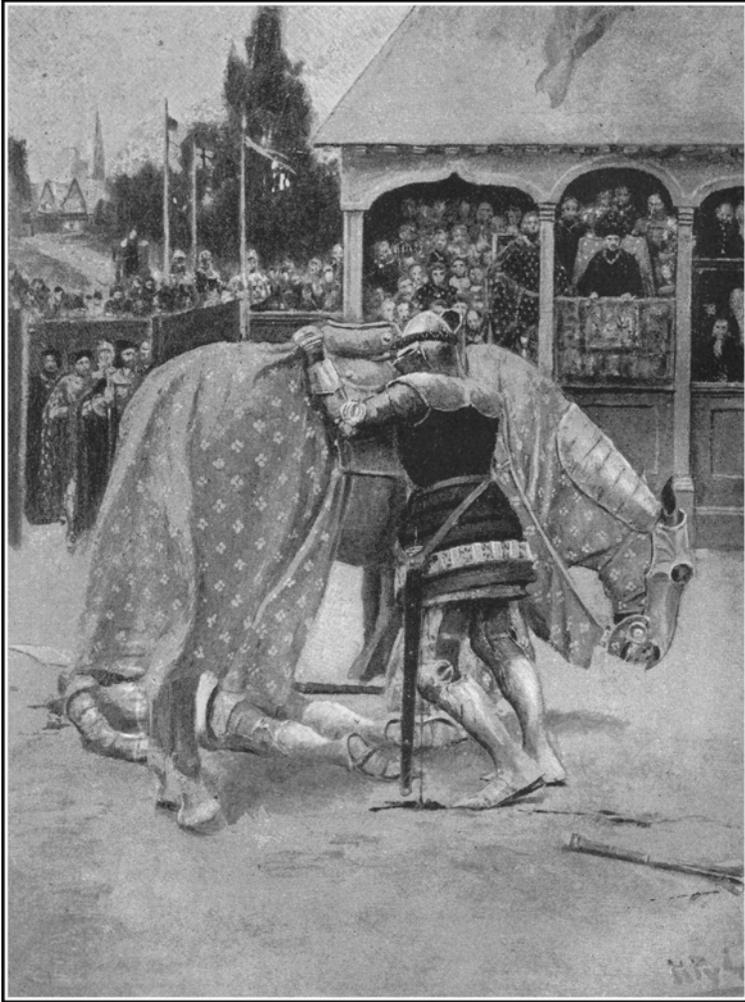


MEN OF IRON



He held tightly to the fallen man's horse.

MEN OF IRON

BY

HOWARD PYLE

YESTERDAY'S CLASSICS

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TO
MY FRIEND AND CRITIC
J. HENRY HARPER

Is Inscribed

ALL THAT MAY BE OF WORTH
IN THIS VOLUME

H.P.

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INTRODUCTION

THE year 1400 opened with more than usual peacefulness in England. Only a few months before, Richard II.—weak, wicked, and treacherous—had been dethroned, and Henry IV. declared King in his stead. But it was only a seeming peacefulness, lasting but for a little while; for though King Henry proved himself a just and a merciful man—as justice and mercy went with the men of iron of those days—and though he did not care to shed blood needlessly, there were many noble families who had been benefited by King Richard during his reign, and who had lost somewhat of their power and prestige from the coming in of the new King.

Among these were a number of great lords—the Dukes of Albemarle, Surrey, and Exeter, the Marquis of Dorset, the Earl of Gloucester, and others—who had been degraded to their former titles and estates, from which King Richard had lifted them. These and others brewed a secret plot to take King Henry's life, which plot might have succeeded had not one of their own number betrayed them.

Their plan had been to fall upon the King and his adherents, and to massacre them during a great tournament, to be held at Oxford. But Henry did not

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appear at the lists; whereupon, knowing that he had been lodging at Windsor with only a few attendants, the conspirators marched thither against him. In the mean time the King had been warned of the plot, so that, instead of finding him in the royal castle, they discovered through their scouts that he had hurried to London, whence he was even then marching against them at the head of a considerable army. So nothing was left them but flight. Some betook themselves one way, some another; some sought sanctuary here, some there; but one and another, they were all of them caught and killed.

