being head of the household.

By the time Mistress Finch reached the bottom step, John was there to take her by the arm.

"Mother," he said quietly, "the Abbot wants to speak to you. He—"

"I know, John. I know what he will say. I have expected that—"

She drew him to her, and together they faced the Abbot. He stood before them, his hands clasped over the ivory cross, his gaze severe and penetrating, including them both in its authoritative sympathy. Sir Stephen Alard stood aloof. Such problems were beyond him, and he could find nothing to say.

"I had to wait, my daughter," said the Abbot, "for there might have been hope. But now the fleet returns and there is none. It is the will of heaven."

Mistress Finch looked at him proudly. She had mastered her grief in anticipation of the worst, while alone with her cousin in the upper room. John felt her hand tremble and fasten more sharply on his shoulder.

"To what purpose are these wars, Father?" she said at last.

The Abbot frowned. "We do not know," he said sternly. "Nor must you ask, Mistress Finch. Men are not angels, though they are God's sons. That is so. We know no more."

As though to approve this statement, Sir Stephen

gravely took her hand and proposed escorting her by boat to Rye, to meet the ships of the Cinque Ports. Nobody yet knew how many of them would put into Rye Harbor.

A serving woman was sent to fetch cloaks for the two ladies, and then the company moved off, under escort of a dozen pikemen, down to the landing stage.

As John left the hall, walking beside his mother in the sad procession, he saw Signor Barde in conversation with the man from Bordeaux, Raymon Tarys. Both were so closely engaged that they ignored the boy. He heard a snatch of their conversation, however, for they were standing near the open doors of the hall, just behind a smear of blood on the floor—the blood of the murdered carpenter, Hugh Champney, who had spoken up for truth.

“I have been searching in the ruins of my office,” Barde was saying, “but the accounts are gone. We must make an estimate of the losses and sign the report together, to send to Florence and Bordeaux. You will be anxious to reassure your people.”

John saw the Frenchman smile bleakly, with a venomous gleam of teeth.

It was evening as the fleet came home. Swallows in their hundreds skated about the sky, their shrill cries adding to the noise of the people gathered on the water front. Boat after boat put out, crowded with Rye folk eager to return to their devastated homes and to break the news to the returning husbands, fathers and brothers whose reaction was so uneasily awaited.

The boats stood offshore until the larger vessel, a fish-

ing trampler, put off to take the lead up the narrow waters to Rye. It contained the two mayors, some of their jurors, all now wearing their chains of office, the Abbot and two of his officers, Sir Stephen Alard and his wife, Mistress Finch and John, with the escort of armed men. The long sweeps cut the water slowly, in stately fashion, and ripples and wake flashed in red and gold under the evening light. The westering sun was still hot at their backs, but John felt cold. He saw his mother shiver and draw her cloak over her head and close around her shoulders. She might have been an old woman sitting opposite him in the stern; but she was upright, rigid, staring before her into space, her face drawn, her lips set tight.

John watched her, and he felt ice in his heart. He could do nothing. His mind was frozen. He could only wait upon events.

Those events began to crowd upon the unhappy citizens, afloat in the harbor before their ruined houses. The hill, formerly graced with roofs, chimney stacks, sheltering like warm chicks under the brooding church, was now bare except for broken fragments of brickwork, skeleton timbers, the isolated tower of the church, and a faint haze of smoke touched into rose and pearl by the setting sun.

After the sea battle which ended off the Goodwin Sands, the Cinque Ports fleet had split up. The mariners were too much mauled and exhausted to want to make a united, triumphal return into the shelter of Sandwich Harbor. It had been a costly victory. The captains from the other ports were eager to get home and lick their wounds, too weary even to distrust the men of Sandwich

in the matter of prize money due from the capture of *La Saint Spirit of Lucebon*.

Four vessels limped back to Rye Harbor, only one with bowsprit intact. Sails were rigged in scrambled fashion on damaged masts and shrouds. They came one behind the other, the flagship *La Katherine* in the lead, but listing to keep the sea from rushing in through a hole burned down from her bulwarks amidships, where the hand-to-hand fighting had centered and boiling lead had done vile damage, spilled in carriage from the cauldron on the deck, to be flung aboard the enemy.

She was followed by the *Robert of Lenn* and the *Swallow*, both damaged. Last came the smaller *Anna de Rous-sel*, a lovely vessel with her beauty still unspoiled.

One by one they dropped anchor, and the people in the boats saw the pennon flutter out from *La Katherine*, moving up the mainmast and stopping halfway. Silence fell, and held the scene arrested for several moments.

John stared, his throat aching with misery. He saw his mother's hand clasping the cloak to her throat. The knuckles whitened. That was all the feeling she betrayed. But her son knew what lay behind that self-control.

The boats gathered about the four battered ships, behind the lead of the trampler. Sir Stephen Alard stood up, snatched off his bonnet and held it aloft as he hailed the *La Katherine*. His voice rang over the waters of the harbor, breaking the unnatural silence. "What news, friends?"

The captain replied from the poop, cupping his hands before a face blackened with smoke and dried blood. "We come home sorry and dirty, straight from the battle,"

he shouted. Again the words rang out over the heads of the listeners and echoed back from the hill, "*—the battle!*"

Another pause, while the waters turned a deeper color and the smoke sifting upward from the ruins changed from warm pearl to cold marble.

The captain's voice rang out again. "But what is this?" He was seen to turn and point at the town. "Is this our neighbors' work?"

Everybody knew that he referred to the people of Sandwich, who were a law unto themselves, uneasy subjects of the King.

Nobody replied. Shame and misery silenced even the most eager tongues.

The traveler drew alongside the *La Katherine*, and Sir Stephen, followed by the Abbot, went aboard. A short conversation with the captain, Michael Yonge, followed. He then sent for the two surviving masters, Richard Wybert of the *Swallow*, and James Peny of the *Anna de Roussel*. James Peny was the young brother of Mistress Finch. The captain of the *Robert of Lenn* had been buried at sea, along with the other Rye men killed in the battle. Only one of the dead had been brought home.

The Abbot saw the shrouded figure that lay on the deck in front of the steering wheel. He approached it, kneeled, and touched the sword and helmet that held the sailcloth down over the body.

When Mistress Finch, followed by her son, was helped aboard, she saw the Abbot kneeling in prayer. For a moment she wavered, looked around in despair, then took John by the hand and approached with him. They

both knelt. Sir Stephen Alard followed, and all the ship's company. People in the boats crossed themselves, bowed their heads, and where possible, knelt.

Thus, spontaneously, a service of worship began around the dead admiral, Robert Finch, whose body symbolized all the events, horrors, cruelties and brave deeds of the past few days. He was the known warrior, his name standing for every man, woman and child now done to death.

The Abbot rose at last and gave the benediction. What answer was given to Michael Yonge's loud demand, "Is this our neighbors' work?" nobody but he heard. Yonge was a grim character, dark by nature, who needed neither the grime nor dried blood of battle to make his appearance sinister. During the prayers, he stood like a rough-hewn statue, his face blank. But his hand rested on his sword hilt, moving it a little back and forth.

The Abbot turned to the crew, and to left and right, raising his arms to include the citizens in the boats. "Let us take him now," he said. "The Church of Rye is still the House of God."

The hatch, carrying the body, was lifted and lowered into the trameler. Mistress Finch and John, as chief mourners, immediately followed. The captain with the Abbot put off in another boat and were rowed swiftly ashore to precede the funeral cortege. Sir Stephen Alard, whose wife had not left the boat, went with Mistress Finch, with the body and the Mayor and the few jurats of Rye.

Dusk began to settle over the world as the procession passed slowly along the harbor, through the broken

Watergate and up the steep lane which was now an open causeway. The fangs of burned-out buildings stood up on each side, looming in the gathering darkness like draped figures. Monks from the abbey, present with the Abbot's troops, followed the mourners, chanting as they walked, bowed over the ascent.

John walked beside his mother, and Sir Stephen Alard, that good friend of the dead man, at her left hand. From time to time John glanced up at her face, but it was shadowed under the hood and told him nothing. He was left to his own feelings—a dull anger, an emptiness, and a bewilderment.

Still weary and overstrained from one violent experience after another, he was in a state almost of trance. At each footfall as he trod slowly up the hill behind his father's corpse, the shock of touching the ground began to form into a sound that rang round and round in his bruised spirit. It was the sound of the tenor bell once again, as he had heard it only two days ago tolling for the death of King Edward III. It haunted him, and grew louder as the procession approached the desecrated burial ground at the top of the town.

At the lich gate, which had escaped damage, the bearers paused, set down their burden, and stamped their feet to shake off the dust and ash. Through the gate the gaping sockets of the windows in the nave could be seen. Through them shone the copper-tinted light of a three-quarter moon, lately risen as though to balance the sunset.

The chanting ceased. Only the shuffling of feet broke the silence as the procession resumed its way, to halt be-

fore the family vault that stood intact a few yards from the now roofless chancel at the east end of the ruins.

The people following crowded into the churchyard. Murmuring, chattering, lamentation died away as members of the ship's crew opened the vault. Now the moment had come—the last farewell. John put out his arm and grasped his mother's cloak. But she did not respond. She was locked in her own grief. Desolation swept over him. The illusion of that great bell tolling hurt him, booming inside his skull. Then the impossibility of it angered him. He looked up at the empty tower, from which the Bells of Rye, the very tongue of God, had been torn out. In that moment, this thirteen-year-old boy became a man.

His hold on his mother's cloak tightened, as though he were grasping a sword. She must have sensed the change in him, knowing that now he was no longer drawing upon her strength. At last she responded; he felt her arm move, fling back the folds of the cloak. Hand in hand, mother and son watched the body pass into the mausoleum. The heavy stone slab was replaced behind the iron door to which shreds of newly torn ivy clung, like fingers of grief. But with John Finch, grief was changed to resolution.

In this mood, he listened with close attention to the Abbot, who stood in front of the closed tomb addressing the people of Rye. One or two lanterns had been lighted and set down near him, making his figure loom up, underlit and drenched in yellow from the candle flame. A faint light from the west wove into the moonlight. In this cross-current of candle flame and midsummer evening,

the scene of devastation floated, more ghost land than earthly. The Abbot was framed in it, a visitant from another world, come to prophesy.

"Sons and daughters of Rye," he said. "We have still to bury our dead. Sixty of your citizens have been slain, and we have returned to find them and to honor them with decent and Christian burial in this sacred ground." A cry went up, interrupting him. It was followed by an outbreak of grief; weeping, execration, inarticulate noises like all humankind mourning. It died down, and the Abbot resumed. "But after that we must turn to the future. What is destroyed by man's wickedness must be repaired by man's faith. First the tower of this holy church must be set up again, to receive the bells when they come home. For they must come home. Does anybody deny that?"

This roused the people afresh, but not to grief. A murmur of anger swept the crowd, covering both sorrow and shame. The blood lust which had done a number of innocent citizens to death a few hours earlier was still not satisfied. The Abbot strove to convert it into a constructive force.

"So at once, *at once*, we will begin to build the tower, even while you set about restoring your homes and the offices of the town. There is much before you, but I will seek the bounty of the new young King, and Sir Stephen Alard and other gentlemen of Sussex will summon what brotherhood in kind and labor are possible after the losses of the plague years. Citizens, we will set Rye newly upon its hill!"

These last words he almost shouted, raising both arms

as though to embrace the crowd, the night sky, the whole universe. A hearty cry of assent, almost of triumph, rang among the ruins, rising again and again as the Abbot moved away, to direct the troops whom he had gathered to help salvage, to organize an encampment, and to feed the refugees.

In the care of Sir Stephen Alard and his lady, Mistress Finch and John turned to go down to the harbor. At the lich gate they found Signor Barde. He bowed over Mistress Finch's hand and fell in beside John.

"That was wisely spoken, John. Those are the only true words. It is always tomorrow that can save us. Let us take part in the rebuilding."

He said no more for a while, but as they descended, picking their way over the moonlit debris down the lane, he took John's arm and whispered close to his ear.

"You saw me talking with Raymon Tarys? I have to keep on good terms with him. But I believe he suspects me. It was he who signaled to the Normans from the water front, and he believes I saw him; which is true. But he must also have seen us and the pretty piece of work we did. Has he spoken to you, John?"

John looked up at the handsome face. It was still untroubled. What nerve the man possessed! John's admiration deepened.

"You may be sure, signor," he said quietly—so quietly that the Italian was startled, and studied the boy keenly. Then he spoke again.

"You have learned much, John."

John nodded, and they went on in silence, following Sir Stephen and Mistress Finch to the boat.

IX. A LICKING OF WOUNDS

THE long summer days passed, and the smoke from the ruined town died away. Every night the dew settled on the ashes, cooling them and settling them into the neutral earth. The citizens, camped in tents on the northern slopes outside the gate, quickly recovered from the horror of that dreadful visitation of fire and slaughter. Sixty of their number had been killed, and four jurats taken as hostages, to be held in Normandy until sufficient money had been raised to ransom them.

But how to raise that money? Most of the people had lost all their possessions: their homes, their livestock, their tools and the work on which to employ these tools. The citizens who had property outside the town had mostly departed to their outlying farms. After a week, however, they began to drift back, one by one, to receive cold looks from the neighbors who had been camping on the hillside, living on the charity of Battle Abbey and the citizens of Winchelsea, Romney and Lymne. One landowner and his wife, from the old Saxon village of Aldington that overlooked the marsh, arrived on the third day, with two retainers who drove two head of cattle, three pigs and a dozen Romney sheep, as a food offering. Not only that, but the Lady of Aldington, soft-handed and beautiful, came with home-woven blankets and

tanned hides, as well as a great basket of simples and ointments prepared by her women from medicinal herbs gathered from the marsh and the downs.

Their visit coincided with one of many paid by Sir Stephen Alard with Mistress Finch and John, from Winchelsea. They heard about the Abbot's words spoken at the funeral oration over the dead Admiral. The Lady of Aldington, whose soul was devout, wept as she listened.

"Husband," she said, "will it not please God if we send a mason, a carpenter and laborers to carry out the will of the Abbot of Battle? These poor folk are concerned, and rightly concerned, to restore their homes before the winter comes. That must come first for them."

As though to further her request, the distant sound of the bells of Winchelsea came pleading across the creeks and shingle beds; for it was noon, the hour of the second Angelus of the day.

The Lord of Aldington, a shrewd, silent man, looked gravely around, first at his lady, then at Sir Stephen Alard. He was a man of affairs and had played a part in the King's government at Westminster. He looked largely at all matters, seeing before and behind immediate problems.

"Yes," he said at last, "we will send the craftsmen and the laborers. But it will be well if the townsfolk give a hand in the reparation of their own church. For what is a church, or a city hall, that lacks the mortar of civic pride to confirm its masonry? If you will summon the Mayor and jurats, Sir Stephen, we will put the proposal to the commune of Rye in due form."

This was done, and the Mayor was found superintend-

ing the re-erection of a custom house on the harbor front, from a pile of timbers that had escaped destruction because it lay beyond an open sewer that flowed from the town.

During the consultation that followed, the Lady of Aldington with Mistress Finch set up a dispensary under the church wall, in the shelter of a small tent erected by John and a team of boys who had gathered around at the sight of food. There were not only the people injured during the raid. Every hour brought fresh hurt to citizens groping among the ruins of their own homes, trying to salve what might be left of their possessions, or looking for what they dreaded to find—the bodies of parents or children still unaccounted for.

In spite of this gloomy occupation, and of the disaster of the raid, most of the townsfolk were cheerful again. They had survived; and it was healthy and natural enough to be glad of that single fact.

The mock trial in the hall of Sir Stephen Alard's home at Winchelsea had, after all, served this good purpose—that it got rid of the agony, misery and rage in one violent spasm. So it appeared, at least; for the working party down at the harbor was heard to break into song. The cheerful sound floated up on the sea breeze and surrounded the interruption of the Angelus bell from Winchelsea.

The Mayor's response to the generous offer from the Lord and Lady of Aldington was immediately cordial, but two of the jurats, tough Sussex burgesses who had no love for landowners, were at first suspicious, and moved aside to whisper among the rest, questioning what this gesture might mean, and what hold these aristo-

crats from Aldington were trying to put upon the townsfolk of Rye.

But good meat on the hoof was more eloquent than the cunning of words to bring hungry people into an acceptance of the goodwill from these neighbors. A cheer went up from the small crowd which had gathered round the ministrants and the Mayor. The livestock was handed over, the blankets carried into the base of the roofless church tower, while the sick and wounded were lined up for attention by the team of women and nuns organized by the two ladies.

The conference of the officers of the town included the two captains, of the *Swallow* and the *Anna de Roussel*. The ships, with the *La Katherine* and the *Robert of Lenn*, lay anchored in the harbor. The damage done during the running battle in the Channel could hardly be seen from the hilltop. The hole burned in the hull of the *La Katherine* had been stopped up, preparatory to floating her into dry dock. She no longer listed, and now sat on the water like a sleeping swan. She was a handsome vessel but lacked the grace and promise of speed shown by the *Anna de Roussel*, a boat like a living sea creature, born to dance to the music of the four winds of heaven.

Richard Wybert of the *Swallow* had his arm in a sling, and a bandaged head. He had been struck by a falling spar during the battle, though he was a small man more likely to escape hurt than the gigantic captain of the *Anna de Roussel*, James Peny. Like his sister, Mistress Finch, Peny was a person of quiet dignity, who moved slowly but to some purpose. He, with his ship, had been unhurt in the fight, and since his return he had thrown

himself and his crew into the salvage work among the ruins of Rye.

He stood now, grimed from head to foot, listening to the conference of his elders, John at his side. The boy had joined him as soon as he came up from the water front, and together they heard the decision that work should begin on the church tower as soon as the skilled men and laborers from Aldington should arrive. They looked at each other as Sir Stephen Alard cried, to conclude the meeting, "Well set, my masters! And with the tower restored, within and without, we shall need to cross the water and bring home the bells, and thus to restore the poetry of the church."

This was accepted by the crowd, as it was spoken, without rancor. It was just a statement of fact, an announcement of the last stage of a necessary job of work. But it was all the more resolute because of its lack of emotion, either of anger or pride.

John Finch and his young uncle were not the only couple to exchange glances. Signor Barde and Raymon Tarys had come up from the temporary custom house, with two other Italian officials arrived from Sandwich after receipt of the news of the sacking of Rye. They were Donatus Lambarde and Luke de Luka, representing other banking families interested in the oil and wine trade with England.

Barde and Tarys, mutually suspecting each other of the parts played by them in recent events, exchanged glances. Both wondered what they should report to their headquarters in Florence and in Bordeaux.

X. OUT OF THE ASHES

THE disaster acted in different ways upon the citizens of Rye. Some gave up in despair, and sank into squalor, refusing to help themselves, or to be helped by willing hearts and hands of neighbors and even fellow sufferers. The majority, however, got to work and made the most of the long summer days. The old Mayor, Simon Lonsforde, showed his mettle by organizing the reparations. He sought permission, and raised funds from the King's Bailiff, to send a party of men across the marsh and over the ridge into the forest of Anderida, to fell virgin oak trees, and in exchange for this green wood to take an equivalent weight of seasoned planks from the King's timber yards on the edge of the forest.

Day after day the traffic rumbled on, the timber coming down on drays, dragged by oxen to the tiny ship-building port of Smallhythe and brought from there as rafts, towed by boats in which the women pulled the oars.

Most men were their own craftsmen in those days, and a gladdening sight it was to watch husbands and sons, with their womenfolk to lend a hand and to cook meals in the open air. New homes of rough-hewn timber sprang up like mushrooms on a September morning; and they looked just as fresh—the pink and white wood, touched down to a silvery patina by seasoning, shining

in the sun, under the golden thatches at which the craftsmen in straw and reed worked from dawn to dusk. The Mermaid Inn, near the top of the steep High Street, rose like a phoenix from its ashes, and while the last truss of straw was being woven into the roof, two great barrels of ale were set up and broached; one a gift from the burgesses of Tenterden, the other from Sir Stephen Alard of Winchelsea.

Encouraged by their own industry and determination, as well as by the continuing sunny days and serene midsummer nights, the bereaved people gradually shook off their grief and the harsher manifests of anger. But they were nonetheless resolute, as could be seen by the quiet fury with which they worked. For the time being, after that hysterical outburst and its dire results on the day of the trial, the whole community worked in unison, as bees work in the hive to build the 'honeycomb cells.

So the houses, shops and lastly the warehouses of Rye reappeared, standing a few inches higher than the former town; a few inches of past history powdered into ash and rubble.

While this activity was in process, the helping hands from neighboring towns, under the direction of the skilled craftsmen sent by the Lord of Aldington, slowly restored the church tower, marked out the new foundations of the nave, and began to build.

It had to be a less noble church than that destroyed by the Normans. Times were hard. England, like the rest of Europe, had been swept by the Black Death, a grim visitation which took two thirds of the population, just at the time when King Edward III hoped to improve

the wealth and prosperity of the country by manufacturing the raw wool into cloth before exporting it, thus vastly increasing the value of the English trade overseas.

But it was a beautiful church, a truly Kentish church of warm-tinted stone that seemed to have a life of its own, flushing and paling under the caress of the weather. As autumn passed, and winter sucked the green from the great forest, the church reached a stage whereby the citizens could partition off the fore part of the nave, adjoining the fully restored tower, to worship there on Christmas Day.

One thing was missing—the voice of the bells. So on that morning of the Nativity, the ringers of Winchelsea, Romney, Udimore and Brede, towns and villages near enough to be heard from Rye, sent messengers, each with a gift of incense for burning, and a request that the people of Rye should be in their church at early Mass, while these good neighbors should ring a few changes down their respective scales, according to the number of their bells.

