

The Fall of the Grand Sarrasin eBook

The Fall of the Grand Sarrasin

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CHAPTER I.

Of how I, *Nigel de Bessin*, was brought up by the monks of *the Vale* in *Guernsey Island*, and how on a certain day the abbot gave me choice of two lives, and which I chose.

This is the chronicle of me, Nigel de Bessin, of good Norman stock, being a cadet of the great house, whose elder branch is even to-day settled at St. Sauveur, in the Cotentin. And I write it for two reasons. First, for the sake of these grandchildren, Geoffrey, Guy, and William, who gather round me in the hall here at Newton, asking for the story of great deeds of old days, such as were the deeds of Tancred and Duke Rollo, and him I loved and fought for—loved, though stern he was and rude—William, who by his mighty conquest gave us our place in this fair realm. And second, since the winter days are long, and I go no more out to hunt or to fight as of old, to recall all this and more will have much sweetness, and delight my old heart with gentle memories, like the smell of lavender laid between robes or napery in the oak press yonder, as one takes this or that from the store.

And first, how came I to write it in such clerkly wise? Ay, that was through the foresight of my uncle, the Vicomte de Bessin, since I knew not then my father, and the good care of the monks of the Vale, and chiefly of Brother Bernard, a ripe scholar and a good, with whom I progressed so well in learning, that at fifteen I was more like to have put this grissled head under a cowl than under a soldier's helm. A fair place was L'Ancrese in the days of Abbot Michael, false Maugher, and the Grand Sarrasin. And a good school of manners and of learning of books and piety, that may aid men in their earthly life, was the Vale Cloister. I see it now—the quiet, sober place, with its great round arches, and its seats of stone, pleasant and cool in summer, bitter cold in winter, when the wind came in sharp from the Eastern sea, so that we wrapt our Norway furs about us, and shivered as we sat, till Brother Bernard said, "Up, lads; catch who catch can up to the Viking's tomb!" or "Haste ye now, and run to meet the pirates in Bordeaux Bay, and bring them to me to shrive, ere ye do them to death, as Normans should!" The blood ran free and warm then, and the limbs grew straight and strong, and the muscles of arms and legs like whipcord, and brown we were as the brown rocks of L'Ancrese Bay, as we played at war on those salt-breathed plains—Guy, Rainauld, Gwalkelyn. Alas! they are all passed to their account! There were no aches or pains of back or shoulder; there were no mean jealousies, no bitter hatreds, no discourtesies, no words that suit not the sons of good knights or lords, but wrestle or tussle and mock battle, and tourney, and race by land or water in summer, when our bodies gleamed white beneath the calm waves as we played like young dolphins in the bay. And ever and anon would Brother Hugo be amongst us, his



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cowl thrown back, and his keen eagle face furrowed into merriment as he sped on some knightly play—for he himself was a nobleman, and had been a good knight, and a famous name lay hid under that long Benedictine robe. Thus, wondrous peacefully and happily had I been reared with other right princely youths and some of humble lineage in that fair place. And but one unhappiness ever disturbed my joyous spirit. It was that while all had fathers and mothers that loved them, and took pride in their increase in learning year by year, or else had dear memories of those that were their parents, I had been told naught of my parents save their name, and asking of them was bidden not to ask further. This at times was a grief to my spirit, but amid so many joys it weighed not on me heavily.

Now it was before the coming of the Grand Sarrasin and his troop of the wild off-scouring of every sea, that settled in the midst of the isle and defied lord and squire, abbot and prior—it was before those days with which my chronicle has most to do—that to me, Nigel, sitting conning an old book of knightly exploits, which for a reward Brother Hugo let us read on summer days, came a summons to go and see no less a one than the abbot himself. Now, the abbot was a great man of holy and blameless life, that sat in his own chamber towards the west, and had much traffic in matters of State and Church with the duke, and messengers went often to and fro from him to Caen, Rouen, and Paris, and in that year, the year one thousand and fifty-seventh since the birth of the Saviour of men, ever adorable and blessed, there was much afoot, for William, with the young blood still in him, gaining to himself by force of will chief power upon the mainland, was already spreading his wings like a young falcon for another more terrible flight. And lately Maugher, his uncle, and his bitterest foe though out of his own household, he had banished, archbishop though he was, from Rouen, to our small Isle of Guernsey, where there was scarce footing for the tread of so great and dark a schemer in high matters. And already the Conqueror had himself appeared at Edward's Court in England, and prepared his way thither.

I was near sixteen years old, and I stood tall for my years, some five foot and a half, and for a lad I was well made, if yet lacking my full strength and girth round the chest, such a lad as in two years more Geoffrey my grandson will grow to, if God will. Fair I should have been if I were not burnt black with the hot sun pouring through the salt air, and my fair hair clustered crisp and neat round my temples and neck. So stood I, no doubt a fair and honourable youth, at the entering in of the abbot's inner chamber.

And the abbot, sitting in his carven chair amid his rolls of parchment and instruments of writing, raised me swiftly as I stooped to kiss his hand. Dark-eyed, hawk-nosed, with black hair not yet flecked with snow, there was an awe and stateliness in him whether he spoke to gentle or to simple. He was a Norman, and being such feared none, and had his will, and when it was possible mixed a rare gentleness with his acts and words.



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“Son,” said he, “thou hast been happy here?”

The keen eyes were fixed upon me, and I could not but answer the truth, even had I wished to lie.

“Yes, holy father,” I answered.

“And thou wouldst stay here ever?” The eyes were still upon me, and they searched my soul as a bright flush, I knew, rose to my cheek, and I hesitated how to answer. Then suddenly, as I stood in doubt, they seemed to change, and it was as if sunlight gleamed over a landscape that before lay dark and grim, for the abbot smiled upon me with the kindest of all smiles. “Thou feelest no calling to the cloister and the cowl, the book and the pen, the priesthood, and the life of prayer?”

“Ah, no, holy Father.” I had gained my tongue, and spoke boldly, if reverently. “Books and prayer are good; but I am young, and there is a world beyond these grey walls, and my kinsmen fight and do rather than pray or read.”

“The eaglet beats his wings against his cage already,” said the abbot, kindly; “it is indeed a shapely bird. Thou art right, lad. There is a world outside, where men strive and fight and do—how blindly and how wildly thou knowest not. But the battle is not to the strong or the race to the swift, though so it seem. Go, then, out into the world boldly but warily, and be thou a good soldier, as thou art a good scholar. Thine uncle shall know of these words between us.”

I knelt again and kissed his hand, and left his broad and pleasant chamber.

And outside I strolled upon the green, dim vague thoughts surging up swift into my mind, as I went striding on swifter than I knew. Ere long I reached the extreme limit of the land, the high-piled rocks of L’Ancrese. I looked out upon the sea to where Auremen lay flat and wide against the sky, and I thought I could descry the Norman shores and La Hague Cape stretching towards me; and, though I knew no home but the Vale Cloister, another voice of home seemed calling me over thither. A voice in which battlecries and trumpet-blasts were strangely mingled; and I seemed to see men fighting and striving, and banners and pennons flying; and a voice seemed to spring up from my soul, bidding me go forth, and fight and strive with them, and gain something—I knew not what.

I knew not then; but I know now, what that voice was, that yearning, that discontent with the past. It was the Norman blood rising within me, the blood of force, and battle, and achievement. Surely there is something in us Normans—a hidden fire, which sends us forth and onwards, and makes us claim what we will for our own! And having claimed it, we fight for it, and fighting we win it. So with Tancred of Hauteville, so with Rou, so with William. Will of iron, heart of fire! A grand thing it is to be born a Norman.



CHAPTER II.

Of *Vale Castle*, hard by the *Abbey*, and how I was sent with a letter to *Archbishop Maugher*, and by the way first saw the *Sarrasin* pirates at work.



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Now, men were busy in the Vale. I have yet said no word of Vale Castle, built a mile away from the cloister, of hewn stone, goodly and strong. It lay upon the left horn of St. Sampson's Harbour, near where that holy man landed with the good news of God in days of old, and its stout bastions rested on the bare rock, and its walls seemed one with the rock below, so thick and stout they were, built as Normans alone can build, to last as long as the rocks, as long as the earth. And in Vale Castle no lord or baron ruled. It was the Castle and outward defence of the Vale Cloister, and its lord was the Abbot of the Vale. And within its ramparts there was room (as we found ere long), in times of danger from pirate or strange foes, for all the brethren and children of the Cloister, and for many more besides, so that when the watch-tower fire sprang into life upon the beacon, and the alarm-bell rang out by night or day, the folk of the dale came flocking in with their babes and their most prized goods for shelter beneath the abbot's wing. Vale Castle feared no pirate-band, and in a short space all our most precious things could be secured behind those walls snug and safe enough, until the evil men who had come to alarm our peace steered their long ships away again, sore dissatisfied with the plunder of our isle. So well guarded we were, and so strong were our three castles, within whose walls all who listed could find safety. As, indeed, it proved in the attack of the great Moor, of which this chronicle will chiefly tell.

Now, the Castle had been built some forty years before, by none other than the great Cherbourg himself, Duke Robert's engineer. For it chanced that Duke Robert was royally entertained years ago by Abbot Magloirios, when he was forced by foul weather to put into L'Ancrese Bay, who, on his departure, left Cherbourg and other skilled men to build three castles for their safety against pirates. So it was through Duke Robert's stay at the Vale that our Castle was made so strong. Thus God brought here, as ever, good out of evil.

And among the lay brothers were good soldiers, who could man the Castle. And once, in bygone days, they say a whole company of knights (all resting now in Abraham's bosom, and their bodies in the Vale churchyard) came together, and sought to be made quit of the world and its strife in our peaceful cloister. These, though they left the world behind, were able to teach for safety's sake something of warlike matters to the brethren; and thus it chanced that our brothers were ready to be men of war when peace was impossible, and men said of them, in rhyiming fashion—

“White cowl and white cloak,
Chain-mail and hard stroke.”

Now, about this Castle of late men had been more than ever busy. Sundry instruments of besieged men of a new and deadly fashion lay in the armoury, and were at times by Brother Hugo brought out and practised by the brethren that formed, as he said, his *corps d'armes*. Then were they soldiers indeed, not monks at all, as, cassock and cowl thrown aside, they drew the bows, or aimed with their great engines the balls of stone and iron.



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Now, it was in those days that the abbot sent me on matters more heavy than I knew to that archbishop of whom I have already made mention, who, his state laid aside, lay in exile as a poor humble man, though Duke William's uncle, in a small moat-house, by name Blanchelande, with little land attached beyond the forest of St. Pierre, and hard by the bay of the Saints of God.

Though I would fain haste to our meeting, yet must I first tell what manner of man he was reckoned by the folk of our island and by ourselves. Abbot Michael had expressly charged us, on his first coming, we should believe nothing of aught we heard of him. Yet tales went round, and gathered force as they went, ill tales that took scant time to travel; and we lads, innocent of mind, were full of shame for what was common talk, and we were ready to believe that here was no common sinner. We knew there were witch women whom men justly burn for sin. And of Archbishop Maugher men said a spirit of evil ever went with him, or was at his hand.

Now, when abbot Michael gave me the missive into my hand, there was a look in his face that seemed to ask if I feared the journey; but I took it readily and heartily, and turned to go.

“Stay,” said the abbot, as I went. “Bring me word how my Lord Archbishop takes my letter, what he says, how he looks. Bring me his slightest word, his least look. Thou art quick and clever. Do my bidding as a good lad should. Thou hast naught to fear of such as he.”

So I went forth boldly, leaving the Vale behind me, and within an hour had entered among the trees that part it from the forest land.

Now, in due course of travel I reached that high point of the isle whence through the trees one can look down on all sides save the south, and see the blue waves and the distant islands, and there lay, I knew, the earthworks of an ancient fort, that the first tenants of the isle used for defence in days long past—yea, and their wall of stone circled the space this way and that, and the roofless walls of some building—a temple perhaps—stood near, wherein they worshipped the false god of the sky or the hearth; here awhile I rested, and after brake again into the path, and made for the Bay of the Saints, where Maugher dwelt.

Now, I was not far upon my road when I heard a faint whistle through the trees, and, running back a few yards, I saw the old ruins I had left, not empty, as I had left them, but—strange sight—tenanted, I could see, by men, and, as I thought, men of evil aspect. Now, I knew that they had seen me, and thought me well upon my road, so I dared not return; and, indeed, I feared in my heart, for I had little doubt they were pirates, if not spirits of the men of old of whom I had been dreaming. Therefore I went swiftly on my path, and covered quite a mile ere I brake into the forest again, and made my way back



to another side of that old ruined fort. Now, as I crept up, I saw little that was strange—
only



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two men walking to and fro in earnest conversation, and from where I lay—for nearer I durst not approach—I could hear nothing of their talk. They were men of light and supple build, bearded, and of dark swarthy skin, as of those who know no shelter but the decking of a ship, and their hands were seldom absent, as they paced it side by side, from the hilts of the brace of daggers swinging from their waists. I guessed that they were pirates, and my heart fell as I remembered what manner of men they were—haters of all—their God, their king, their fellow-men—and how, in consequence, the hand of man was against their hand, as their hand was against man's. Where were the other men I had seen? In a moment I guessed the truth, for I caught the dull sound of digging and delving in the earth below—thud, thud, thud—as of many spades and picks, and beyond the angle of the wall I saw the earthwork piled with new earth in many places. So my young eyes peered curiously and cautiously out through the leaves, and a flood of feelings struggled in my heart, and the digging went on—thud, thud, thud—beneath my very feet, and the two strange men trod ever up and down, staying at times upon their way to point to this side or that, to tap the wall, or draw figures with their swords amid the fallen leafage.

I stood a long time fixed to the ground, and then with a great effort I stole noiselessly away, and, once on the beaten track, I hastened on to the moat-house.

With a heart that I could hear beating, I turned my back on the bay, and, crossing the little drawbridge, craved of a warder at the gate—half fisher, half ecclesiastic, in a frayed frock and seamen's shoes—an audience of my Lord the Archbishop for the delivery of a missive from the Abbot of the Vale, that must be delivered into his hand alone.

CHAPTER III.

Of my Lord Maugher and his Familiar Demon. How he received the abbot's letter, and how I was courteously entertained at his house of Blanchelande.

And my lord was not difficult of access. He sat in a deep chair in the hall, and round him were all manner of strange things whose shape and name I knew not, but little was there save old rolls of parchment to betoken a Churchman's dwelling. A great table held bottles of many shapes of glass and earthenware, and optic glasses and tools lay intermingled. I caught the gleam of much bright steel on settle and shelf—chain-mail, targe, dagger, helmet, and sword. A great warrior's complete equipment, tunic and hose of mail, shield, and helm, hung before me as I entered. Three huge hounds, with heavy chaps hanging loose from their jaws, lay about the hearth, but only noted my entrance with a drowsy gaze, then dropped back upon their paws; but a strange ugly creature, like an ill-shaped child, that was so vile to look on that I thought him the very Devil himself, crouching on the table by the archbishop's side,



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set up a chattering and a muttering, with now and then a kind of mocking laughter like a madman's meaningless merriment. Nor would he cease until my lord clouted him twice or thrice rudely on his ill-favoured crown with a "Hist, folly, stay thy devil's clatter." Now, this beast it was, one, I suppose, of those apes that King Solomon trafficked in, that gave rise to the saying that a familiar from Hell housed with my lord in Guernsey. But being of a bold spirit, and expecting even worse than I yet saw from the ill-fame of my lord, and the tales of monk and churl, I stood firm, and with something of a courtier's air placed in his hand the letter I bore, with a simple, "Greeting, your grace, from my lord the Abbot of the Vale;" and as I gave the letter, I set my gaze on him for the first time square and straight, and met eyes as keen and straight as mine own. Now, this surprised me, for I had heard evil men could not look straight into men's faces. He was far above the common height, and his body and face were very fat; like a great bull of the stall he lay in his chair. His face was full and red, and I noted he had little hair, save a mass, half grey, half red, that clung about his ears and neck. Of his passions I was soon to see evidence, for having gazed at me a moment, he took the letter from my hand, tore away the seal, and unrolled the scroll. As he did so I saw another little scroll roll out, which fell upon the ground before my feet. Then I knelt and handed this to him likewise. Can I ere forget his look as he took it from me, or wrung it rather from my fingers?

"Whence hast thou this? Whence came it?" he shrieked, with a rabble of ill words; and for a moment it seemed he would have crushed me in his great sinewy clenched hands as I stood there before him. His face was scarlet that before was only red. Great black veins started up upon his forehead, and his round blue eyes were straining out of the flesh in which they were enclosed.

I stood firm before him, and humbly showed him that the second scroll fell out of the first. Then he turned suddenly upon his heel and went towards the window, and looking forth upon the bay below in a few moments calmed himself, read what was writ on the first scroll, and with an air of unconcern tossed them to a corner of the table.

"Thou knowest naught of these papers, lad?" he said at length.

"Naught, my lord, in good faith, save that I bore them hither."

"And thou didst well to do that," he said, "for here is a matter dangerous to me, as thou sawest by mine anger. Your good abbot hath done well to send me this letter by thee."

I answered not, since it was not for me to speak, and yet I craved to know what could be in the second scroll to move him so.

"May I return with your grace's greeting or other message to my lord?" I said.



“Ay, and by word of mouth,” he said. “We exiled men well-nigh forget to write, nor have much practice in the tools of the clerk. Tell the abbot the Archbishop of Rouen thanks him for his courtesy, and that this paper—this paper was written by some foe of other days that chooses thus to strike the fallen. Canst thou carry that.”



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I said I could, but I thought that there was an ill lie behind his words.

“Hist, good lad, what is thy name?” said he.

“Nigel de Bessin, nephew of the Vicomte of St. Sauveur,” I answered.

He pondered and gazed at me curiously. “Ay, well I knew thy grandsire, the old vicomte,” said he. “And thine uncle has had of me other gifts than shriving.”

Now it came into my heart to ask him of my father, since he knew my grandsire and my uncle; so I said boldly—

“And didst thou know my father?”

“Ay, I knew him—I knew him,” said he; “but what do they tell thee of him?”

“Nothing, in sooth, my lord,” I answered; “and bid me wait till my pupillage is over.”

“Then I may tell thee naught more than thou knowest, save that we were good friends. Thou wilt not long be bearing missives for your abbot, if thou art like thy sires. Thou art soon for Normandy?”