The Earl of Kent—one time Duke of Surrey—and the Earl of Salisbury were beheaded in the market-place at Cirencester; Lord Le Despencer—once the Earl of Gloucester—and Lord Lumley met the same fate at Bristol; the Earl of Huntingdon was taken in the Essex fens, carried to the castle of the Duke of Gloucester, whom he had betrayed to his death in King Richard's time, and was there killed by the castle people. Those few who found friends faithful and bold enough to afford them shelter, dragged those friends down in their own ruin.

Just such a case was that of the father of the boy hero of this story, the blind Lord Gilbert Reginald Falworth, Baron of Falworth and Easterbridge, who, though having no part in the plot, suffered through it ruin, utter and complete.

He had been a faithful counsellor and adviser to King Richard, and perhaps it was this, as much and

INTRODUCTION

more than his roundabout connection with the plot,
that brought upon him the punishment he suffered.

CHAPTER I

A COMMOTION IN THE HALL

MYLES FALWORTH was but eight years of age at that time, and it was only afterwards, and when he grew old enough to know more of the ins and outs of the matter, that he could remember by bits and pieces the things that afterwards happened; how one evening a knight came clattering into the court-yard upon a horse, red-nostrilled and smeared with the sweat and foam of a desperate ride—Sir John Dale, a dear friend of the blind Lord.

Even though so young, Myles knew that something very serious had happened to make Sir John so pale and haggard, and he dimly remembered leaning against the knight's iron-covered knees, looking up into his gloomy face, and asking him if he was sick to look so strange. Thereupon those who had been too troubled before to notice him, bethought themselves of him, and sent him to bed, rebellious at having to go so early.

He remembered how the next morning, looking out of a window high up under the eaves, he saw a great troop of horsemen come riding into the court-yard beneath, where a powdering of snow had whitened

A COMMOTION IN THE HALL

everything, and of how the leader, a knight clad in black armor, dismounted and entered the great hall door-way below, followed by several of the band.

He remembered how some of the castle women were standing in a frightened group upon the landing of the stairs, talking together in low voices about a matter he did not understand, excepting that the armed men who had ridden into the court-yard had come for Sir John Dale. None of the women paid any attention to him; so, shunning their notice, he ran off down the winding stairs, expecting every moment to be called back again by some one of them.

A crowd of castle people, all very serious and quiet, were gathered in the hall, where a number of strange men-at-arms lounged upon the benches, while two billmen in steel caps and leathern jacks stood guarding the great door, the butts of their weapons resting upon the ground, and the staves crossed, barring the door-way.

In the anteroom was the knight in black armor whom Myles had seen from the window. He was sitting at the table, his great helmet lying upon the bench beside him, and a quart beaker of spiced wine at his elbow. A clerk sat at the other end of the same table, with inkhorn in one hand and pen in the other, and a parchment spread in front of him.

Master Robert, the castle steward, stood before the knight, who every now and then put to him a question, which the other would answer, and the clerk write the answer down upon the parchment.

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His father stood with his back to the fireplace, looking down upon the floor with his blind eyes, his brows drawn moodily together, and the scar of the great wound that he had received at the tournament at York—the wound that had made him blind—showing red across his forehead, as it always did when he was angered or troubled.

There was something about it all that frightened Myles, who crept to his father's side, and slid his little hand into the palm that hung limp and inert. In answer to the touch, his father grasped the hand tightly, but did not seem otherwise to notice that he was there. Neither did the black knight pay any attention to him, but continued putting his questions to Master Robert.

Then, suddenly, there was a commotion in the hall without, loud voices, and a hurrying here and there. The black knight half arose, grasping a heavy iron mace that lay upon the bench beside him, and the next moment Sir John Dale himself, as pale as death, walked into the antechamber. He stopped in the very middle of the room. "I yield me to my Lord's grace and mercy," said he to the black knight, and they were the last words he ever uttered in this world.

The black knight shouted out some words of command, and swinging up the iron mace in his hand, strode forward clanking towards Sir John, who raised his arm as though to shield himself from the blow. Two or three of those who stood in the hall without came running into the room with drawn swords and bills,

A COMMOTION IN THE HALL

and little Myles, crying out with terror, hid his face in his father's long gown.