It was a calm morning and a green Christmas, with the scent of the marsh like the promise of haytime, and the rooks floating lazily across from Brede to Romney, talking as they flew. The air was so still that the bell music coming from east and west hung reluctant in the distance, as though doubting its own good news of the birth of Christ, and restored goodwill among men.

But from time to time one or other of the peals swelled and came clamoring across the marsh, rich and jubilant. It was a heartening sound, filling the citizens of Rye with

new courage, as though they were accepting congratulation for the work so well done during summer and autumn toward the rebuilding of their town on the hill, and the resumption of trade and fishing, as an effort to pay for it all and to resume the independence habitual in one of the proud Cinque Ports.

Mistress Finch, not to be outdone by her fellow citizens in putting a good face on things, had set up, not far from her re-risen home in Watchbell Street, a lean-to kitchen against one wall of the old fortress tower, built in King Stephen's time as a lookout. This tower dominated the town, standing high on a corner or elbow of the hill, not far from the church.

Mistress Finch, with three of her women, prepared a Christmas feast in this kitchen, to be served in a huge tent borrowed from the King's Bailiff. Christmas must have been sad for her, since she could not help but compare it with others of former years, when her husband the Admiral had been host to the poorer folk of the town. But she hid her feelings, for she knew that she must take his place this year, as he would wish, with John to support her.

On the day before the feast, she had a heartening surprise. A trampler put into the harbor, hurrying in on the morning tide. It tied up at the wharveside, flying the Cross of St. George and the standard of Florence. A long blast of horn music sounded from the poop.

The Bordeaux agent, Raymon Tarys, supervising the reroofing of his wine warehouse, a solid stone building whose walls had survived fire and battle, came hurriedly

out and stood in the winter light, a hand shading his eyes from the low sunlight striking up from the water and surrounding the vessel in a halo of cold fire.

He saw the Italian, Peter Barde, hurry along the plank, followed by two fellow countrymen, the bankers Donatus Lambarde and Luke de Luka. He frowned, and stepped back into the doorway to watch unobserved. He hated this clever Florentine, though he had to pretend to be cordial, by way of business. Such were his instructions from his masters in Bordeaux, who were in league with the French Court, that was greatly in debt to the big banking families of Italy. But there was nothing he disliked more than having to work in harmony with Barde.

He saw the three Italians talking and gesticulating vigorously on the wharf. Their laughter offended his ears. He quickly recognized what was happening. Barde, after greeting the two fishermen who had thrown the plank aboard, summoned several others who were busy repairing their nets. With shouts and greetings, the natives mingled among members of the crew and helped them unload two large barrels and a wooden crate.

One of the drays used for carting timber from the wharf up to the town was now commandeered. To another outburst of cheers, the barrels and crate were loaded onto the dray. The horses strained forward, their flanks steaming in the bright air.

As the procession, headed by the three Italians, passed the French warehouse, Barde saw the figure lurking in the doorway.

"Ah!" he cried. "Monsieur my colleague! Good day to

you! We came by sea from London, in time for Christmas and the Feast of Innocents. We bring our masters' gifts to the people of Rye. Look! A barrel of Tuscan wine, a barrel of olive oil from the groves of Lucca, a crate of silk from Padua and woollens from Milan: samples of our products and our brotherly goodwill in a time of trouble, as you know full well, monsieur!"

The Frenchman knew he was being taunted. He scowled at the Italian. He had done nothing to help the townsfolk. He had merely reported the failure of the invaders to link up with the pro-French factions in England and had made no suggestion that help should be sent. Indeed, his whole intention and effort was now to make his warehouse secure so that profitable business might be resumed. He was angry because six months had passed without his being able to repair the warehouse. By some mysterious means, either workmen or materials were not to be found. He blamed Signor Barde, though he had no evidence. Personal dislike is often stronger than evidence.

So now he scowled.

"You show only too clearly, signor, where your sympathies lie."

The Italian laughed. "But even so, monsieur, I fear we shall be late with our gifts. Your offering of good Bordeaux wine, blessed by Saint Emilion, will already have been distributed to these unhappy citizens. They will not mind. Their need is great!"

The Frenchman turned his back and strode into the warehouse. He had lost an opportunity and he knew it. No Bordeaux wine to win the goodwill and further the future custom of this important town had come from

him. He could not believe that the Italian bankers acted out of largeness of heart.

From his dark retreat he watched the dray disappear around the corner and heard the increased rumble as it moved uphill within the confinement of the narrow street, attended by English and Italian voices blended in brotherhood.

John Finch heard the uproar rising from Mermaid Street and he came running down the cobbled road to find out what was happening. His young brother followed, holding the baby sister by the hand. All three had spent the morning of Christmas Eve in the lean-to tent, on the patch of level ground by the watchtower. John, at least, had made himself useful, carrying faggots and logs for the fire, laying out cups, goblets, and double-sided wooden platters on the tables, climbing up the tent poles to hang bunches of holly and mistletoe.

With all this, he was attentive to his mother, looking protectively at her from time to time, occasionally joining her to seek further orders or merely to say something that should keep contact with her. This had been his purpose since his father's death six months ago, during those days and nights of terror. It was so long ago, for time had slowed down since then into a dreadful uniformity and silence, as though nothing could ever happen again.

This Christmas feasting was the first sign of a return to life as he had formerly known it, warm with kindness, carefree moments, and a sense of safety. But never again could he take these things for granted. He had learned to

be watchful. It took the form of consideration for others. He had seen suffering and disaster.

But in addition he was alert for what might happen next. By day and by night, he heard the ghostly tolling of that tenor bell. It rang in his mind, reminding him of his father, and of something vaguely worrying, that he could not name or understand. If he called it revenge, then it vanished into a cloud of despair. For revenge could not bring his father back, nor dispel the sorrow that darkened his mother's eyes and put those lines around her mouth, aging her before her time.

For weeks John had been at a loss. His tutor left him lessons to do and then disappeared on business to London. He had hinted to John that he was seeking aid for the stricken people of Rye and would be detained in London for that purpose.

But Christmas covers a multitude of memories and comforts unhappy people not only because of the appearance of the Star in the East, but also by the meats and flagons on the table. So, body and soul, the survivors of the disaster of Rye, after six months of grief, anger and superhuman labor, now turned to jollity and goodwill to all men.

They had not forgotten, however. The tongues of the bells came whispering their music over the marsh, from the neighboring towns, with a reminder that the newly restored tower of their own church was dumb this Christmas, standing there reproachfully, as though its silence shamed it, darkening its walls, dwarfing its height, reducing its authority.

The people gathered in the big tent soon after mid-day. Most of them had been to Mass, for which the Abbot of Battle rode over from the Abbey with his chaplain and two of his military officers. These visitors also came to the feast, and their purpose was twofold.

The first was to offer good Christian neighborliness to a community which had shewn courage after its suffering. During the feast, the Abbot rose and spoke about this, praising the people of Rye for the way in which they had buckled to and progressed so far with rehousing themselves and restoring the church.

But then he referred to the bells, and at this John Finch pricked up his ears. He sat near the Abbot at the high table, on the left hand of his mother. The Abbot was on her right and stood looking along the other tables down the length of the great tent; a proud figure in his robes, again fingering the ivory cross as he spoke. Now for his second purpose!

“Injury done to the Church is injury done to God. And that is blasphemy. Our duty is always to repair the damage it does. Our next concern, therefore, is to set about the recovery of the Bells of Rye. They are both your voice, and the voice of God in you. Do you not feel, with me, that we must bring these bells back?”

The guzzling and the pouring of ale ceased for a moment. The bishop had touched a sore point, the pride of the people of Rye. Silence fell. Hands about to carry morsels to hungry mouths stayed in mid-air. Eyes glared in the light of torch and lantern, some in shame, others in fear.

“Haven’t we had enough?” cried a voice. It was not referring to the dinner. It spoke for those citizens who had no stomach for more bloodshed.

But that faction was lost in the sudden clamor following the silence. Men jumped up waving their fists, turning to the Abbot and shouting, the words lost in their own noise. No doubt of the approval of the majority.

When the hubbub died down, the Abbot pointed to the Mayor and other officers. “We shall see to it,” he said quietly, “but today is for goodwill!” And he sat down.

The good folk needed no urging to return to the feast, having been driven and deprived for six months. The coming and going between the improvised kitchen and the great tent was resumed, joints cut from the roasted ox, capons cooked inside the carcass, another peacock pie for the high table, decorated with the bird’s tail feathers; these followed as a second installment of the main dishes, which had come after great dishes of lampreys in galantine, oysters, eels and baked trout. The meat was served with buttered turnips and cabbages.

After this there came gingerbread, fruit tarts, quinces in comfit, apple mousse, with cheese from Essex and Gloucester brought by sea captains. Old ale and new ale for most, though the women and children drank mead. At the high table, the drink was either Portuguese wine or claret. Some of the captains, who knew the Low Countries well, drank the Flemish bitter beer flavored with hops, an herb not yet introduced to English ale.

From time to time, John Finch looked sidelong at his mother. There she sat, upright and serene in her black

garments, mistress of her sorrow, showing no sign of grief. Her hair, turned from brown to silver since the summer, was covered by a lace mantle.

John suddenly saw her afresh. He realized that she had become stronger, more important, since his father's death. She had not given up. She had come forward, taken the lead. This great Christmas feast was her doing; the planning, the organization, the carrying out. The Mayor, the King's Bailiff, the jurats of the town, even the Abbot himself, paid deference to her.

John was proud of her. He secretly touched her robe, and her power and courage flowed into him. She must have felt it, for she broke off her talk with the Abbot and looked down at John. Their glances met. She was serious, even severe, but her hand touched him and he knew what that meant. Happiness overflowed, and he returned to the pleasures of the moment, amongst which was to be the distribution by Mistress Finch of lengths of the cloths and silks from Italy.

This was done while the Abbot, with his officers, retired to the Mayor's new parlor to a discussion with the elders of Rye. The high table was thus half emptied, and Mistress Finch had the board cleared for the bolts of material to be carried in and laid before her. The tailor was now summoned with his shears, and he stood beside her as one by one the women came forward, chose what they wanted and were allotted lengths of silk or cloth.

This did not greatly interest John, and he would have left, to join other boys who were playing outside the marquee and around the churchyard, full of vigor after the feast; but he stayed. Among the few left sitting at the

high table to watch the distribution were Peter Barde and Raymon Tarys.

John studied his tutor's face. Its habitual good humor was masked by watchfulness. The Frenchman was talking not to him, but at him, studying the effect of his veiled remarks on the bankers from Lucca. He dared not openly accuse Barde of breaking neutrality, but he wanted it to be known in Italy, to make difficulties at home for this man whom he hated. It was a cat-and-dog hatred; unaccountable. The very physical build of the fair-haired Florentine, his open, generous nature, his scholarly mind combined with simplicity, all enraged the man from Bordeaux. Although it was his duty and to his profit to work with Barde, he intended nevertheless to bring him down.

John watched the four foreigners. His wits were sharpened by recent experience and new responsibilities. He read the signs in those faces: the ill intention in the Frenchman, the disregard and contempt in Barde, the puzzlement and perhaps suspicion in the others.

He moved from his place farther down the table and joined his tutor.

"Thank you, sir," he said. "The present you brought me from London! I have always wanted a Spanish knife. And the sheath—"

"The sheath is Moorish, John. There you have the secret of Spain. It is different from the general view. I believe that the European element in the Spaniard is the knife blade. The African conceals it, decorates it. That's contrary, I know, but—"

They were interrupted. The Abbot's chaplain ap-

peared, approached Signor Barde and whispered in his ear. Barde laughed, stood up, and said to John, with a side glance at Tarys and the two Lucchese, "I wish I could take you with me, John. We do well together, eh? But it is a private council, I am told. I must leave you."

He leaned down and spoke only to John. "Watch our friend there. He does not wish us well."

XI. AN UNEXPECTED ALLIANCE

AFTER Signor Barde had left with the chaplain, the two other Italian bankers rose, paid their compliments to Mistress Finch and went off with their servants and hawks, to find some sport over the mainland toward Udimore before daylight failed.

John was about to slip away, too, but Raymon Tarys held him back.

"Well, young master. Your mother has feasted us royally. You may be sure I shall report on this in my dispatches to Bordeaux. Where there is trade there must be peace, and no ill-will. We want none who interfere in these overtures of peace. Is that not so?"

John knew what he meant and saw how truth was being twisted; but he looked at the Frenchman innocently and said nothing. He was obeying Barde's words, "Watch our friend."

Tarys came with him and stood at the entrance to the tent, a hand on his shoulder.

"Your tutor is very active," he said. "You learn quickly with him?"

"I might, sir, if I had more wit."

"Ah! Yes, yes. A common failing. But you are willing, nevertheless?"

"My mother wishes I were more so."

"But you remember your lessons, I am sure."

John began to take fright. He saw where this conversation was leading, and the Frenchman had a powerful, hypnotic way with him. Those dark eyes, glittering, determined and cunning, held him transfixed. He pretended to be childish. Jumping up and down to simulate impatience, he cried, "I must go! Must go! The other boys are waiting to follow the falconers."

He ducked, releasing himself from the restraining hand, and ran up the lane below the east end of the church. When out of sight of Raymon Tarys, however, he turned into the square and hid in a doorway opposite the new Town Hall.

A few minutes passed and then Tarys strolled up, having crossed the churchyard. The square was filled with well-fed townsfolk, talking and laughing as though no tragedy had ever visited the place. Tarys threaded his way among them, looking warily about him. John saw him slip behind a pillar of the portico and, after a cautious pause, disappear through the doorway leading to the anteroom to the Mayor's parlor.

How could John watch him now? It was urgent, for he knew Tarys was spying, to find out what was being discussed at the Abbot's conference with the Mayor, the jurats and the three captains, one of whom was John's uncle, James Peny. If John went into the Town Hall after Tarys, that worthy would at once renew his suspicion of him and his childlike innocence.

Suddenly he had an idea.

"Look!" he shouted. "Look! Look! He has gone to hide, and nobody has thanked him!"

At first his cry was ignored. People were concerned only with their little groups here and there. But John persisted, shouting again, and louder.

A woman turned. "Hush, boy! What are you about?"

John fastened on this first sign of attention. "Our feast, the wine from Bordeaux, that many enjoyed. Monsieur Tarys, the agent who brought it, has not been thanked—"

He was quite unashamed of this white lie, the effort to make the crowd believe that the Frenchman had made a gift of the wine.

Yet again he shouted, and somewhere in the crowd a man took it up and repeated what John said. The idea spread instantly, and now the people were one in purpose, surging into the Town Hall, determined, as only mobs can be determined, to follow its blind impulse.

A few minutes later the tide of humanity, still cheering and shouting, flowed back again into the open. Floating on it was Raymon Tarys, bewildered and angry. But he tried to disguise his anger and embarrassment. He was quick-witted enough to adapt himself to the goodwill of the mob and hoped to use it. He waved his arms, intending to quiet the din so that he could make a speech favoring himself and his masters. The crowd was flushed with Christmas fare, good drink and victuals, and it would not be silenced. It was only vaguely aware of what it wanted. It hardly knew who this man was. But John Finch, young son of Admiral Robert Finch and the gracious lady who had provided the feast and warmed their stomachs, had started them off, so why should they be stopped? They continued to shout, cheer and sing.

A little hunchback was lifted on the shoulders of a huge fellow who stood a head taller than anyone else in the crowd. In a voice shrill as a piccolo, the cripple began a song to suit the occasion.

“All Englishmen know
That the wine of Bordeaux
Is good, both white and red,
So let the wine flow
And drink as—”

But the words were lost as the crowd took them up and tossed them to and fro, roaring and stamping. The Frenchman vainly waved his arms, trying to keep abreast of this avalanche of public good humor. Finally he gave up, and John Finch saw the raised hands close into fists under a spasm of anger.

The crowd would not let its prey escape, however. It surrounded him as he battled his way downtown, and the song begun by the hunchback dwindled after him, descending to the warehouse on the quay. There, the more persistent members clamored at the doors until Tarys was forced reluctantly to roll out a small barrel of wine and broach it. He was so enraged by this extravagance that he could not bear to look on at the drinking. He went inside, shut and bolted the warehouse door at the side, sneaking off to his lodgings in the house on the town wall, which had escaped the fire.

The giant, with the hunchback on his shoulders, did not follow the mob. He set the lad down, and while doing so turned and saw John Finch.

“Why, young master, do you remember me?” he cried.

John had come out from his observation post in the portico of the new Town Hall.

"It is Adam Cogger? And were you paid for the burned boat?"

The farmer laughed loudly and gave the boy so hearty a clap on the back that he nearly knocked him over.

"Why, you're an old-fashioned one, to think of that first! Wise for your years, I'd say. Could make you a partner, I could!"

"Partner in what?" cried John, delighted to meet the companion who had shared the adventure of that unforgettable night in June.

The farmer laughed again, and turned to the hunchback. "Listen there, son. He'll be a wise one when he grows up! Mark him now!"

"I'll grow up, too. I'll be as strong as anybody," piped the little fellow, still elated by his success in starting the song that set the crowd jigging.

Adam Cogger sobered. He looked down at the cripple. John was embarrassed.

"What's the name, boy?"

"Mark Cundy, sir. I'm apprenticed to the tailor Stephen Aspelon, who is cutting the cloths for Mistress Finch."

He spoke up so bravely that John was ashamed of his embarrassment. "I know you," he said. "I am her son."

"And I know you," cried Mark Cundy. "I know what you did that night. I know a lot of things. There's not much I don't see!"

"Well, did you see why the Frenchman sneaked into the Town Hall?"

The farmer laughed again, but Mark Cundy ignored him. He was intent on impressing John Finch, whom he saw as a hero.

"I can't see through a wall, but I can guess well enough. He's a sharp one, that man from Bordeaux. He's after knowledge; and I understand that. The man who knows is the man who wins."

He puckered up his shrunken little face, thrusting out his lips and frowning. It was a pathetic effort and might have been laughed at. But John was not inclined to laugh. He saw the determination there; the will to courage and great deeds.

"Yes," he said simply. By that one word of acceptance, he made a friend and a follower.

The farmer, amused by all this, but not understanding the boastful cripple, stood over the boys, waiting to explain how well he had done by the loss of his boat, thanks to the honesty and goodwill of the Italian.

Before he could explain, however, the conference in the Mayor's parlor broke up and several of the jurors came out, followed by the Abbot and Signor Barde. The Abbot stopped.

"Well, Master Finch, your mother has entertained the citizens of Rye with the generosity of a princess. Her bounty will not be forgotten, I hope and believe. She has done much to put fresh heart into the people, after their sufferings. And she has found her own strength in that good work."

"Yes, sir," said John, so overawed that he hardly understood what the Abbot was saying. He knew that Signor Barde was looking at him, and from him to Mark

Cundy, with a twinkle in his eye. John knew that it meant something was brewing. He could read that face. It had been one of his books of study for more than a year.

The Abbot turned to the hunchback, and put a hand on the thin, silky hair.

"You are a child of Rye?" he asked. But he did not want an answer. He went on speaking to Barde. "We have done well enough in there, signor. They need not know too much, lest our plans are carried abroad. But we need lose no time preparing for the effort. It should be done in friendly weather and with a helpful sea. I think the time shall be the early summer, with a promise of days such as we had when the raiders came to us. So we shall go to them."

"Where do you think the bells are now, my Lord Abbot?"

"Well, there are many guesses. These villages of ours were formerly under the religious rule of Fécamp. It is natural that the bells should have been taken back there, perhaps. But we must go and see. A reconnaissance should be planned as secretly as possible, and as soon as possible. That we must discuss with Sir Stephen Alard and Master Peny. These I know to be natural leaders."

The farmer, who had respectfully drawn back a pace or two, snatching off his cap, now stepped forward on overhearing the Abbot.

"My Lord," he said. "I am Adam Cogger, farming at Stone-cum-Ebony. But I know these waters of the Channel as well as I know my mother's moods. And I know the Norman ports better than I know my father's strength. I have worked with the signor before, eh, sir?"

He grinned at Peter Barde.

"What is this?" said the Abbot, frowning at the interruption. "Who is this fellow?"

"I can speak for him, sir," said Barde. He stepped forward eagerly and took Cogger by the hand, leading him closer to the Abbot. The two boys stood side by side, wide-eyed, missing nothing, while Barde explained that he had reason to believe Adam Cogger was responsible for that matter of the gallant exploit, the burning of the *Godesknight of Genoa*.

The Abbot looked at the Italian, interpreting the downcast eyes, the demure voice, in his clever way. But he said nothing of that. He listened gravely, glancing from time to time at the great figure of the farmer.

"You have several trades, it seems?" he said when Barde ceased. "A useful citizen! And you were well compensated for the sacrifice of your boat, I hope?"

He was closely studying Signor Barde as he fired these last words at the farmer. The banker and the priest instantly read each other's thoughts. Neither smiled. Both kept up the pretense.

"Aye, my Lord Abbot, and handsomely paid by—"

"Those concerned," Barde interrupted.

Adam Cogger stared blankly. Then understanding dawned, and he grinned again; the same half-sleepy grin with which he had told the Italian, at the beginning of that adventurous summer night, how he kept his two boats for bringing his sheep down from the hills to the marsh.

The two boys lost none of this interplay of minds among their elders. They looked at each other and recog-

nized that their quick wits gave them the promise of much to be shared; and that was the basis of friendship.

“We sing the same tune,” whispered the hunchback shyly. His voice may have been thin and shrill, but John felt the intelligence and power behind it. It was a rich discovery on Christmas Day.

XII. KING'S BOUNTY

THOSE Christmas festivities, with the friendliness shown by the folk of the villages among the creeks—Winchelsea, Udimore, Brede, Ebony—and also those as far away as Aldington (a village marked for its hospitality), Warehorne and Lymne, gave added courage and energy to the survivors at Rye. Their efforts at helping themselves created a favorable impression through the counties, and from far and near came aid, in one kind or another.