I wished not to unfold my purpose to this man, so I simply bowed, and prepared to go with due courtesy. Now, as I knelt upon one knee, he laid his hand upon my shoulder wondrous kindly, and raised me up by the arm, and led me to a seat so gently that for the moment I forgot that I distrusted him. Then he spoke of studies, and brought down some great tomes, excellently well writ and pictured in French scriptoria, and turning from them to his table he showed me a wondrous box, which looking through, as I held it up, I saw as it were the far off bay draw near to mine eyes, so that I could see men walk clear where I saw but shapes before. And with surprise I well-nigh dropped it from my hands. He took it from me, and told me I had seen what none had seen in the earth before but he alone.

And the thought entering into my mind that here was something more than human, he seemed to guess it, and said with a smile that was hard and keen—

“Nor is there wizardry therein, save the wizardry of a lonely man, that devises new solace for his loneliness.”

A pasty was ere long set before us and a flask of wine, whereof we both partook.

“Say not,” said he, “that my lord of Rouen sends his guests hungry away.”

So we ate together. And after eating, as the sun was already stealing down the western sky, he bade me farewell, and pressed a little ring upon my finger as I left him, bidding



me not forget to see him again ere I left for the wars, and at any time he said he would stand my friend, with a greater air of power, it struck me, than one could show who knew no other future than more long years of exile, such as he now lived in our small isle.

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Now, as I turned from the drawbridge at the moat-house of Blanchelande to go homewards the remembrance came to me of those men that I guessed were pirates digging their storehouse in mother earth in the midst of the wood. And thinking on it, though I feared them not, I had no taste to return to the vale that way. So, instead, I followed the path rugged and uneven as it was, along the side of the cliff to the northward. First along the gorge of the Bay of Saints I went by the side of the stream that ran singing from Blanchelande, and then I cut straight up the cliff amid the heather, and so came into sight of Moulin Huet, where an ugly craft, that I liked not the sight of lay at anchor, right under the nose of Jerbourg Castle, wherein our abbot had a small corps of men, even as at the Vale. I stood a moment looking down on her riding deep in the sky-blue water, and presently I saw a boat put out from shore with men on board that rowed towards her. I could not tell if they were the same I saw up by the chateau, but I guessed they were, as I saw them climb into the bark. And then I journeyed on, clinging here and there to the cliff or the green stuff that grew thereon, like a very cat of the woods, past Fermain Bay, and through the little township of St. Pierre Port, and I wondered, since the pirate bark was so near at hand, that naught was stirring in the street or on the jetty. Now, St. Pierre Port was a pleasant place to me. A little world of its own, for every man of St. Pierre Port was a soldier, and could draw bow and slash with his broadsword, and pirates meddled not much with St. Pierre Port, for its men were tough and stern and loved their homes right well.

I stayed not to chatter with fishermen or priest to-day; but hasted on, and at length the little tower of St. Sampson arose before me, and ere long I was at the abbot's lodging.

The abbot paced up and down his orchard and garden of flowers.

"Thou art late, my son," said he. "Did my lord detain you?"

"My lord," I said, "was very kind and gentle, far beyond that I dreamed possible, and kept me with good entertainment and choice converse far into the day."

"And my lord was pleasing to thy taste?" said Abbot Michael, with a strange smile, not like his own, that I knew not.

"How may I, holy Father," answered I, "speak aught but well of him, who did me no ill, but good only? And, indeed, my lord spake to me out of his store of knowledge, as to one not ignorant and young; but, indeed, like himself in age and state. And yet, in good faith, he pleased me not at first."

"And how was that?"

"There seemed indeed, Father, somewhat that I distrusted, and then his passion at the opening of thy scroll was terrible to see."



“Ay, was he moved? And what said he when he perceived that inner scroll?” inquired the abbot.

“Moved, Father! I thought he might have done some deadly deed. But he calmed himself at length.”



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“And what sent he in return?”

“Nothing in writing,” I answered, “but this by my mouth—that the inner scroll was the writing of some foe of other days, who thus strikes at a fallen man.”

The abbot mused in silence at this reply, and took a pace or two beside his lily border. Then he gazed seriously at me for a moment, and bade me walk by his side.

“Thou hast seen to-day, son, one of the world’s schemers, and thou hadst been, as was natural, deceived by him. With ill men first impressions are the true ones. Thou hadst been more than a stripling of the cloister, and we had taught thee over well for thy years, had he, whose power has lain in such arts, not made thee love him in spite of thyself. Son, dost thou know why this Maugher lies here in exile?”

“Ay, Father, was he not like St. John of old, who said, ‘Thou shalt not have her:’ to King Herod?” answered I, as I thought aptly.

“Indeed, my son, they said so, and strong were the archbishop’s words when Duke William wedded against God’s law. But thou wilt learn, that words and censures of Holy Church are too oft like daggers and knives in the hands of evil men in high places of the Church—and such was this censure of the marriage of Matilda in the hand of Maugher. He would have cut his way with it—dost thou know whither, son?”

“Whither, Father?”

“My son, to the dukedom itself, Churchman though he was.”

I listened in astonishment, and an air of doubt must have shone out from my innocent eyes, that never knew to hide the thought within.

“Wouldst thou have proof of this that I say, and know how even to-day this serpent in our island-grass bites at the heel of princely authority?” the abbot asked.

“Indeed, Father, I would. His words to me so frank, his description of great men so just—his——” I was about to be fervent indeed in the praise of my new-found friend. Abbot Michael drew a scroll from his breast, and held it before my eyes with firm fingers, watching me intently the while. It was like the scroll I had taken to Blanchelande within the other. It was the same scroll, or a cunning copy, for there lay two great hasty blots upon it in one corner, and its signature ran up the page like a ladder against a wall.

“Read here, and here,” said he, “and understand how this cursed man would incite milder men to shed Duke William’s blood!”



CHAPTER IV.

Of the coming of the Sarrasins in force, and of the building of their chateau. Of Brother Hugo's confidence in God, and how I rang the alarm-bell at *St. Pierre Port*.

Through that journey to Blanchelande I was able to give the first warning to the abbot, and Brother Hugo, our *tete d'armee*, of the presence of new pirates in the very midst of the isle, through the ugly sight I had seen on my way by what men called the chateau.

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And, indeed, all looked grave at my account, and Hugo shook his head, and he and the abbot and Martin and Richard had long and anxious converse in the Castle, and already we were bid to move very many of our holy things that bedecked the Church, or were used in God's service, within the Castle wall, and the builders had set up among the ramparts long sheds of wood, wherein began to be stored all manner of com, brought in from all the granaries around.

For the abbot had received from St. Michael's Mount and other places on the Breton coast most portentous accounts of a gathering together of the pirates of the sea and marauders of the land, and that some devil's bond had been forged between them, and that the wildest and most daring of these villains of every race and land had elected as their chief captain one whom they named "the Grand Sarrasin," one born of that black race, the deadliest enemy of Christendom. Others called him "Le Grand Geoffroy" as though they would save him at least from the black stamp of Paynim birth; but for us he was ever the Grand Sarrasin, and still the Grand Sarrasin, cursed a hundred times a day by every tongue in our cloister and island.

Now, as I saw Brother Hugo on the ramparts and knew, though full of matters now, he grudged not a word to us lads whom he loved full well, I spake to him thus—

"What news to-day, brother, of 'Le Grand Sarrasin'?" I spake half in jest indeed, for long ere this, this very brother had made great sport of pirates and their dark deeds, and especially, ere this name I spake had risen to such a sound of evil omen, had he delighted to tease the children of the cloister therewith. As on some dangerous path he would whisper, "Go not that way for fear of Le Grand Sarrasin!" or out in the fishing-smack, he would point to some cosy, full-bottomed trading ship with a "Hist, lads, the great Geoffroy there astern!" But now Brother Hugo liked not the jest, but looked sternly at me from beneath his great brows.

"Le Grand Sarrasin!" said he, "if so thou lovest to call the vilest foam of filth on these Norman seas, this day last week rode into St. Brieuc by night with eighteen ships, climbed into the fort, none letting him, slit the throat of a sentinel and warder, barred the garrison into its own quarters, and poured like a midnight pestilence through the streets, bidding his Paynim hounds of slaughter, without pity and without fear, enter where they listed, and that they did. And there by night in St. Brieuc, good men and good wives, who never harmed man or beast were knifed as they lay, the young maids led captive, and the babes flung like useless baggage through windows into the gutter, and that is the last I have heard of Le Grand Sarrasin!" said Brother Hugo, sadly enough.

I stood beside him silently, and the salt tears burst painfully under my eyelids as I heard the fate of that poor town by the Breton coast.

"Ay, weep, lad, weep!" he said. "And God give strength to our arms to show him better than tears, if he come our way, this fiend that fears not God nor man."



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“But the monks, brother, are they not safe? The worst pirates oftentimes fear to touch holy men and holy places,” I interposed.

“The monks of St Brieuc,” he said solemnly and sadly, “holy men and servants of the poor, lie cold and still in their dormitories, brother by brother, saint by saint. And the sun looks in on them and sees their faces agonized in death, and the blind eyes staring with horror at the fate that woke them but for death. In such wise the Sarrasin’s devils fear holy men and holy places.”

I saw Brother Hugo as he looked far out to sea in his turn dash the drops of salt from his eyes, and strive to master his sorrow.

“Should they come our way?” I asked, in bitter questioning.

“Surely, ere long!” he answered, “and we shall be prepared. I pray to God, and—smile not at it, lad—some sort of vision in a dream has come to me that the downfall of ‘the Grand Sarrasin’ shall be through us, brethren of the Vale, and perhaps through me.”

A kind of holy look floated into his face as he said this and looked seaward; an upward look as of seraphs close to God, not seraphs frail and delicate, but full of lusty strength and goodly spirit of war, such as went forth with Michael, when there was war in Heaven.

“Be strong, and of good courage!” he murmured to himself; and, pausing awhile, strode with me across the fort, showing me this or that, that was fresh provided for safety, and the goodly stores of food, and the watchmen even now out on the towers, and the alarms all ready to call in the defenceless. Indeed all was there that a great captain could devise for safety in time of border warfare.

“Thou knowest,” he said presently, pointing towards the chateau, “that it is forbid to travel thither. Nigel, it is a very castle they are building, and beside it this fortress of ours is weak and small.”

“It will be then,” I said, “maybe a strife of castle with castle,” said I.

“Ay, so it will,” he said, “and that ere long.”

“Then, Brother Hugo, I need not voyage to Normandy to taste battle under Duke William.”

“The battle,” said Hugo, “will be hot enough before these very walls. Therefore thou shalt be my esquire and learn to taste blood under my command.”

Indeed I had no higher desire than this, and so I said.



* * * * *

Now, it was not many days after these words, one afternoon about evensong, a summons came to Hugo from the watchman on the wall at Vale Castle. He called me to go with him. We swiftly reached the rampart, the watchman saying nothing, simply pointed to the northward, and then we saw a very fleet of ships—pirate ships, we felt sure—bearing steadily towards Grand Havre. And one that seemed longer and heavier than the rest ran far ahead.

“They are making for their anchorage in Moulin Huet,” said Hugo, “and it were well for our islanders to be prepared this night. Light the beacon, honest Bertrand, let it carry its bright word from Vale to Ivy Castle, from Ivy to St. Pierre, from St. Pierre to Jerbourg, though they lie at anchor below, to Torteval and far Lihou, and thou, son, shalt take a kindly message to the men of St. Pierre.”



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In a few moments the bright flame burst out on the rampart tower, like a red tongue of fire telling forth a deadly message. And lo! I saw, as I went, other tongues leap forth along the coast from tower and castle, all singing out in direful glee the same word "War."

And once within the market-place I ran as I was bid to the Church of St. Pierre, and great man I felt myself, as I pushed open the church door and took the bell-rope in my hand. "Ding-dong!" rang out the alarm bell from the tower hasty and quick, and ere twenty pulls at the rope, the townsmen were all around, and I was drawn into the market-place, and there at the head of the Rue des Vaches I sang out lustily—

"Good men, good citizens and sons of St Pierre, make fast your defences, and man your walls this night; the fleet of Le Grand Sarrasin is anchored in Moulin Huet."

CHAPTER V.

Of what befell the abbot's envoys to *Duke William*, our liege lord, and more particularly *Brother Ralf*, and how we were hemmed in by our foes.

There was no attack of the pirates upon St. Pierre that night, and no assault on our castles or cloister. And those who had taken refuge within our walls, ladies and children for the most part, whose lords were at the wars, spake as though they would return home having nought to fear. But this our abbot did prevent, except the very nearest living souls. Others from afar, as Dame Maude de Torteval, and the Lady Marie de la Mahie with those that they brought with them he sternly bade to stay in their safe haven.

Now, the pirates touched nor harmed naught in Guernsey through those first days, save some few beasts they drave up to their chateau with its high bastions amidst the trees, and its great flagstaff bearing a green flag with a white curve like a sickle moon broidered on it.

And it would seem that the fleet that lay in Moulin Huet had chiefly come to disencumber itself of all manner of goods for the furnishing and defence of the castle up yonder. For some four days the train of rough-bearded men in long seamen's boots toiled to and fro from bay to castle, from castle to bay, with horse and ass, waggon and cart, till men said all the spoil of Brittany and Spain, with all manner of treasures of Moorish lands were stored in the deep caverns under the chateau. And it was even said that since Le Grand Sarrasin would be lord of Guernsey, he would treat well and justly them that dwelt therein, and that if the islanders touched not him he would smite not them, and so forth. But we of the cloister knew our abbot was no man to close his eyes, when ill was afoot around him, and that though the pirate-swarm had none other hand thrust into their comb, his at least would go there, or send others that were mightier.



And messengers to Normandy had been sent week by week, but none had of late returned. Day by day our hearts grew more anxious as we saw the number of Moorish ships in our waters, and we began to fear that they and their letters had fallen into those evil hands.



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And then our worst fears were realized. It was late one evening, I stood at the cloister gate, and on the white road that led to the chateau I saw a figure I seemed to know; but kind heavens, what a figure! It was good Brother Ralf indeed! But his white skirts were slit in rags, his ankles bleeding with sore wounds; he stooped and tottered as he walked, and, horror! that women's sons should do such deeds, his ears had been hacked and hewn away, and his head hung bloody on his breast whereon a strip of parchment said—

The envoy of Michael to William returns from Geoffroy to Michael.
More such will follow, and Geoffroy himself ere long cometh to do
unto Michael likewise for his courtesies. Salut.

In a horror I summoned up the brothers, as they trooped out from compline-prayer, and two of the stoutest bore Ralf gently to the refectory. There, drugs and good care brought the life back to his eyes, and he smiled on us as though half in fear that we were foes.

We would have had him speak; but he spake not. And the abbot came, calm and unmoved yet, but a glitter of keen light kept glancing lightning-like from his eyes, and he said, as he stood by the settle whereon he lay—

“Speak, dear son—speak to us thy brethren.”

Ralf struggled, and raised his heavy hand, and but babbled without meaning.

A quick burst of colour rushed into the abbot's face. Calm, stately, still, with a very blaze of anger hidden in his eyes, that we trembled again, he stood with that red glow in his cheeks.

“He speaks not—for he is distraught,” he said. “What shall God do to men that rob their brothers of His noblest gift—the gift of reason?”

For a moment he stood in prayer, and then raised his shapely hand and blessed him thrice, and then bid us bear him to the sick-house, where sisters nursed him tenderly to life, and won him back much of strength and health—but never the gift, the abbot called God's noblest gift—for he had left that for ever behind in the chateau on the hill.

Now, this Brother Ralf had set out three weeks before in a trader's bark that sailed for Granville Harbour in Normandy. And he had borne most urgent missives from our abbot to Duke William. In them was writ how that a castle of ill-fame was already built, in them that the arch-foe himself, that so harried St. Brieuc with a very fleet of ships, either lay in the harbour, or in the new chateau.

But thus three things we knew. First, that as yet Duke William had had no word of the evil presumption of this foul settler in the isle, and could therefore send none to destroy

him, and that therefore we had for the time naught but our own hands and walls to succour us. And next, we understood, that there was indeed between Le Grand Geoffroy and ourselves war that none could stay with prayer or supplication to men or to God. For whereas he knew we had sent to the duke, the sternest sweeper from land or



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sea of robber and marauder, to deliver us—so we knew, as we thought of Ralf, that life and life's joy would have for us neither sweetness nor endurance, if he went free, who had been to our brother without mercy and without pity. And, lastly, it was clear that Geoffroy's Moors were yet more deadly than we thought, and more numerous. They were stationed, we dreaded to believe, off every point, at all four quarters. They ringed the Norman Sea with their cursed hulks. They lay like a moving line of forts 'twixt us and William.

I longed in my heart to break through that encircling line and reach Duke William; but how could I go? The attack might at any hour come, the brethren were armed beneath their robes, all goodly things were already stored in the Castle, and we were ready to pass thither when commanded. Hugo had his watchmen on the seaward wall, and had enrolled in martial wise all the lay brethren, many gentlemen, and sundry stout herdmen, shepherds, and merchants of the island. None slept, though some lay down to sleep; two days passed without attack, but at the dawning of the third day we saw some twenty ships sweep from St. Martin's northward, and as the wind permitted, draw nearer, until they were as close as they dared come, and we saw the boats trailing astern of every ship.

Then we knew we were surrounded both on land and by sea. Yet that sheer cliff was hard to mount, running straight up to our wall from the very sea. So in God and our own walls we had confidence still, and the prayers of men in danger went up from the Abbey choir. No prayers were said in those walls, after that day for ever. The day after, church, cloister, hall, refectory, guesthouse and abbot's dwelling were flaming up to heaven, or charred and ruined amid their fallen roofs and stones.

CHAPTER VI.

Of our passing from cloister to castle, and of the burning of the *Vale Abbey*. Of their siege of the castle, and the exploits of *Brother Hugo*.

Now, on the next day it was close upon the hour of Lauds, when the scouts that were set in sight of the chateau among the thick brushwood and gorse, came with great haste and told us that the Moors were even now on their way to us, hoping to catch us unsuspecting at our prayers. Now we had our orders of Brother Hugo in such a case, and we simply did what we had done already at his bidding, many times for practice of safety in an hour of danger. First the great heavy doors of the monastery were closed, and the bolts drawn, and the bars of iron swung into place to stay their passage. Then we swiftly gathered up whatever still was left that was precious or useful—books, vestments, relics, and sacred vessels had gone already—and by the ringing of a little bell gathering together all that were now housed with us—a goodly company indeed it



was of old and young—with all due confidence of heart and mind we proceeded in long line to the Church, which lay from east to west, forming with high thick walls the northern defence of our cloister. And as we passed two and two up the choir that morning, the monks raised with slow and solemn voice their last Miserere in that holy place, the home of many of them from their boyhood.

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But what did the convent at its prayers, as the Moorish host drew near? This was made clear ere long. For we were to see, we lads, what ne'er had met our eyes before, the very earth open to save us, and this by no miracle save man's skill given by God to devise wise and cunning shifts for those in peril.