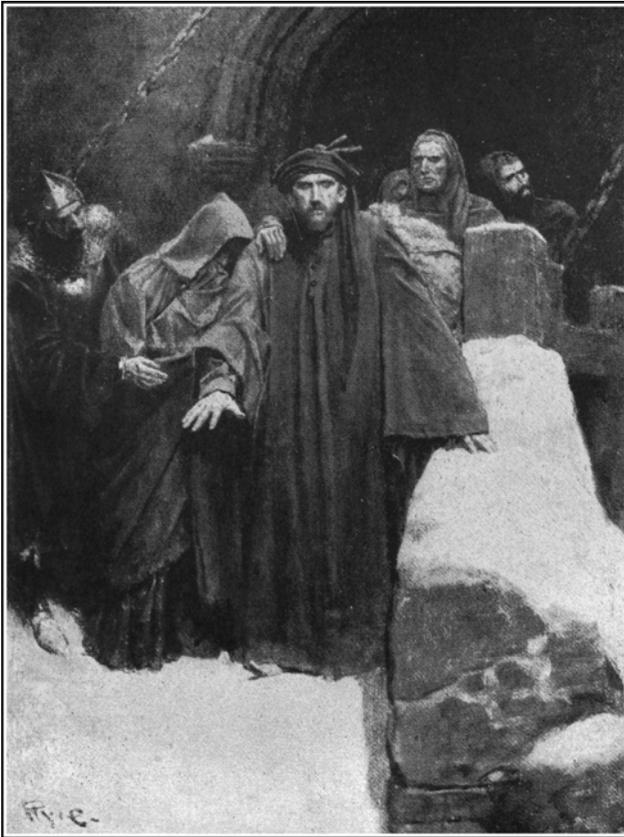
The next instant came the sound of a heavy blow and of a groan, then another blow and the sound of one falling upon the ground. Then the clashing of steel, and in the midst Lord Falworth crying, in a dreadful voice, "Thou traitor! thou coward! thou murderer!"

Master Robert snatched Myles away from his father, and bore him out of the room in spite of his screams and struggles, and he remembered just one instant's sight of Sir John lying still and silent upon his face, and of the black knight standing above him, with the terrible mace in his hand stained a dreadful red.

It was the next day that Lord and Lady Falworth and little Myles, together with three of the more faithful of their people, left the castle.

His memory of past things held a picture for Myles of old Diccon Bowman standing over him in the silence of midnight with a lighted lamp in his hand, and with it a recollection of being bidden to hush when he would have spoken, and of being dressed by Diccon and one of the women, bewildered with sleep, shuddering and chattering with cold.

He remembered being wrapped in the sheepskin that lay at the foot of his bed, and of being carried in Diccon Bowman's arms down the silent darkness of the winding stair-way, with the great black giant shadows swaying and flickering upon the stone wall as the dull flame of the lamp swayed and flickered in the cold breathing of the night air.



The Flight from Falworth Castle.

A COMMOTION IN THE HALL

Below were his father and mother and two or three others. A stranger stood warming his hands at a newly-made fire, and little Myles, as he peeped from out the warm sheepskin, saw that he was in riding-boots and was covered with mud. He did not know till long years afterwards that the stranger was a messenger sent by a friend at the King's court, bidding his father fly for safety.

They who stood there by the red blaze of the fire were all very still, talking in whispers and walking on tiptoes, and Myles's mother hugged him in her arms, sheepskin and all, kissing him, with the tears streaming down her cheeks, and whispering to him, as though he could understand their trouble, that they were about to leave their home forever.

Then Diccon Bowman carried him out into the strangeness of the winter midnight.

Outside, beyond the frozen moat, where the osiers stood stark and stiff in their winter nakedness, was a group of dark figures waiting for them with horses. In the pallid moonlight Myles recognized the well-known face of Father Edward, the Prior of St. Mary's.

After that came a long ride through that silent night upon the saddle-bow in front of Diccon Bowman; then a deep, heavy sleep, that fell upon him in spite of the galloping of the horses.

When next he woke the sun was shining, and his home and his whole life were changed.

CHAPTER II

LIFE IN SECLUSION

FROM the time the family escaped from Falworth Castle that midwinter night to the time Myles was sixteen years old he knew nothing of the great world beyond Crosbey-Dale. A fair was held twice in a twelvemonth at the market-town of Wisebey, and three times in the seven years old Diccon Bowman took the lad to see the sights at that place. Beyond these three glimpses of the outer world he lived almost as secluded a life as one of the neighboring monks of St. Mary's Priory.