Bodiam Castle, up the Rother Valley, sent more timber and repeated consignments of meat and fowl. Romney built two tramelers and presented them to the jurats of Rye, sailing them through the narrows of the Limene River, decorated with holly and bannerets bearing the arms of Rye, while pipers made music on the journey.

It was a good sight to watch these vessels coming in across the Guildford Marsh, skillfully handled, rippling through the half-frozen waters one cold January day, the east wind ruffling the holly branches and flinging out the bannerets toward the bows.

The boats rode deep, for they were laden with offerings from the other four Cinque Ports, brought by sea to

Romney and held there against the completion of the tramplers.

The people of Rye came down in a body to the water front to welcome such good neighbors. The vicar with his boy singers, one carrying the cross, stood in the middle of the crowd, backed by the Mayor, jurats, Mistress Finch and her brother James Peny. These two had played an ever increasing part in the organizing of labor and funds for the rebuilding of the town. Everyone took it for granted that they should stand with the Mayor.

John stood with his mother, between her and his Uncle Peny, a small figure beside that giant. He saw Mark Cundy a little ahead of him, among the vicar's singing boys. The hunchback's high soprano voice was of great credit, as also was his gift for verse making and reading the music staves. That was why he was not standing with his master, the tailor Stephen Aspelon, who had a place with the other tradesmen in their several guilds, each with its gaily colored banner.

Few had known of the forthcoming presentation. A message sent by rowing boat had reached the Mayor only an hour before, at mid-morning, when all were about their business at home, in shop and work-shed, hammering, planing, sewing, all men and women at their tasks. The Mayor had sent the town crier through the streets, with the great horn used for summoning the courts of the Cinque Ports. It had been lodged for a year at Rye, as a gesture of confidence by the other members of the courts in the recovery of Rye. It now trumpeted through the streets, its notes echoing off such new walls as had risen from the ashes.

Out came the people, some crying in alarm that another evil visitation was upon the town. But all were quickly reassured, and citizens who had time enough put on their best garments or the guild garments of their trades and reappeared bravely, in holiday mood.

The news spread and the procession grew, with stragglers coming in from beyond the town walls, the husbandmen, the shepherds, still muddy from the fields and pastures. One shepherd carried a lamb in his cloak, whose dam had died giving it birth. Its little cry, feeble but penetrating, blended with the voices of the choir of boys.

That singing, with the murmur and outbursts from the crowd, floated out to mingle with the pipe music from the gaily decorated tramelers, approaching over the Guildford Marsh and spreading a wake that crumpled the surface of the water and broke the reflected image of the winter sky.

Slowly the pipe music grew louder, and at last it dominated even the chanting of the vicar and his boys. The brand-new vessels, their varnish shining like chestnuts freshly broken from the pod, bobbed against the rope fenders hung over the landing stage, making them squeak and grind. Mooring ropes were flung ashore, seized and secured around bollards, gangways of planks run out to the decks, and with shouts of welcome the gift bearers were brought ashore.

During the reception ceremony, the speeches, prayers and religious rites, John slipped away. He knew that his uncle, James Peny, famous for his silent tongue, would not keep him informed of what was going on. Standing behind the church party and the officers of the town, he

could see little, certainly not enough to satisfy his curiosity.

Toeing, step by step, as the reception and service went on, he crept like a fox through a copse until he reached Mark Cundy's side. The boy was singing, free as a bird, his mouth wide and his eyes staring up enraptured. John nudged him, and at first he did not notice. At the second nudge he started, looked around.

"What is it?" he said sharply, hardly recognizing his friend.

Before John had time to feel hurt at the seeming snub, he saw that clever, wizened face light up. "Can you get away?" he said.

At that moment the singing ended. Mark looked wickedly to right and left, and then at the vicar. But the vicar was stepping forward to greet Sir Stephen Alard coming off the first trameler, bearing a small casket covered in crimson velvet. He was followed by the several mayors of the towns participating in the gift. Immediately behind them was Signor Barde, his fair head bared, a smile of achievement on his face.

As this business proceeded, it was witnessed by the two boys from behind an empty wine barrel to which they had scuttled like a couple of cockroaches, just beyond the press of people.

"They won't dare to whip me for this," whispered Mark. "Old Master Aspelon is fiercer with his scissors than with the rod. Besides, *this*"—he flung a hand up to indicate the hump on his back—"is a sure protection. I have learned to use it when necessary, making the most of what I've got."

John saw the pain in his eyes, however. It spoke more than his bravado.

"There's something bigger on the way," Mark said. "You see the second trameler is not much remarked. Look, they board the first and are unloading. But what is in the second is not for public sight, at least until the time comes."

"You mean the time the Abbot spoke about at Christmas?"

"Surely. And do you remember, he said there must be an expedition first, to find out where the bells have been put up in Normandy, and what the defenses are. I heard the vicar talking with the Abbot's man, sent yesterday from Battle, to warn him that when the two ships came the second would be laden with arms forged at Lamberhurst and stored in the King's Yards at Chatham."

"How do you know of these places, Mark? They have nothing to do with tailoring."

"Oh well, my ears are sharp. My old master is a great man in his guild, and I overhear much gossip at the meetings. The talk can be heard from the cupboard where I sleep. The carpenters, the iron founders, the cordwainers, the fletchers tell each other of their work. It's all most of them can talk about. And what I overhear, I remember. I could write it down too, if I had a mind to. I have that much scholarship, young Finch; and what can you say to that?"

John had learned to take these little outbursts of vanity kindly. He told himself there must be some compensation for that poor crippled body, that wizened face. What

he saw now was the burning eyes, the wild eagerness of the little fellow.

"I'd say you've done well, Mark. I wish you shared my lessons with Signor Barde. You would take more profit from them than I do."

"Ah, but you have Latin, Italian and French. If I had Latin and French I would write songs in all those tongues, and have triple fame."

John was about to reply, when two men approached, withdrawn from the crowd. One was giving instructions to the other. John put a hand over Mark's mouth and jerked a thumb.

"Use your ears now," he whispered. "It's the French agent Tarys. You remember, it was through him that we met on Christmas Day when he was spying on the meeting in the Mayor's parlor. He hates my tutor, I don't know why—"

Further talk was cut short. The man from Bordeaux stopped only a yard or two from the barrel and shook a finger at his companion. John recognized the second man by his voice. He was the keeper of the wine shop on the quay, a person who belied his genial trade, for he was known as a miserly money grubber. Gossip said that he watered his wine and of course was not above smuggling, though few would blame him for the latter indulgence.

"Though you are more than ever behind with your payments," Tarys was saying, "we can accommodate you there. But six months' supply is long credit, my friend. You could do better than that."

The innkeeper whined. "But the raid, sir. You don't

know what I suffered. My store was rifled and my shop broken. Why, they were fighting in the very room, flinging the benches and earthenware when they could not get at each other with their weapons."

"Come now! That is nearly eight months ago! You have shared the Royal bounty and the help from the counties. I admit, the bounty is meager enough. You and your countrymen would be better off today had France succeeded and taken the throne of England on Edward's death. There would then be none of this greedy taxing, one barrel in ten; no need of the perilous adventures to evade that customs duty."

The whine continued, but Tarys cut it short, his voice hardening.

"We'll talk of your debts later! I want you now to find out two things. First, you must contrive to overhear what is said between Sir Stephen Alard, the sea captain Peny, and the Florentine, before the day ends. Secondly, I note that the second vessel is out of the picture. Look, she rides with hatches battened down and half her crew still aboard, taking no part in the Thanksgiving. I would like you to find out what she carries."

The two men passed on behind the crowd, down the quay toward the wine warehouse.

Mark Cundy was trembling with eagerness.

"Look, John!" he piped. "This is a plot. That poor devil is in his power. But I would trust neither of them. Oh, I'm a grown man in these matters. Do as I say!"

John ignored that last bit, though indeed he sometimes saw his friend as a little old man rather than as a boy less than a year older than himself.

"You then!" commanded Cundy. "You get hold of your tutor and your uncle, to warn them. I, meanwhile, will shadow the innkeeper. The Frenchman is so conspicuous that all he does cries aloud. That is why he employs others."

"Well," said John dryly, amused by Mark's act as a counterconspirator, "Monsieur Tarys so far has done a great deal himself."

He had in mind the incident of the signaling on that midsummer night, to guide the invading ships into Rye waters. But he had told nobody about this, not even Mark Cundy. Signore Barde had since explained to him how complicated was the business relationship between the French wine trade and the Italian banking houses of Florence and Lucca. Personal likes and dislikes must not be allowed to interfere there. Such was the tradition of the great Barde family. There were other reasons, he had said, but did not explain further. He had said, of course, what risks he had taken in playing an active, pro-English part on that unforgettable night, at the burning of the *Godesknight of Genoa*.

It was safe now for the boys to act. After agreeing to meet before the short day ended, they parted. John followed and overtook his uncle and mother as they walked up through the lingering crowd toward home. In front of them Sir Stephen and Signor Barde walked with the Mayor, the old man bent as though his chain and badge of office weighed his old bones down. He was a shrewd wool merchant and knew how to handle men. The two with him now treated him with respect. At their heels was the messenger, a monk sent from Battle by the Ab-

bot. He was able to hear conversation among the three men in front of him, and the brother and sister behind him.

He listened when John interrupted the latter conversation, to tell his uncle what had been overheard on the quay from behind the wine barrel.

James Peny shook his head as he received the information; but he said nothing. The frown on his face, however, disturbed Mistress Finch. Her whole purpose nowadays was to keep the peace. War had cost her dearly all her life, and recently she had suffered sadly. She and all fellow women lived in the shadow of a double enmity, war and the sea. What woman in those Channel towns, exposed to the ravages of the waves and pirate ships, had not cause to cry "A plague on both of you," and flee to the church for comfort and shelter? But even there the solace was uncertain, for Bishops and Abbots too often were men of the world, politicians and soldiers rather than saints.

So she was forced to come out and fight, in her own way, for peace, making charity and goodwill her weapon. Where she saw evil, her heart misgave her, but she fought on, believing that wealth and authority must be her method. She could not be passive or resigned.

"You must not stir up mischief," she said to John. "Monsieur Tarys only works for his masters' good. He has to keep himself informed of all business in the places where he trades."

"Yes, mother," said John demurely. It was hard for him to say nothing about Raymon Tarys and the part he played in this endless warfare between England and

France, the dynastic struggle that worked such havoc in the lives and profitable trade of the two so closely interwoven peoples. John had learned of this from Signor Barde, also a seeker after peace, but given, as John knew, to outbursts of reckless adventure.

"You say yes, but do you mean no?" said his mother.

James Peny glanced down from his great height at the boy, then at his sister.

"It's not a matter of words, Anna. We have to work to an end. The whole of Kent and Sussex will be out of key until we fetch the Bells of Rye home again. What is that fellow at, prying here, prying there? Devil take him, we can't put up with it!"

He stepped ahead, asking pardon of the monk who walked alone.

"There's mischief afoot," he growled at Sir Stephen Alard, interrupting a close conversation to repeat what John had told him.

"Ah!" said the Mayor, "we must move with caution. You realize Raymon Tarys is a power in our commerce. Much of our revenue—"

"So!" said Sir Stephen, "but James is right, your Worship. We must also protect our plans, as the Abbot would wish. And here you will play a part, James. We need to find out what the Normans have done with the bells, and with our four jurats taken as hostages. The ransom demanded is impossible. Rye is near to ruin, after the cost of reparation and the loans from Westminster and the Florentine banks—as you know, signor."

"A safe investment, sir," said Barde. "The risk lies rather with the Florentines, as our neighbors the Medicis

know. But none of that now. I must only advise you, of course. I knew the coast of Normandy, its harbors and possible landing places. You need a contact there to bring you in at night. The tide must be right—and the wind. Man is only sometimes treacherous; the wind always. So we must woo it, cajole it with cunning seamanship.”

“You say we, signor. Does it mean you would take part in the reconnaissance?”

The Italian looked at Sir Stephen Alard, a mask of innocence over his face.

“No sir, I must not be known to do so. And now, the good innkeeper must not see us as we make our plans. My pupil has shewn his ability, in warning us. Shall we meet tonight?”

“Yes, my sister’s house is unlikely to be watched,” said James Peny.

This was agreed. Sir Stephen, instead of returning home to Winchelsea, would spend the night under Mistress Finch’s new roof, and the Mayor, the King’s Bailiff and the two sea captains Richard Wybert and Michael Yonge arranged to sup together, the sailors bringing their charts.

John overheard, and resolved to stay awake to hear what he might hear about the first planning of the campaign for bringing home the Bells of Rye.

XIII. THE VOICE OF A GHOST

JOHN was not to learn what took place at that conference in his house. The guests were assembling, coming to the house through a dark and windy night. A gale blew down Channel from the North Sea, throwing flurries of snow from time to time out of tremendous masses of cloud hurried across the full moon.

Only the Mayor brought a lantern, to help his tired eyes and faltering legs. The others groped their way by the help of the fitful bursts of moonlight. They hoped they were not noticed. A single lantern might pass, but half a dozen converging on a house was likely to attract the attention of anybody on the lookout.

Mistress Finch again showed her skill at housekeeping, a craft of great range and subtlety. In the hours since the arrival of the two new travelers, she had set to in the kitchen with her serving women, roasting a huge goose stuffed with onions, sage and codling apples. The second half of winter, after the Christmas feasts, was a poor time for meat, but most houses had their pigeon cotes, and there had been a rapid slaughter and plucking that afternoon. The inhabitants of the cotes throughout the town had escaped the effects of the midsummer raid. They rose in one great flight that day and appeared to haunt empty space until the horrors subsided, filling the sky as though

they were the soul of Rye temporarily disembodied. Most of the cotes had vanished in the fire, but the pigeons came tamely back, content to live among the open ruins until their cotes should be rebuilt.

The richer townsfolk had already done that and Mistress Finch had to thank her brother James for his skill, and the fact that since the Admiral's death James had made his home in the house which his craft-clever hands had helped to restore. That house was now fragrant with the smell of roasting goose and pigeon pie, with an overtone of mincemeat tarts and red wine being mulled for punch.

John was put to scullion's work in the kitchen, and he enjoyed it. As the evening drew on, with no abatement of the storm, he was sent around the house to draw the curtains lent by his mother's cousin, the Lady Alard, until Mistress Finch could weave her own to replace those lost in the fire.

John was sleepy. It had been a long day, the kitchen and hall were hot from the great fires which could not be kept low under the excitement of the gale. Flamelight leaped up the walls and the drawn curtains swayed out and back. The wind roared in the open chimney stack of hall and kitchen, which had the two fires back to back.

Now that the preparations were completed, John coiled up in an ingle seat in the hall, watching his uncle who was studying charts of the Channel, in readiness for the conference after supper.

The next thing he felt was a hearty shaking. He woke and saw Signor Barde towering over him in the firelight.

“Rascal! Where is the Latin exercise you had to prepare for me today?”

His tutor would not let him off nor accept the excuse that today had brought interruptions. The hungry and still sleepy boy was sent off to put in half an hour’s study before supper. The only quiet spot he could find was in a lobby at the back of the house, which in daylight overlooked the town wall and the steep drop to the lower road out of the town.

But now the window, which faced the harbor below, was a gray square, touched madly by moonlight and cloud shadow, as they rushed over the winter world. John sat with a tallow candle beside his Latin exercise, trying to concentrate while the elders were assembling, but it was no easy matter. Every sound in the house and the clamor of the storm outside called to him, making him look up at the window in expectation.

And so, in one of these moments, the expectation was changed from fancy to fact. Above the roar of the wind John heard a thump outside. He was instantly alert, crouched over the board on his knees. Then a small hand appeared, grasping the sill. That thin fan of bones could belong to only one body, the twisted frame of Mark Cundy. A second later, the ravaged face peered in.

“I saw the light,” he gasped when John had let him in. “Come quick! They’ve lost no time. The innkeeper has set the old legless soldier John Prat in a crate opposite the second boat, to watch. And I believe he’s arranged with the Frenchman to take a barrel of wine along to the crew, first doctoring it with poppy juice that will put them

to sleep. What he intends after that I don't know. He can't do much except assure himself that the weapons are there, and so report to the people across the water."

John, warmly clad in a leather jacket against the cold of the lobby, saw that Mark had nothing more than his daytime blouse of gabardine.

"You're freezing, Mark!"

Mark screwed up his already wizened face and gestured impatiently. "Don't fuss!" he cried. "You're wasting time. We must get down to the harbor and be ready to receive that barrel."

"And warn the crew!"

"No, you dolt! Haven't you learned your lesson from your tutor? He wants nothing to show; no open struggle at this stage, or the Normans will be warned at once!"

It might have been wise to tell Signor Barde, but both boys were too excited to allow themselves further delay. They crept out into the night, facing the wind and the flurries of snow. The ground was alive with the flying flakes, whose pattern in the moonlight writhed and danced about the boys' ankles.

The fiery little hunchback moved so swiftly that John had to trot beside him. Townsfolk were indoors, their windows curtained against the weather.

"How did you find out?" gasped John.

"Never mind! I used my brain. This is where I come into my own!"

It was impossible to crush this imp, as John realized. He looked down at him, as he scurried crabwise, the hump more pronounced than ever in the fantastic half

light. The boasting was part of him, and of the spirit imprisoned in that warped body.

"Take it easy," said John, wanting to protect him from himself.

But Mark ignored this. "Here we are now! Take care! Look, there is the crate, and so disposed that the crew can't see the watchman inside it. Anybody about? Yes, it's the innkeeper himself, talking to one of the crew. He's telling him that a barrel of wine is coming along, a gift from the Frenchman. No, he won't say that, in case of trouble later on. He'll say it is from the town, the Mayor and jurats. That's it, John. I know I'm right. Yes, I've got it. But what do we do? Let me think! Let me think!"

John looked at him. "Let *me* think?" he said. "And what I think is that you're crazy."

Mark Cundy turned on him in fury, clenching his little fists and beating them against John's chest.

"You don't trust me! You don't believe in me! I am different from other men, my mind as well as my body. I thought you knew it, you who are my friend. John! John!" He burst into tears; he wrung his hands and moaned, then turned away and hid his face in his arms, only to swing around again, his eyes glittering with tears and pride. "Don't speak! Let me go. I've finished!"

But John seized him, putting both arms round him, holding the shaking and trembling boy close.

"Mark! You'll make them hear us! Quiet now! Don't be a fool. You know I believe in you. Why should I be here otherwise? I came when you called, didn't I?—

though I may have to pay for it when I go back, unless—”

“Unless what?”

Mark was already calmer. His attention was turning again to some new idea spun by that lively brain. He hardly listened to John’s reply.

“Unless there is something in what you suspect. Then we can go back with a useful story.”

Then that something happened. Several of the crew came off the boat, summoned by the one of their number who was talking with the innkeeper, who had just handed him a small bag, or purse. Another parley took place, and one of the crew shook his head and returned to the boat. A second made to follow him, but was held back by the man with the moneybag, who shook it in front of him.

At this, the innkeeper looked back into the shadows between two sheds on the dock and waved a white kerchief. At first only the wind answered the signal, rushing down from the marsh and spilling another cloudful of snow out of the night. For a moment this obscured all vision, but as the flakes thinned out, half a dozen men were seen hurrying toward the group by the trameler.

“I’m right!” whispered Mark. “But they’re going to steal the whole thing and sail it across to France. So easy! But listen—”

Before John could speak or act, Mark put his hollowed hands to his mouth and let out a piercing cry, long, shrill, from that body which was neither young nor old, male nor female. It was a cry not of this earth. It quivered and agonized, dying slowly away into a kind of strangled moan, utterly inhuman.

“Quick! Back now to the wall!”

He seized John and drew him after himself, still hidden by the line full of nets and a pile of timber, between which they had been hidden.

They made no noise on the snow-covered ground, and safely found cover again behind a warehouse. There they waited.

The newcomers, perhaps inflamed with drink and uncertain of the adventure into which they had been drawn, wavered. Three of them turned and fled; the others, after hesitating, made toward the spot from which the supernatural cry had come; but they changed their minds again and turned toward the boat.

By that time, however, the untempted members of the crew who had remained on board, were the first to recover from the ghostly intrusion. They ran ashore and attacked the innkeeper, with the remainder of his gang, assisted by their own shipmates who now saw an easier way to lay hold of the bag of money.

“Watch! Watch!” whispered Mark Cundy, leaning forward against the wind and snow. “Shall I raise the ghost again?”

“No need,” said John, holding him back, afraid that in his eagerness he would rush out and attempt to join the fight.

For now it was a fight. The innkeeper was a powerful ruffian, used to tough situations. One of the sailors approaching him tripped over an iron mooring ring, and was instantly seized with one hand by the back of his jacket and flung over the quayside, to be caught and pinioned there by the rearing boat, which crushed his legs as he

tried to pull himself up. His screams rang loudly, but the roar of the wind cut them down and carried the agony out to sea.

They roused the shipmates to anger, however, and what might have been little more than horseplay now became an earnest struggle. The man in whose face the tempting bag had been shaken, lunged forward from where he still stood, facing the innkeeper. He grasped the man's wrist with one hand and twisted it before the innkeeper had recovered from heaving the other sailor into the harbor. The innkeeper turned in rage, but his bag was gone and so was he. The ship's man seized him around the legs, and he was served as he had served their comrade. But he went in head first, and again the traveler, fretting on the hawsers, swung in and crushed his head and shoulders. He died without a cry and disappeared in the suction as the boat pulled off again.

This was enough for the marauders. They turned and fled along the quay, crying murder. They carried one of their number, from whom a trail of blood dripped, to be covered up instantly by the wayward wafts of fine snow.