Lo! the abbot stood, *in medio chori*, noble and calm, and the sad strains of Miserere rolled down the aisle. He stood by a stool of oak that rested there for prayer withal, and ever so lightly touched a little point of brass, that lay but a speck in the midst of the stone floor. And as he pressed with his kid shoe a moment, the stone sank slowly some two fathoms, leaving disclosed a stairway, and a passage arched overhead with bricks, with a cool and pleasant air therein, that, rushing up, refreshed our souls.

Then we passed downwards, old and young, and so along the brick passage, that ran straight eastward, as I guessed to the Vale Castle. And the abbot stayed till we had all passed through. Then, as he pressed upon the stone, it slowly rose again to its right level, and looking round I saw him in like manner cause sundry other stones to drop behind him as he came. Then letting loose a trap—lo! a very shower of granite blocks came falling down closing the path behind us with great heaps high as a man's shoulders.

So, heartening one another with cheery words as we went, we passed through a little chamber that led straight through the Keep—and so we were met by Hugo and Bernard, and dispersed each to his right place, as was meet in such a perilous time.

Now, by favour of Brother Hugo, I stood near and succoured him, and though in my stormy life I have had fighting and besieging in Normandy, Brittany, Touraine, and here in England, never have I seen such prowess and such strength as I saw in Brother Hugo.

Thus, by his favour, I was ere long on the south bastion that overlooked the gate of the Castle. There was but one gate by Cherbourg's design, and that a small one for so great a place, and yet, what need of greater? The larger hole surely that a rat's home hath the easier to find the rat, and rabbiting were easier were the burrow a yard in circuit. So Cherbourg built Vale gate not for state but for use, to pass men through, not foes but friends, and it was clamped with well-hammered iron, and secured by ponderous bars and bolts.

From the rampart we looked southward, and saw away by the cloister gates the black swarm of the Sarrasin. We saw them nearer by-and-by. But now they stood before the gate, and seemed as they would hold parley with those that they thought to be within. But they heard naught, and saw naught through trap or grating. Then must they have thought the brethren were in hiding, or maybe stayed in the church to meet death at prayer, as good monks have chosen to do ere this, preferring so with calm hope to pass to God than in a useless struggle, for which He framed them



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not. For a young tree was rooted up, and with its full weight, rammed by a troop of knaves against the gate. And though it stood the charge not once, nor twice, nor thrice indeed, at length with the rush and weight of many men behind it, it charged with such a force that the great gate fell with a sound that we could hear in the still morning, and in a moment the barbarous swarms were over it, and ready to work their will in cloister and house of prayer.

It was a sore moment, and one to make the strongest set their teeth hard together, when we saw through the trees a little curl of smoke wreath itself up in the calm air, and then smoke more dense, and still more dense to follow, and then the bright red tongues of flame leaping and dancing as though in ungrateful glee o'er the ruin of the home of men who did no harm, but only good.

"They will soon be here, lad," said Hugo, beside me on the wall. "Let us say, 'Sursum corda.'"

"Ay, 'ad Dominum,'" I answered bravely.

Now, these were our sign and countersign for our holy war that day. And just then word came from the north-east bastion that the Moors were already in their boats, and rowing to the Castle, with ladder and rope on board, a round hundred or so of the knaves, hoping to catch us asleep in the rear, while we met the foe in front, and order was given that at once we be prepared to discharge plenty of stones, and to shoot our ignited darts down on them from the height. There was no sign yet of the foe in front, so we went to the seaward wall, whither the boats drew near. Now, Hugo himself sent forth the first stones, but the boats were yet too far, and the balls but struck the waves, and made them spurt up fountains of foam.

Yet the rogues seemed surprised and scared at our being so ready with defence, and they stayed a moment ere they came within range of our armoury. Then at a signal of command they all rowed straight forward. They hopped out of so many some would get through. See! A very hail of stones and rocky fragments, and a very shower of fiery arrows, each one a deadly comet as it falls! They descend on the swift-rowed boats. They fall as they will without mercy on man or thwart. The devils shriek out and drop their oars, and writhe horribly when they are hit. And some with bold hands sweep them out of their craft.

In one boat some three fire-darts fell, and while the rogues struggled among themselves to escape burning, a worse thing happened, for the dry wood within sprang into flame, and no dowsing of the water could put the fire out, till the waves rushed in and swamped her in a moment, and the crew of some ten souls were struggling in the



water. None of the rest essayed to save them; they were already overburdened, and had their own work to escape damage.

I know not whether they retired, or whether, landing hard by, they swelled the main attack, which as I write had already begun. For Hugo had left me to speed the manage of the balls, and when he called me again I saw a new sight in front of the great southwestern bastion.



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The Moors were gathered in force indeed, and an evil crew, evil equipped, and in evil order they were. Each within a little his own general as we first viewed them, each his own envoy to shoot forth to us on the walls foul and blasphemous words, that shamed us to hear: "Come forth, ye foul rats of the cloister; come and be spitted here on the ground." "Spear or fire, greasy monks, which choose ye, or a spit to roast your fat carcasses by the flame." "Good Michael, send us, prithee, thine envoy hither; see us deck him with fair traps for thine entertainment"

In such wise they ranted and railed before us, but naught was said in answer, nor, as they doubtless hoped, did they draw us to think of leaving our fastness for the open. No word was spoken. No arrow was shot. Nor was a ball thrown yet.

But the number of the villains! Stretching back across the common, well-nigh to the cloister, and seeming even still to be pouring down from the woods. Ah me! What a black hell of sin lay 'neath those faces, like an ugly, stormy sea below us, and what a motley of lost souls of every race. Dark Moors were there in plenty, with rich dress and shining mail; black Africans with blubber lips and mats of furzy hair; sleek Jews slithering in and out the groups, inciting to devil's work; figures of nobles and gentlemen of France or Espagne, dishonoured and merged in the depth of the lowest scum there present; great Saxon churls and Danes, standing stern and resolute, but barbarous, as lions in the ranks of jackals and wolves!

CHAPTER VII.

Of Le Grand Sarrasin, and of the renewed attack upon Vale Castle. Of my first deeds of arms, and how the Moors were beaten back.

What they waited for we guessed not, till a great black horse came cantering over the plain, and a whisper went through the ramparts: "The Grand Sarrasin himself!" And he it was. He had his visor down. For none, so men said, had ever seen his face; and with excellent management of the steed of Araby, whereon he sat, drew up straight in front of the long rank of villains that he led. A great figure he sat on his horse, but swift and ready in his movements, though stout and heavy, and exceedingly knightly, as he rested with one hand on the beast's haunch.

The ranks were no more in disorder, and the sounds ceased. Side by side they stood, erect and deadly. Each eye on him. Each head steady. It was a disciplined host. It was a band of music that he ruled with the sweep of his hand. We understood how the pirates of the Norman seas were all at one. They had found their master, and knew naught but his will.



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Soon we saw the army break into three, and come forth to assault us at different points. Of the southeastern bastion, where I was stationed, I can only tell. What happened elsewhere I only know by hearsay. There we had some forty of our complement of men to relieve one another with the stones, and shoot their arrows, and be prepared for service with the broadsword should need come. And great prongs we had very swiftly to dislodge the ladders, which with sore effort they strove to thrust into the thick cement 'twixt stone and stone. And once or twice when the ladder held, there was quick work pouring hot pitch on their heads. Hour by hour they strove on, caring not for defeat, for when men fell wounded and hurt, others more like devil-cats took their place; but we thought, for our part, the attack was slacker, when sudden, from the northern rampart, that was steeper than the rest, and therefore less defended, rang deadly, heartrending shrieks and clamour for aid, and we knew that at that post the Moors had gained a footing, and "Haste ye, left rank with me," said Brother Hugo; "you, Bertram, and you, Alain, keep up the defence here."

So by Brother Hugo's side I rushed to the northern rampart, and saw him, with his bright blade sweeping like lightning through the air, deal death amid that Sarrasin crowd, that in face of pitch and stones had worked their way up the well-nigh upright wall.

There were with us at that moment some twenty on the rampart, and this was well-nigh enough, had there been no surprise in the attack. For the Sarrasins could but come up slowly, and one, discomfited at the summit, would roll back and carry with him many that were clambering up below him. But already some thirty were on the rampart, or in preparation to spring. And our men had been affrighted and fled, had not Hugo, with his "Rou! Rou!" loud upraised, relighted their failing courage. And, indeed, who would not follow bravely such a one, in such peril fearless, and himself tackling already a knot of five or six of the foe with his invincible sword that was named "Roland"? The white blade swept down sharp and swift, and in a moment two Sarrasins lay helpless, for they were surprised by the swift onset. Up the blade rose again, and met ready parry and defence from a tall, sinewy fellow, that bore in his address the signs of nobility. And then began a sharp tussle 'twixt the twain, sword against sword with ready guard of shield, that I saw not, for a passion that I knew not possessed me—the fever of war, a sad thing, but a glad thing yet when it doth sweep into a youth's heart in his first assay of arms. This new thing in me, raging like a fire, bore me to bar the way of two that rushed to clear the path that ran down beside me to the open lawn within, and so to shun the onset of our men who were driving back with good success already those that were in act to spring over the wall. 'Gainst one I struck, and he, despising my stroke, or but half seeing 'neath the stairway, parried but carelessly, and my blade slipped through, and wounded his sword-arm at the wrist, that it fell slack, and the blade dropped clattering on the paving-stones. Then the other knave pinned me against the bastion, and I for five good minutes stuck at sword-play with him, he waxing each moment more wild and fierce, I striving to remember and show forth in act all that I had learned of defence.



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“Play not longer with the lad, Guilbert,” quoth one behind, “or he will breathe thee.” And at this cry shame stung him, and he waxed more dreadful fierce, and I within me seemed to hear a voice say “Keep cool, and all is well!” So, wonderful to tell, the more he raged the more cool was I, and little strange was it that he, sweeping the air with wild thrust and parry, met ere long in his heart the clean stroke of my sword, and I, quivering and half appalled as I drew it reeking forth, was forced in a moment to be on guard again, for another rogue was at me. Yet, with a wild gladness, I saw the villain roll moaning at my feet, and the new rogue found himself involved at once in a battle with two—myself and a stout farmer, who, seeing me in danger, had rushed in to my defence. He, with sheer strength, beat down his sword, and sore wounded him, catching himself a scar meanwhile, and so I had time to glance and see how the battle went.

Still Hugo stood like a king of swordsmen, and around him lay those that he or others mustering to his defence had slain—some five or six—and now he was engaged with one that seemed the captain of that storming party—as I believe, an Englishman, cold and resolute, and thereby the more dangerous. And I dreaded, for I saw Hugo grow wilder in his stroke, and moreover weaker and weary withal with his great prowess. And I seemed almost to see with my eyes what I dreaded—that the Englishman should tire him out, and then take him where he would; so, careless of rule, I ran and struck forth at him on the left, and for a moment he kept us both in play. And then Hugo, gathering himself now as for a final stroke, struck him below the tunic, and he too fell among the slain or wounded.

Then we looked round. “It was done warily and bravely, lad,” he said. “Maybe thine arm saved my life. But see! No longer they leap our wall, and but few are left to slay.”

“See, see!” I cried in exultation, “they rush back! We have them now in the rear.”

And so we had in faith, for the scant dozen that were yet unharmed were easy prey as they fled, choosing to risk their bones as they dropped, or clung with a bare chance of life, to be cut to pieces by us; for it was clear that Le Grand Sarrasin had called off the attack at that quarter. Two or three got off scot-free; but, thank Heaven, these gave such an account of us as monk-devils and witch-men, that all hope was given up of taking us by storm—by day at least.

It was now towards evening. No better success had been won by the Sarrasin at any point in the attack. It but remained for him to sweep his forces back again to the chateau. Our hearts leapt up to see them turn their faces towards the forest-land. And before long, with a flag of truce, they were collecting the wounded and the bodies of the dead. Those of the storming party we handed down the wall, or, if living still, led them through the gate.

Now we reckoned that the Moors that day, by sea, arrow, stone, and ball, and in storming, had lost at least a hundred men, while our loss was only nine men killed and twenty-six in hospital. So nobly and well we faced that day of my first fighting.



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“Now, look you,” said Hugo, “we shall have no more storming, unless they find greater forces.”

“What then?” said I.

“Next will they come like Brother Mole,” he said, “with his long tunnel under earth. And then, if that fail—as God grant it may—they will trust to a surer *aide-de-camp* that I fear the most. His step is heard already—”

“And who is he—this friend who will aid them best?”

“Hush! Whisper it not, Nigel, abroad to dishearten any; but we have but three weeks’ provisions here for so many mouths, or a month’s at the most, if we be wary in giving rations.”

“Then their friend is——”

“Famine!” said Hugo, grimly.

CHAPTER VIII.

How I was sent forth by my lord abbot to seek the protection of *Duke William*, and of what befell me by the way of the pirates.

That night there was restless sleeping in Vale Castle and but rough quarters, but no assault nor alarm.

Next morning there was singing of “Non nobis” and “Te Deum” to boot by the brethren assembled in martial conclave on the open lawn. Their church was destroyed and its beauty perished; but said Abbot Michael—

“Lo, brethren, here be your choir these days, here your House of God. See, its pillars are the Lord’s, and they fear no sacrilegious hand; see, its arch is the heaven, and its roof the sunlit sky, and for music to our chant hear the lapping of the waves that God hath set in their bed below.” So, with comforting words, did he restore our courage, as we thought sadly of the ruined cloister, whose smoke yet went up pitifully to the sky.

And shortly after these solemn offices I was taken by Hugo to the abbot’s presence, in the little chamber he had on the seaward wall. Very strange and careworn he was.

“Son,” he said, greeting me with a sweet dignity, “thou hast done well already in the profession thou hast chosen, as I hear by good report of all, and indeed so comes out in thee the prowess of a noble race. Thou seest what straits the brethren are in by this blockade and siege?” He pointed seaward and landward. “And that, should help come



not, a deadlier enemy than the Sarrasin himself will strive with us—the famine with the sword. Thou knowest all this?”

Now, as he spake, I guessed why he spake thus, and so right boldly I replied, with a straight look in his eyes—

“Ay, my lord, right well I know. Send me, therefore, now, whither thou thinkest well, for succour in this day of extremity!”

His eye brightened at my words, and he and Hugo looked gladly at one another, and Hugo said, with low voice, proudly—

“Our Father, the abbot, hath chosen thee, my esquire, and a proud mission it is, being assured of thy strength and truth of heart, to be his messenger to our sovereign lord the duke, and to inform him of the dangers of his faithful bedesmen here, and of the arrogance of their foes and his own. To-night thou wilt start on a noble and knightly enterprise.”

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“It is, my son,” said the abbot, “a path full of danger. But also, as our brother saith, an enterprise both noble and knightly, for the saving of these men of God, and the feeble ones that are sheltered in our fold, not alone from death, but from rude insult and sharp pain.”

I told my lord that I was indeed willing to accept it, though I loved life full dearly. And he, assuring me that all matters of my setting forth that night were in Brother Hugo’s hands, bent over me, and pressing his hands, that trembled the while, on my young head, committed me to God’s care. And I went forth calm and steady with his holy words yet in my ears and a great glory of gladness in my heart, that I, still a lad, was thus chosen for a knight’s work.

I was to set out, Hugo told me, at nightfall from a little cove named Bordeaux Bay that lay hard by the Castle. Old Simon Renouf, a wary pilot amid the dangerous rocks and shallows of our seas, was, with one other, to be my comrade, and I was to be clad in the rough dress of the fisher folk in case of capture. We were that night to make for the Isle of Jersey, and craftily to lie hid in a quiet opening in the rocks for the day, and then next day, if the wind were good, to sail to the port of Granville in Normandy.

Now, it was arranged I was to bear no written message to my lord the duke, only a ring of gold hung in a little bag about my neck, that our abbot said would stand me in better stead with William, recalling past services and duties, and would be thought, were I taken by the pirates, but some harmless relic or valued heirloom. Now, the ring had on it but the letter “A,” and the motto inscribed around “*Loyal devoir.*”

And so at nightfall we went forth from the back side of the Castle, down the steep and rugged path that led at length to the shore of Bordeaux Bay, Brother Hugo, as we went, giving me words of good counsel as to my behaviour before Duke William, impressing on him the insult of these knaves to his high fame as duke, and how I should keep a still tongue if I fell into the hands of the Grand Sarrasin.

We found Simon Renouf and Jacques de la Mare waiting for us in their small fishing-smack which I knew so well, having so often sailed with them as boy and lad, and well they loved me, as did all the fishers of Grande Havre and St. Sampson. But now, as Jacques took the tiller, old Simon bade me handle the sail, as though I were indeed that which I appeared, a raw hand learning seaman’s craft. Right manfully I took up my task, and in a moment the dark sail ran up the mast, Simon undid the fastening and pushed off, and with Jacques cunningly guiding us from the rocks, the boat stole noiselessly from the bay, coasting northward for a space to get away from the Moorish ships that still lay outside, and then, aided by a dim white mist that lay upon the face of the waters and a chill night-breeze, we bore away to the south of Herm and Jethou, whose craggy sides loomed black and terrible as we sailed by.



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Presently the wind fell, and we lay well-nigh becalmed, and the moon came out, and we could see now the high walls of Sark and the steep side of Brecquou, and slowly we approached thither. So we ran straight to Jersey. The moon set presently, and we made little way, and with the light of breaking dawn we entered a small creek, wherein the water lay calm and still. When the boat was in safety we clambered upon the rocks, and among them Simon showed a little cave overhung with green streaming plants that indeed was a pleasant place, with all manner of coloured sea-plants clinging to the wall, that the light as it entered played upon. Here we ate of the good store that lay in the boat's locker, and a rare draught of wine washed down the food and refreshed our spirits, and then Simon bade me lie down and rest, and as the sun began to climb up and make all the sea glisten along its crest, I lay down and slept, and awaked not till he had climbed far up into the sky. But when I awoke old Simon Renouf still sat by the cave-mouth, gazing out to sea from under his looming brows, and I thought he sat there like some great eagle by its eyrie keeping watch over its young. And such indeed he was, an eagle soaring high in fidelity, and my guardian to the death, as in the end it appeared.

Now, as evening drew near, Simon showed us that with an early start that night, with good weather as the wind lay, we would make the Norman coast ere morning, and creep along as we might to Port Granville by daylight.

But alas! that night we had but just shot out of our hermitage amid the rocks, and were giving great heed to the perilous passage withal, when, as we rounded a sudden shelve of rock, we met almost face to face a great ship that was making across our course. And I feared that the worst would hap, for she was of the same build as the fleet of Le Grand Sarrasin. Did they see us lying in now close by the rock? We could not tell for a moment, but then there was no doubt. A shout rang out, and a voice bidding us come aside.