Crosbey-Holt, their new home, was different enough from Falworth or Easterbridge Castle, the former baronial seats of Lord Falworth. It was a long, low, straw-thatched farm-house, once, when the church lands were divided into two holdings, one of the bailiff's houses. All around were the fruitful farms of the priory, tilled by well-to-do tenant holders, and rich with fields of waving grain, and meadow-lands where sheep and cattle grazed in flocks and herds; for in those days the church lands were under church rule, and were governed by church laws, and there, when war and famine and waste and sloth blighted the outside world, harvests

LIFE IN SECLUSION

flourished and were gathered, and sheep were sheared and cows were milked in peace and quietness.

The Prior of St. Mary's owed much if not all of the church's prosperity to the blind Lord Falworth, and now he was paying it back with a haven of refuge from the ruin that his former patron had brought upon himself by giving shelter to Sir John Dale.

I fancy that most boys do not love the grinding of school life—the lessons to be conned, the close application during study hours. It is not often pleasant to brisk, lively lads to be so cooped up. I wonder what the boys of to-day would have thought of Myles's training. With him that training was not only of the mind, but of the body as well, and for seven years it was almost unremitting. "Thou hast thine own way to make in the world, sirrah," his father said more than once when the boy complained of the grinding hardness of his life, and to make one's way in those days meant a thousand times more than it does now; it meant not only a heart to feel and a brain to think, but a hand quick and strong to strike in battle, and a body tough to endure the wounds and blows in return. And so it was that Myles's body as well as his mind had to be trained to meet the needs of the dark age in which he lived.

Every morning, winter or summer, rain or shine he tramped away six long miles to the priory school, and in the evenings his mother taught him French.

Myles, being prejudiced in the school of thought of his day, rebelled not a little at that last branch of his studies. "Why must I learn that vile tongue?" said he.

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“Call it not vile,” said the blind old Lord, grimly; “belike, when thou art grown a man, thou’lt have to seek thy fortune in France land, for England is haply no place for such as be of Falworth blood.” And in after-years, true to his father’s prediction, the “vile tongue” served him well.

As for his physical training, that pretty well filled up the hours between his morning studies at the monastery and his evening studies at home. Then it was that old Diccon Bowman took him in hand, than whom none could be better fitted to shape his young body to strength and his hands to skill in arms. The old bowman had served with Lord Falworth’s father under the Black Prince both in France and Spain, and in long years of war had gained a practical knowledge of arms that few could surpass. Besides the use of the broadsword, the short sword, the quarter-staff, and the cudgel, he taught Myles to shoot so skilfully with the long-bow and the cross-bow that not a lad in the country-side was his match at the village butts. Attack and defence with the lance, and throwing the knife and dagger were also part of his training.

Then, in addition to this more regular part of his physical training, Myles was taught in another branch not so often included in the military education of the day—the art of wrestling. It happened that a fellow lived in Crosbey village, by name Ralph-the-Smith, who was the greatest wrestler in the country-side, and had worn the champion belt for three years. Every Sunday afternoon, in fair weather, he came to teach Myles the art, and being wonderfully adept in bodily feats, he

LIFE IN SECLUSION

soon grew so quick and active and firm-footed that he could cast any lad under twenty years of age living within a range of five miles.

“It is main ungentle armscraft that he learneth,” said Lord Falworth one day to Prior Edward. “Saving only the broadsword, the dagger, and the lance, there is but little that a gentleman of his strain may use. Neth’less, he gaineth quickness and suppleness, and if he hath true blood in his veins he will acquire knightly arts shrewdly quick when the time cometh to learn them.”

But hard and grinding as Myles’s life was, it was not entirely without pleasures. There were many boys living in Crosbey-Dale and the village; yeomen’s and farmers’ sons, to be sure, but, nevertheless, lads of his own age, and that, after all, is the main requirement for friendship in boyhood’s world. Then there was the river to bathe in; there were the hills and valleys to roam over, and the wold and woodland, with their wealth of nuts and birds’-nests and what not of boyhood’s treasures.

Once he gained a triumph that for many a day was very sweet under the tongue of his memory. As was said before, he had been three times to the market-town at fair-time, and upon the last of these occasions he had fought a bout of quarterstaff with a young fellow of twenty, and had been the conqueror. He was then only a little over fourteen years old.