Still the boys were the only observers, for the wild night had sealed the townsfolk indoors, cut off from all human noise by the superior uproar of the elements.

John and Mark, clinging to each other, sickened by the result of Mark's fantastic stratagem, retreated from their hiding place. They had to pass behind the Bordeaux wine warehouse. As they did so, they saw a figure, wrapped in his cloak, creep along the shelter of the wall and struggle to produce a key, to open the small side door.

"You see?" whispered John, holding his friend back. "He has been watching too! Will he have heard you?"

Mark chuckled, bent forward and rubbed his hands delightedly up and down his thighs, like a wicked little fly.

"He will think it was his master, the devil!"

"Oh, and won't he be dangerous!" said John, thinking of that dark visage and those cold, penetrating eyes. But that frightening image was instantly followed by one of his tutor, waiting for him to deliver that Latin exercise; humorous and helpful, but not to be fooled.

"Come along, Mark, it is safe now. He's shut himself in. We have something to tell them that will cover up my tracks. We must hurry before the town is wakened. We saw the whole fight, and must give our account before the men from the inn rouse the watch and have the sailors arrested."

They fought their way against the storm, up the steep Mermaid Street and a distant murmuring of angry voices from the neighborhood of the inn on the quay.

"Quick! Quick!" cried John, breathless, as he burst into the room where the elders were in conference, planning the reconnaissance trip to Normandy. With one arm he supported the exhausted cripple.

XIV. BEATING ABOUT THE BUSH

WEEKS, months dragged past before the long-planned reconnaissance was made. John and Mark could not understand the delay. They grew more and more dispirited and blamed all the grownups concerned.

One weekday morning in early spring, John got up from his lessons with Signor Barde. He was bored. Life had been monotonous, every day alike, nothing but study, duties in the house, and in the services in the church, under the forepart of the nave whose completion seemed to be as remote as every other wished-for thing in life.

"When is something going to happen, signor?" he said, stretching his arms and yawning.

"Such as?" said his tutor.

"Oh, anything, everything! Look, sir, it will soon be summer, and still they delay. We know nothing more now than we did last Christmas."

"You are too modest, John. You've learned much, both in Latin and Italian, since we settled down again. And all around us the houses of Rye grow in number."

"But that is nothing but work, work, work!"

"Yes, but it is also life, life, life." Signor Barde put down the swan's quill which he had been resharpening after an hour's writing, while supervising John's studies.

He smiled, teasing the exasperated boy. "Were you expecting more; the Great Tidings, perhaps, that we all long for? It does not come from outside, John."

"Oh yes, I know. But when you're waiting and expecting something special—you know what I mean!"

Signor Barde became serious. "Maybe I do. Yes, I expect too much of you. But let me explain."

He put the quill in a pot, along with a dozen others, and fidgeted with the feathers as though he were arranging flowers. "I don't know. It is difficult to explain, especially as you are already impatient and discouraged. Perhaps your friendship with that dancing imp of mischief, Mark Cundy, disturbs you?"

He studied John intently as he said this.

John flushed. He was struggling with a force more powerful than he could control. He wanted to make himself understood, for he trusted and admired Signor Barde.

The tutor observed how he threshed about inside his own mind, and decided that help was needed.

"Look, John! Our troubles here in Rye are a small part of larger problems. The kingdoms of England and of France are shaken by this unending and wicked war, as if the misery following the plague were not enough. We bankers try to knit Europe together with the thin thread of our gold, but it snaps again and again, like the spiritual gold of the Church. You see how life is not as simple as you would like it to be."

He laughed, rose and stretched his arms up, shaking his fists at the ceiling.

"But I'm not the man to set the good example. Think of our adventure last year! That was not the result of

considered diplomacy, eh, John? I'm still likely to get into trouble over that, especially now Raymon Tarys has found out what part I played in it!"

"How did he find out, sir? I've told him nothing. I've told nobody, not even Mark Cundy!"

"Ah! Your little friend! An old head on young shoulders! Would they were more shapely shoulders. Does your mother approve of him?"

"I don't think she has noticed him. She is so busy rebuilding Rye. Since my father was killed she has done nothing but work for the people." John spoke bitterly.

"Come, John. You must be patient. Time will put that matter right, among other things. One of them I can tell you about, to lighten your heart. We have found out through our agents in Normandy that the Bells of Rye are to be set up in Fécamp."

"But why is that, sir?"

"Because Fécamp has canonical jurisdiction over Rye. That is the excuse given. But it need not prevent the men of Rye from fetching them home again, if they think it is worth the bloodshed."

"Worth the bloodshed! But sir—"

"I am weary of wars, John. I share your mother's mind. She works for peace, goodwill and the comfort of the people. So do I—until I see fraud, deceit, injustice, and cruelty. Then I become rash—as you have cause to know."

He paused, and studied John's face. He saw there only angry opposition, and he decided to say no more for the present, in favor of peace.

"But now I can also tell you that preparations to equip

the expedition have begun. The first load of weapons, which you and the tailor's apprentice saved, is being added to secretly. Most of it is to be dispersed among the men who will go over when the time is ripe. That way, it is safer than it would be if stored in the Winchelsea armory. We dare not risk keeping it in Rye, for Tarys has his observers everywhere here. He has made that wine shop his headquarters since the rascal who kept it was killed in his service. But I talk too much, John. It should cheer you, however. We must not have you grieving still, or thinking bitterly of your mother. She and her cousin of Winchelsea are great ladies. They, like Mother Church, are the preservers of mankind, and bind our wounds."

John ignored the last bit.

"Then it is Fécamp, sir? We work to that end?"

"*You* work! You mean yourself and that mischievous young demon with the angelic voice and the wit of a cunning old moneylender?"

John protested, but Signor Barde talked him down. "Nonsense! You're far too young. Dismiss such an idea from your mind. Your duty is to your studies, and his to his trade."

Neither had voiced what was in his mind; that John longed to be one of the expedition when at last it should set forth. But both understood each other, in more ways than one.

XV. A SHEPHERD AND HIS SHEEP

JOHN passed on the news to Mark Cundy a few days later, when they were out fishing off the northern side of the narrow spit of shingle protecting Guildford Marsh from the open sea. They had pulled out, with John at the oars, around the point and dropped anchor some quarter of a mile off the spit, where the water deepened toward the central course of the River Rother, which at that time folk also called the Limene.

The boys were close friends now. Mark, recently recovered from one of his bouts of sickness with violent headaches, was more lively than ever, and inclined to be troublesome because John would not let him take a turn at the oars, though the boat was only a light one. He boasted of his strength and claimed to be as good a sailor as Adam Cogger, with whom the boys had gone out fishing frequently during the early spring.

John listened amiably to all this. He was used to it and understood how necessary it was for Mark, as a compensation for his warped body. He sat, under the warm April sunshine, watching Mark's quick fingers sorting out the lines, three of which were already over the side.

Then he broke the news that the Bells of Rye were now said to be set up in Fécamp.

"Huh. As though I didn't know!"

"How did you hear, then?"

"How did I hear?"

John saw the puckered forehead and pallid cheeks working under the fierce play of thought.

"You say that! I hear everything. I move with the cattle. I browse with Cogger's sheep. I am like no other men. I even fly—like—like those flights of wild geese coming in across the Channel!"

He flung up an arm to the sky, under whose blue dome there grew, moment by moment, an arrow-shaped flight of migrants on their way inland. Their honking was the only sound on the marsh other than the boys' voices.

The army of geese passed overhead. The draft of its wings raised a haunting rhythm, ominous as a drum-beat, that silenced even the boasting of the hunchback.

The boys watched the flight dwindle and vanish. "That's what we want," said Mark, contradicting his recent claim. "A hundred men with wings like that, and we should be in Normandy, bearing the bells home overnight."

"Who would carry the Tenor Bell? It weighs two tons!"

"Oh, that would be mine. I can be an eagle when I want!"

At that moment, under the magic of his imagination, he looked like one; the flaring angry eyes, the sharp, curved nose, the head outthrust from between the hunched shoulders. John stared at him, fascinated by the display of will power. He realized that this was more than boasting or the voice of vanity; Mark really believed

he was an eagle, for he lived in a world of his own, a world of ideas where he was no longer handicapped by that feverish and crooked body. Who would dare to disillusion him? Somehow, he always managed to justify his extravagant claims.

Another flight of geese came in, calling Mark to an almost prophetic state of mind. He raised both puny arms to the passengers overhead and remained thus until they, too, had vanished. Then he turned to John, his eyes brighter than ever.

"Look! We make up our minds today, here and now! That expedition to Normandy is not going without us, John! We must make our plans. No use pleading to go. Nobody will listen. We shall smuggle ourselves aboard the *Anna de Roussel*!"

"And why the *Anna de Roussel*?"

"Because that is your uncle's ship. If we are discovered, he will be easier to work on than the older captains. He is still a boy himself. I am years older than he is—in spirit! I am the Ancient of Days, John. I am bent under the weight of the world. Yes! Look at me!"

John looked at him, half frightened. Was he mad as well as crippled? That eager face belied such a possibility. So did his mind, with its strange logic.

"Another thing, John. I wonder about Fécamp. Have they not bells there already? And who are these agents in Normandy? Could they not be deceived, or bought? I cannot believe that Raymon Tarys does not know of the Italian's inquiries, since he hates him so. Hate clings as close as love; I feel it in my bones. It drives me on! One and the other, they pull us—"

"Stop! You'll make yourself ill again, Mark! Calm down. No need to impress me. I know you well enough now."

Mark collapsed like a pricked bubble. His head sank back into his shoulders. The fire died in his eyes, leaving them smoldering in their sockets. He turned to the lines.

"We ought to pull home before dusk," said John. "Your old master, who is kinder than a grandfather, told me to bring you back before the night grew treacherous."

Mark had lost all resistance and made no objection. Sadly he pulled in the empty lines and coiled them in the bottom of the boat, while John raised anchor and rowed back to Rye Harbor. Already the air was cool, though the sun still stood over Winchelsea, above a mass of gathering cloud.

"I didn't tell you," said John, as the boys left the boat and parted on the quay. "Adam Cogger is out lambing. He invited us up. He's got a hut on the slopes under the forest, for it's warm there at night, warm and dry. Shall we go?"

Both boys were so excited by the suggestion that they forgot Mark's delicate health. They met next day, for Mark was supposed still to be resting after his illness. He appeared at John's home, soon after midday, and was found by his friend sitting with Mistress Finch at her embroidery frame, lending a clever hand to the work, the making of a tapestry intended to cover the bare walls of the rebuilt living room. The two younger children stood by, watching Mark's fingers closely, mystified by the speed with which they worked.

For the first time since she was widowed, Mistress Finch looked amused and relaxed. John appeared in time to hear Mark say, "—and in this top corner, out of the sky, we'll have a flight of geese carrying home the Bells of Rye in their beaks; and their wings must be as wide as the wings of angels."

Though he had come to see John and to arrange about spending the night with Adam Cogger in the hills, among the sheepfolds, he was now so intent on the embroidery that he did not notice when John came in.

John stood watching. He saw the thin hand, the flashing needle, the eyes dazzled by their own vision. Impossible to interrupt! He joined his young brother and sister, with a hand on a shoulder of each.

Mistress Finch, working at the more solid part of the tapestry, turned her head and exchanged glances with John. Both expressed wonder.

The spell could not last. Mealtime brought servants bustling into the room, and Mistress Finch left her needle in the fabric. She invited Mark to eat with the family, and during the meal discussed the design of the tapestry with him, accepting his suggestion about the geese, and adapting the surrounding pattern to this new feature. John had not seen her so alert since his father's death nearly a year ago.

"That boy!" she exclaimed, after Mark left.

John grinned. He was proud of this queer little punch-inello, of the lightning mind and body.

"He'll be just the same tonight, when we are with Adam Cogger in the hills. He'll be teaching the shepherd how to deliver lambs!"

"That poor little frame? You're not keeping him out in the night air, John?"

"Mother, he's made of wire! He may scuttle along like a crab, but he outpaces a grown man. There's a fire inside him, too!"

Mistress Finch was so impressed that she offered no objection to the proposal. She did not even inquire if Mark had permission from his master to spend the night in the hills.

Hills is a bold name for the farmlands where Adam Cogger made his living on the Isle of Oxney—or rather, part of his living. But the whale-shaped island rose steeply at the nose and eastward, by the ancient settlement of Stone-cum-Ebony.

The boys met on the quay while the spring evening was still bright. The air smelled of young grass and primroses, with a tang of the sea. The day was passing calmly into night. Before the boat reached land at Ebony, the boys saw the planet Venus dipping and flickering in the western sky over the beach by Iden. Eastward, above Romney Marsh and the distant ridge by Hythe, the moon rose, sleepy red, and shrank to silver, to flood the scene later, when the sunset faded.

The woods falling almost to the water's edge at Ebony loomed in the twilight. John tied up the boat at the moorings, and the boys followed a path rising through the woods. It was already dark under the trees, but a carpet of windflowers glimmered there, a lake of blossom. Blackbirds still fluted, but their songs died away as the boys passed the church and the old Roman altar stone. An

owl startled them, gliding across the path and disappearing with a shriek below the trees.

"Steady, Mark; not so fast," gasped John.

He was not prepared for his companion to stop suddenly. He stumbled into him.

"What's—" he began.

"*Ssh!*"

Mark grasped his arm in the darkness.

"We're not there yet, are we?" he whispered.

"No, his pastures are well clear of the wood, because of foxes."

"But something is going on ahead."

They stood still, and listened.

"I don't hear anything," whispered John.

"Your ears are too full of fur," Mark hissed impatiently. "Shake them, and listen again."

Beyond the night sounds of the trees, sighings of upper foliage, fretting of sleeping birds, and other and less recognizable murmurs, John heard a measured sound. It was the thud of hoofs on soft soil. Horses or donkeys were moving through the woods.

"You know what that means?" said Mark, close to John's ear. "They are carrying wine inland."

"But this is an island."

"Idiot! Don't I know that? This will be a hiding place, to store supplies on which they draw as needed."

John was annoyed. "You're sure the wine isn't doctored with poppy juice!" he said. This was the first time any reference had been made to Mark's wild theory about drugging the crew of the trameler laden with arms.

Mark pretended to ignore this heavy sarcasm. He may

not have heard it, for he was already spinning romantic explanations of this new turn of events.

"But which party is it? If they catch us, we're in for trouble. It's a rough trade." He shuddered with delight; quite unafraid. "Come on, we'll explore." He began to creep forward, putting out a hand and grasping John's jacket.

"One moment, Mark! I'm wondering, too. Adam Cogger isn't expecting us tonight, and farming isn't his only occupation. I know that."

"Why do you know it?"

Mark spoke sharply, jealous of rival theories.

"Adam made no secret of it," said John.

"Well, if that's so, we'll lend a hand!"

"But what about your apprenticeship? Doesn't your indenture forbid all unlawful conduct?"

Mark considered for a moment. "Don't you realize, imbecile, that I am more than one person? A part of me is that meek tailor's apprentice. But the real me moves freely. I command my armies! I carry my harp through the kingdoms of the world, making music for—"

"Leave that now," said John, clapping a hand over his mouth, knowing that his voice would rise to a shrill scream as the vision took hold of him. "Something's happening!"

It was. The sound of hoofs stopped, then started again, gathering speed, only to stop again. Men's voices were heard in argument, followed by a shout of anger.

"That's Adam Cogger! Come on, Mark!"

Both darted forward, to find the open land above the woods. By now the day had died and clouds covered the

moon. A faint light showed a train of half a dozen donkeys, each loaded with two barrels, pannier fashion.

Two men accompanied the donkeys. The one at the head of the train was confronted by a giant whom the boys at once recognized. He had appeared suddenly and brought the procession to a halt.

"Wait!" whispered Mark. "This is complicated! Oh, I see possibilities! Don't you see who the other man is?"

He was gleeful, and would have danced with excitement had not John held him to earth. There they stood, still under the darkness at the edge of the wood, commanding a view of the bridle track running across.

"Oh, the wicked world!" squeaked Mark. "I see it! I see it all!"

"What d'you mean?"

"Why, the agent from Bordeaux. It is he! And Adam Cogger has caught the double-crosser red-handed."

"Well, the hand's not red yet!"

"Except with smuggled wine," cried Mark, while John again tried to muffle that piccolo voice. "Set a smuggler to catch a smuggler! Unless of course they're working together, and the mean Frenchman is trying to cheat our Adam of his share in the profits!"

This fanciful guesswork was stopped by a snort of rage from Adam Cogger, who had put a hand on the bridle of the first donkey, only to have it struck by the cane with which Raymon Tarys was commanding the animals.

This outbreak of exasperation was a mistake. Cogger seized the Frenchman by the arm and collar and snatched him away from the patient donkey. The other man, how-

ever, sprang forward. A knife flashed in the veiled moonlight.

"Oh!" cried Mark. Then he shrieked again, as he had done on the quay during that other scuffle. As his unearthly cry rang out, he darted forward, with John abreast of him.

The follower, who had stopped in his tracks, saw figures coming. He turned and ran, leaving his master and the barrels of wine to their fate. He was heard stumbling down the bridle path, around the outskirts of the oak wood.

"Adam!" cried John. "We've come to help with the sheep!"

"Nay, this fox first," grunted the farmer. "Eh, sir, you'll cheat me, will you, who has served you well? I tell you I'll not dispose of any more of your contraband cargoes. I've taken the risk and done the dangerous work too long!"

Mark's quick mind was at work.

"Ah, sir," he piped up, "we shall have a long story to tell the King's Bailiff when we return from our lambing. Oh! Oh!"

He danced like a mischievous elf in front of the Frenchman, whom Cogger had now released.

"You limb of Satan!" growled Cogger. "What is this to you? That nose of yours needs twitching off. I'll—"

To his amazement, Mark rushed up to him and embraced him around one huge thigh.

"Adam! Oh, mighty giant! Don't you see? Don't you value what has happened? Let me ask the Frenchman."

The leading donkey, indifferent to these human sub-

tleties, began to move on, but John took him by the bridle and halted him. He stood stroking the beast's ears and watching the absurd course of events as directed by the inspired apprentice.

John half-turned, so that he could leap to Mark's assistance if the magic of that impudent tongue should fail.

"Look, sir!" cried Mark, still clinging to Adam Cogger's smock. "This fine discovery will not suit you or your masters in France. It is likely to lose you your post in England, eh?"

Raymon Tarys said nothing. For once he was at a loss. But his rage could be measured by the movement of one knee, which flexed to and fro. The quick-witted boy did not miss that.

"Anger is useless against the laws of this country. So let us agree somewhat between us."

"What do you want, you monkey?"

Mark was triumphant and did not mind rude names.

"Only your help, sir. When the men of Rye go to bring home the bells, they will not need to go to Fécamp, do you say?"

John Finch and the farmer stared aghast. What secrets would the young devil spill next? Cogger, mortally afraid to touch the misshapen body with his powerful hands, stepped back, to leave Mark standing alone in front of the Frenchman. Here again his audacity guided him. He danced nearer, leaned forward and raised his hand to his mouth, as an actor prepares for a stage whisper.

"Look, sir. We can be silent, having no love for the revenue man. But we need to know this one thing. Is it Fécamp? No, sir, it is not! Where, then, is it?"

Raymon Tarys remained silent for several moments. He was not to be caught easily. Then he addressed himself to Cogger. "Well then, the commission as before; but we will talk of this another time." He turned to Cundy. "As for you!" A pause, words failing him. Then he spat the name out. "Wilet! They are at Wilet!"

With that, he turned and hurried away, leaving the train of contraband wine to Adam Cogger.

"We all heard that?" asked Mark. "Wilet—do you know the place, Adam?"

"Aye. And we must carry this information quickly. It will mean a change of plans: tides, approaches, all the rest of it." He chuckled.

"But first, you half lawyer, we'll stow the wine and stable the donkeys. Then we'll return to the sheepfolds and watch the night through, simple shepherds once more."

XVI. MIDNIGHT ON THE RIDGE

ADAM COGGER put his hands to his cheeks and gave a long owl's cry which he repeated three times, with a pause before the last. "Wait a moment, now!" he said. "And forget what you are seeing tonight. You hear that, my little lawyer?"

He took Mark Cundy under the chin, and his hand was like a great dish carrying the wizened head. The proud boy half resented this liberty, and stared up, frowning yet trustful. His eyes, for once in repose, shone in the veiled moonlight. The face was not of this world. John stared at it, puzzled and frightened. Could such intensity last? he wondered. Would not this little firebrand burn himself out? The possibility saddened him.

"You don't want to catch cold, Mark," he said. "Here, wear my leather jacket."

Before he could take it off his own back, however, there came the sound of men running, and three farmhands appeared from the open country north of the wood.

"Ah, boys! Here's the little flock. You know where to fold them," said Cogger.

With little remark, the men took charge of the six laden donkeys and led them away. Cogger was left with the boys.

"Now, young masters," he said, "to our night's work.

April is late for lambing, but as you will see, I always keep some ewes in fold so that we have a reason for being out at night!" He chuckled, a deep rumble like a subsidence of earth in a mine. "But we will carry it through. A peaceful night under the open sky does any man good service. Come with me."

He led the way, walking between them, one stride to two of John's, while Mark scuttled along bent almost double, wheezing and throwing out snatches of song and comment, overexcited by his triumphant discovery at the expense of Raymon Tarys.

They left the woods and rose above them to open country, marked by one or two windbreaks of oak trees and hawthorn, the latter breaking into blossom here and there, like girls in white dresses under the moon.

"Here are our folds," said Adam, as they approached a hut and a maze of hurdles. They began to tread loose straw, from which rose warmth and the greasy smell of sheep.