What could men so bidden do? To sail forth were hopeless. This great craft would overhaul us of an instant. To coast along the shore were perilous and must end in capture. For a moment Simon hesitated, and then ran our boat into the creek again.

"See, lads," he said, "here we must stand. The land is more friendly than the water. Yet I have prayed oft to die on the sea, when my time came."

We climbed on to the rocks, and he handed us a cutlass apiece and a knife such as seamen use, and he pointed to a square ledge of rock, that but one could enter upon at a time, since a thick jagged wall protected half the front.

"Stay, Simon," said I, "art sure she is a pirate?"

"Ay, lad, sure," he said; "none but a pirate so hails peaceable fisher craft"



“Simon,” I said, “why not give in? Why should you and the lad die for me?”

The old man laid his rugged hand upon me, and the sun lit up with a rich light his red beard as he spoke.



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“Have not the Brethren taught thee a word called ‘Duty,’ lad?” he slowly said, “a word for me, that was born a poor fisherman in the calling of the Lord’s Apostles, as well as for thee born of a great house.”

“Then it is thy duty thus to do?” I said, perceiving that naught could move him, and that indeed a noble strain within him forbade him to be moved.

“Ay, lad,” said he, “and may we all, thou, Jacques, and I, old though I be, do our duty right well this morn!”

CHAPTER IX.

Of our battle on the rocks of *Jersey Isle*, and how *Simon* gave up his life, and how I was taken captive and brought back.

The pirates had put off in two long-boats, and in a short space of time entered the creek, and climbed across our boat to shore—if shore it could be called, where the rocks stood broken into such strange and rude shapes, and where the footing amid them was so rough. I had no doubt of their errand, for each man had a great ugly naked weapon in his hand, such as we bore ourselves, only heavier.

Up the cliff they clambered, and soon spied us in our fastness.

“Come out, ye spies,” they shouted; “come out, cursed rats, or we will come and slay you where you stand.”

Our hearts panted to answer, but we said naught. Then they in a moment changed their tone, and two approaching more civilly, spoke with us almost at the entry of our fast place. Fair words they used, saying that their captain had business of great import with certain stalwart seamen of Jersey that day, and begged us for our own advantage to come down aboard their ship.

“And who is your captain?” curiously asked Renouf.

The rogue dissembled not. “Our captain is Le Grand Geoffroy, Lord of Guernsey, and his *aide-de-camp*, Mahmud le Terrible, is even now on board of yonder craft.”

“Then, hark you, Sarrasin dog!” said Simon. “Sooner will we three die on this rock as good men and true to the law of God and man, than have parley further in anywise with you and your men of blood.”

Our civil visitors saw that fair words were of no avail to save fighting, and so they ran back to their fellows, and with a few minutes’ chatter among themselves, half of them climbed up amid the rocks, to drop on us, as we guessed from above, where they might



find foothold among the crevices, and the others with determined aspect ran up to us in single line, taking the narrow ledge for their road to our stronghold.

Then began the fray. It was no hard matter for Jacques de la Mare and me at first to stay their attack, for the first comer and the next, struck ere they strove to pass us, fell down helpless among the rocks below. But the third, running in quickly, closed with Jacques, and forcing him back, left room for another to close with me, and by this a shout above our heads warned us that the rest would be upon us



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as it were from the sky. I dimly saw Jacques locked arm to arm and breast to breast with a villain, his equal in strength and stature; and then, as I had seen wrestlers in peaceful times, so each now on that narrow spot, grasping cutlasses the while, strove with all manner of feint and twist and turn to throw his adversary. Close to the side they were, when I saw the thickset pirate swing as easy as a child across Jacques' back. The two clung together for a moment. Jacques struggled to get loose. But the villain clung too well. And so they both fell together into the deep well below. Creux de la Mort the islanders call it to this day.

I sought rather with sword play to strike the villain in my path, and old Simon by my side saw soon his place to strike in, and gave him a deadly stroke. But as he did so the first two rogues dropped from above, and the little narrow ledge of rock, with its far outlook over the waves, and pleasant vision of white surf running over the rocks, and still gulls seated thereon, was soon like hell itself, full of dark and evil faces. Now Simon was attacked at back and front, as he stumbled back over the bodies; a great knife was thrust into his back, even as he faced a rogue before his face, and I saw the old faithful soul fall forward, and making a kind of stagger with his arms up, ere he fell, drop into the pool below. So, according to his prayer, he died in the sea, and nobly, as any knight of great fame, was true to death.

Now, what of myself. The villains would not kill me, though this they could have done many times. Yet like a young lion I fought fiercely with my back against the rock, and I know not how many I slashed and cut with my weapon, till, with a swift stroke, one struck it out of my hand, and I seemed at their mercy. But my great knife was in my hand in its place, and with that I hastened another of these evil men to his last account. And then two, rushing at me from either side, pinioned me as I stood with a rope, and I, seeing no hope in struggling longer, like a naughty child, let myself be led or carried to their boat, and so taken on board the dark ship, whither they bore me.

And once on board they took little heed of me. Only they bound me more securely with cords that cut my ankles, and threw me in a corner of their craft amid some baggage. One that I judged to be Mahmud the Terrible came and gazed on me with a dark smile, but said no word.

Now, after two hours or more, I heard a voice say from the tiller, "Straight for St. Martin's Point!" and in a short time we came to anchor in a certain harbour. I know not of a surety, for mine eyes were blinded, but I guess it was Moulin Huet. And presently I was partly unbound, set upon my feet, and made to walk. So, blindfolded and miserable, I entered again that dear island, that I had left for Normandy but two nights before.

CHAPTER X.



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How I was brought before *Le Grand Sarrasin*, and of his magnificence. How I saw *Folly* in his chamber, and was lodged in a cavern under earth.

It is long years ago since I was borne up the Castle Hill, the prisoner of the Moors, but I stand not upon any high hill even to-day to look down without remembering how I felt on that day, when the bandage was torn from my eyes, and I looked round, dazzled at first by the daylight. But there was that in me, in that I was young, and had all my boyhood been taught true faith in Heaven, which even now rose up and persuaded me that come what might a man could bear it, and that no evil man could by any means force out of a true man's lips that which he would fain not say.

Before me rose a bright pavilion of green and gold, and two great sentries in rich raiment with pikes stood either side of the entrance, letting none pass without a countersign.

Then as my captor drew me rudely onwards towards the entrance, I guessed, as they stood speaking with the sentries ere we entered, that this was the Pavilion of *Le Grand Sarrasin*.

We entered, and found ourselves in a rich antechamber, spread with carpets of Turkey, whereon men in glossy cloaks trod to and fro in converse or lay at ease. A fair curtain of blue silk was drawn across an inner entrance, guarded by two negro lads in scarlet. Awhile we waited, but at length a page came through the curtain, and with a low obeisance to Mahmud called us to follow him, and we went into a second chamber, wherein was no daylight, but only great lighted lamps of silver, that swung melancholy in the gloom. As mine eyes used themselves to the dim light, I saw it was indeed Geoffrey's presence chamber that I, poor Nigel, stood in, with the great foe of our cloister seated before me.

Stout and thick-set as I saw him on his Arabian steed, he sat in his golden chair, clad in black velvet, with buttons of glittering jewels. I looked up through the dim light to see his face, but lo! I saw naught, for a little veil of black gauze was stretched round from a small gold cap upon his head. And I remembered how it was current talk that no man had ever seen *Le Grand Geoffrey's* face in war or peace, and that a terrible mystery lay beneath this veil of gauze, through which he gazed on his men.

Upon my entrance, he stooped and spoke to one at his side, who it seemed was to act as interpreter between us; and he coming forward bade Mahmud speak, which he did in a strange tongue, pointing to me at times as though recounting my efforts to resist at Jersey.

Upon his ceasing, the interpreter presently approached, and bade me tell my name, and whither I went in that boat, and what my business. Now, I was determined to answer



nothing, lest ill be done to the good cause of my friends, so I said not a word. Then at a word from the Sarrasin, Mahmud said—

“Silence avails not, Nigel of Vale Abbey; we know thee and thy business, and have power to know more!”



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At this I forgot caution, and replied hotly—"My name thou knowest, and it is not a name that a man need be ashamed of; more shalt thou fail to learn, for all thy craft."

This I hurled madly at Le Grand Geoffroy on his throne, but he stirred not.

"Thou wilt tell us," proceeded the black-bearded ruffian, "how many there be shut up in Vale, what thou knowest of their treasuries, what store of food they have, and the disposition of their sentinels at nightfall."

My answer was a gaze of angry scorn.

The Grand Sarrasin bent down to the interpreter, and when he had spoken, he came forward like a herald, and spake thus—

"Thy lord, and the lord of these isles, would have thee know that he loves thy courage, Nigel de Bessin, but fears for thy folly in this matter. He would have thee answer to all questions asked thee, and so in good season enter his service as a brave man."

I smiled defiance at the cunning monster. "Yea! yea!" I said, "thou wouldst have me add to my other woes the woe of treachery! Geoffroy, if that be thy name, know thou my friends' matters are safe in my own keeping."

Again the Sarrasin bent and conversed with Mahmud, and the little bag they had robbed from my neck was taken to him, the which he opened, and curiously handled the ring that lay therein, with its motto, "*Loyal devoir*," and the letter "A."

Presently the interpreter again came forth, and bade them in his lord's name remove me to safe keeping, as other matters were at hand to occupy him. Then, with all due state, we passed out of the chamber on one side, and I was, by a straight passage, led downward to those very caverns under earth which the pirates had dug for their treasuries. Now, as we passed out, I saw others in a throng enter the Sarrasin's presence chamber, but I could scarce see them clearly, and beside this throng of visitors leapt, I thought, that very impish ugly devil, the ape that men called the familiar of the Lord of Rouen, that he named Folly, the which I had set eyes on at the house at Blanchelande. Yea, it ran chattering with many a mow and grimace, and though I saw not those that entered, I was well assured that my Lord of Rouen had free entry to Le Grand Sarrasin, full lot in his friendship and unholy fortunes; nay, as it struck me at once, was working through this Moorish devil evil to our abbot, whom he now hated, and danger to a greater than he. Now, these thoughts ran through my mind when I saw Folly, the archbishop's ape, so lively in the Sarrasin's presence chamber, and I exceedingly dreaded this evil union of evil men, yet remembered I my "*Quare fremuerunt*," and had good faith that One more powerful than man would save me and my good friends the Brethren from false Maugher and cruel Geoffroy.



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To a sad dungeon beneath the ground was I led, exceeding dark, for the only light entered through a narrow slit in the rocky roof; and I saw that the walls and roof were rugged and rough, half cavern and half cell. Alas! alas! sad moment indeed it was when I was thrust therein, with my arms bound to my back and my wounds still undrest, my body stiff and full of pain, and my head dizzy and heavy after so great excitement. Helplessly enough I crawled around the rocky walls, and found a barrier that seemed framed of wood across the entry. I felt, and found that it hung like a great gate on a bar of iron that ran through holes cut in the solid rock. I looked in despair up to the narrow slip above. In agony of spirit I even for a short space threw myself as I might against the door, against the rock.

At length I knew it was hopeless, and I crawled to a heap of plundered goods, and lay on them passive for a season. Perchance I slept, and at least a little space forgot my troubles, but not heavily, for a very gentle moving of the door appalled me, and in a moment I was half on my feet. There was no need for such alarm, for he that entered came softly in and whispered that he was a friend. A moment I thought here was a wile of my foes to catch me, but I looked long and sternly at my visitor, and decided he had not come to work deceit. A man he was of noble and knightly aspect, easy in his bearing, frank in his gaze, exceeding handsome, so far as by the dim light I could judge. He came close and stood by me, and spoke softly.

“Hush, lad,” he said, “fear me not, for I come hither as a friend! And if thou art to be saved from torture and death, thou must trust me as the saint trusts his God. Wilt thou do this?”

I murmured beneath my breath that I did not doubt him, and bade him for the sake of God not to delay.

“Thou dost not know me, Nigel de Bessin,” he said, “but I know thee already, and with many another stood this day in yonder antechamber and heard thy words to Geoffroy. Now, those words I loved to hear, and I have been in a struggle since I heard thee, the one part of me saying, ‘Save this lad,’ and the other part counselling me to let thee die. But I am here to save thee.”

“Yea! yea!” I broke in; “but how may it be done?”

“Trust me,” he said, “and in an hour’s space, for it is even now evening, the chateau will be at rest, and our sentinels are slack of watch. Meanwhile, refresh thyself, and prepare even now for what may be thy hardest battle.” He laid before me some eatables and a little flask of wine, and with a slash of his poniard cut the cord from my arms, which for long hung cramped and aching, so tight had they been bound.



With that he vanished out of the cell, and hope again sprang up in my heart, and I thanked Heaven for sending me such aid in my woes, even here in the womb of the earth.

CHAPTER XI.



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By what means I was delivered from *Le Grand Sarrasin*, and how I found shelter with the priest of *St. Apolline's*.

The cell had been dark before. Now it was black as night, and having eaten my friend's goodly parcel of food, I was refreshed, and eagerly awaited his return. Presently he was with me, and softly rolling the great door on its hinge, let me swiftly through into the long earthy passage that led upward. We traversed many yards, and I know not what treasures I saw heaped hastily on this side or on that, and I saw at the end, where the path passed forth, the form of the sentinel at his post. Now all our hope lay in what that moment chanced. He lolled easily against the rock, gazing forth, as I thought dreamily, into the open. My companion drew me along on tiptoe till we were even a pace behind him. We were so close that I think I heard him breathe. Then rapidly the man felt a scarf round his mouth and wiry fingers at his throat, so that he could make no sound.

"Strike, Nigel!" said my comrade. "There is little time for mercy!"

So I drew my companion's dagger from his waist and used it swiftly, though it went sore against my nature thus to strike a sentinel at his post by surprise.

He fell heavily backward. I drew forth the dagger, and we ran swiftly for the cover of the side of a building. Along the wall we crept warily and without sound, and the next moment I saw my deliverer swing himself upon a bough that hung within his reach. In his train I followed, as he caught wondrous craftily in the darkness now at this branch, now at that, and more than once passed like an ape or squirrel of the woodland from tree to tree. At last I looked down and saw the wall loom from below, and the branch whereon I clung spread across the wall into the open. There we dropped down right nimbly as I remember a full ten feet, and the branch swung back from our hands noiselessly, and without sound we passed swiftly on hands and knees for a space under the near shelter of the forest brushwood.

Nothing was said till we were a round two hundred yards within, and then my friend pointed to a little path, for the moon was risen.

"Yonder, dear lad," he said, "lies thy way to the Vale, and I must now be for a space a dead man in the woods, outcast even of the pirates."

"Nay, friend," said I, "I go not back to the Vale till I come with force to release them from their woes."

"What!" said he. "Thou still art minded to journey to Normandy? Oh, dear and knightly lad!"



“Yea,” I said, “thither must lie my road, and I pray thee to help me on my way, for indeed I fear to fall into Geoffrey’s jaws again; and now three days are lost that should have brought me nearer to William.”

“If it be indeed thy will,” he said, “and indeed thou couldst not will better, since, as the case is, yonder castle could not many weeks withstand the Sarrasin, thou must come with me, and on the road to my good friend, to whom I journey for safety, I will ponder over this matter, and concert a scheme, whereby the wish of thy heart may be carried out. Meanwhile, trust me, good child, as so far thou hast nobly done.”



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“One thing, good friend,” I said, as we swung along southward, “what is thy name, that I may know whom I may thank for this wonderful deliverance.”

My comrade laughed strangely at my words, and answered hastily—

“For names, lad, we are not over-ready with them in the chateau yonder. Ofttimes their sound, compared with their ring in other days, bringeth more pain than joy. You may call me, if thou wilt, Des Bois, for indeed I love the woodland. And for thanks, lad, thank me with a kind word and trustful look, and a good stroke of the sword, if that be needful ever for mine honour.”

So we strode on, and as the moonlight made silvery passages amid the trees, I watched him as he knitted his brows in thought, whether on my account or his own I knew not. I thought I saw in him all that I dreamed of knightly spirit, and I guessed that in Des Bois lay hidden one like Brother Hugo, who for some reason masked a great and noble name in this poor, paltry disguise. Ay, but it was a visage that not long rested serious. A smile broke over its furrows, making it like a field that smiled in the sunlight, and he said right gaily in my ear—

“Ay, good lad, we will weave thee a rope to Normandy both strong and subtle, and witty withal, and thou shalt hear its texture when we arrive yonder; but as the night wears on, we must ride faster, or trot ourselves, since steed are lacking, so let us not lose time.”

With that indeed he broke into a nimble run, and I followed. And ere half a mile was passed, we were out of the forest and by the shore of the sea, hard by Cobo Bay, and keeping still close to cover, lest danger should arise—for the pirates had their sentinels in huts in every small harbour of the isle—we ere long were by La Perelle Bay, and I could see on Lihou the dim outline of the monastery.

Soon Des Bois turned sharply to the left, and we were soon in a trim wood that ran up almost from the shore. The blind, thick wall of a small building lay in our path, and by its side a little low-roofed hut of daub and wattle.

“The chapel of good St. Apolline!” I said in surprise, for I knew well that little shrine by the coast, where the fisher-people made supplication for good weather and success in their craft, and hung up their poor offerings for the holy saint’s honour.

“Ay, that it is,” said Des Bois. “Now will we find its guardian at his vigils.”

He oped with ease the latch of the lowly door of the hut, and we found, indeed, no saint at matins or prime, but only the priest of St. Apolline, curled on his wood settle in honest slumber, and snoring lustily withal.

Des Bois gazed at him with a merry smile, and presently tweaked him merrily by the ear, crying out—



“Up, good hog! up, griskin-knave! up, lubber! and provide meet entertainment for honest men.”

“Ralf! Ralf!” sang out the priest in alarm, as he leapt from his poor couch. “What make you here at this hour of night?”



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“Often hast thou,” answered Des Bois, “with sage reproof bid me turn to an honest and a sober life, and now I have turned to the side of the holy saints. Lo! I have cut my ropes this night, and am free again. Free, that is to say, if thou wilt hide me for a season, and do thy good offices for Nigel here, who indeed hath saved me, as I him.”

The good priest grasped his hand, and I thought he wept, as though Des Bois’ words conveyed more than I could understand. The two men drew aside together and whispered seriously for a time.

But I was glad, before they ceased, to wash away the blood from my wounds, and all the dust and sweat of my capture and escape. And after much washing in the brook, I felt well-nigh a new man; and sitting down at the priest’s rough board, we next refreshed ourselves with such store as the good man had. And after we had eaten, Des Bois, whose name I now knew was Ralf, began to explain the plan by means of which I was still to journey safely to Normandy.