"We shift them by day," said the farmer. "Pretty little beasts. They're mostly delivered now. Half a dozen ewes, maybe, still expecting. There they are away from the rest." He pointed to a wattle enclosure removed from the larger folds. "We'll take a look before we settle down for the night."

The boys followed him to the smaller fold and stood with him, looking in.

"Eh, lass!" Adam exclaimed suddenly, and stepped over the hurdle. He bent over a ewe, his huge back hiding it from the boys. They heard it breathing and murmuring with a fretful little cry, disturbingly human. "That's right

now, little wife," he said, at work helping the delivery of the lamb.

The boys heard a long bleat, followed by a familiar voice. It was the voice of all newborn creatures, innocent but also urgent with hunger. They stared over the wattle, at the mother calmly chewing the cud while Adam severed the cord which steamed in his hands. The lamb, a crumpled, pink bundle, lay beside the ewe, heaving and struggling, as though trying to conquer the world.

The farmer peered closer, then grunted angrily.

"Bah! No use! See, it's got a short leg! Best throw it out!"

Before he could touch it, however, Mark cried out, and fought so fiercely to climb over the hurdle that it collapsed under him and he sprawled forward at Cogger's side. Instantly he seized the farmer's hands.

"No! No! It's unfair! You don't know what you're doing. This lamb may be— Oh, you mustn't. There are kings who limp! You brute, you murderer!" He burst into tears of rage and fastened his teeth in the rolled sleeve of Cogger's smock.

The farmer, amazed, quickly recovered from the miniature assault. He looked in appeal to John, who had stepped into the fold and was re-erecting the hurdle to prevent the other ewes from straying. He too was distressed. He saw Adam move his arm away and look down at the crooked back now almost in his lap.

"Nay, lad," he said, very gently. "But a sheep is not an immortal soul." He rose and lifted up the sobbing boy, setting him tenderly on his feet. "But if you want it that way, it shall be so."

With that, they left the nativity, Cogger leading with Mark supported under his huge hand, to prevent him from stumbling. The boy was still convulsed, his whole body shaking with the conflict of passions. John walked behind, wondering what it was all about. He doubted if he would ever understand this boy, this clumsily tied up bundle of contradictions.

Adam led them to the hut. It was only a rough shelter under a thatched roof. The walls of planks let both moonlight and air through the joins, and the stripes made a zebra pattern along the strawed floor. A pile of hempen sacks and woolen blankets lay in a corner.

"Make yourselves warm and snug," said Adam, "and I hope we won't be disturbed again before daybreak."

That hope was not fulfilled. Hardly had the boys sorted out sacks and blankets and made themselves comfortable for the night, than they were roused out of their first sleep by an outcry from the flock.

John stirred, grunted, opened his eyes to find Adam shaking him.

"Come, lad; may want your help! It'll be a fox trying to get at them."

He glanced at Mark as he snatched up an ashplant with a crooked handle.

"Best if he doesn't wake."

John found a stick and followed Adam. The moon was now high, and the world was flooded with quicksilver light, lovely but fluid and deceptive. Its magic robbed objects of size and form.

It revealed, however, that something was happening in the small fold among the half dozen ewes. The loose hur-

dle was down again. Through the gap there flashed a streak of red fur. The fox was head up, burdened with a load in its mouth which it was trying to toss onto its back as it ran. Piteous cries rose from the fold, and one ewe dashed out after the fox. The others were huddled together, a chorus of fear, at a farther corner of the pen.

"Ah!" cried Adam, instantly enjoying the hunt. He lunged forward and caught the fox by a hind leg with his crook.

"Quick, boy!"

John ran forward and aimed a blow at the fox's shoulders. But he was not quick enough. The cunning thief, caught by the leg, relaxed, drew back, and instantly released himself. He turned, it seemed in mid-air, and slunk off at right angles. And he still had the crippled lamb in his jaws. A moment later he was gone, lost somewhere behind the hut, from which Mark Cundy was just emerging.

"You wicked old dog!" cried Adam, shaking with laughter. He shook his fist at the emptiness. "You'll pay me later!"

Meanwhile, John had cornered the mother and coaxed her back into the pen. She was still bleating, bewildered and pitiful, while Adam made the hurdle secure.

"He'll come back," he said. "Once he's tasted, he'll want more. But that won't be tonight, so we can sleep on it, lads. Back in with you. Nay, Mark, you've lost your lamb, and 'tis no fault of ours. Did you see how we nearly saved it?"

Mark looked long and narrowly at him but did not reply. For a moment he remained standing in the doorway

of the hut, with the moon shining full on him. His eyes glittered, and two white hands, skeleton thin, trembled at his mouth. Then he turned and went in. As he disappeared, the moonlight rested on his humpback, gently conjuring it away.

John and Adam Cogger did not immediately follow. Some shared feeling held them back. They stood side by side, Adam leaning on his crook. A warm air fanned them, bringing a smell of earth and that first caress of spring, the perfume of primroses.

The commotion among the sheep had died down. All that could be heard was the low grind of their jaws chewing the cud.

Then, over the stillness, the air wafted the voice of midnight from the bell in Stone Church. It was so near that John shivered. He heard again that deeper bell, the tolling tenor of Rye. Sorrow moved up and over him in a slow, deep wave: the sorrow for his father's death. It was still touched with anger and a craving to understand things that could not be understood, though at such moments as this, in silence and moonlight, they seemed to be brought by vast forces close to hand, almost to be revealed.

"We might tell that lad," said Adam, "we might tell him it was the hand of God who took the lamb."

Mark was already asleep when they went in and they quickly followed his example.

XVII. A BIRTHDAY ON THE THRESHOLD

MUCH replanning had to be done as the spring days lengthened into early summer. The first anniversary of the disaster drew near. Sir Stephen Alard and the Abbot of Battle were satisfied that all was prepared for the return visit to Normandy.

The confession that the Bells of Rye were now being rung not in Fécamp but in Wilet had been weighed solemnly. Agents were sent to London to pick up news through that main channel of diplomacy. Others, unobserved fisherfolk, in the course of their work at sea, also tried to net information. All appeared to confirm what Mark Cundy's cunning had dragged out of the Bordeaux agent, as the price of nothing being said about his double-crossing activities in smuggling some of the wine for which he was officially and openly responsible.

Repairs were finished on the ships damaged in the big battle. The *Swallow*, under her former captain Richard Wybert, the *Anna de Roussel*, under her owner and master James Penny; the *La Katherine* under Sir Stephen Alard, the Admiral to command the whole expedition; the *Robert of Lenn*, captained now by the grim Michael Yonge, who was not too pleased at being removed from his own ship, the *La Katherine*, to make way for Sir

Stephen and to command the vessel of the captain lost in the Channel battle last summer. He also resented an admiral from Winchelsea leading the expedition which was the concern of the community of Rye.

But that could not be helped, and he was forced to agree. Rye was still poor, crushed economically by the disaster which some folk still believed to be due to the stupidity and cowardice of the citizens left at home during the sea battle. The town was rebuilding itself and living from day to day on loans, some from the Royal Exchequer; more from funds raised by Signor Barde on the Florentine banks. He had persuaded them that the spirit and enterprise of the people of Rye were higher than ever, and that with help they would quickly recover to begin productive work. Two harvests, and consequent gatherings of wool, and restored weaving, would show a dividend on old investments there by the Florentines. Signor Barde said that it was only a matter of priming the pump.

All this he had arranged during several expeditions through the great Forest of Anderida to London. He traveled with a bodyguard of four armed men supplied by the Abbot of Battle. Since the Black Death some thirty years earlier, the peace and plenty of the English countryside were sadly degraded. Though there was now a shortage of craftsmen, workless folk roamed the woods, living without law and by violence, for lack of masters and organized trade.

In the course of his journey, however, Signor Barde, able to promise good wages and conditions, recruited some fifty or more of these otherwise honest fellows, bringing them back to Rye and maintaining them there,

to help with rebuilding the town and equipping the ships.

Further, with the agreement of the Abbot and Sir Stephen, he had visited Sandwich, at that time the headquarters of the Cinque Ports fleet, and persuaded the Mayor and jurats to lend a large vessel, the *James of Westminster*, carrying eighty hands, which he proposed to man with his recruits rescued from their lawless pursuits in the forest.

All this was done by Signor Barde through the agency of the Abbot of Battle, so that his activities should not be known to Raymon Tarys and thus to the French, who naturally favored the Normans. The Italian was seen about in Rye and the other Cinque Ports as usual, and he continued to give lessons to his pupil John Finch.

Indeed, he was even more attentive at John's home than formerly, for Mistress Finch, now widowed, needed advice in the running of her estate and the control of her farm workers on the mainland. Barde drew John into a study of these matters, adding practical studies to the lessons in Latin and Italian.

Through spring and early summer John's days were strictly organized, with regular hours spent at his lessons, and others in company with his tutor moving around the farms.

Mark Cundy was also kept busy, for his master was commissioned, with many other tailors in Rye and neighboring towns, to make jackets and breeches for the ragged recruits now being fed and trained under the command of the Abbot of Battle and Sir Stephen Alard.

The boys managed to see each other, especially when the days lengthened. The anticipation and excitement

which gripped the whole community as the warlike preparations intensified, could not fail to stir John and Mark to fever heat. They saw what was going on; the ship repairing, the sail and rope making, the work of smiths and fletchers, tailors and weavers: all this in addition to the labors of folk still engaged in rebuilding the town.

On the morning of John's fourteenth birthday, the sixth of June, he woke early to hear a blackbird shouting below his narrow window which looked over the strip of garden and the town wall. Still fuddled with sleep, he was puzzled to hear a blackbird singing from the ground.

He climbed over his young brother without waking him and peered out. The blackbird was Mark Cundy, perched on a bench under the wall and looking up at the house, to observe the effect of his mimicry.

John waved a hand, and the fluting stopped. He crept down and joined his friend.

"Any news?" said Mark, as they moved off to find a warm spot in the morning sunshine that now came flooding across Guildford Marsh in a great tide of misty light. "Everything is speeding up. The Abbot's commissioners are around every day, looking into things and urging people on. Twice this week they have been to our shop, inspecting the finished garments and taking them away. I hear what is said, John. I keep my ears open."

"And what have you heard?" said John dryly. He knew these bursts of inspiration, and liked Mark none the less for them. They were part of the odd little character.

Mark eyed him cunningly. "You should know. You move amongst the commanders."

"Yes, but commanders don't give away their secrets."

Mark snorted and flicked his fingers at the open sky. "Fuh! What do they think we are, mere dolts? We know as much as the next man—more indeed, where we have the wit!"

"You have that all right."

This bit of flattery soothed Mark. He calmed down and turned to John confidentially. "It's established that the fleet sails on Midsummer Night. What d'you say to that?"

"I wouldn't know," replied John. "I've done nothing but lessons and husbandry since Easter: just one day after another. But Signor Barde is going off again on his affairs next week, to Sandwich and London."

"Ah! Is that so? It means something! I can see it all. I read the map of the world. I can prophesy what is—"

"Now don't fly off again."

Mark was indignant. "Fly off again? Look at you, at the hub of things. If I were in your place I would know every detail. I would command the whole situation! Why don't you wake up? Don't they meet at your house, when the Abbot comes to Rye?"

"Yes, they meet here, but they don't invite me into the council chamber!"

John knew that it was useless to be annoyed. Nor could he thump the vanity out of this misshapen imp—if indeed it was vanity. He listened meekly.

"I'll tell you something," Mark continued, producing a small parcel from the pouch at his waist. "An owl screeched at the window of that chamber the other night and caused the leaders to raise their voices!"

"You mean you were outside, eavesdropping?"

"I didn't say so."

John saw laughter and triumph in the wizened face. "You'll end up with a rope round your neck, and I'll do nothing to save you!"

Mark pretended to be rueful. He looked at the parcel and held it out to John. "You won't want this, then!"

"What is it?"

"Oh, nothing. I just made it at odd moments in the shop, for your birthday."

John hesitated. The quick changes of mood, and the self-contradictions of this friend, confused him.

"Open it, then!" commanded Mark, irritated by his own show of feeling.

John found a bonnet of black velvet lined with crimson silk. His face flushed. He stared at the beautiful object, then glanced shyly at Mark.

"Thank you," he said. His voice was rough. "You're a strange devil, Mark."

"You're an ungrateful beast," said Mark, but he was smiling at John, and a faint spot of color touched the bony cheeks. "The silk comes from Padua, in Italy," he said. "I wheedled it out of my master."

"You would wheedle blood out of a stone," said John, putting the bonnet on his head.

"Good!" said Mark, studying it critically. "That must be worn at the wars." He said this quite casually.

John stared. "Why, are you still deluding yourself about that?"

Mark fired up. His voice leaped an octave, shrill and

thin, belying its intensity. "Delusion, you say? I've got everything planned. D'you mean that you don't want to go?"

"Who said I didn't?" John was angry at last. But anger made him silent. He sat there frowning, and once again he heard the booming of the great bell of Rye. It rolled around in his brain and stirred his blood in a grim chemistry. Mark watched the process, his clever eyes bright with understanding.

It happened that the *Anna de Roussel* was being refloated that day, after a complete overhaul. John asked his uncle if he might bring Mark Cundy when they went aboard to inspect the repairs and replacements. Nothing reasonable could be refused him on his birthday. Mark was popular in the Finch household since the day he showed his skill with the embroidery needle. His handiwork on the tapestries, during many long evening sessions, would remain as a record of his acceptance by Mistress Finch and of her motherly interest in him.

After his day's work, Mark appeared on the water front. His pale face looked corpselike in the evening sunshine, for he had sat all day crouched over needle and thread. He glowered suspiciously at the tall figure of James Peny. All robust people over six feet were regarded by him as opponents whom, sooner or later, he must bring down in defeat. He ignored John, except for a quick glance to note that the black bonnet was being worn.

James Peny said nothing, as usual. He followed the boys into the boat and sat between them in the stern. The sailor manning the boat was about to cast off when a shout came from across the quay. Adam Cogger appeared.

"I heard she was being floated out today, Captain. I've just pulled across for some business at the wine shop, so I waited to come aboard should anybody be inclined there."

"Aye, Cogger," said the Captain, "you're welcome, since you'll be with us later on, eh? And you'll be bringing some stores aboard also?"

Cogger joined them in the boat. When it reached the *Anna de Roussel* some hundred yards offshore, he picked up Mark Cundy and carried him aboard. This was done without a word of by-your-leave or thanks between the giant and the dwarf. Mark treated Cogger as a beast of burden. In return, the farmer handled him with awe, as though the boy were a god modeled in porcelain.

The Captain and Cogger at once got busy with the purser and two officers already aboard. The boys were left to themselves, and they explored the vessel from bow to stern. Mark darted about like a beetle.

"You see," he whispered, from the half light of the hold, whose hatches were open. "Here are the water barrels. When they are filled, the stores will be stacked in front, but a clearance must be kept to get at them. This corner will be safe enough then, and should anybody approach we can hide under this hatch down to the bilge. Not nice, but safe! Once out at sea, we can show up. If your uncle cuts up rough, Adam Cogger will step in. But I don't anticipate that. These big men are soft to handle."

John made no objection to this rash statement. The day was approaching for which he had waited since his father's death nearly a year ago. He was keyed up. He could feel the tension in his bones and muscles. He was not quite sure what he had to do about it; but there, in-

side him, the resolution hardened. Whatever was done by the men of Rye, he must take part in it for the sake of his father; for the sake of his mother's dumb grief; for the sake of his home; and finally, for the sake of that something within his mind and heart which he could not define. But it was there; and if he did not obey it, it would burn him up.

XVIII. THE STOWAWAYS

DURING the next two weeks everything began to come together. Work that had been in progress throughout the marsh towns now showed results. And as always at the zero hour, those results seemed both chaotic yet miraculous. A fleet of tramelers and barges grew of its own accord, gathering from Smallhythe, Romney, Winchelsea and various anonymous creeks about the marsh waters.

Conferences were held daily, some in the Mayor's parlor, some in Mistress Finch's hall. The latter house had the advantage of being a good watch point across the harbor and Guildford Marsh, where the fleet lay. Here the Abbot of Battle made his headquarters, to be joined by Sir Stephen Alard for several days before the departure.

The captains assembled. They were busy men, working at last-minute preparations, their wherries scurrying between the harbor and the fleet. No attempt at disguise was maintained. The French agent Raymon Tarys had disappeared early in May. Nobody knew of his whereabouts. So too had the Italian. He was due back from London the day after John's birthday, having arranged a berth on a coasting vessel bringing spices from London. But the boat arrived without him. For two weeks John had been free of lessons. His mother was too busy with her guests to notice that her son was out of the house from morn

till night. One day, however, his uncle remarked on it in his dry, laconic way.

"Why, lad, where's your tutor? What of your grammar? You are studying more for a ship's chandler than a scholar these days, eh?"

John trembled. Nothing must hinder him now. He could not explain. He feared he must be as inarticulate as his uncle. He longed for Mark Cundy's eloquent tongue. But that fear, and the burning purpose which prompted it, gave a dumb persuasiveness to his whole self, his looks, his limbs, his actions. He was a dedicated being. People thus possessed often can command without uttering a word. John even took the lead with his friend Mark Cundy, who behaved during these last few days with a demureness quite out of character. It was as though he were satisfied that all his plans were maturing safely.

So it proved to be when Midsummer Day dawned. It was the first anniversary of the destruction of Rye, the rape of the bells and the death of John's father. Fortunately, there was no opportunity to brood over the past. At daybreak the household was stirring, and Mistress Finch appeared as soon as the servants were about.

John, who had slept but little—who can sleep with a fire in his stomach?—met his mother at the threshold of the hall, where a great breakfast of meats and ale was preparing. He saw her studying him with a dangerous curiosity. Did she know, or suspect? Then a moment later he wondered bitterly, did she care? He must look her straight in the eye. There was nothing to be guilty about. He knew himself to be a man—and a man with a mission.

All night he had tossed about on the bed shared with

his young brother. And as so often since the great disaster, during the past year, at moments when his thoughts and feelings rose to fever heat, he heard within his brain the booming of that tenor bell, which now rang in actuality somewhere across the Channel.

"They sail tonight, Mother," he said.

She did not reply for several moments. Indescribable anguish showed in her eyes. Then to John's astonishment, she drew him to her. "John! John!" she said, her voice harsh and broken. "Not again; not a second time. Thank God, you are too young."

The fire inside him flickered, then flared up again. He must not answer. He must not give way. But at the touch of her hands, the first sign of affection since he had stood with her that day on the town wall, watching the Norman ships on the horizon, he felt a flood of happiness and confidence.

He said nothing, but gently withdrew from her embrace. She recovered self-command and turned to the tasks of one of the busiest days in her life. The household was the center of the town's activities. The Abbot and Sir Stephen sat in the small parlor behind the hall, besieged by officers, messengers, applicants. Orders and decisions issued from them and their secretaries. The campaign, so long planned, was now moving into action. Time and tide had come together, and the weather was kind, for the day was sun-drenched and the sea gentle, though a breeze from northeast freshened.

Adam Cogger appeared at the house toward noon, to leave with James Peny. His intimate knowledge of the ports on both shores of the Channel was appreciated by

the Abbot, and after a long interview in the parlor he was invited to eat with the family. When the meal was finished, and he and Captain Peny were setting out for their ship, Mistress Finch drew him aside.

"Do you know the whereabouts of Signor Barde?" she asked. "John has run wild this month, and I too am in need of advice."

Cogger looked at her innocently. "I would not presume to know, my lady. But I do know that a man of quality is good to have about a house."

Mistress Finch did not smile; but there was kindness in her glance. "Well, you know the boy too. See that he does no mischief before the day is out."

She let him go at that, for demands on her attention were many. Now the Abbot was asking for her, and Sir Stephen was waiting to bid her farewell before he left with his officers for his ship, the *La Katherine*. Adam Cogger retreated, puzzled by her remark about John.

Meanwhile, John had disappeared. Having seen that the captains were making ready to join their ships, he slipped away unnoticed after the midday meal.

"Have you said anything, Mark?" he asked, when his friend darted like a hermit crab from the narrow passage beside the tailor's shop.

"No need to," said Mark. "All work is suspended in the town today. People will be out in the streets soon, and they'll stay out until the fleet moves tonight. Has your mother noticed anything?"

"I don't think so. She was rather serious this morning for a while, but that passed. The Abbot is coming down

to the harbor to see the Admiral leave. That will be the great moment. We had better start."

People were already out to stage a holiday, and the streets began to fill up. This suited the boys. They made their way downtown to the harbor where the crowd was gathering. The harbor was lively with traffic of small boats, and the boys had still to find a means of getting aboard the *Anna de Roussel* without drawing attention to their purpose.

"What do we do?" asked Mark, still unusually content to allow John to lead.

John looked up and down the water front. Not a free space to be seen! As one boat put off, another nosed in to take its place for loading up with arms, men, provisions or gear. The water in the harbor seethed under the assault and the strengthening breeze. Cat's-paws flashed, vanished and flashed again in the sunlight, hither and thither, one over another.

A babble of conversation rose from the quays, with cries, commands, bursts of laughter. Nobody had misgivings or fears, it seemed. The realities of battle, experienced only a year ago, were forgotten. Barrels of ale were broached, ribbons and favors flaunted. The scene might have been that of a country fair, with all this gay junketing.

"Ah! Here's our chance!" exclaimed John, seizing Mark by the arm. He instantly glanced at him, for the cripple was shivering and his eyes were clouded.

"Is this the beginning of the end?" Mark spoke as though to himself, or to some power unseen.

"What?" said John roughly. "Come on, man. Wake up! There's one of Cogger's boats, and his man, loading up with sheep's carcasses. If we go and lend a hand we can be sure of getting aboard unnoticed."

Mark followed him, stumbling like a blind man.

"It's come now, Mark. Cheer up!"

Suddenly the cripple dropped his mood of darkness. He shook off John's helping hand. "Yes, quick! I'll engage that fellow. You seize one of the carcasses, John. Do as I say."

John grinned and went his own way. The man was one of the laborers who had led away the train of donkeys that night, which now seemed long ago. Time was racing. The sun in the blue sky galloped westward.

Help with labor was welcomed, and the boys saw to it that their efforts were made at the reception end, safely in the boat. The loading completed, the shepherd joined the boys, and without comment on their company, he put out an oar at the stern and coaxed the heavy load over the water.

Many hands on the deck of the *Anna de Roussel* took on the unloading, during which operation the boys shinned up the rope ladder and mingled with the crew. They walked around the deck, examining again the smart paint, the cleanliness, the new sails furled so neatly. She was a graceful craft, and feminine in that grace. The afternoon sunlight caressed her, and she appeared to accept that homage, looking down at herself with womanly pride, waiting for the water to offer a mirror for her beauty.

"Now, quietly edge away," whispered John. "Every-

body's busy. Look! Down the hatch before they hoist another load!"

Mark had fully recovered his agility. He went first, sliding down the ladder. John joined him, and still nobody had seen them. They moved away from the open hatch, into the dusk of the farther hold.

"Here are the water barrels."

"Are they filled?"

John kicked one with his heel. "Yes; safe enough. And it looks as though the stores are already stowed in front here. We can slip behind, this way!"

He pushed Mark in front of him and followed into the gap left between a bulkhead and a water cask. Mark crept farther into the similar space behind another cask.

In spite of the recent overhaul, these recesses smelled of bilge and the fusty stench of rats.

"We shall stifle down here," John whispered.

"It's not for long. They set out before sunset. Only three or four hours." Mark spoke as one used to squatting, tailor-fashion, from morn to night. The confinement was unnatural to John. He soon began to feel cramped. His breath labored—but nausea resulted if he stretched his lungs, for he inhaled only the foul air from the back of the hold and the stench from the bilges.

One hour, two hours passed. The heat grew. Both boys were sweating. John managed to turn the tap in the spigot of one of the water casks. He crept out to do so, like a foraging mouse. A dirty earthen mug hung from the spigot, to catch the drip. He wiped it clean, filled it slowly, and took it back to Mark. He found him asleep.

For a moment he was frightened. Mark sat huddled in

the darkness, his head in his arms, which rested on his raised knees. The hump on his back lay like a black cat, or a demon, perched there possessively. His breathing was quiet and irregular, as though he were struggling with an evil dream. A murmur moved his lips from time to time.

John was faint with thirst. He sipped at the water, moistening his lips and tongue. The water was fresh enough but warmish, and that robbed it of something—its life-giving quality. It was dead water. Even so, it revived him.

Should he wake Cundy? The strange fellow might begin to cry aloud in his sleep, for that brain was never at rest. And his voice was like a bosun's pipe, shrill and penetrating. It would betray them at once.

John began to think things over, being thus alone. Here they were, embarked on an adventure for which they were ill-prepared. Of what use would Mark be in the fight? And himself? He had the knife given him last Christmas by his tutor. He could not bring his bow and stock of arrows. They were too cumbersome for a stow-away. He was certain that Mark had no weapon at all, unless it were a pair of scissors, or an ounce of needles hidden somewhere about his odd-shaped person. The whole adventure seemed foolhardy and likely to lead to trouble, both for themselves and other people.

He was in the depths of depression. He leaned forward, groping with an arm behind the farther cask, intending to touch Mark, for this solitude was not to be endured. But while he groped, he heard from far away, beyond the hubbub of voices and footsteps on deck, the faint voice of bells. For an instant he believed it must be that illusion

which had haunted him for the last long year, the ghost music of the Bells of Rye.

Then he realized that it was actual. He heard the breeze suddenly swell into a moan in the rigging. It was blowing across the marsh and down the Channel. Those must be the bells of Romney, ringing for Evensong.

Good enough! His courage rose again, making his blood tingle. He told himself that this was the day of days; that what he did during the coming hours would give him the authority to take his father's place as a man in a world of men. He thought of the Abbot's words about being the head of the family. He crouched in the darkness, no longer alone.

With a sudden jerk, Mark kicked out in his sleep. The thud of his foot on the cask woke him.

"What are you doing?" he hissed angrily.

"*Ssh!*"

"Eh? What?"

"Somebody coming!"

John touched him, urging him to squeeze closer to the bulkhead. Mark was quiet, and John edged in toward him.

Two men clambered down the rope ladder into the hold and began to move about, checking the bestowal of the stores. They took their time, beginning at the far end, and working their way back toward the stern, one reciting to the other, who was ticking off the items on lists, and answering with short grunts.

John recognized the voices: the purser and Adam Cogger. They gradually drew nearer. John was sure they would hear Mark breathing.

"You must try to hold your breath when they come to us," he whispered. "You sound like a flute."

Mark prodded him. "Look after yourself. You sound like a hog wallowing in the sty!"

It was good to have him awake again. John had time to realize again that always in a moment of crisis, this sickly, misshapen little mortal became lit up with a mischievous joy, drunk with danger, yet clear-headed and incisive. "Come in farther," Mark whispered. "I've shrunk myself to nothing."

But before John could follow, the purser moved across. "The water!" he said. "All filled?"

Adam Cogger hit the casks one by one with his stick. The blow on the farthest cask was more than Mark's overtuned nerves could stand, and he uttered a squeak. John's hand closed and pressed on his ankle. Both boys held their breath.

"Confounded rats still aboard," growled Adam.

The purser laughed. "That's a good omen!"

"Aye. For those of us who come back."

"Report to the ship's cat," said the purser.

Cogger grunted, and lunged with his stick behind the two casks at the back; once, twice! The third thrust caught John's leg. His mouth opened to cry out, and stayed open. He must not! Pain surged up his leg, and he screwed up his eyes as the muscles all over his body contracted. Sweat gathered in his hair and trickled down his face. A bony hand touched him. It was not the hand of pain; it was Mark's, trying by this mute contact to let him know that Mark had felt the blow through him, and was lending him strength.

The two men moved away. John closed his mouth, almost biting his tongue. He leaned over, hugging himself to ease the pain. He did not mind now. The danger was past. The men were heard to climb out of the hold, and a moment later the hatches crashed down, on total darkness.

"Safe!" said Mark. "Now we can move. We'll make him pay for that when we land home safely. These big men! He nearly shattered my nerves, hitting the casks like that."

"To say nothing of my leg!"

Mark snorted. "Oh, that! Good for you; stir your wits up a bit!"

John's reply was to pass him the mug of water, which he took without comment.

A pipe shrilled on deck. The disordered footsteps fell into a rhythm. A winch groaned, and the ship shuddered as the anchor rope tautened and began to wind inward. Cries and cheers rose from the fleet and the crowd ashore, muffled by the closed hatches.

The voices halved, one half receding, dying. The *Anna de Roussel* had come to life, the pulse of movement making itself felt throughout her timbers. She was being towed out between the spits of shingle.

John and Mark stood in the narrow gangway, flexing their limbs, breathing freely and listening to the portent of every sound. Another outburst of cheers, followed by quick commands! The ship slowed, hesitated, while the slapping and flapping above indicated that sails were being set.

Then she moved again, swinging around and dipping

as though curtsying to the shore. A murmur of lapping waters came from the bow, growing to a lapping play all along the hull. Then she lunged, rose and lunged again.

Mark staggered, groaned. John felt for him in the solid darkness, and tried to hold on to him.

“Don’t touch me!” He was indignant. “Can look after myself! We’re out now, and can best settle down to sleep.”

They made themselves as comfortable as possible on a pile of spare sailcloth, noted when they came aboard. “It’s blowing up rough,” said John, who knew the moods of the Channel.

Mark did not deign to answer.

“It must be evening by now,” John said, guessing that Mark was still awake. “This breeze should blow us there by midnight.”

XIX. INITIATION

THE following few hours were best forgotten. The heat, the violent motion, the darkness, the stench—they nearly destroyed the hunchback. He tossed about, groaned and complained. John woke from time to time, pondering if he should call for help before Mark died of his own misery.

The wind down-Channel was now a half gale. The ship slapped into the waves, shaking herself at each rise before plunging down again. Then John heard commands, followed by the flapping of sails being taken in. The ship wallowed more madly and turned into the wind, heaving from side to side. Mark Cundy's lamentations redoubled.

"I'm going up," said John. "Sounds as though we've sighted land. They must be turning into Wilet Harbor. That means the night has half gone, though we've made a good pace."

The prospect of action, and of being released from the hold, cured Mark at once. He did not intend to be left out.

"I'll go." His voice was still feeble. "I can sense where the ladder is."

"I'm already on it," said John, laughing as he swung with the movements of the ship. "Mind I'm not flung down on top of you. Keep away from my feet."

The *Anna de Roussel* was now beating up against the weather. She might have been stamping on the sea in anger. But she was riding proudly, edging her way against the wind. "I'm at the top now," said John; "I'm going to knock at the hatches with this pulley. Are you ready?"

Mark replied, and John began to drum on the underside of the hatch. Nobody heard, for the ship's company was on the move, trampling overhead, in response to a rapid fire of commands. "What's happening, John?" Mark's voice was far distant and weak, at the bottom of the hold.

"Everything's happening. It sounds like a fleet order from Sir Stephen, for our people seem to be taken by surprise. They're putting back still farther, like hounds leaving a false trail."

Both boys listened, John still clinging on the ladder beneath the hatches.

"There's a lull now. Here goes!"

He thundered on the hatches and shouted. Someone approached. John repeated his tattoo. Footsteps receded.

"What do we do now?" cried Mark. "Wait here until they reach harbor?"

A moment later the hatches were lifted off and a shadowy head peered down, against a background of stars and a velvet sky.

"Come out, you curmudgeons!"

It was Adam Cogger.

By contrast with the darkness of the hold, the deck was ablaze with moonlight powdered with starfire. Human figures glittered like mackerel; masts and sails too were phosphorescent.

There stood Adam Cogger and James Peny by the hatchway, both grinning at the stowaways, though the Captain was trying to conceal his amusement behind a mask of discipline.

"So you've got aboard, eh?" said Cogger. "And now what use are you?"

"D'you mean to say you knew we were down there?" said John. His indignation provoked a roar of laughter.

"It's no joke, young man," said his uncle.

"I'm not laughing," said John. "I knew it was the only way I could come. And Mark would not be left behind."

As well as being indignant, he was relieved; for he had been secretly worrying about the reception which might have been given to him and Mark. He was still uneasy. He must make them see how much the escapade meant to him.

"You know why we had to come, Uncle. It follows on from last year."

He did not utter his father's name. He said nothing about the family, or the responsibility which it had not needed the Abbot of Battle to put upon him.

James Peny had no faculty for commenting on this brief speech. He looked at his nephew and saw a passionately intent character, staring at him with a determination which he understood.

"Yes," he said gruffly. "But I'm sorry for your mother. You must obey orders from now on. Nothing foolhardy. Remember that!"

He turned aside to contemplate Mark Cundy, who now emerged from the shadow of Adam Cogger.

"Nay, Captain," piped the hunchback, his voice rising

clear above the confusion of noises aboard ship and the chorus of wind and water. "We surely have not reached Wilet—or have we been carried past it, that you are beating back?"

Cogger rose to his full height, flung back his head and roared with laughter. "Eh! The cunning little general! He's marked us, Captain! Though buried down below, he's taken us, Captain!"

Captain Peny stared at the hunchback as though about to cross himself against the workings of black magic.

"We're obeying orders," he said, and pointed out to sea.

Here and there, astern of the *Anna de Roussel*, lanterns flickered above the waves. The nearest belonged to the *La Katherine*, whose form, a ghost ship in the deceptive light, loomed around the yellow bead of her lantern.

"But you lead the way," said Mark instantly. "So we must be approaching Wilet, where the bells should be, if we can trust the Frenchman."

"Why, you had the confession from him!"

Mark looked pityingly from one grownup to another. He could not understand their codes of behavior; their deliberate acceptance, or seeming acceptance, of appearances. It was as though they treated life as a game, with a set of rules.

"Let me tell you, sir," he said, "I have the ear for music. Wherever those bells may be hung, I should recognize them and distinguish them from all others."

"Is that so?" said James Peny. He did not trust such cleverness. It was too sure of itself. "And how old are you, my lad?"

Mark frowned. "I was born out of time. I am never—"

"Take care, Mark," whispered John. He was afraid that Mark was about to soar up into one of his prophetic displays. That would not appeal to Captain Peny, who lived on the principle that the less said the better.

Mark turned on John angrily, his pride wounded. But before he could speak, a cry came from the bow. "Land ho! To larboard!"

The *Anna de Roussel* appeared to answer instinctively, without human aid. She backed closer into the wind and rose instantly on a wave. Mark Cundy's frail body would have been tumbled overboard had not Adam Cogger seized him and held him firmly to the deck.

From that moment the boys were left to themselves, while officers and crew were hard put to navigate the ship, fighting against the 'caprice of the roughening weather as the land loomed nearer.

Low cliffs became outlined, broken chalk faces flashing in the moonlight, where a promontory looked eastward. Captain Peny stood with Cogger, staring at the gap in the cliffs.

"As I thought," said Peny at last. "We've blown too far down Channel. This is not Wilet, Master Cogger."

"No," replied Cogger, "it is St. Peter's Port, master: another nest where many an egg is hatched!"

The *La Katherine* was signaled by lanterns, and told. After a pause, she replied, ordering the *Anna de Roussel* to tack up Channel toward Wilet.

But the fleet had been seen, for the *La Katherine* and the *James of Westminster* had closed up on the *Anna*

de Roussel, with the smaller vessels bobbing behind them. The *Swallow* and the *Robert of Lenn* moved in the rear, though the last-named ship was turning off and setting a course round the convoy, like a sheep dog at work. The grim Michael Yonge had some object of his own in mind, or he had failed to take the signal from Sir Stephen Alard, ordering the fleet to tack against the wind, back to Wilet. Michael Yonge was a law unto himself. His mother was a native of Sandwich.

Signs of alarm were seen on shore. Lights moved rapidly. Then a beacon on the cliff top flared. Suddenly, on the back-thrust of the wind, there came the sound of bells, two bells clanging wildly. One of them was deep-tongued, hollow and full of power.

John recognized it instantly. He cried out, but it was Mark Cundy who spoke first. Indeed he did more than speak. He leaped forward, turned and stood in front of the steersman at the wheel, struck an attitude with one arm raised and hand pointing to heaven.

"I knew! I knew it!" he screamed, his voice lifted to that shrill piping which was a sign of his moods of possession, accompanied always by a fierce light in those protruding eyes and a kind of nervous violence through the whole misshapen body as though he were charged with magnetic force.

Whatever its origin, it was a force that commanded attention, and brought even his elders into obedience. It acted that way now. The whole crew, from James Peny to the dullest clodhopper commandeered for the expedition, stood hypnotized by this fiery little demon gesticulating and screaming in front of the steersman.

"He has cheated us again, the Frenchman from Bordeaux. Why should he not? He has worked against Rye—yes, and against England's King, from the beginning. He led the Normans into Rye Harbor last year. He tried to steal the shipload of arms last spring. I tell you, he will have something prepared for us at Wilet, should we be fools enough to take the bait. And here the Bells of Rye would lodge still at St. Peter's Port! We must go in! We must go in!"

His entreaty died away to a lull in the wind, to be punctuated by the last stroke of that tenor bell which John knew so intimately. It had haunted him for a year; but now he heard it outside his own skull, and the haunting ceased. He stood there exultant, a warm flood of happiness and confidence coursing through his veins.

"The young devil is right," said Adam Cogger. "There's no doubt about those voices, eh, Captain?"

"We *must* go in, Uncle," John piped up. "We must signal to Sir Stephen."

James Peny said not a word. He took the lantern from a seaman, moved to the stern, and signaled to the *La Katherine*. For some minutes there was doubt. Would Sir Stephen believe so sudden a change of intelligence?

The doubt was dismissed by action from the *Robert of Lenn*. Michael Yonge had heard the bells too, and seen the exchange of signals between the *La Katherine* and the *Anna de Roussel*.

"I am going in," he signaled, and instantly followed this by beating in closer against the wind, tending to cut across the bows of the *Anna de Roussel*, and then

straighten course toward the harbor mouth, which by now was seen as a dark gap in the moonlit coastline.

This undisciplined tactic must have convinced Sir Stephen. At that time the concentration of naval authority was an uncertain code. He signaled his agreement, putting it in the form of a command, the better to maintain his authority.

At this, James Peny signaled to Michael Yonge that the *Anna de Roussel* would keep the lead, to simplify maneuver into the harbor. Yonge agreed, and luffed for long enough to allow the leader to move on in front of him. He skillfully drew in after the *Anna*, in front of the *La Katherine* and the several tramelers following her.

"The captains of Rye first," he signaled to Peny.

All this navigation was so swiftly put in hand that the defenders of St. Peter's Port were sadly caught. It was obvious that they had not expected this visitation. Maybe the preparations at Wilet had made them feel secure.

A few badly armed men were assembled on the jetty as the *Anna de Roussel* drew in, closely followed by the *Robert of Lenn*, which had put down two wherries to keep her under closer control.

In the quarter of an hour between the mooring of the two vessels, there was some brisk hand-to-hand fighting by the men of the *Anna de Roussel* against the locals. But the latter were outnumbered before reinforcements could appear, and by the time Michael Yonge had landed with a company of his sea dogs well seasoned in the lifelong Channel warfare, the men from the *Anna* were already moving into the little town, pushing the unprepared and fear-maddened townsfolk before them, taking

their first toll of revenge. Blood flowed against blood, and horrors such as those enacted against the people of Rye were now repeated, in the dreadful monotony of lust and cruelty. Spilt blood is a powerful drug. It turns men into creatures worse than wild beasts, and dissolves the purposes and achievements of civilization.

The sight of it acted strangely upon Mark Cundy. It might have been some form of sacred ritual to his abnormal imagination. He had no weapon, and committed no violence; yet he moved, with John at his heels, up the street toward the church, ignoring the dead and wounded, the screams and pleadings, the blows and counterblows, the outbreaks of fire, the lurid flames reflected in the eyes of fugitive women and children.

Fortunately, most of the people got away from the town before the invaders had found their way about the narrow streets. Dour as the Normans were, they could not stand against this sudden descent out of the midnight sea. A sense of deserved retribution may have hastened their flight. It also saved further bloodshed. Even so, one or two more dogged fellows put up a show of fighting.

Adam Cogger was almost caught by one of them. He was tramping up the street toward the church, treading calmly like a great shire horse, oblivious of the commotion around him.

His body acted as a shield for the fragile frame of Mark Cundy, who followed him closely, with set lips, mad eyes, and a stance like that of a sleepwalker. John was close at heel too, but he was forcing himself to notice everything, determined that his premature manhood must play a full part in the events of the night.

But his resolution wavered. Was revenge so sweet after all? He had no time, however, to question himself. He saw how Adam Cogger strode on, calm and untroubled as on that night when he confronted the French agent. Neither violence nor authority turned him aside.

John's admiration was suddenly interrupted. A shadow leaped across out of a doorway as Adam brushed past. A knife was raised behind Adam's back. John, whose hand was on the hilt of the Spanish knife given him by Signor Barde, acted instantly and instinctively, and as he struck under the raised arm of the assailant, he had a rapid vision of his tutor's face, and the expression on it of forces in conflict, the love of peace, the impulsive urges toward adventure. With the same conflict of mind, John struck.

The Norman sailor gasped, turned, and sank to his knees, blood running out of his open mouth from the pierced lung.

Adam turned, and saw John withdraw the knife. "Why, young master, so that is your first. You start young." He spoke almost reproachfully. Then he stooped, took the dying sailor under the armpits, and eased him into the shelter of the doorway.

"Poor deuce!" he said, his voice deep with compassion. "You missed your mark, brother." He made the sign of the cross over him, then spoke gruffly to the boys. "Come, lads, no time to lose."

"John! John!"

It was Mark Cundy who now urged John away from the scene. John woke from the enchantment, shuddered, and mastered himself. He wiped the blade on the skirt of

his jacket, breathing heavily with a half-sobbing violence as he followed Adam Cogger up the street.

Mark also was strangely affected. He seemed to have shrunk, as a hedgehog coils up to protect itself from the world. "John!" he ventured from time to time, putting out a hand and touching his friend. "John!" It was as though he expected John to be changed into another person after this bloodletting.

"Enough!" shouted Adam suddenly, who had been silent for some minutes. He turned and took John by the arm. "Forget that now, boy. We go forward. I shall do the remembering, if we come through this night's delight."

XX. THE BELLS ARE FOUND

THE incident, of no account in the sum of the events of that night, yet momentous to John Finch, had delayed Cogger and the boys for no more than a few minutes. But it left them lagging behind their comrades of the *Anna de Roussel*, who had rushed on behind the captain, James Peny. They found themselves now overtaken by, and mingled with, Michael Yonge's men, a company that took its character from him—fierce and sinister.

"What, you linger?" growled the Captain as he passed Cogger. "No time for booty yet, man. The bells first!"

Cogger was himself again. He laughed. "Why, neighbor! You did not see that little play? Young Master Finch, the Admiral's son, saved me from a nasty cut. Go back and look in the yard there, if you doubt me."

Michael Yonge glanced at the boy as he hurried on. "So? There is always a time to begin. But take it as it comes. Look now, here is the church and your lads already at work." This cool acceptance of John's deed brought him safely down to earth and his habitual matter-of-fact way of handling events.

Mark Cundy reacted differently. The gruff sea captain had ignored him in passing. That woke the vanity which never slept for long. Mark was jealous also on John's behalf, for he regarded his friend as part of himself.