“Hark you, good Nigel,” said Ralf. “I have discovered a rare likeness betwixt you and our Father, this dear Augustine. Indeed, saving for the marks of time, ye might be brothers of one birth. Now, it likes me not to cast away prodigally such rare aid given by Mother Nature to our designs. So, look you, you shall journey to Normandy as Father Augustine, priest of St. Apolline’s in Guernsey, while Father Augustine and I, dear yoke-fellows of old, shall betake ourselves, as once or twice before, to the nether-world for a season.”

Father Augustine smiled his assent to the scheme, as I asked hastily—

“But, even so, how will the knaves yonder let me pass?”

Ralf smiled as he replied, “Ay, they will not molest thee. Augustine hath a gift of walking warily, so that all men count him their friend, and, earnest man, he hath full oft his own good designs, that carry him to and fro across the seas. Thou hast but to stride with his smart step boldly by yon chateau gate, and so to Pierre Port, and none will forbid thy passage on any vessel that thou pleasest, if thou but give good word to all thou meetest, Moor and islander alike, good man and good dame. Pat, too, the little innocents on the head with a paternal blessing. Answer not save in words of hearty jest. Keep a front unconcerned and free, though thy heart rap hard against thy chest-bones, and, in good faith, within a sennight or twain thou wilt be back in the isle, with Duke William at thy tail.”

“And it is well for thee, good lad,” said Augustine, “that thou art better suited than this rogue to figure harmlessly as a priest that men trust. But surely it will aid thee much in carrying through this scheme that thou wast bred amid monks, and churchmen, and art used to their ways of act and speech. Yea, lad, with a bold step and an easy manner

thou wilt be safer beneath my cloak in the open than if by secret paths thou essayedst never so warily to cheat the Sarrasin's sentinels."



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What could I do but thank them, and yield myself with all despatch into their hands, to be turned by means of razor and paint, of cunning dye, still nearer like the priest of St. Apolline? In the end, as I drew the good father's cowl around my pate, and essayed to imitate his careless stride and easy gait, they both swore that the good saint himself, were he to escape from the skies and visit his earthly shrine, would be hard put to it to know which was his own priest and which the counterfeit.

But ere this the sun was up, and there were sounds of fishermen already moving in the bay below. We knew that by this time our escape must be discovered, and so with hurried counsel my friends betook themselves away—at least, they were with me at one moment, and then of a sudden, like dreams, were lost to my sight. And I, as it were to try the strength of my disguise, went down for a short space among the huts of the fisher-people.

There goodman and goodwife alike gave me friendly greeting, and I cheerily told them they must spare me for one sennight, if that might be; whereupon the children, running up, stayed further question, and in a moment I, in my long, sober cloak, was a war-horse, or a crazy bull at the least, that went ramping among their blue-eyed chivalry, carrying little affright, but rather earning peals of merry laughter.

CHAPTER XII.

Of my second setting forth for *Normandy*, and in what guise I took passage.

I next prepared to start on my journey to St. Pierre Port; and, before I went, I tarried for awhile in the rude chapel of St Apolline, to say a prayer for myself and those good men whom it was in my heart to succour. But, my prayers ended, I must fare forth. And lo! even as I turned to leave the chapel, I heard the sound of hasty steps and voices, and already three of the pirates were in the yard, singing out—

“Come forth, master priest, and help us find our quarry!”

How my heart rapped as I made myself seen of them at the gate, and, with a gay face, fetched out a merry inquiry—

“What seek you, early birds, so soon afield?”

Never face and attitude surely so belied the man within; for, indeed, I doubted if my legs would bear me, and my poor heart, as I spoke, went rap, rap!

“Now, hast thou seen two runaways by thy gate this morning, master priest—one a stalwart, dangerous fellow, the other a measly, monkish lad? And, prithee, see thou speak the truth.”



I assured them lightly none had passed save the fishers to their boats, and they seemed satisfied, till one, looking more keenly than the rest, came near to me, and, with a suspicious gesture, cried out—

“And thou hast not got them hidden up thy wide sleeve, good priestling? Come, we will search with a good will thy parsonage.”

My heart leapt again. But I managed to ring out a laugh that sounded careless—



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“Oh yes,” said I, “gentlemen galore, and heaps of little beardless monks lie stacked in my poor house yonder. Bring them forth, good sir, and leave more room for me.”

He led the way to search, but the others seemed unwilling, having good trust in him that I counterfeited, and all that might afford a hiding-place in the hut was opened and turned about—nay, the very holy rest of the chapel was disturbed as search was made, walls and wainscot rapped, cupboards forced, and stones prised up, the while I stood at ease peeling a light cane that I had cut from the wood.

“Now, good brothers,” said I, lightly, as they stood at fault in the midst of the chapel, “are you satisfied I am no concealer of other men’s property or persons hereabout?”

“Yea, we will press on,” said one of them. “They have taken to the caves like enough, and we shall have a week’s ‘rabbiting.’”

“Then I wish you good morn,” said I, “with a word of thanks for turning out in your zeal much old stuff of mine that I thought was lost and gone.”

Glad was I indeed to see my three guests break into the forest opposite. So, with a thick staff for my luggage, I took the path that led straight to St. Pierre Port, six miles away. Without let or hindrance I passed on, imitating as I could the easy gait of Father Augustine, and taking care to greet all I met, of all conditions, who were about on their business that autumn morning, with such jests or merry speeches as I could muster.

Now, I have said already that Le Grand Sarrasin, save for his enmity to Abbot Michael, had as yet showed no unfriendly disposition to our islanders, except where they thwarted or marred his designs.

Therefore no ill had happened to St Pierre Port, its fishing, or its carriage of necessary things, or of persons. And though that heathen fortress could be seen towering up there miles away upon the hill, the good burghers of St. Pierre, finding their daily business not interrupted, made but little grievance of Le Grand Sarrasin’s presence.

Wary of running into trouble, they jogged an easy way. Their boats came in and out. Their bales were landed and embarked. Nay, I have heard that it was their wont to hush the voices in their states council that were for craving succour of the duke, regarding one ruler, so long as he whipped not their backs too hard, as equal to another.

So I went into St. Pierre as into no besieged town, and without hindrance of any made my way through the winding streets to the harbour, where I hoped to hear of passage to Normandy. And the good father had told me of one Le Patourel, that would assist me to embark. This was a man not too well known to him, for too close acquaintance in this case were dangerous to me, but one doubtless ready to serve the priest if need be.



So I sought out this Le Patourel, as it appeared an honest trader, who took me without doubt for that I seemed. To my joy I found that a vessel, but just finished lading, would start in a short space for St. Malo, and the skipper was willing for certain silver pieces to take me for his passenger. These I paid down out of a sufficient purse Des Bois had pressed upon me, and with a light and joyous heart tarried on the quay.



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Thither came by presently a bluff priest of the town church that was like to give me a fall.

“What, Augustine!” he shouted, so that all on the jetty heard. “Whither art thou journeying?”

“And that thou wilt come near I will tell thee,” I replied, not knowing for the world his name.

“Whither art thou bound?” said he.

“To Coutances,” said I. “My lord archbishop, you remember.”

“My lord archbishop,” said he, “thou shouldst know is far from Coutances at this season—for his health.”

Here I was troubled, for I had told many that my lord had sent for me on a certain business.

“Ah, yes,” said I in haste, “before he went my lord left letters for me that I alone can fetch. But I must go aboard.”

“Stay,” said he, “a moment! What didst thou in that matter of Sir Hubert? There is a like case of conscience here in St Pierre.”

I hurriedly told him that it was not proper for me to disclose so nice a case of conscience, even to my dear friend himself. Whereat he looked strangely at me, I thought, and soon went on his way, wishing me shortly a good voyage to Normandy.

By three o’clock we sailed away. And glad I was to see this second time the highland of the isle grow dim and faint as we sped away with the wind behind us.

CHAPTER XIII.

How I arrived at *St. Malo*, and, proceeding to the Abbey of *St. Michael de Tombelaine*, found friends to set me on my road.

With a straight course that naught delayed we ran to St. Malo, that ancient town hard by the holy Mount of St Michael, the mother-house of our Vale Abbey, where I had good hope that I should quickly thence be sped upon my way.

So when we had come to port, bidding the captain farewell, I chartered a good horse to reach the holy place where, as men say, the blessed Michael came down to bid St. Aubert build him a brave house on that lonely rock.



It was the hour of vespers when I attained the hostel of the mount, but I had been aware the last few miles of the sound of a trot behind me, whose pace was marvellous like mine own. If I stayed a moment, the rider behind likewise stayed; if I went at a gallop, he galloped also. It gave me some concern to be followed by a caitiff, watching for my purse, as I had only a sheath-knife with which to defend myself.

However, seeing the abbey lights gleam kindly through its narrow windows, I urged my beast on, though in sooth she was weary; and as I clattered at last into the yard, saw, as I waited for a space by the gateway, my follower walk his steed quietly by, peering the while as he passed.

Now, I strove as soon as was convenient to gain audience of my lord abbot. And this was not easy at that time for a simple secular priest, such as I appeared, for there was ever strife and common contempt 'twixt monk and parish priest, even as it is to-day.



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“Audience of the holy father—and to-night?” repeated the seneschal, with proud disdain. “Good son, it is impossible, the abbot is engaged with knight and bishop; keep thou thy little matters till thou canst catch his rein, as he rides forth to-morrow.”

“It is no little matter, good brother,” I pleaded, “It is of life and death to many holy men.”

“If it concerned a kingdom,” returned he, “I could not send thee to the abbot now—with the little matters of thy parish to plague him withal,” the fellow muttered under his breath.

As we debated thus, a most reverend monk passed through the corridor, of a strangely lofty and noble air and of a winning sweetness, who stayed his journey as he saw my evident distress.

“What ails thee, O my son?” said he.

“I bear grave and sad news to my lord abbot,” I said, “and news that he should know without delay.”

“What is thy name?” he said, and searched me kindly with his eyes.

I could not lie to him, so I said simply, “Nigel,” as I would fain say no more.

“Then, good Father Nigel,” said he, seeing my reluctance, “I will go whisper in my lord’s ear, if thou wilt tell me more clearly of thy business.”

“Tell him,” said I, “that Abbot Michael, his good brother, has sent me with sad news of the miseries of Vale Abbey.”

“So, my son,” said the monk, gently, and disappeared through the stairway, whence he presently returned, and led me with him.

He led me to a certain fair chamber, wherein sat many great lords around my lord abbot.

“Who is this, brought by our brother of Bec?” said one, as I entered by the side of that great scholar, Lanfranc, the Abbot of Bec.

“This,” said the abbot, an Italian also, “is an envoy from the isle of Guernsey, who comes with greeting from our brother yonder, bearing a sad tale with him, or I am mistaken.”

I knelt to my lord, as he sat in his rich-broidered cloak, with his plump legs cross-gartered, as befits great nobles, and, kissing his hand, begged that I might speak on.

“Nay; first, sir priest,” he said, “tell us thy name, and then thy story.”



“Indeed, father,” I replied, “I am not that I seem; no priest am I, though bred in Vale cloister in Guernsey.”

“Then how darest thou,” said he, hotly, “to come hither in this habit?”

“If thou but knewest the greatness of the perils of our brethren, how they are near being murdered by savage men, thou wouldst forgive me, father. But I bear a name none need fear to own—I am Nigel de Bessin, and mine uncle its vicomte, would vouch for me, were he here——”

“As indeed he is,” put in a pleasant voice of a gentleman that in scarlet cloak sat by my lord’s right hand. “And thou art my nephew?” said he, as I moved forward to do him courtesy.

When we were made known he bade me proceed, assuring me that all my wishes should be fulfilled.



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“My lords,” said I, “the good brothers of St. Michael of the Vale in Guernsey are besieged and shut in this four weeks, nay, stormed and murdered by a most pestilent villain and an innumerable horde of Moorish devils that are settled in the isle. Men call him Le Grand Sarrasin, and as ye have doubtless heard, he is a caitiff without mercy, that wars on women as on men, on monks and husbandmen. This is he that calls himself the Lord of the Norman seas, in clear treachery to our lord the duke, and so cunning he is that he hath watchmen and spies at every harbour, that he may establish himself more stoutly ere help come.”

“And didst thou escape his hands?” said mine uncle, pondering, head upon hand.

“Nay; he caught me and shut me in the womb of the earth, but by God’s grace I escaped him—but this matters not. Give me your good aid to the duke, that in all haste I may return with a great host to save the brethren.”

“How old art thou, my son?” asked Lanfranc.

“Father, but sixteen years,” said I, as though I feared they might smile at me.

“And thou,” said he, in admiration, “hast come through these terrors in such a spirit of courage, wisdom, and love. Verily, my lords, ye see here a child that God has led marvellously on an undoubted work of charity.”

While their eyes rested on me with a wonder I loved not—for, indeed, what had I done above what any knightly youth should do for those he loves?—I spake on, telling them how few days’ food remained at Vale, and how strait they were shut in, and begging them to see that I passed on to William swiftly.

“The duke is far north now,” said the abbot, “gathering strength for the dangers that are looming from France. It is a sore ill time to beseech him. Yet matters will not wait. In this case,” he said strangely, “thou wilt be thine own best advocate with him, for well he loves a brave and knightly deed. With all haste fit letters shall be written to win thee a ready entrance to his presence—to his heart thou must win thine own way, as thou hast with us.”

“Teach him not, then,” said Lanfranc, “too piteously of the sorrows of our brethren, for a few monks more or less matter not to him, but represent the arrogance of this Sarrasin, and how clearly he claims the title of Lord of the Seas. That will touch best our sovereign lord.”

“Is not my Lord Maugher still in Guernsey?” asked the abbot, pondering.

“Yea, he is,” I said.

“And how acts he in this trouble? Is he besieged with the brethren, or goes he free?”



“My lords,” said I, “as I was led captive through the Sarrasin’s castle, I saw the same evil beast that my lord calls Folly, but men his familiar demon. I saw it in the very presence of Geoffroy; therefore I think these evil men are hand and glove together.”

“Nay—wilt thou swear this?” said Lanfranc.

“Ay, that I will,” I said.



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“Then this also must be made known the duke,” said Lanfranc, darkly.

“Now, my dear son,” said the abbot, “retire to our chamberlain. Cast off these poor weeds, and take from him aught in his presses that befits thy dignity, and then return to us, that we may see our vicomte’s nephew in his bravery.”

With a courtly bow I left them.

Now, the abbot’s chamberlain found me a fair good suit, more courtly than I had ever worn, and I scarce knew myself in the glory of its rich, dyed cloth. Fair linen next my skin, fit for an abbot’s wear, a long blue tunic brodered with gold, and a trim girdle, a grand surcoat of damask, and a gay red cloak over all, with an emerald brooch on my right shoulder. With bright stockings and a little ribboned hat I was no longer Nigel the scholar of the Vale, but Nigel de Bessin, gentleman and courtly soldier.

So drest and refreshed with food, I returned to my lord’s chamber, where at mine uncle’s footstool I heard these noble lords and churchmen speak of the circle of events from England to Italy, and through all their words the one great name of William seemed to be present as the centre of their surmisings. So deep had this son of Rollo stamped himself in the life of those rare days.

“Strange news from England, this,” said one, “now that the Atheling is dead. We can guess of a truth whom the royal priest will light upon, as he grows near his end.”

“He loves not Godwin’s brood,” said another.

“Then the prophecy that set Henry of France afire will yet be true in another way. William shall reign in London, not in Paris,” said Lanfranc.

“And thou at Canterbury, good brother,” said the abbot.

And, indeed, ere many years this came to pass.

CHAPTER XIV.

How, being given letters to *Duke William* by the Abbots of *St. Michael* and of *Bec*, I set out for *Coutances*, and of what befell me on my way.

“Sit down and take thy pen, good Nigel,” said the abbot next morning; “this Lanfranc shall dictate thee thine epistle.”

I sat down by the abbot’s writing-horn, and wrote somewhat as follows, while the two great men put their wise heads together. After customary salutation, the letter ran—



“We send the bearer with news of grave moment to thee and thy rule. A Sarrasin pirate even now lords it in Guernsey, and kills very many of thy lieges. Moreover, his force grows daily to a greater height. There hath joined him Maugher, once archbishop.

“Thou wilt know how best to protect thine honour. The bearer hath for his years done wondrous chivalrously in this enterprise. Delay not, duke, to hear him.”

Such was the letter that I bore, signed with the names of the two abbots. Now I had great joy in having the great Lanfranc’s countenance, for all men knew William loved him, since, after his first disgrace for his sharp rebuke of William’s marriage, he met him fearlessly, and with cool laughter and wise words brought him into still closer union than ever he had been before. So I knew my letter would have weight.



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Now it was decided I was to ride with all speed to Coutances, near fifty miles away, and there to inquire more certainly about William's whereabouts.

My uncle chose for me a fresh horse from the abbot's stable, that he swore would bear me nobly, and seeing me suitably equipped, led me once more to the abbot, who blessed me ere I went forth.

"Child," said he, having given me his blessing, "thou hast by thy spirit made clearer to me the legend of this holy house. A fair child, men say, went with Aubert of old to lay these foundations in the rock, and wherever he trod,—that child of olden days,—the hard rock crumbled for the great bases to be laid. So, beneath thy tread, young though thou art in years, doth difficulty crumble to nothing, for it is the work of God—the saving of our brethren—thou art called to, and wilt perform!"

"What have I done, holy father," I replied, "that any knightly youth would not be proud to do?"

With all fit instructions as to where I was to go at Coutances, and the priests that would there send me onwards to the duke, I jumped upon my steed, and in all fair array, as befitted a youth of high rank, alone I left St Michael de Tombelaine, and leaving Pontorson behind me, and having the blue water all the way on my left, reached Avranches by noon.

Now, though my horse showed signs of weariness, I hoped to get forward another good stage before evening. Therefore after a short rest I pressed forward, and I soon came into a country that was well tilled, and the land was divided by hedges like our lanes in England. I was ill pleased indeed, when well forward on these desolate roads, to hear the same trot behind me that I heard before on my road from St. Malo.

It made me press on my tired steed to a canter, and the steed behind me cantered too. I thought, "I will stay, and let the knave pass," but as I stayed in the way, the horseman that followed stayed as well. We had ridden some hour and a half like this, and the road ran now through a wood that seemed dark and cheerless to the sight, yet I was forced to press on. I had not progressed far, when I heard a whistle behind me, and lo! I saw, as it were, in answer two great knights come spurring towards me from the trees ahead.

Then I feared greatly, and I knew there was an evil trap set to catch me on my way, and I ground my teeth to think that here seemed fresh delays to the work I had in hand.

The three came at me now with drawn swords.

I drew my little poniard, since I knew I must fight.

"Yield thyself up!" said one great villain. "It is useless to resist!"



My answer was an attempt to drive my horse forward, but the frightened brute refused my urging. I lunged at the first with my blade, but with a sweep of his own he drave it out of my hand.

“How now, sir page,” said he, “must we teach you manners?”

I was nigh weeping for shame that he should so best me, yet I had no other weapon, and they were three men, and I but a lad.



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They dismounted, and pulled me from my horse, and holding me flat on the ground with his knee, one of them began to rifle me. "The abbot's letter," I thought, and in a moment I gave tongue.

"Look you, good sirs," I said, "take my money. You are welcome to it, but let me go forward on my road."

"Wherefore such haste?" said one. "Thy money we will take, and thy sorrel hack, but there is a letter still on thee we require to be found yet!"

It was plain they were no highwaymen, but in some sort the Sarrasin's men, even here in Normandy, and a great terror took me of his power. In a frenzy I escaped from them a moment, and stood clutching madly my breast, where the letter lay hid.

They made a rush for me together, and though like a young tiger I struggled with scratch and bite and kick, they had me down again.

"Alas!" I thought, "die then of famine, poor brethren of the Vale."

One of them thrust his hand under my riding-tunic, and had the parchment in his very palm. And all seemed over with me and my mission, when suddenly I heard the sound of horses' hoofs coming nearer, and I shrieked out "Help!" My enemy stuffed his cap into my throat to stop my cries.

But they had been heard, and they came closer at a gallop. "More villains," I thought, "to make certain of my capture."

But it was no villain's voice that rang out next. It was my uncle's, and with him were men-at-arms. And as he shouted my assailants left me, and, jumping into their saddles, fled into the wood.

So I was free, and my letter safe, and my uncle raised me up, and most tenderly handled me to find my injuries.

"Curse the day," he said, "that I sent thee forth alone! How did I not suspect ill!"

"But how camest thou in such good hour?" I asked, still trembling.

"My heart smote me," said he, "to send thee thus alone. And, indeed, I felt a presage of ill. So I got my men-at-arms, and swore that I would be thy convoy to the duke himself."

"Uncle," said I, "these were no highwaymen."

"What then, lad?"



“They were searching me for the abbot’s letter, my passport to William,” I said.

“Then traitors grow like mulberries down yonder,” he said, pointing back to the Marvel.
“But now, if we press on, we shall reach ere nightfall the house of a good knight, where we shall lie safe till morning.”

So we trotted forward, and in two hours’ time we were at the gateway of the castle of the Sieur de la Haye, who received my uncle with all courtesy, and refreshed us and our steeds; and next morning we rode to Coutances.

CHAPTER XV.

How I saw an evil face at a casement, and how, at my uncle’s house of *St. Sauveur*, I heard tell of my father. And of what happed on our setting forth for *Valognes*.

Now, as we rode into Coutances that day, I saw a sight that made me again fearful. The street was full narrow, and the houses leaned forward from either side, so as to leave but scant vision of the blue sky above, and there were plenty of windows in each story.



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Now, as I rode by, I was level with the first story of the houses. And, suddenly, before one window, my eyes were held captive, and I could not turn them away. A man in a fisher's tunic was gazing out on us, and I had not even to ask myself where I had seen his face before, for I knew that it was Maugher. My eyes fell before his, and I blushed and trembled at his sight.

"Uncle, uncle! my lord vicomte!" I said when we were passed, "dost know who stood at yon window in a sailor's dress?"

"What meanest thou?" said he, as he saw me tremble.

"It was my Lord Archbishop of Rouen, the Sarrasin's accomplice," I whispered in his ear.

We reined in our horses and looked back, but the man was gone.

"It was a fancy, child," said the vicomte; "there was no man there."

I said naught; but I knew it was no fancy, and I guessed whence these villains that lately attacked me got their commission.

Now, at Coutances we learned of the canon, that knew the duke's whereabouts, that he was near Barfleur, seeing both to his navy of ships in the harbour there, and having care also to the exercise of archers on the land.

"As I think," said the canon, "you will find my lord duke either in the shipyard of Barfleur, or the shooting-ground of archers at Valognes hard by."

It was then to Valognes, beyond the river Douve, that we were next to ride, and we would pass on the way my uncle's castle of St Sauveur, where mine ancestors had been settled since they were lords of the Bessin. And the whole distance to Valognes was near fifty miles. It was then mine uncle's wish that we should rest again at his house, and prepare to approach Duke William with due state on the morrow; and this, though I was unwilling to delay, I was forced to agree to.

So before evening we came in sight of St. Sauveur, a high and fair castle, round whose walls the Douve makes a circuit.

Across a bridge raised on pillars over the moat we rode, and through the wide-open gate we came into the courtyard, where there was great greeting of my lord vicomte by my cousins, from whom he had been some weeks absent.

"And here," said he, to young Alain and Rainauld, his sons, "is Nigel, your cousin, a good scholar of Guernsey, that bids fair to be a better soldier still."



So with fair greetings was I led in to the chamber of my lady the vicomtesse, where with plenty demure damsels she plied her needle. Much surprised was she to see me, and heard with a grave face my story.

“And thou art but sixteen,” she said, “and art about so noble an enterprise? My Alain has barely left his governor. Indeed, thy good monks know how to teach chivalry.”



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Then I asked her the meaning of this fair tapestry that, stretched on a long frame, she and her maidens toiled at round the chamber, for it caught my eyes as showing, I thought, great exploits of arms. And she told me that it was the exploits of Duke Rollo that she wrought there in many colours, and that the Lady Matilda herself, who loved such needlework, had made choice of the panels. In one I saw the ships being made in far Norway; in another, in a goodly company they rode upon the sea; in another, Rollo ate and drank with his fellows; and some pictures told of battles, wherein I saw them in their close hauberks and narrow shields, waving swords and driving their deadly spears.

“And in every picture,” she said, “I love to work in one like my dear lord in figure and knightly person, and to work the name of this great family above.”

“Ay, good aunt,” cried I; “in sooth thou art like myself in pride of the Norman race, that even now, in the glory of William, is worthy of its forbears.”

She smiled kindly as mine eyes sparkled, and said I was indeed a knightly youth. Then, as we were left alone by the vicomte, she dropped her voice, and gazing at me most tenderly, inquired if I had ever seen my father.

“Nay, dear lady,” said I, sadly but proudly, “I know not, from aught that has been told me by any, whether he be alive or dead. Save that he is my lord vicomte’s brother, I know naught.”

“Poor lad!” she murmured tenderly, “’tis time thou shouldst know more. Yet it is a sad story. Know, then, thy father was a wild and untameable youth, that was courteous and brave withal, but brooked not government overmuch. He was, too, of a wondrous merry disposition, that loved a jest at men in great places, and this made him not beloved. Against his father’s command he stole away thy mother, who perished in a raid of her kinsmen upon his house, and in the minority of the duke he was found on the side of violent men—and then he disappeared. Thou in thy baby innocence wert the only charge he left us, and as soon as times were fit thou wert sent to the Abbey of the Vale, which is indeed a good school of gentle manners and sound learning.”

I had listened sadly enough to the story of my father’s fall, and its recital grieved me.

“And has my lord vicomte seen my father since? Has he inquired of me?” I asked.

“Nay, I must tell thee no more,” she said. “Maybe I have told thee too much already.”

“At least, tell me of my mother,” said I.

“Poor child,” said she, “thou hast never known mother’s love! Thy mother was most fair and gentle, and indeed thine eyes and smile are hers.”

“Of what race came she, lady?”



“Child,” said she, sadly, “I will not tell thee that to-day. Know only her name was of the noblest.”

Thus, in the chamber of the vicomtesse, that afternoon I learned something of the secrets that I had wondered over in my boyhood. Sadly I kissed her hand, when I knew she would tell me no more, and thanked her courteously for her tender words.



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“Indeed,” said she, “I long to number thee soon among mine own sons, when thou leavest the monks thy tutors.”

“And I,” said I, right gallantly, “will strive to be worthy of honours so high, of a race so noble.”

Now, next morning we rode forth gaily, on our last stage, as we hoped, to Valognes, and a company of grooms and men-at-arms rode with us, such as beseemed my uncle’s rank. And for many miles we rode along the western bank of the river Douve, that runs by my uncle’s castle, but at length the stream took a great bend to the west, and we had to cross within some twelve miles of Valognes.

Here was a stout timber bridge on four piers, over which our road ran; and it was on the west side of the bridge that my lord stayed, it being a convenient place to send fit messengers to my lord duke to tell of our approach. Therefore a courtly gentleman of my lord’s retinue—by name De Norrey—with a groom were sent forward in advance.

Their horses’ hoofs clattered on the wooden way as they sped forth. But lo! great was our wonder and terror to see a sore disaster befall them there in the midst of the passage over the stream. We saw suddenly the road give way beneath them, as though it were clean sawn asunder, and both horsemen in a moment cast down suddenly into the stream below. Then, too, we heard a loud thunder of the beams falling, and there was a great mass of woodwork in the river, that dammed up for a while the flood.

The gentleman, the vicomte’s envoy, was alas! killed, thrown headlong by his horse against a pier ere he struck the water. The groom that rode with him marvellously escaped death, but was sore wounded by his fall.

“What villain hath done this?” cried the vicomte, in hot anger. “With my men will I scour the land till I track him.”

“Ah, my lord vicomte,” I said, “this is the work of Maugher, that I saw lurking in Coutances. And I grieve that thy good Sieur de Norrey should thus die by a stroke that was aimed at me.”

“If it be as thou sayest,” said my uncle, “this venomous man, kinsman though he be of the duke himself, shall no longer trouble men.”

Then, with all sadness, the body of De Norrey was recovered and borne back to St Sauveur, and we, riding down the stream a mile or more to where there was a safe ford, crossed safely, and riding sorrowfully and warily, though we were so near to the duke’s presence, came presently in sight of Valognes.



CHAPTER XVI.

How at length I was brought before *William, Conquestor Invictissimus*, of all soldiers the greatest, and most invincible of dukes. Of the manner he received my mission, and of the expedition of *Samson d'Anville*.

And now, children of my house here in England, I bid you con eagerly what I write in these next leaves, for, if God will, I will record how I first met, in that land of the Cotentin, him who was my star of glory while he lived, being indeed the greatest prince of our day, and, as I think, as great a soldier as any that ever lived of our race or of any other. And, following his conquering arms, we came to this haven in our own fair country, as ye know.

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My uncle had with great ease overcome, as a high noble may, all obstacles in our path; and assuring all who questioned, that indeed we came on business that could not wait, he won his way in an hour where I alone might have wasted days, such walls of state there are around the great ones of the earth.

But with a smile and a good word to one, a meaning whisper of secret import to another, a high hand and a proud look to a third, he passed through all barriers with me at his heels; and at length we were led by a high noble through sundry gates into a broad level mead, all green and close-shaven by the scythe, where many targets stood, and amid a bevy of noble gentlemen Duke William himself saw to the training of his archers.

Now it was easy, even in that noble throng, to see who was the duke and master of the company, not by rich apparel or device of royalty, but by simple glory of manhood. He stood well above the tallest there, gentle or simple. His great bulk had not yet hid his fair proportions, though in girth and weight he outstripped the rest. On a strong neck like a broad column his full round head rested, and frank and straight his wide-open eyes gazed forth on men, masterful and proud.

Here was a man that hid not his passion or his feeling—one that could hide naught. Afterwards the very force of mastery and passion left their impress on William's face, but when I first saw him there, in the full glory of a man's honour and strength, I gave him my boyhood's worship, for that I knew he was a king of men.

He was busy with his archers, and minded not our approach.

"Blind dolt!" he cried. "Such a flight would harm none! See here!" He drew the great wooden bow he carried right back to the breast, and the arrow sped sharp and clean from the twanging cord, and hit the mark plain in the middle with a mighty force. "Now—hard and straight!" he said, as the archer essayed his shot again. Then seeing us approach, "Vicomte, good morrow."

"My lord duke," said mine uncle, "with pain I disturb thee; but thou wilt agree that our matter would not wait."

"Then tell it quickly," said William.

"My lord of Bee sends forth my nephew with this letter," said the Vicomte.

"Then let him ope and read it."

With a great awe I read Lanfranc's sage words to the duke. Careless and moody he stood when I began with his high titles, but he let me read. But he awoke as he heard of the Sarrasin, and hot anger filled his face. I read on steady and slow till I came to the name of Maugher, and at that there was a very storm in his eyes.



“Give me the letter!” said he; and he snatched it, gazed an instant on it, and ground it the next moment into the sod with his iron heel.

He raged up and down in a passion, heedless of us and of his archers. Then he recovered himself.

“And the monks are shut in by the Moors?” he said to me.



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“My lord duke,” I said, “they and all thy loyal people of Guernsey are near starving, and this vile Moor calls himself lord and master of the Norman seas.”

“Does he?” said William. “Tell me more of Maugher.”

“He speeds on the treachery. His devils are seen in the Sarrasin’s castle. He hath twice sought my life on my way to thee. I have seen by our abbot’s grace treacherous letters of his to King Henry, that your highness wots of. And yesterday I saw him at Coutances in disguise.”

“At Coutances?” said the duke, near as I feared another blast of anger. And then, turning to a burly lord hard by, that I guessed soon, not from his bearing, but from Duke William’s words, was his brother and councillor, Odo of Bayeux, he said, “Here, my lord, what thinkest thou of these letters?”

He gave him to read the parchment that I picked up from the turf. Odo read it slowly.

“It would seem,” said he, “that this Sarrasin is grander than we thought.”

“At this juncture he is dangerous,” said William.

“Maugher is the danger,” said Odo.

“Shall we strike at once?” said William.

“’Tis but a week’s work,” said Odo, “and it would seem by one stroke you will clear the seas for years.”

He turned to me and inquired very exactly all that I knew of the strength of the pirates by sea and land, of the building and position of the Chateau du Grand Sarrasin, of the Vale Castle, and the defence of it by the monks and islanders.

He learned (for how could I keep back even my own doings, so peremptory he was?) of my being taken captive, and bursting into a huge laughter at the tale of my escape, swore I was a wondrous fellow for my years. Then, as he had a map in his mind of all that I knew, he turned and said to the Vicomte—

“’Tis a brave boy, this thy nephew. Tell me, whose son is he?”

At this the Vicomte hesitated a moment, and I coloured and looked down.

“He is the son,” he said at length, “of my younger brother, who this fourteen years has been reckoned unworthy of his place among knights.”

The duke looked on me again, and I met his gaze.



“See, then, lad,” said he, “that thou redeem thy father’s good name! And now for thy mission hither. It is my will to do all that thou askest up to thy desires—yea, and beyond thy desires. This pirate-swarm have massed themselves together, and lo! I will sever their many heads at one blow, and they shall know rightly who is lord and master of the Norman seas and isles. I will bring all my ships——”

He was proceeding, when Odo plucked him by the arm, and, whispering in his ear, as I thought, dissuaded him from coming in person. He frowned and chafed, but at last gave way, and after further words, called to him a little man of wondrous heavy build, yet muscular withal, that stood among the greatest of his lords.



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“Hither, Samson d’Anville,” said he; “here is brave work for thee, that I was near taking for mine own. Thou shalt be admiral and captain of an expedition that I send with all speed to sweep out with all force the pirates that infest our Norman seas. In great pride they are gathered in Guernsey to defy my power. Take men, take ships, all that thou wilt need, and delay not thy journey, for certain monks and islanders are hard set with famine. See me again to-morrow. Vicomte, good youth, farewell.”

So Duke William returned to his archers.

* * * * *

We had but just left the duke’s presence, and were even considering whether I should return with mine uncle to St. Sauveur or tarry there at Valognes, if I could find a lodging, when none other than Samson d’Anville, that had been placed in command of the expedition, came after us, and would have me to be his guest until, all preparations having been made in a week’s time, we should sail from Barfleur.

“Come now, little soldier,” said he, “and we on this expedition will be true brothers-in-arms.”

With that he wound his arm into mine, and I noted that, though he called me “little soldier,” I was almost a head taller than he.

So at his bidding, for he would take no denial, I took a hearty and reverent leave of the vicomte, who assured me that when this matter were over he would welcome me in his retinue for the French war, and linked arm-in-arm with Samson, returned to the camp.

Now I had time to see more closely what manner of man this d’Anville was. I have said he was short and stout, but I should have said that in so small a frame one seldom saw such activity and strength. Like some pollard oak, he seemed all knotted with muscle and vigour. He went bearded and wore his hair unshaven, and thus amid those Norman lords, shorn back and front, he looked wild and unkempt.

But the merry easy smile that lived in his black eyes was enough to show me that, though a great warrior, and terrible in battle, he would be a sweet comrade in time of peace. This was that Samson d’Anville that so swiftly broke down the arrogance of Geoffroy, and for this and other noble deeds was given that estate hard by the Vale, which his sons hold yet.

And so it came to pass that within a week of my arriving, by great good luck and marvellous dispatch in preparation, the order was given that we should sail for Guernsey.



CHAPTER XVII.

Of the journey of our ships to relieve the Brethren of the Vale, and how we fought a great battle with the *Moors* outside the *Bay of L'Ancrese*.

As I remember, children, our armament made an exceeding fair show as we sailed with a fair wind out of Barfleur Harbour, and great joy I had that such good fortune had attended my embassy to our great governor.



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And indeed, though I remember not exactly after these many years the number of the ships, I think there were at least five score, and in each ship close on five-and-thirty men-at-arms, besides the sailors who had the management of the sailing. Duke William, when thus aroused, did not things by halves. And as we rounded Pointe de Barfleur, and saw on the one side Cape de la Hague looming through the morning air, our fleet rode in a fair line forward, making a semicircle as they sat gaily on the sparkling waves.

And in the ship that was at the northern horn of this great bow was Samson, and I by his favour with him, and the man on the look-out in this great ship, that was called *Le Saint Michel*, saw more clearly than any other of the mariners of what lay ahead. Now, *Le Saint Michel* was the ship Duke William loved, and indeed it was both stout and strong, and made for swiftness rather than great burthen. And being the favourite ship of the duke, it was gloriously dight with gold and colour, so that it looked right noble as the sun glinted on its golden vanes, and lit up the splendour of its close-woven sails of crimson, whereon two lions were curiously blazoned. And before upon the prow, as it cleaved the waves, sat St. Michael with wings outspread, white as the gulls that circled around our fleet, as though he were indeed bearing us forward with good hope upon our journey.