To dismiss the recent bit of drama with a glance and a word was more than he could stand.

Stooping forward, he darted past John and Adam Cogger, the crablike motion more pronounced with his speed.

"He'll be hurt!" cried John. "Stop him, Adam! Fetch him back!"

They both ran after him into the open square, but Adam's huge body was held back by the press of men from both ships, gathered around the church. Mark had wriggled his way between legs, scabbards and spear butts. He reached the Norman porch and climbed upon a coil of lead standing on end beside the porch.

"They are here, our bells, the Bells of Rye!" he piped, clear as a flute above the din, miraculously quelling it. "And see! The lead I stand on, that was stolen from our roof. We saw it rolled down Mermaid Street. Now! Back to Mermaid Street! Bring home the Bells of Rye, and have done with it all!"

This little speech was well taken. It directed and unified action that might otherwise have turned to casual looting.

With a cheer, the men from the two ships surged forward, carrying Mark with them on the shoulders of a sailor who had snatched him up from his perch.

Before John could follow, there was an outcry from the men inside the church. It grew to an angry roar, and the human tide surged out again, bringing with it the priest, who had taken shelter at the altar when the English landed.

"No bells! No bells!" the cry went up. The priest was

roughly handled, and John covered his eyes, expecting a dreadful end for the young cleric. But he saved himself by pointing out that the bells were set up at ground level behind the church.

This helpful circumstance appeased the searchers who had brought out the priest. James Peny ordered him to be released and the unhappy man led the way to the temporary belfry, which was hidden by the old Romanesque building.

Mark had also been carried out with the priest, and he was now seen walking beside him. He had taken him by the hand, to urge him on, half a pace ahead.

"Come, John," said Adam, "we'll take our rights in this work. 'Tis a craftsman's job."

They pressed forward with the others to find the belfry. It stood on the north side, somewhat removed from the graves, on open ground but shadowed by a gigantic yew tree that loomed, frowning, in the moonlight, indifferent to the uproar and traffic of violence. A faint, bitter perfume came from it, the smell of time and lost centuries.

In contrast, the timbers and thatched roof of the belfry were raw and clumsy. The bells hung dimly outlined, until men kindled torches of pine, improvised from a wood stack against the north wall of the church.

"There it is!" said John, awe-stricken. He pointed to the tenor bell, the monster whose voice had haunted him for the past year. The torchlight touched points where the metal had been scratched or rubbed. The bruises glittered like red wounds in the furry green verdigris of the surface. But the shapely creature lay there indifferent

as Helen of Troy to the battle raging for her possession. The rest of the peal, diminishing in size along their positions on the timber scaffolding, also caught the smoky beams of torchlight.

Now was Mark Cundy's opportunity. By this time, after the excitement of landing and the progress through the town, he was wholly enflamed. His tinderlike personality could be no less. With dramatic skill he urged the priest forward, in front of the press of men from the *Anna de Roussel*.

"Brothers of Rye!" he cried in his shrill treble. "We have found the bells. And the vicar of St. Peter's Port wishes to return them to us with no more trouble."

"Why, he's changed his tune, the young Satan!" muttered Adam Cogger, who stood in the forefront with John at his side. "What's the meaning of this?"

"It's the noise," said John. "He can't stand it."

Mark had seized the priest by the hand and was now urging him to approach the bells. But this effort failed. The priest stood there, facing the crowd, with his other hand raised in command.

"Brothers from Rye," he spoke with dignity, "remember what we have in common. Those bells were first founded in this country, and set up to ring in yours. We are all one, in the foundry of Christ, and we speak with His tongue. Let it be together, in harmony, not in discord; forgiveness, not revenge."

He was about to say more, for his words following Mark Cundy's had hushed the human storm immediately around the belfry and the space between the yew and the church.

But beyond the church, around the south porch, nothing of this small ceremony was heard or known. The men of the *Robert of Lenn*, with their grim captain, arrived to find those still inside the church ripe for mischief. The mood caught on, and here the devil took command. More torches flared, were carried into the church, and suddenly the windows lit up fitfully, then shone with an increasing glare as fire spread through nave and aisles.

Those standing subdued to the priest's words on the north side saw the windows behind them light up. They knew what it meant, and the contagion was too strong for their temporary withdrawal from the violence of this night's adventure. As a body, they turned and ran around to join the sport of fire and rapine which was now to be let loose throughout the town for the rest of the night.

Cogger, John Finch, Mark Cundy and the priest were left standing by the belfry, with only the moonlight immediately over them. The stained-glass panes of a window burst, and a tongue of fire licked out and up the wall. A bird, nested in the ivy below the ledge, flew out, protesting in terror.

"Ah, God have mercy!" said the priest. "We deserve it all; but have mercy on us."

John, still troubled by the deed done in the narrow street, looked at the dagger bared in his hand. The moonlight fell on the stained blade. He was troubled, but he had saved Adam Cogger's life, and he had proved his own manhood though still only a boy. He had left something behind him for ever. Even Mark Cundy, that ageless mortal, seemed by comparison to be a child now.

Mark did not think so. The excitement had set him off again. He made to dart away after the rest of the men. But John leaped forward to stop him. He missed the imp, stumbled, and fell against the tenor bell. It moved forward, paused, then swung back in compensation and caught John before he could recover his balance. He felt the slow blow, and heard the muffled roar as the iron tongue touched the metal against which he was pressing in order to save himself.

Mark was nearest, and instantly he turned, seized John and pulled him away, crying out under the stabbing pain of his own deformity. They rolled on the turf as the bell moved sulkily to and fro, once more to utter that hoarse note, hardly more than a sigh, gradually lapsing into silence and stillness.

Adam Cogger and the priest picked the boys up. "Look you!" he said. "We leave the rest to those who like it. Our work is to get the bells down to the boats. First, they have to be dismantled. A second heating may destroy them. But how is that to be done now hell is let loose through the town? We want the right tools!"

He looked with disgust at the spear in his hand and the short sword in his belt. He might have been standing by the sheep cotes on the Isle of Oxney, alone with his flock, calmly considerate of the job in hand. Beyond the church, and within the church itself, raged all violence and horror, fire and death dealing.

John, half-confused by his wrestling match with the tenor bell, stood marveling at the turn of events. He had not imagined that in the very heart of a battle, surrounded by destruction, there could be an oasis of calm, with a

little company of mortals concerning themselves with peaceful and constructive matters. But here was Adam Cogger looking for a spanner, to tackle the bolts and nuts that fastened the bells to the beams of timber. Even more astonishing, here was the priest, but lately escaped from being murdered by the mob, and now having to see his church in flames as a beacon toward the burning of the town, gently proposing to Adam Cogger that he should lead him to the smithy beyond the churchyard wall, where the necessary tools could be found.

This he did, and the two men, with the two boys, might be seen moving to and fro among the graves, under the conflict of moonlight and glare from the burning church and other fires in the town. They brought tools, ropes and sets of wheels that had been repaired and set aside for refitting to wagons.

The priest had evidently decided that he could do nothing directly to stop the satanic goings-on of the marauders. Maybe he believed that his parishioners deserved this punishment as retribution for the part they had played in the equivalent destruction of Rye a year ago.

Whatever his thoughts may have been, he acted without the urgings of local patriotism. Moreover, he persuaded the smith, whom they had found prepared to defend his workshop against all comers, to lend his skillful hands to the task of removing the bells and getting them down to the harbor.

The team was no sooner started on the job than they were joined by James Peny.

"Nothing can be done until they have had their fill," he

said in disgust. "Those outlaws and cutthroats gathered by the Italian and put to man the *James of Westminster*, lent by the jurats of Sandwich, have now landed and are out of control. Michael Yonge, a law unto himself, has given his men the freedom of the night, with the injunction to reassemble on the quay at daybreak. This will be the devil's work again."

"And set the wheel of anarchy turning once more," added the priest. "But it will be something to get these bells across the water. They are the manifest of our wrong-doing." He stood, begrimed with grease, wielding a large wrench. The glare from the raging fire lit up his features, a round, good-natured face comically streaked by a smudge of black from the ironwork. He behaved as though resigned to mankind's folly and wickedness. His work now was an example of his tolerance.

Cogger saw to it that John and Mark were kept busy. He nodded shrewdly to Captain Peny. "No good for the lads to witness that kind of thing," he said. "Over young for it yet. They've got their lives before them, master."

"Shouldn't be here at all," growled Peny. "What shall I say to my sister when we get back? She's turned against the natural ways of the world since the Admiral was killed last summer. But she's no less fierce for all that. She's learned the habit of command. Even the Abbot fears her tongue. A fine world, when women of her kind come to rule it!"

"Ah!" said Cogger, pausing from his labors to look at the Captain and to direct his help on the job. "But ewes will bear their lambs in peace when that comes about. There'll be no more of this!"

He pointed with a crowbar at the burning town, from which rose hell's music, the crackling of the fires, shouts, shrieks of madness and agony, crash of tumbling walls, and the growing over-all moan of air rushing into the conflagration to feed the flames.

So powerful was the draft that it snatched at John's velvet bonnet, Mark's birthday gift. He was stooping, head bent over a bell at the farther corner of the open framework. John felt the invisible hand pluck at the bonnet, and saw the crimson lining as it left his head.

"Mark!" he cried, but his voice was lost in the general uproar of wind, fire and maddened humanity.

Mark had seen the theft, however. He flung a hammer after the bonnet which was capering along the path toward the burning church. Then he threw himself after the hammer, and fell upon the bonnet at the moment that Sir Stephen Alard appeared from somewhere beyond the flames.

The dignified Admiral stumbled over the prostrate hunchback. "Why, boy, what is this?"

Mark rose, with the bonnet safely in his hand. He shook it free of dust. "Nearly lost, sir. We were scared to death!"

Sir Stephen looked down at the imp. "What! A mere bonnet—and all this going on around us?" He indicated the flames behind him.

"Yes, but I made it," said Mark. "It was for John's birthday."

He looked up at Sir Stephen, who saw a wizened face, now happy and innocently triumphant.

"Bless my soul!" Sir Stephen exclaimed. Then he

added, much to his credit, "Quite right, boy, quite right!"

What he meant was left for Mark and John to discover as they continued to work together, while the Admiral inquired of James Peny about the events of the raid and the finding of the bells. He appeared to be no more disturbed by the outbreak of mob violence than he had been when it appeared, with such cruel results, at the court of inquiry over which he presided on the day after the destruction of Rye.

He saluted the priest courteously, however, and commended the whole party for the work in hand. "The disorder will die down," he said. "We can then get transport down to the ships and set sail before the countryside is roused. They do not know how few we are, or they would be on us now, to save their townsfolk."

XXI. A PROPHET IN THEIR MIDST

BY DAYBREAK, the fury of the invaders had fallen, exhausted by its own strength. The sun rose in the northeast, and its clean, full light put the man-made fires to shame. They shrank and died, leaving a pall of smoke that lay heavily over the shattered town, disturbed from time to time by shafts of heat that tore it apart. But it folded over the gaps, turning in on itself, leaden and sour. Only its outer fringes caught the sunlight and changed to bronze and gold.

The church lay gutted. Dew gathering above it caused a spectrum to form outside the smoke still rising from the blackened beams.

The draft had died away, except for fitful wafts of air which caused a blackened beam here and there to glow afresh. A group of the invaders, touched at dawn by remorse (for morning light is a great revealer of conscience), went about with buckets of water to quench these fresh outbreaks. But the roof had fallen in, burying the altar.

A crucifix still stood, above the debris on the altar. Mark Cundy, who had been slaving all night, saw the crucifix through a gap where the north wall had split below a window. He was the only mortal not dispirited and worn out by the events of the night. Covered from

head to foot in grease, soot and ashes, he was hardly human. But under the lank hair his eyes were still bright with the fever of confidence. His quick wits had made yet another discovery during the horrors of the night. He was now to reveal it.

"John! John!" he cried, starting up from the circle of those who had worked at the bells and were now sitting at a rough and ready breakfast, silent and weary as they munched the bread and meat and drank the wine brought by the blacksmith and the priest from nobody knew where. "See! The Christ, standing to forgive us!"

He snatched the knife from John's belt, left the circle, and cut a spray of bitter foliage from the yew tree. John Finch and the elders stared, hand to mouth, at the black imp loping across the trampled ground to the gap in the church wall. They watched him squeeze through, pick his way over the hot floor, mount the altar, and tie the bough of yew to the crucifix, below the nailed feet, with a strand of ivy.

The priest rose, then knelt and crossed himself, to remain in prayer as the hunchback limped away to return to the circle.

Mark replaced the knife in John's belt and collapsed beside him. Nobody spoke. Nobody dared to resume eating.

"It is a sign," he said, as he eased the shoes off his feet. They were steaming and singed. "Ah!" he gasped with relief. Then he spoke again, as though to himself, or addressing an invisible multitude of ghosts. "We must do no more evil. Let us take the bells home, and have done."

Adam Cogger and Sir Stephen Alard looked at each

other, flushed, and looked away again. James Peny set down a hunk of rye bread and bent over to put his head in his hands, as though to conceal himself from his own thoughts.

John dared not look. He put his hand to the haft of his knife and felt it warm to the touch. He had the sensation of great heat and light beside him, coming from the figure of Mark Cundy, his friend—at this moment something more than his friend, something incomprehensible, beyond him.

“Do you see?” Mark went on. “We have hurt these people as they hurt us. That is enough; or worse will follow.” His voice rose, thin and piercing. John knew what that signified: one of those moods, arrogant and prophetic, that came not from the tailor’s apprentice, young and twisted of body, but from a strange creature with an authority not of this world. “I see disaster if we seek further revenge. We must sail home, and be thankful.”

Sir Stephen broke the spell. He rose, handed his empty wine horn to the serving man who had been standing behind him, and brushed his hands together. He frowned at his own embarrassment.

“Summon our people, Master Peny. All will have eaten by now. Then to the ships with the bells. We will carry the tenor on the *James of Westminster*, with some of these timbers to make a gantry on deck, so that we can swing the bell and sound it as we come into harbor, to let the people hear of our success.”

He paused and looked at the blackened hunchback. “There is truth in what the boy says,” he added, as he turned to greet Michael Yonge, who appeared with a

party of his crew after a night of pillage. "Master of *La Katherine*, will you resume command of your own ship now, and take the rest of the bells aboard?"

Whether or not this was a command, Michael Yonge was not prepared to obey.

"Nay, sir. The *Robert of Lenn* is my command on this occasion. You shall take the bells, in *La Katherine*, while I and my ruffians play the watchdog, since the Channel is not free though our fleet won the battle. We did not sink them all; and there's the error. Kindness in war is a sowing of trouble."

Such council was more familiar to Sir Stephen, and he did not deny it. With a gesture, he bid the work begin.

It was carried forward by the crews of the ships belonging to Rye. The men were weary of pillage and ready to return to discipline. They obeyed orders overeagerly, as though seeking indulgence for their escapades during the night. They had stolen, burned, and murdered; but their grimed faces shone with innocence in the clean morning light.

With joyous shouts and outbursts of song, they hauled the bells down to the boats, set up a derrick on the quay, and hoisted the tenor bell aboard the *James of Westminster*, where it was roped down firmly. The rest of the peal was taken aboard the *La Katherine*, still under Sir Stephen Alard's command. The derrick was then unshipped and put on deck with the tenor bell, for use as a gantry to swing the monster when approaching home.

Meanwhile, the stragglers had gathered on the quay, the latecomers being the most heavily laden with loot: furniture, weapons, clothes and fabrics, even baskets and

sacks of vegetables and corn, poor end-of-season stuff, not unwelcome to the hungry folk of Rye. The crew of the *Robert of Lenn* was the most heavily burdened. Michael Yonge watched his men as they stowed the stuff away. The grim features of this long-remembered seaman almost broke into a smile.

"An eye for an eye," he said, half to himself and half to the gigantic figure of James Peny, who stood beside him with the two boys, waiting the moment to go aboard the *Anna de Roussel*, which lay behind the *Robert of Penn*, nosing its stern.

Peny said nothing, but Mark Cundy at his knee piped up. "They've taken no slaves then. That's something in their favor, Master Yonge."

Michael Yonge scowled. "Bah! They took to the open country. Had they stayed to defend the town we might have done better. But we shall repair that at the next port of call."

James Peny grabbed at the hunchback, thinking he had stumbled forward, in danger of falling over the quayside. But Mark had leaped across like an angry cat, to confront the speaker. He was, for the moment, inarticulate, gasping and swallowing, while he flapped his arms up and down in a semaphore of rage.

"Madman!" he shrilled at last. "Madman! You are tempting fate. Your greed and spite will destroy you. Don't you see that wherever you put in now on this hostile coast, the people will be prepared to meet you? And do you mean Wilet? Because that is where Raymon Tarys told us the bells were held. But is that not a bait in the trap laid to catch you?"

Michael Yonge, at first taken aback, quickly recovered his habitual savagery of temper. "Quiet, you monkey! What do you know of these matters, you tailor's brat? I'll break that crooked back if you dare to disaffect my men. You should have been thrown overboard when they found you stowed away. That would work no mischief, Penny!"

Mark Cundy did not flinch. He was beside himself with anger and the fever of prophecy. Again his voice rose above the din on the crowded quay and vessels.

"I tell you, Master Yonge. I tell you all, captains of Rye. If we do no Christian thing today, the wrath of heaven will come down once more. Have you not shed enough blood, spread enough misery? Have you brought our own dead to life by the deeds of this night? You fools! You blind fools!"

His voice was so shrill that the tiny Jeremiad was heard on the *Robert of Lenn*. Those men already aboard had crowded to the gunwale, to laugh and jeer at the boy. But some of them were scared. Conscience or superstitions were touched. One or two voices were heard expostulating.

"The young wizard is right!"

The cry came from a man near enough to be hypnotized by the fervor of the small figure of Mark Cundy; the gestures, the burning eyes, the white hand pointing accusingly at Michael Yonge.

At this, the Captain woke to the danger of the boy's weird influence. "You brood of hell!" he muttered; and he made to grasp the cripple, to stop him by some violence.

He was not quick enough. John Finch darted forward and grasped his arm.

"You must not touch him, sir. You must let him speak. He is true and honest. He is not like the rest of us. He sees where we are blind. What he says is—"

"Ah!" The Captain spat over John's shoulder, and made no further move to touch Mark Cundy, who now surrendered meekly when James Peny picked him up like a child and carried him off to safety aboard the *Anna de Roussel*.

At that, the Admiral, Sir Stephen Alard, came along the quay with the vicar of St. Peter's Port, both somewhat disheveled and smoke-stained.

Sir Stephen ignored the situation. But his shrewd eye had not missed the aftereffect. He was ready to seize the opportunity offered, moment by moment, to lean to no theory or principle, and to let no personal consideration sway his decisions and actions. He was a political man.

By his mere presence, he changed a rabble into an army. The power for discipline is a mystery, not necessarily found in the most intelligent of men.

Sir Stephen stood on the quay, doing nothing, saying nothing, with the priest beside him. One by one the masters of the vessels approached and waited while the crews joined their ships quietly, subdued by the silent authority of the leader.

Then the captains followed, and lastly, Sir Stephen Alard went aboard the *La Katherine*. Poles thrust the vessels from the quayside; then came the sweeps to move the fleet from the shelter of the harbor into the wind, which still blew freshly from the northeast out of the

morning sky. Gulls shrieked, quarreling over the waste thrown from the ships. A cheer broke from the *James of Westminster*, to be taken up by the crews of the other ships.

Two figures stood on the deserted quay; the vicar of the ravished St. Peter's Port, who, after making the sign of the cross in response to the cheers from the ships, stood with his hands together, in open-eyed prayer. Beside him stood the blacksmith, leaning on a crowbar, his chin on his clasped hands.

XXII. THE OVERREACHING

THE wind being still from the northeast, the fleet had to beat up against it to make a way across the Channel. The morning was crisp and clear, with a sparkling sea that could almost be heard laughing at the fury of the gulls circling the ships.

The lead was now taken by the great ship carrying the tenor bell. Nobody had given this order. The *James of Westminster* forged ahead, luffing against the breeze as daintily as the *Anna de Roussel*, who took in sail accordingly, to hold herself back. Maybe the personality of the noble bell was alone responsible. The fleet grouped itself, with the *La Katherine* in the center and the *Anna de Roussel* in the rear. Once again, however, Michael Yonge with the *Robert of Lenn* hovered round the fleet like a sheep dog.

For an hour or two of slow tacking, he was content to harry the heels of the lagging vessels. But as soon as land began to fall away behind, he threw out a signal. "I head for Wilet."

Consternation followed. The continuity broke, vessels turning to the wind with sails shivering. Some hauled to, lying in danger of those coming up. No answering signal came from the *La Katherine*. Sir Stephen was deliberat-

ing. It was not in his training and tradition to show much mercy to an enemy.

Those few moments of waiting touched the rest of the fleet. The indecision resolved itself in favor of the master of the *Robert of Lenn*, who knew his own mind and instincts. The majority shared his reaction to foes who had robbed them of pride and possessions. More cheering broke out. The leader, the *James of Westminster*, turned sharply into the wind, and the rest followed, taking the lead to starboard for Wilet.

The *Anna de Roussel* had to follow. James Peny stood by the steersman with Mark and John lying nearby. The boys were under the scuppers, fast asleep under a blanket thrown over them by Adam Cogger.

As James gave the order to put about, he looked wryly from the boys to Cogger. The farmer chuckled and pointed to Mark Cundy. "This will set that little brand burning again, master. You will have to answer for it when he wakes."

Peny looked serious.

"'Tis to be hoped they'll sleep through it all. One night of fire and slaughter is enough for a first bleeding. They should not be here, Adam. I have still to face my sister when we put home to Rye."