“Look you!” said Samson, shading his eyes with his hand as he leant with his arm on the gunwale; “we take our track neatly betwixt Auremen and the Hague, and in so fair a day as this have no fear to run close by yonder cursed Casquettes, where many a good ship hath met its doom. Dost thou see them yet?”

“Yea,” I said. “There, like a rough, jagged set of teeth, they spring yonder from the calm waves and a long track they make where thou seest the foam on either side.”

“Then we will have no risk of our good men,” said Samson, presently. “Port helm, man, and keep a clear mile from yonder hungry rocks.”

Soon the north coast of Guernsey hove in sight, and earnestly I gazed forth for signs of any pirate ships that might intend to do battle with us on the sea. And, indeed, it was well to look, for around from the Grand Havre as we approached swept a great straight column of their low-decked, lean, swift-sailing vessels, and we seemed to see another such column lying-to behind.

“See you them?” I hastily cried to Samson.

“Ay, it means battle,” said he.

But this good soldier, well used to fighting by sea, as well as by land, was even now as cool and undismayed as though he but went about his proper work.



Samson gave his orders with words sharp and few. And indeed it seemed that all was arranged for us to meet such a defence of the coast by our foes. For, like living beings, our great ships sailed swiftly into two lines, strong and steady, with our vessel at the end of the second rank. And all this was done without disorder or confusion, as men-at-arms will form square on parade, and still we rode on the while, and Samson stood watching the pirates' fleet that lay now in a long line in front of L'Ancrese Bay awaiting our attack, as was meet for them to do.



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The wind sprang up now, I remember, from the east, and I heard Samson say in a glad tone——

“Thank Heaven for this breeze! It will prove the very messenger of victory from God.”

“Ay, in good truth,” I said. “See, even now before we attack them, they drift, though they would stay steady.”

We were now well past Les Casquettes, and I could see clear the great rocky headland of the Guet, and others as high and deadly, that I remember not the names of, loom sharp and clear behind the pirates’ fleet.

The good breeze bore us on, and it was evident that, without feint or device of any kind, we should face our foes fairly, and do battle hand-to-hand with the pirates chiefly by boarding their craft.

And I was glad at this, for I had no fear of the result of the day’s fight if William’s trained men-at-arms, suppled by a hundred battles, met their foes face to face on a few square feet of wood. The pirates, in their self-deceiving folly, that led them to a swift doom, had the like thought of their own prowess, and indeed they had need be proud of their wild fighting, being men who so fought as caring not for life or escape.

The ships of our front rank sailed swiftly down on their foe, and each crashed heavily into a pirate vessel. And with the loud crack of wood against wood, and shattered prows, and rocking masts, uprose over the clear water the hideous din of battle. High above all the cry of “Rou,” and the shouting “Dieu aide,” “God and St. Michael,” “Duke William and St. George.” Then the wild diabolic cries from the Moors in their harsh ugly tongue, “Le Grand Sarrasin,” or “Le Grand Geoffroy,” echoing among their uncouth war-cries.

I cannot tell what happened that first part of the fight; but I saw a confused sight of our men with a strong rush of might, their bright swords gleaming o’er their heads, leaping into this vessel or that, and blazing with the onrush of their attack upon the Moors, that met them with mad ferocity. There was a scene on each deck in which I could distinguish not which way the matter went, except that the war-cries of our men sounded ever more triumphant. Two vessels at the least were so disabled by the shock that they drifted away southward on the jagged rocks with their crews still in them. I know not whether the rogues in them were saved or lost.

The men of *La Belle Mathilde*, straight in front of us, had good success, for already, ere we came into action, they had cleared the deck of the vessel they had attacked, and leaving it to drift away were about to run down its neighbour, into whose side some of the crew had climbed, having leapt into the water from the battle with the Normans. We cast our eyes along the fighting-line and saw the like going on; and then came up their



second line, in two curves, east and west, to their friends' assistance. Now, this was our signal to ride forward and engage them. So we swept round to keep them off on either side, and ere I knew what was afoot there ran a great tremble through the ship, and a crack like thunder sent my heart into my mouth, and in a moment I saw the Moors hacking eagerly at the wrists of our soldiers, that clung lustily to the rigging of their craft, that was called *La Reine d'enfer*.



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With a shout that rang like a great trumpet, our little Samson had his foot in a moment on the gunwale. “Stick on lads, tight!” he cried, as with half a score of whom I was one, he landed on the pirate’s deck. Three of them rushed at each of us, and well it was we had good hauberks and good blades, for “slash, slash” came down on us the strokes from either hand. But swift in our tail came a score more of our Normans, some of the readiest and stoutest of Samson’s own men that followed his standard, and like lions zealous for his honour, and eagles careful for his life, they fought their way to their little leader’s side, who was well-nigh bested, contending with three or more, who knew his place and station and attacked him at all points. But the rush of the boarding party swept all our foes before us, and in a short space the remnant of them, now far below our numbers, collected by the stern of the ship in a thick mass. It was no light matter to dislodge them, thrice we essayed it, and thrice from their sharp blades we recoiled. And, indeed, I could not but honour these men now engaged so hopelessly in their last conflict, and never crying out for quarter—nay, even stricken down on the deck still crawling with bent and broken sword, to slash once more at us, if it were but at our hose of mail.

In the hot fray we recked not of our moorings, and we saw already we had lost hold of *Le Saint Michel* and drifted some yards astern, and a great shock of the ship showed us we were broadside on with another of their ships, *L’Aiglon*. Now we were soon involved in sore danger, for the pirates on board this latter, lost no time in coming up to their friends’ assistance, and like a crew of black kites they swept over the side, with curved cutlasses brandished in their hands. I know not how it would have chanced had not *La Blanche Nef* boarded their ship, and attacking them in the rear, swept through them to our relief. So they were between two attacks, and enough of us were left to engage in our last deadly hand-to-hand struggle with the pirates in the stern. I followed a great Norman soldier that led this last attack, and closing with a sinewy Moor that strove cunningly to slap my sword from my grasp with an upsweep, we were ere long rolling on the deck amid the dead and the slippery streams of blood, each guarding the other’s sword-hand from his breast; and since the Moor was a strong villain of full man’s strength, I was in evil case. For with me, thus striving on the deck, the swing and rush of my youthful strength availed me naught against his tempered muscles, that seemed pressing my arms back with a grasp of iron. Yea, I was as near cold steel in my heart as ever in my life, when suddenly I felt his grasp tighten and then grow loose, and a sharp blade that had already been run through his back, came out below the breast-bone, and gave my arm a graze that drew blood.

“God, save you, good lad!” rang out Samson’s voice, and I knew that he had found time in his control of the whole battle to think of me—and in good season, for I have small doubt that, though the point of his sword grazed my arm, yet it saved my life.



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When I arose up, the ships that were named *L'Aiglon* and *La Reine d'enfer* were both cleared of the Moors, and our men were steering the shattered vessel as well as could be done towards *Le Saint Michel*, which we presently boarded, letting the pirate ship with a hole in its bottom run away towards La Jaonneuse, a rock on the north-west that broke her up.

Now I saw that the victory in this sharp sea-battle was already won. For to right and left the second line, or those vessels that still remained, had retired, and were bearing away southward. Some five or six of the first line, that we afterwards overhauled had run aground for safety in L'Ancrese Bay; and the remnant, about twenty ships in all, drifted with shattered and broken masts and rigging on to the rocks, on which some lay foundered already.

So it was with a cheery voice I sang out to Samson d'Anville—

“Lo! the way lies open to the Vale.”

And he pointing to the stiff dead bodies floating in the water, and wiping his sword-blade carefully, cried back—

“So die all pirates, and enemies of the duke in the Norman Seas!”

CHAPTER XVIII.

The story of the relief of *Vale Castle*.

Now, by the ending of our battle before L'Ancrese Bay, the sun was setting, and for fear of some attack on us as we disembarked, Samson d'Anville thought it better that, though well in sight of Vale Castle, that already had lit beacons of joy upon its towers, we should drop anchor for the night in L'Ancrese Bay.

This we did, and there was much business in our fleet in the repairing of the damage of the fight. When the tale was made up, but forty men-at-arms had been lost with some sixty more who had sore damage, and two of our ships were so disabled that we left them to float upon the rocks.

From the prow, where I lay down to sleep, I thought of the joy in the hearts of our brethren and the abbot, and “Oh, Brother Hugo!” I thought, “now, by God’s grace, have I well-nigh fulfilled the task thou gavest me;” and then sleep drew my eyelids tight, and with no alarm of sea or enemy, I slept until the morning.

Now, the day that followed has ever been the brightest and the gladdest of my memories as I have trodden the path of my life. For on that day by Samson’s side I entered Vale gate in very sooth the deliverer of my friends.



I remember not in what manner that goodly army was disembarked, but well I know, through the long space it took, my heart burned to be away. But all was done in the due order of war, for Samson greatly feared an ambush of the Sarrasins in rocky spaces betwixt us and the Castle. And good companies of men were left in a little camp, hastily thrown up by the shore, lest there should be a mishap upon our march.



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But at length the men-at-arms were drawn up in order of march, and every man sent forward gave word that no sign of Sarrasin could be seen in the Vale. So, steadily, with the great standard of the two lions unrolled, we marched across the common, and soon the great mass of Vale Castle, on its seat of rock, towered up before us, and along the rampart we saw gathered the defenders, like saints of heaven, welcoming us as we came. And the women, so long pent up with anxious minds therein, waved their light kerchiefs, and wept for very joy at the sound of the soldier's tramp shaking the plain. And along the wall, as at a set signal, when we passed the black ruin of the old cloister and church, uprose the deep sound of men's singing, and we heard the goodly round Latin tongue roll its heavy cadence o'er our heads—"Magnificat anima mea Dominum"—ay, magnificat of praise and glory, as greeting this deliverance wrought by the most Holy One, and the downfall of Satan's power. And ever, when they sing that hymn of blessed Mary, I seem again to be a-marching with all the triumph of a noble lad in the successful doings of his first great enterprise over the wind-swept grass of the Vale up to the Castle gate—marching with a great army, that knows naught of sin and guile, full-stedfast and full-faithful through all its sunny ranks.

Then, without let or hindrance, we stood before the gate, and once more the great bolts shot back, the mighty bars clanged as they moved, and the huge gate swung heavily on its massy hinges, and the advance guard sweeping on one side, left the way free for Samson and myself to enter.

Could I enter in such stately wise with trumpet-blare and step of dignity into that place on that day as a young prince or saviour from afar? Nay, here were the very stones I had played upon through all my boyhood, and around me stood the good nurses and governors of my early years. It was no place for me to enter in this pomp. Nor were these simple monks the men for me to come back to so ceremoniously.

I stood for a moment by Samson's side in hesitation. Then, seeing Hugo and the abbot, I forgot the army and Samson and my place, and ran straight forward, like a babe to his mother, and in a moment had mine arms around the neck of my father-in-arms, Brother Hugo of the Vale. Then, when he stayed me, and unclasped my hands, that were like to choke him, so joyously they hugged, down went I on one knee and kissed the hand of Abbot Michael, that stood by his side. He, courteously raising me, said simply—

"Thou hast done well, good child. And glad are we that our woes are over. But who is yonder gentleman?"

Then I led up Samson to him, and made them known, and a fair scene of courtesy it was to see Samson in his chain-mail kneel and take the abbot's hand so thin and delicate in his own rough palm.

“Ye come like angels from above, good gentlemen,” said Michael; “for, with all sparing and restraint, our cruse is now full low, our store consumed, and, with diminished strength, there was small hope to rebut the next attack.”



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“No angels, holy Father,” answered Samson, smiling; “but stalwart fellows in plenty, with a strong stroke and a high spirit. Normans, in brief, that know well how to carry through a matter such as this. But how oft have they attempted an attack?”

“Our general shall inform thee best,” said the abbot, “this good brother, whose clear head and strong courage have saved us not once nor twice; and, indeed, most good it is that two such men as thou and he should meet.”

With that he led Brother Hugo to Samson, and the two brave warriors did embrace with all due show of courtesy.

“Thrice, now, have they engaged to storm our wall,” said Hugo, “and, while strength remained, we feared not to throw back to their sore damage such attacks. But three nights back we were in extremest case, for the rogues entered by a cunning mine the citadel itself, and but for swift action on our part they had got through in force, and overpowered the garrison. But, by God’s favour, we were aroused in time, and with a great scuffle drove them back, and with small loss to ourselves slew a score or more, and so at morn destroyed and blocked the mine; and even this night we feared a like attack, had you not brought this great army from my lord the duke to destroy for ever the Sarrasin’s arrogance.”

Then they took counsel of the resources of their arms; and, indeed, with the islanders that were with us already, and that now came flocking, being afeared to come before (as there are such in every cause), we mustered an exceeding great host, and after the ravages the Sarrasin had made, we had even now fear of famine till corn could come in by sea. And the Normans, since the Castle was too strait for all already, lay encamped in a fair camp by the waterside by St. Sampson’s Bay, till their leader should ordain the order of attack.

Now all was changed in Vale and hill country, for the Moors that so long had roamed at will, setting their watches and their sentinels on every headland and navigable inlet, and claiming to be of right the liege lords of all from Blanchelande to Torteval, from Torteval to Vale, were now shut up in their great chateau, and their fleets lying in Grand Havre and Moulin Huet Bay. No longer able to be besiegers, they had become besieged, and indeed, if they knew all, were already in extreme case. We saw none of their vile faces in lane or forest-path. The narrow street of St. Pierre Port was cleared of the swaggerers, with their clanking metal and heady brawls; while our Normans lay by St. Sampson’s shrine waiting the order to attack, they sat quiet and sullen in their hold.

And in this sullen calm there was much to fear.



CHAPTER XIX.

How we set forth to attack *Le Chateau du Grand Sarrasin*. Of the *Normans'* valour, and of the flight of our foes.

Now, for the next two days Samson had under review our islanders, and the brethren, who in martial accoutrements, and restored moreover already by good store of food, would fain take part in the great matter of executing Heaven's vengeance on Le Grand Sarrasin and his troop. These were bound together in a second regiment auxiliary to the men-at-arms, and set by Samson of his deep wisdom under Hugo's leading.



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Now, all this time the Sarrasin sat still awaiting our assault, like a sick lion in his cave, and the only sign of life up at his castle was the green flag on the pole that fluttered in the wind.

And on the third day all was in preparation for the attack. And Samson had it in mind that he and his Normans would bear the brunt of the assault, and have our contingent in reserve to fight on the level when entrance had been made. Now he determined not to attack the Castle on the side towards Vale, but from the south, where the height was not great, and there was good cover of brushwood to hide our strength, and to protect from arrows and balls. We, in a close body, were to lie quiet to the east within a run, and we were told to await his signal to enter in the breach to do our share, or, if need were, to swoop on the pirate swarms unexpectedly, if they essayed to escape to their ships.

And thus once more I found myself by Hugo's side, prepared for sharp fighting.

"See, Nigel," whispered he, as he stood fuming and craving to be himself in the thick of the fighting that soon must chance. "Yonder tree shoots up clean and straight, and, as I fancy, there is clear vision downward to the Castle, and an easy drop and scamper hither again at the signal."

"Let us mount," I said.

So, careless of rules of war and obedience, like two school-lads we swarmed up the smooth trunk, and sat soon in the joinings of the branches. Thence could we see, so far as leaves allowed, the Sarrasin camp within the walls of the chateau.

They were not to be taken by surprise. For a great array—far greater, I thought, than came down to the Vale Castle—was collected on the green, and being divided into companies, had charge of the engines of defence, or tried the temper of their blades. And I saw others on the wall ready to roll stones and hot pitch upon their assailants, as is the manner of defending castles. And amid the companies stalked heavily the Grand Geoffroy himself in full armour. Could any mistake that great form, and not feel his presence amid those wild men of so many nations, that his spirit alone united into one.

"Heigho!" thought I. "Ill knight that seest without being seen; now without being seen we see thy camp and thee."

As I thought that, his great helm turned our way, and a strange shudder took my limbs, as he seemed to look upward to our roost, and know us to be there.

"He sees us," I said to Hugo.

"That were not possible with mortal eyes," said Hugo; "but even evil beasts are oft aware of the near presence of their foes."



But he had soon to turn his eyes elsewhere, for the Norman assault came sharp and swift, like the rush of great wild creatures through the forest. Indeed it was a rare sight—that sweeping mass of chivalry that seemed to reckon naught of the walls, or the arrows, or the balls, or the pitch that a hundred hands rained down on them. Over the wall they went, and through the gate that withstood not their charge. O Heaven! they were not men those Normans, they were storms and floods, they were fire and mad waves of ocean, that scorn with wild gleefulness the granite rock and scarped boulder!



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I have seen the sea, swept in by a fierce north wind, so triumph over man's poor defences. I have seen the mad fire catch hold of mart and dwelling in a blazing town that met Duke William's anger. I saw in the north the great eygre rush through Lindis' bed, and swamp the peaceful plain with doom and ruin. Not less resistless, not less vehement was the first assault of Samson's Normans. And I knew now, as I looked, how, by fire and spirit more than by numbers, William won the famous day of Val-es-dunes, and I might have guessed, had I known what was to hap ere ten years had run away, what would come to pass below Hastings in England on the crown of Senlac.

They recked not of death or wounds—where one line fell, another took its place. Like a river that ceaselessly flows, they swarmed into the Castle, and closed with the Moors. So it seemed that, overcome by the ferocity of the onslaught, the Moors soon gave up all effort to defend the wall, but reinforced the troop that held the crest of the hill, that contended in a mighty struggle with the invading Normans. This way and that way the battle surged. Now it seemed they would drive them back after all, now they themselves were carried backward. Norman and pirate were mixed strangely together in this fierce conflict. We expected each moment that the signal for us to join the fray would ring out, but it came not. It seemed to us that Samson, greedy of honour for his men, desired to claim the total glory of the victory. But we knew not his great sagacity, nor what a strength we were to him lying there in ambush.

But what of Le Grand Geoffroy? We saw him bear the first brunt of the onset. He rushed then like a flame from line to line. And where he was, the Moors seemed to rush on to victory. Once Samson and he had met, but supported by two smart swordsmen, the Sarrasin had retired and left Samson to them. And now we espied him not, and hoped some hand had struck him that we saw not. Meanwhile, the Normans made great way, and drave the enemy back step by step, killing as they went.