"Nay, master. The triumph of bringing home the bells will banish her care."

"I wonder! Maybe I grow weary too, after a lifetime of war at sea. That cudgeling we had last year when the boy's father was first blinded and then killed has weakened my faith in the sword."

Cogger listened sullenly. He was a kindly fellow, but a

man of his time; that is, a man of the world. He believed he knew the ways of the world. But he listened now to James Peny, whom he respected for his great strength and experience in war. He got a word in first.

"These Normans will always take more than their share. They may be our kin, but they are too rough with it, and need a lesson."

Peny walked over to the boys and peered down at them. They slept on, drugged by exhaustion. He turned, touched the tiller behind the helmsman's hand, giving it a slight correction closer to the wind. He was creeping out of formation, relying on his vessel's speed to sail up past the fleet and follow hard after the *Robert of Lenn*.

That was the substance of his reply to Adam Cogger; but he was still unhappy.

"Look you, man; did you hear what that vicar said to me during the night, while we were at work dismounting the bells? He said of his own flock that they had asked for this trouble, and that our Lord would not blame us more than He blamed them. He spoke out of the Holy Book too: 'Those that live by the sword shall perish by the sword.' And when we put out from the harbor, did you see him give us the sign of the cross, though we have burned his church and scattered his people?"

"Aye," said Cogger. "It's a whole man who bears no grudge. When the bill is paid we should be ready to forget." He looked out ahead, to the *Robert of Lenn* which they were gradually overtaking, and to the coast of Normandy looming larger beyond. "But those bells may cost us dear before we've done."

The wind was shifting a little farther north, bringing

a skein of mist down Channel. It aided the purpose of Michael Yonge. By midday his ship confronted the hostile chalk cliffs. Somewhere, hidden up one or two chines, lay Wilet. But this was a lee shore. Fortunately the wind was falling. Michael Yonge dropped anchor after furling his sails. One by one the rest of the fleet gathered and halted before the cliffs, riding like a flight of gulls on the rising tide.

"I am going in," signaled Michael Yonge.

A few minutes later he put down his boats, and they pulled toward the shingle beach, helped by the tide and the gentle water. Not a human soul was to be seen. The base of the cliff was in shadow, with the sun standing high over the countryside behind the chalk face of Normandy. The few buildings below were silent. Green breaks sloped up to the right and left, where two chines led from the shore to the interior, which could not be seen from the ships.

The silence was sufficient warning to the canny old warrior Michael Yonge. Standing up in the leading boat, he signaled a halt, and his followers rode the waters while he studied the shore. He knew it as well as he knew the English coast. That made him wary. Those two chines, clothed with long grass, tamarisk bushes, gorse and broom, made perfect cover for companies of men. The sea front between could thus be an ambush for a landing force. The light, too, was not of any help. It would blind his archers.

While he was deliberating, boats put down from the *James of Westminster* and the *La Katherine*, and moved in to join those of the *Robert of Lenn* waiting offshore.

James Peny, confident of his ship's lightness to the touch, drew in closer to the shore before dropping anchor. His crew, like those of the host of tramelers, could have waded ashore.

Michael Yonge, scowling against the sun beating down on his face, saw from under his clasped hands the innocent-seeming chines and the empty beach. He hesitated. The small music of the wavelets on the shingle came like a lullaby to his ears. He suspected it might be an invitation to the sleep of death. He distrusted that silence and peacefulness which lay under the midday sun.

Then, halfway down the cliff face, almost invisible in the shadow, he saw a human figure. It was hidden from land view by protrusions of chalk, so that it stood as in a sentry box. A faint line in the chalk suggested a ridge, or even a path, cutting a diagonal down from the grass-edged top.

The captain's gaze hardened. "Ah!" he thought. "Their observer! So it's a trap!"

He was about to give an order to pull out and move along the coast to seek another break in the cliffs, when the figure began to signal with a white scarf.

"By the gods!" cried Yonge. "He is using our code of last year. Behind the times maybe, but a friend!"

The message was a warning of the intended ambush: men waiting in the chines, and a long covered pit above the waterline.

Yonge turned to look back at the fleet and to pass on the warning, with an order to move along to an unguarded landing.

He was too late. The men from the *James of West-*

minster, those recruits from outlawry in the Forest of Anderida along the weald of Kent and Sussex, had broken away from the temporary discipline again. The last night's taste of blood and plunder had whetted their appetites. They wanted more, and they went to get it.

With shouts of hungry excitement, the men leaped from the boats before they reached the shingle. As Michael Yonge shouted his order, it was instantly ignored, for the first to land were running up the beach unopposed.

They reached the trench, not seeing the skillfully contrived cover of twigs and shingle. Suddenly, the first wave of men disappeared and there rose screams and curses as the second wave tumbled on top of the first.

It was a signal for the defenders. A deadly cross-fire of arrows, like a sudden flight of starlings, caught the third wave of men as they left the boats. Many fell, and the confusion grew.

The retreat might have come at once, had not the figure on the cliff been seen to signal again. He was urging the invaders to take the left-hand, eastern chine, and first to run along the beach in front of the trench which ended as he would indicate.

With a cheer of self-encouragement, the English who had left the boats followed their leader. Michael Yonge had instantly responded to the signal, and now ran through the small surf, sword aloft. The loaded boats a few yards out rowed parallel, to reinforce the men already ashore.

The flight of arrows from the archers, concealed in the undergrowth at the entrance to the western chine, was

followed by a charge of pikemen, who fell upon the survivors of those fallen into the trench, still struggling out. Not a man escaped. Some were slain on the beach, others as they groped for handhold out of the trench, which ran with their blood.

Now the Norman pikemen were running eastward, alongside the English, with the trench between them. As they came out into the open, the figure on the cliff face disappeared.

This opening gambit of the battle was studied by Sir Stephen Alard from the castle of the *La Katherine*. He saw how the cunning preparations laid by whoever was commanding the defenses of Wilet were being weakened by this action of the body of pikemen in leaving the western chine open, since a rank or two of archers was poor defense. He gave an order to take advantage of this mistake. Men leaped from the tramelers and waded ashore, bringing planks. Rapidly assembling out of range of the archers, they bridged the trench and raced across it, to form up smartly, though now the arrows were picking out many of them.

Then, in phalanx, with their shields locked Roman-fashion as a roof against the arrows, they trod as one body up the beach toward the western chine, cutting off the Norman pikemen from a retreat and threatening the archers still hidden, and still shooting, from the bushes.

Now the reserves appeared; another body of pikemen, with a company of knights in armor behind them; a formidable defense turned to attack. The meeting took place on the beach, near the straggling bushes. At close quarters, the archers shot upward from the ground, tak-

ing the front rank of English in leg and groin, beneath the locked shields. But with a roar of rage, Michael Yonge and his picked men came in from the flank of the phalanx, like the thrust of water at the bows of a ship, and beat the bushes for the archers. One by one they were mown down and trodden into the bruised sea lavender and thistles.

On rolled the phalanx, plod! plod! into the chine and up the slope, treading those adversaries in its way but ignoring everything on its flanks. The free lances were left to deal with the opposition which the phalanx had cut into two parts.

Now came contact with the armored cavalry. The knights, seeing the ground cleared before them, set off down the chine at a steady gallop, pennons fluttering from lances and swords raised. They intended to crack that phalanx open by sheer weight and then to dispatch the footmen one by one.

But Michael Yonge had seen the horsemen at the back of the chine. He ordered his men to grasp handfuls of pebbles from the shingle at their feet. At his word of command, the phalanx was to divide as the cavalcade approached, to let it pass through to the beach. They were to throw down the pebbles on the hard surface of the ground rising from the shingle.

The order was carried out successfully. Many horses slipped on the pebbles and fell, throwing their riders to the English pikemen, who thrust at them between the joints in their armor almost before they reached the ground. Such smart work was too much for the slow-moving knights. They wavered on the beach, saw no way to

retreat, and decided to ride on to the support of their pikemen heading for the eastern chine to cut off the English. But they made slow progress on the shingle, and found themselves overborne by the English pouring over the bridged trench. Many were cut down, some galloped on eastward out of the battle; a dozen were taken as hostages, their horses running wild.

The western chine was now open. Michael Yonge reassembled his crew, whom he had persuaded, by sheer grimness of character, to accept his discipline without question. This body moved up the chine to take the town. It was followed by a looser rabble of marauders, those who put loot before glory. Soon the usual cries of agony, fear, rage filled the air, as the English entered the houses, tearing infants from their mothers' arms, slaughtering fathers, husbands, sons, as though they themselves were not also fathers, husbands and sons. Blood lust had changed them from humans into beasts, as it had changed many of those present victims a year ago when they descended in like manner upon the folk of Rye. The pendulum of revenge measured another period.

Meanwhile, James Peny decided to follow the orders of Sir Stephen Alard, in the over-all conduct of the attack on the town. He put down a boat, and made straight for land with Cogger and his other officers, first instructing the fighting men of the *Anna de Roussel* to wade ashore and make along the forefront of the beach, as the quickest way to attack at the eastern chine.

The lowering of the boat, and the commotion of men preparing to leap over the gunwales, loaded with gear, woke the sleeping boys. John felt himself being shaken.

He opened his eyes, blinked in the glaring midday sunlight, and realized that Mark was leaning over him.

He sat up, almost overthrowing the white, trembling hunchback, whose inadequate body was taking its revenge after the overnight exertions.

"What is it? Are we home?"

"Home! Home!" the voice broke on derision. "They have tricked us, John. We are betrayed!"

Mark was weeping with rage. John was so confused that he saw nothing absurd in Mark's outcry—its assumption that he was in command of the whole expedition, responsible for bringing home the Bells of Rye.

"What, are we caught by their fleet?"

He jumped up, to see the fleet stationary off the coast of France, the battle in progress ashore, and the movement of men from the ships.

"Mark! See, my Uncle James and Adam Cogger have gone. Uncle! Uncle!"

He shouted over the gunwale to the boat already halfway to the beach. His uncle turned and shouted in reply through his trumpeted hands. But his command—for it sounded like a command—was lost in the din of battle, the cries of excited men making for the shore, and the never-ceasing murmur of sea on shingle, the farthest-reaching whisper in the world.

"He's ordering us back," guessed John. "We're not to go ashore."

"And what does that mean, John? They're going to fire the town. This must be Wilet, and obviously it is ready for them. Look! The sea front is running with blood. Oh God forgive them! They are mad, mad!"

He grasped the gunwale with his puny hands and leaned over as though about to be sick. But it was a sickness of soul, from which he instantly recovered under the command of that strange, steeling will which was probably the only power that had kept him alive since his deformed birth.

"We must go, John! Look, they are up the chine there and will soon have the town at their mercy."

"But what can we do?"

Mark looked scornfully at him. "Do? We can do everything. We have the vision. They none of them see, neither the brutes who are led, nor Sir Stephen and the others who lead them. They are blind! Blind!"

His voice rose in a wail of angry despair. "But we lose time. Help me over the side, John. I am weak after last night. My bones rebel."

Before John could help him, however, he grasped a sailor by the arm and commandeered him as a beast of burden, to carry him ashore. The man at first stared, incredulous. One look into those blazing eyes quelled the sailor into obedience. Gently, reverently as though handling an object of religion, the man picked up Mark Cundy, set him on his shoulders and lowered himself into the surf. John followed with the man's pike, first assuring himself that his own knife was in his belt.

The sailor appeared to be uplifted by the burden on his shoulders. He became a Saint Christopher of the hour, unwilling to give up his privilege. This suited Mark, who instructed him to make for the western chine, now given to one-way traffic of English feet toward the town.

The trio followed that trend, John at the sailor's heels.

Mark stared ahead, his madness and prophetic mood upon him like a royal crown. The ravaged face white as parchment, the set lips so unboyish, the wrinkled forehead and the lank, silky hair, the hunched back too weak to carry the mental beacon now flaring up in alarm—these were the signs John observed as he trod the sea grasses stained with the blood of those already fallen in this unnecessary carnage.

The noise of the combat joined at the eastern chine reached the ears of the strange trio as they approached the town. But they did not heed it. Their attention was fastened upon the scene that lay around them as they entered the streets and came to the market place.

The marauders had already broken into the houses and were carrying out objects that took their fancy, throwing other gear wantonly from upper windows. There were sights more horrible than that: the cruelty to women, girls and children, and the slaughter of the men trying to defend them. Degradation such as animals could never improvise was practiced, cold, heartless, by men who in a few days' time would be returning to their fishing nets and pasturing sheep, from the axis of peaceful homes alike in all respects to those which they were now violating.

John's stomach heaved, but he hardened himself to the sight by compelling his mind to recall the image of his dead father, and the evil done to Rye a year ago.

No such attempt was made by Mark Cundy. He surveyed the scene from the shoulders of his temporary Saint Christopher, his gaze flickering like an accusing fire from one detail to another of this playground of hell.

"The town hall!" he said. "Take me to the town hall!"

He tugged the sailor by the hair, guiding him as he wanted. The sight of this impassioned creature, on the shoulders of a man with another boy at his heels, was so singular that comrades made way for them. Even fleeing citizens looked over their shoulders, their curiosity endangering their efforts to escape.

As the little party approached the town hall, John Finch saw a figure whom he recognized! Signor Barde came hurrying out of the main entrance.

"What are you doing here?" he cried, pushing through the demented crowd, careless of his own safety. "Who allowed you to come? It is madness! Quick! Come back with me, for anything may happen! Your mother, John! Your mother!"

He was distraught. He seized John and tried to bustle him forward into the shelter of the portico of the town hall, where the City Fathers stood, guarded by a platoon of pikemen stationed by Michael Yonge, who knew that these officials were more valuable as hostages for ransom than as corpses.

Before John could begin to explain, his attention was turned to Mark, who had seen a group of the rougher types from the *James of Westminster*. They were milling before the west end of the church, and piling broken furniture and other inflammable stuff against the great doors of carved oak. They had no profit from this. The action was mechanical, mischievous.

Mark cried aloud and raised both arms above his head. Then he brought them forward, as though about to take flight like a raven toward the church. His human steed

turned and carried him forward at a jog trot. So ominous was Mark's appearance that the mob of ruffians divided to let him through.

John, though bewildered by the speed of events and the unexpected appearance of his tutor, knew that he must not be separated from Mark Cundy. He put up a hand and held on to his friend's leg.

They found themselves on the steps of the church, Mark still aloft on the shoulders of the sailor, who stood panting while Mark began to address the crowd. John stood in front of him, watching for any untoward movement among the men nearby. One hand was on his knife handle, loose in the sheath. Danger had dispelled his squeamishness. All that he realized at this moment was that he must defend Mark. The presence of Signor Barde, though unexplainable, gave him courage and clarity of mind. He could see him now, over the heads of the mob whom Mark was haranguing. The Italian was urging the leader of the platoon to detail some pikemen to come to the protection of the boys.

Mark's passionate address to the crowd was accompanied by violent gesticulations. He leaned forward over the bare head of the sailor, like that same raven now in front of its nest, beating its wings in rage, beak thrust forward, uttering deadly threats. But even his shrill voice could not be heard individually in the general uproar. The destroyers, determined to burn the church, laughed and jeered.

That is the scene which greeted the second familiar figure to emerge from the town hall. Raymon Tarys, who had planned the defense of the town and the ambush

on the beach, was savage with anger at the failure of his plans. He suspected his old enemy, the Italian. He was about to confront him and demand to know what he was doing here at all, when the picture of Mark Cundy caught his attention. Instantly, he misconstrued what was happening. He saw only the mischievous imp who had witnessed his designs of private interest that night on the Isle of Oxney, an interruption which had delivered a consignment of smuggled wine publicly into the hands of the farmer, Adam Cogger, thus giving this man a dangerous hold, as well as the boys. He saw Cogger too, farther off with Michael Yonge, and instantly he suspected them of a larger conspiracy in the matter of taking important prisoners for future ransom. But chiefly, his venom was directed at the hunchback, that sinister, unnatural little monster (as he saw him), now urging the mob to further and more blasphemous violence.

Unable to restrain himself, Raymon Tarys lunged forward, spurred by a courage not habitual to his calculating nature.

John had not seen this fresh menace. He was standing on the other side of the sailor, still with a handhold on Mark's leg, while looking out over the jeering crowd for any sign of hostile action against his friend.

Suddenly he felt a jerk at his arm as Mark was seized from the left and pulled from the sailor's shoulders. The shrill voice foundered; the plea for decency and humanity was cut off.

John dashed around as the sailor lurched aside under the attack. He saw Mark held in the air by his jacket, and

Raymon Tarys, no longer cautious, stabbing the helpless figure again and again.

John leaped, knife in hand, but as he aimed a blow at the murderer, he struck only the air above the crumpled figure of Mark Cundy. Signor Barde was first. He had leaped from the other side, seized Raymon Tarys by the throat and pulled him down.

"Here is the traitor!" he shouted. "Let him answer for Rye!"

He flung Raymon Tarys into the arms of the nearest ruffians, who fell on the Frenchman like dogs on a fox, thrusting their pikes into his body and tossing it back from rank to rank until it disappeared in the melee.

John fell forward on his knees beside Mark Cundy, and his knife dropped from his hand. Signor Barde picked it up and stood with it in his hand, looking down on the boys.

"We must get him back to the ship," he said. "Let me carry him, John."

Mark, from lying on his side, apparently unconscious, turned, opened his eyes and smiled faintly. Blood trickled from his mouth, but he was able to whisper, as John leaned over and slipped an arm beneath, to ease the pressure of the stone steps on the misshapen back.

"John," he whispered, "this time it is true. This time there is poppy juice in the wine."

His head fell back, and he was dead.

XXIII. THE BELLS OF RYE

THAT night the wind blew hard again, fanning the fires in the stricken town. The fleet was forced to lie at anchor offshore, its hulls sulking in the glare from the holocaust. Not until near noon of the following day was it possible to hoist sail and make for home, with hostages aboard and various loot: jars of wine to compensate for the forty-two stolen from Rye, furniture, garments and woven materials, women and children to be sold into slavery.

The rolls of lead, recovered from St. Peter's Port, were distributed among the three larger vessels, the *James of Westminster*, the *La Katherine*, and the *Robert of Lenn*. The *Anna de Roussel*, now second in line after the *James of Westminster*, also carried a roll of lead and some tapestries which James Peny had rescued from the fire. He intended to give them to his sister Mistress Finch, to take the place of some of those she had lost at the hands of the Normans a year ago.

Under one of the tapestries, which represented the seizure of the boy Ganymede by the god Zeus, lay the body of Mark Cundy. That tortured back no longer mattered. Mark was released from the handicap which had fettered him since birth. The fiery spirit, shrewd, subtle, vainly ambitious, was free.

This was the reality which Signor Barde, sitting with John Finch on a coil of rope beside the shrouded figure, gently spoke about to the stricken boy.

At first, accompanying the corpse with Barde as the sailor carried it out of the burning town down to the *Anna de Roussel*, John had been unconsolable. And in his grief was a core of anger that it was not his hand which had avenged Mark's death.

But now his knife was sheathed. The lesson which Mark had failed to teach, and had died for, came home to John as he sat on deck, in the isolation felt by all seaborne folk. Beating back, hour after hour, across the Channel toward home, gave John time to ponder on the two days of events; the violence, the vanity and emptiness of revenge; the numbness of mind and spirit which follows death dealing, and an abuse of justice. He saw that "an eye for an eye" leads only to greater blindness.

Mark Cundy was the one who now saw clearly.

As this truth came home to John Finch, he leaned forward, put his head in his hands, and secretly wept. But they were tears of gratitude and relief.

Signor Barde had stopped talking, and the two, tutor and pupil, sat in silent sympathy, in communion not only with each other, but with Mark Cundy. It was a strange sensation for John; something larger, more powerful and positive than he had ever known before. It balanced his sorrow and the shock of all he had experienced during the raid.

Even so, he could not help saying to Signor Barde, as they stood up at the outcry of "Land ahead!": "This need not have happened, signor. If only they had listened

to him, and been satisfied with bringing home the bells."

A hand on his shoulder made him turn, to see Adam Cogger. "Nay, young master. 'Tis but natural. We mortals do more than we intend. That's why Mother Church exists, to pull us home again." He pointed to the tiny figure under the tapestry, was about to speak, but shook his head and smiled. "See, masters, we are coming into Rye Harbor comfortably under shelter from that north-easter. You feel the wind falling?"

Another day was closing as the fleet drew in, to follow the *James of Westminster* and the *Anna de Roussel*. The western rays flooded across the calm waters of the haven and outlined the hills beyond the marsh. In the foreground, the isolated height crowned by the newly rising town of Rye was silhouetted, with the sunset fire before and behind it.

Its people could be seen gathering on the water front, to greet the homecomers.

Slowly, from the *James of Westminster*, there spread out a deep stain of sound. It was the voice of the tenor bell. It seemed to darken the tone of the waters and the aspect of the hills. The first reverberation rolled across the harbor only a little faster than the movement of the ships. Before it could reach the shore and echo back, a second boom from the bell was launched, to follow the first: then a third, and a fourth. The whole arena of the waters enclosed by the marsh, the meadows, the downs, was alive and vibrant with sound.

The people ashore were silent. The authority of this voice held them in worship, as it held John Finch. He stood with his tutor on the deck of the *Anna de Roussel*,

staring ahead at he knew not what—some new power breaking above his life, a glory and a promise that he could not yet understand.

The sunset light crossed the deck and picked out a part of the pattern in the tapestry shrouding the body of Mark Cundy. John saw the hand of the boy Ganymede holding up a golden cup above the breast of his friend.

Signor Barde drew John closer to his side.

“Your mother, John! Thank God, your mother! I can bring you to her.”

John looked up at him, still not able fully to understand. But he was content to let the music of the great tenor bell of Rye roll around his universe.