Le Grand Geoffroy was neither wounded nor dead! With a great shout he came forth from the very womb of the earth with another swarm of warriors at his heels, and we saw that this last reserve had been kept back to surprise us in the rear. Then, as the great monster rushed in upon the Normans, while still they poured into the Castle, rang out the signal on the trumpet, and from our ward of trees we lusty islanders and zealous monks sprang in to do our share. Here was Hugo, and I his esquire, in the front rank of them all; here was poor distraught Ralf clutching his hilt like a man frenzied. Monk, gentleman, farmer, miller, serf—we all rushed with gladness, that the time at last had come for us to join the battle, in a great wave of fury on the contingent of relief that was headed by Geoffroy himself. And well we did our part. For we, who knew so well the cruelties of the man we fought with, were



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lifted up by a great spirit of vengeance that seemed not our own, but Heaven's. His men reeled at our charge, and left their attack to face us. We charged, recoiled, and charged again. And this time Hugo and I together swung grandly face to face with the great monster Geoffroy; and Hugo slashed nobly at him, and for the space of full four minutes there was sharp sword-play between them, and I hoped each moment that Hugo would best him.

But the duel was not fought out, for (as I heard after) so well had the Normans fought, and so many pirates lay in heaps on the green, that a great panic at this moment fell upon the pirates, and already, like kine affrighted by a wild beast, they were rushing headlong through the northern gate, that some one had unfastened, and pouring down full-tilt to the Grand Havre, where their ships were, and the Normans were after them like hounds on the scent, slaying as they went.

Now, this Geoffroy saw, and rushing in strove manfully to stay the flight. But they were too frantic to hear him or obey. In a moment he made up his mind.

"Follow my lead, then," I heard him cry to his own reserve; "we will not stay to be cut down here. To the sea! To the sea!"

He jumped into the saddle of his steed, that stood ready caparisoned, and was through the southern gate with the pirates on his heels, and we on theirs, before we were well aware what had happened.

Le Grand Sarrasin was making for his other fleet in Moulin Huet.

And of the Normans and of many of us the pirates had the advantage, for they wore not much armour. With the wings of desperation they fled before us seaward over mile on mile of forest and lane. And like a terrible storm we sped behind. Never again may such a storm rage in Guernsey lanes and hills.

Some that were ill runners were smitten down by us as they lagged behind; some that had been wounded before, and were weak from loss of blood, dropped heavily into the brake on this side or on that; the more part, as they neared the sea, pressed on faster, cheered now and again by the voice of their leader far ahead on his horse, as he shouted, "To the ships! to the ships!"

CHAPTER XX.

Of the sore slaughter in the glen of *Moulin Huet* and on the shore; and how *Le Grand Sarrasin* was slain, and of his secret.



At last we reached the head of the glen, and far down below us we saw the blue water of the bay, enclosed on either side with its great rocky bulwarks. And a great portion of the Sarrasin ships were there at anchor as near shore as they might safely lie. And there were many little boats pulling in to take the runaways aboard.

Helter-skelter they went down the rugged, winding path, jostling their fellows with knee and shoulder, hand and heel, as they slammed on their way. Le Grand Sarrasin we saw not, and guessed for the moment that he was already aboard. But when we came in sight of the bay, not long we stood in hesitation, but with a shout and a cry that rang terribly as it echoed from rock to rock, we rushed madly after, spreading our force along the side of the cliff as our fellows pressed on us behind.

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We too were carried on like a mad torrent that could not stay itself, and in the front we cut furiously with our swords at the tail of their long line whenever chance was afforded. Not many so we slew, but a number tripped over in the rush were trampled underfoot, or threw themselves in the streamlet's bed, wherein afterwards they were speedily slain.

But an end came at last to that mad descent, and all-quivering and furious, we landed on the shore. We stayed a moment till a great troop was round us, every moment swelling as the laggards came up, thirsting to have a lot in so great a matter, and then with a mighty charge, that our foes scarce essayed to meet, we drove them before us into the sea. Ay! in that deadly rush, with swinging steel and echoing cry like angels of great Heaven's power, we swept them like some unclean stuff off our island's face into the water. There was great slaughter all along the bay. Some climbing into boats were knifed behind; some half-drowned in the water we cut to pieces; some, but poor swimmers, never reached their ships; and more than one boat capsized, being overfull of raging and infuriated men.

A little remnant speedily entrenched themselves amid the rugged boulders, and smarting as they were with wild and bitter rage, we left them in their fortress, till one of the ships espying them, a boat was sent amid the rocks that they climbed towards and entered safely without hindrance from us. These and the few that swam, and the few that escaped in boats, and some that hid themselves in cave or brake, and afterwards escaped, were the scanty sum of that bodyguard of Le Grand Geoffroy that got to their ships.

The rest lay on the road, or in the water-way, or here where the shore met the white roll of the surf, in great heaps that the waves played with, as they rolled up and ran back dyed with blood. So we islanders of Guernsey and Brethren of the Vale dealt with one-half of the pirates' force, while good Samson d'Anville did likewise with the other half as they fled to the Grand Havre.

It was when we at last rested from this sad work of slaughter that I looked up to the clear sky, since earth and sea seemed all defiled with blood, and lo! there on the spur of land that divideth the Bay of Moulin Huet from the Bay of All Saints, high up on the top, with his form outlined against the sky, sat Le Grand Sarrasin on his Arabian steed. I showed him in a moment to Hugo.

"Fools that we be," cried he, "that stain our hands in this foul work upon these paltry runaways, while he, the chief cause of these men's offending, still goes free!"

"See," I said, "the monster gazes down on the downfall of his lieges, and sees them die without a care!"

"Ay, for he knows," said Hugo, "there is plenty of evil men in the world for him still to lead."

With that Hugo picked out some twenty of his most trusted men and bade us follow him.



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So we started up the cliff side by a little path that wound upward amid the gorse. And still all the time as we toiled with foot and hand at climbing, upon the summit sat the Sarrasin, as though with a proud air deriding our attack.

“Whom seek you, good gentlemen?” he cried to us as we climbed below.

“A vile knave and caitiff!” Hugo cried back.

“He hath not passed this way,” shouted the Sarrasin, “so lose not your labour, good sirs, at this boys’ play of climbing.”

“It is not boys’ play down yonder!” returned Hugo. “Oh, villain, cursed villain, we will mete you the same measure!”

“Then you must rival my Pearl of Seville!” he cried, just galloping lightly away as we landed on the summit.

So he had got away to some secret place, of which there were so many on the coast, had he not met full-tilt a strong band of the Normans that were even now on the road, being sent down by Samson to see that we were not worsted.

These he met tramping to Moulin Huet Bay, and, wheeling hastily at the sight of them, found us behind him. Like a spent hare that runs into a hole, he spurred to the house at Blanchelande that lay at the head of All Saints’ Bay, and we that followed at a run heard his beast clatter over the drawbridge of the moat. We rolled a great stone on to the bridge that none could draw it up, and, with the Normans following behind, pursued him into his cover. The good steed stood riderless before the gate. With all our weight we burst the door, and ran in a great body into the hall wherein I had visited my Lord of Rouen.

No man was to be seen therein, and for a while we stood at fault, Normans and islanders alike, and then went through the house, battering with lusty strokes, that echoed again, every part of wall or wainscot that might afford concealment.

Had all our struggle been for naught, and would the arch-villain escape us thus? We came back to the great hall, and stood therein while our followers ran riot in the house. I took up, as we stood by my lord’s table, that very curious box or optic-glass, wherein he showed me far things brought close, and curiously raised it to my eyes, and gazed down upon the bay. It was brought wondrous clear, and the waves seemed dancing before mine eyes. Suddenly I saw what made me drop the glass, and hastily drag Hugo with me out of the house. The glass showed me the Sarrasin stealing along the shadows of the glen downwards to where a little boat lay moored by the rocks.

We tracked him like a quarry; and ere long he knew we were behind him, and hasted, sore hindered with his great bulky body, to the shore. There we overtook him, and at



once he faced us, and made with his sword a great lunge at Hugo that well-nigh took his life. But even so, Hugo was quick with his parry, and kept him at fence.

“This is no fair fight ’twixt man and man, false monk!” cried the Sarrasin, as I had a stroke at his undefended side, so hot was I for his blood.



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“Stand off, good Nigel,” sang out Hugo. “None shall say I beat him by foul means.”

With this, after sundry passes that came to naught, he drove his good sword straight into his enemy’s side; for, indeed, Geoffroy was wild in his swordplay, and left openings clear to a cool man.

Le Grand Sarrasin rolled heavily on the sand, and we knew that never again would the pirates gather head to harm our island.

“Had I but gained the ship,” he howled, “I would have been duke yet.”

Now this was the last he said, for a great spurt of blood coming from his side, he raised himself a moment on his arm, and then fell back upon the sand.

We knew not what face of horror we should gaze upon as we essayed to pull the helm from the head of Le Grand Sarrasin, that never showed his face to men.

The helm came off in our hands. It was no hideous countenance that it had masked, nor did we fear to gaze on it in death.

It was the face of my Lord Archbishop of Rouen, whom I had visited in his house hard by, and whom I had seen disguised in Normandy, that I now plainly saw.

Where, then, was Le Grand Sarrasin? Le Grand Sarrasin had been none other than this exiled man, that among the most evil of mankind had sought to raise a power that might one day overthrow William himself.

And in this ruin of his glory, achieved by grace of Heaven through our hands, Le Grand Sarrasin was brought to naught.

“Thou knowest who this was?” said Hugo, calmly.

“Ay, well I know,” I said.

“Thou and I alone know this dark thing,” he said. “Is it well that it should enter into men’s mouths and minds?”

“Thou knowest best, Hugo,” I said.

“Then,” said he, “I say it were well for the Church of God, and for men’s love of honour, and for truth and righteousness, that none know but ourselves this dead man’s secret. Let him die Le Grand Sarrasin, a heathen Moor and no baptized Norman.”

“But Maugher will be missed,” I said.



“Yea; and a meeter tale than this will serve,” said Hugo. “A false step, a squall at sea—anything but *this*.” He pointed to the body. “Wilt thou keep silence?”

“If it be thy will,” I said.

“Assist me, then,” said Hugo.

So we dragged the body of the exile a short way over some rocks, whose black bases the deep water washed upon, and weighting it with some great stones, pushed it into the dark deeps. Thence none would raise him again to discover what manner of face wore Le Grand Sarrasin; and none would guess it was no dark visage of the south, but the face of an evil traitor, so much the more evil that he was called by the two high names Norman and Christian. There shall he lie till the great blare of Heaven’s trump call good and ill to judgment.

CHAPTER XXI.

Conclusion. How, the above matters being finished, I was made known to my father.



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Thus fell Le Grand Sarrasin, and I would fain finish this chronicle here, for all matters at the Vale most quickly returned to their old order, the next year being chiefly occupied with the rebuilding of the cloister and the planning of that great church that took so many years to build, which at last is so magnificent, that the old church wherein we used to sing with our boyish trebles seems in our memories but a poor place.

To the laying of these noble stones much of the stores of treasure found in the caverns at the chateau was justly devoted, and the holy things of many a plundered House of God are to be found in the stately church of the cloister.

And in my time, at least, no pirates ever landed on that island. Like a rock of doom they shun the place, for indeed many hundred of them perished there, as I have told, and they lost in one day the gathered treasure of years of crime.

And their captain being destroyed, their spirit seemed fled out of them, to the joy of all good and honest men.

But I must close up this chronicle of his fall with an event that concerned myself, which, as it were, flowed straight out of it. For if I had not journeyed to Normandy, and been caught on my way first by Le Grand Sarrasin, I suppose I should never have been made known unto my father.

And it is of my father, Ralf de Bessin, that I must therefore tell.

Now, the next day after, when we had rested ourselves of our great toils in the battle and pursuit, I and Brother Hugo purposed to go to the Chapel of St Apolline to offer our thanks to the priest and him that had saved me from all the unknown horrors of the prison in which I was pent. Or at least we would hear whether yet they had appeared again.

The fall of the Moor had brought them back to earth, and they sat together in the small hut beside the fishers' chapel, whence I had set out on my second journey. All the time they had lived in a cave hard by, fed daily by some fisher folk that knew their hiding-place; and indeed they looked as men that had fared exceeding roughly, and all the plumpness of the good Father had fled away.

I told them my story as I have told it to you in these leaves, and he whom I knew as Des Bois inquired again and again of all my dealings with the vicomte. Then, when I had finished, he said—

“Full bravely done. I regret not that I saved thee as I did, for thou hast some great deeds yet to do. And now, wouldst thou know, Nigel de Bessin, why I was led to save thee?”

I looked straight at him tenderly, for I guessed the truth.



“It was because thou wast indeed my son.” He clasped both my hands in his, and looked down into my eyes. And I said “Father” for the first time thus, knowing that this was he of whom the vicomtesse told me.

“Thy father indeed,” he said, “but ruined these many years by follies more than by crimes, as this Augustine, mine old schoolfellow, will tell.”



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“Father,” said I, “Duke William and the vicomte will feel kindly to thee for thy lot in this matter.”

“It matters not,” he answered; “I have long ago done with courts, and now I have done with fighting. A quiet resting-place is all I want. And in those solitary days Augustine and I have made our determination. Have many brethren died in the siege?” he asked of Hugo, who nodded sadly.

“Then here is one to fill an empty hood,” said my father. And I knew that the priest of St. Apolline’s had persuaded him to become a monk.

“Thou wilt go forth,” he said to me, “to wars, and courts, and princes, and may God shield thee still from all evil, as He hath so marvellously done these perilous days. From Vale Cloister will I look out on thee in pride of thy knightly fame, if such a small taint of earth as pride in thee be there permitted.”

In such a manner were we made known to one another, the son and the father, and ere long Ralf de Bessin became Brother Francis of the Vale.

But I, ere that, had left my pupilage behind, and was numbered in the retinue of my uncle the vicomte as he followed the ever-conquering banner of William.

THE END.

HISTORICAL NOTES.

The chief authorities for the history and antiquities of Guernsey are:—

Du Moulin: “History of Normandy.” [1631].

Thomas Dicey: “Historical Account of Guernsey.”

William Berry: “History of the Island of Guernsey.”

F.B. Tupper: “History of Guernsey.”

Extracts bearing on the foregoing pages are quoted in these notes from the above, but Du Moulin seems to be the writer on whom the later authors have depended.

NOTE A.

Archbishop Mauger.—“William succeeded Robert A.D. 1035. One of his most powerful opponents was his uncle Mauger, Archbishop of Rouen, who, after William was settled in his Duchy of Normandy, excommunicated him on pretence that his wife Matilda was too nearly related. William, in 1055, deposed and banished Mauger in



consequence to the Isle of Guernsey.... Insular tradition has fixed his residence near Saints Bay.

“Du Moulin says: ‘Maugher, thus justly deposed, was banished to the island of Guernsey, near Coutances, where, says Walsingham, he fell into a state of madness, and had a miserable end. Others affirm that during his exile he gave his mind to the black arts (*sciences noires*) and that he had a familiar spirit, which warned him of his death, while he was taking his recreation in a boat, on which he said to the boatman: “Let us land, for a certainty one of us two will be drowned to-day,” which happened, for as they embarked at the port of Winchant he fell into the sea and was drowned, and his body being found a few days afterwards was interred in the church of Cherbourg” (F.B. Tupper, “History of Guernsey,” p. 40).



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NOTE B.

Vale Abbey.—"The Abbey of Mont St. Michael was reduced in its revenues by Duke Richard of Normandy. The number of Benedictines was reduced in proportion to the reduction of the revenue, and those who were driven from thence, retiring to Guernsey, founded in the year 962 an abbey in that part of the island now called the Close of the Vale. This they called the Abbey of St. Michael" (Wm. Berry, "History of Guernsey," p. 52).

NOTE C.

Vale Castle.—"Towards the end of the tenth century the Danes, or other piratical nations of Scandinavia, who had long been quiet, commenced their depredations. They did not attempt to attack Normandy, but the new settlement of the Benedictines in Guernsey did not escape their cruelty, but was greatly injured by them. They frequently visited the island, and, according to the insular MSS., plundered the defenceless inhabitants, carrying off their corn and cattle. In order to shelter them, a fair and stately castle was built on an eminence in the vale, calculated to receive, even three centuries later, not only the inhabitants of the island but also their cattle and effects. It was called St. Michael's Castle" (*Ibid.*, p. 56).

NOTE D.

Visit of Duke Robert.—"In 1028 Robert Duke of Normandy espoused the cause of his two cousins Alfred and Edward, claiming the throne of England. On Canute's refusal to make restitution, Robert fitted out a powerful armament, and embarked at the head of a numerous army, intending to land on the coast of Sussex. A great storm arose the day after leaving Fecamp, his whole fleet was dispersed, and many ships totally lost. Robert's vessel and about twenty others were forced down the channel as far as Guernsey, and would have been dashed to pieces on the rocky coast of the island had not the fishermen, seeing them in distress, ventured out in boats to their assistance, and piloted them into a bay on the north side of the Vale, where they rode in safety. The Duke was brought ashore and lodged at the Abbey of St. Michael.... To reward the Abbot for his hospitality and attention, he gave them all the lands within the Close of the Vale in fee to him and his successors, Abbots of St. Michael, by the title of Fief or Manor of St. Michael, with leave to extend the same without the Close of the Vale towards the north-west.... And to recompense the islanders for saving him and his fleet, upon their representing to him how they had been plundered by pirates, he determined to leave behind him two of his most able engineers with a sufficient number of skilled workmen under them, who had embarked with him for the intended descent upon England, to finish the Castle of St. Michael in the Vale, and to build such other fortresses as might

be found necessary for protecting the inhabitants. The Duke left a fortnight after his arrival, and the place where his fleet lay has been ever since called L'Ancrese" (Wm. Berry, "History of Guernsey," p. 58).



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NOTE E.

The Sarrazins in Guernsey.—“According to tradition the northern freebooters, who were termed by the old French historians Sarrazins, Anglice Saracens, established themselves in Guernsey, where they erected a stronghold, which was named, probably after their leader, *Le Chastel du Grand Jeffroi*, and it appears also to have borne the name of the Chastel of the Grand Sarrazin. This castle was situated on an eminence nearly in the centre of the island, and commanded an extensive view of the ocean, and of many of the landing-places as well as of the coast of Normandy” (F.B. Tupper, “History of Guernsey,” p. 21).

NOTE F.

The Expedition of Samson d’Anville.—“[Guernsey], in the year 1061, is stated to have been attacked by a new race of pirates, who, according to Berry (p. 63), issued from the southern ports of France bordering on the Bay of Biscay. Duke William was at Valognes when he received information of this attack, and he immediately sent troops under the command of his squire, Sampson d’Anville, who landed at the harbour of St. Samson. Being joined by the islanders who had sought refuge at the Castle of the Vale and other retreats, he defeated the invaders with much slaughter. Duke William is also said to have made large concessions of land in Guernsey to d’Anville” (F.B. Tupper, “History of Guernsey,” p. 41).

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