Old Diccon, who had gone with him to the fair, had met some cronies of his own, with whom he had sat gossiping in the ale-booth, leaving Myles for the nonce to shift for himself. By-and-by the old man had

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noticed a crowd gathered at one part of the fair-ground, and, snuffing a fight, had gone running, ale-pot in hand. Then, peering over the shoulders of the crowd, he had seen his young master, stripped to the waist, fighting like a gladiator with a fellow a head taller than himself. Diccon was about to force his way through the crowd and drag them asunder, but a second look had showed his practised eye that Myles was not only holding his own, but was in the way of winning the victory. So he had stood with the others looking on, withholding himself from any interference and whatever upbraiding might be necessary until the fight had been brought to a triumphant close. Lord Falworth never heard directly of the redoubtable affair, but old Diccon was not so silent with the common folk of Crosbey-Dale, and so no doubt the father had some inkling of what had happened. It was shortly after this notable event that Myles was formally initiated into squirehood. His father and mother, as was the custom, stood sponsors for him. By them, each bearing a lighted taper, he was escorted to the altar. It was at St. Mary's Priory, and Prior Edward blessed the sword and girded it to the lad's side. No one was present but the four, and when the good Prior had given the benediction and had signed the cross upon his forehead, Myles's mother stooped and kissed his brow just where the priest's finger had drawn the holy sign. Her eyes brimmed bright with tears as she did so. Poor lady! perhaps she only then and for the first time realized how big her fledgling was growing for his nest. Henceforth Myles had the right to wear a sword.

Myles had ended his fifteenth year. He was a bonny

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lad, with brown face, curling hair, a square, strong chin, and a pair of merry laughing blue eyes; his shoulders were broad; his chest was thick of girth; his muscles and thews were as tough as oak.

The day upon which he was sixteen years old, as he came whistling home from the monastery school he was met by Diccon Bowman.

“Master Myles,” said the old man, with a snuffle in his voice—“Master Myles, thy father would see thee in his chamber, and bade me send thee to him as soon as thou didst come home. Oh, Master Myles, I fear me that belike thou art going to leave home to-morrow day.”

Myles stopped short. “To leave home!” he cried.

“Aye,” said old Diccon, “belike thou goest to some grand castle to live there, and be a page there and what not, and then, haply, a gentleman-at-arms in some great lord’s pay.”

“What coil is this about castles and lords and gentlemen-at-arms?” said Myles. “What talkest thou of, Diccon? Art thou jesting?”

“Nay,” said Diccon, “I am not jesting. But go to thy father, and then thou wilt presently know all. Only this I do say, that it is like thou leavest us to-morrow day.”

And so it was as Diccon had said; Myles was to leave home the very next morning. He found his father and mother and Prior Edward together, waiting for his coming.

“We three have been talking it over this morning,” said his father, “and so think each one that the time

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hath come for thee to quit this poor home of ours. An thou stay here ten years longer, thou'lt be no more fit to go then than now. To-morrow I will give thee a letter to my kinsman, the Earl of Mackworth. He has thriven in these days and I have fallen away, but time was that he and I were true sworn companions, and plighted together in friendship never to be sundered. Methinks, as I remember him, he will abide by his plighted troth, and will give thee his aid to rise in the world. So, as I said, to-morrow morning thou shalt set forth with Diccon Bowman, and shall go to Castle Devlen, and there deliver this letter which prayeth him to give thee a place in his household. Thou mayst have this afternoon to thyself to make ready such things as thou shalt take with thee. And bid me Diccon to take the gray horse to the village and have it shod."

Prior Edward had been standing looking out of the window. As Lord Falworth ended he turned.

"And, Myles," said he, "thou wilt need some money, so I will give thee as a loan forty shillings, which some day thou mayst return to me an thou wilt. For this know, Myles, a man cannot do in the world without money. Thy father hath it ready for thee in the chest, and will give it thee to-morrow ere thou goest."

Lord Falworth had the grim strength of manhood's hard sense to upbear him in sending his son into the world, but the poor lady mother had nothing of that to uphold her. No doubt it was as hard then as it is now for the mother to see the nestling thrust from the nest to shift for itself. What tears were shed, what words of

LIFE IN SECLUSION

love were spoken to the only man-child, none but the mother and the son ever knew.

The next morning Myles and the old bowman rode away, and no doubt to the boy himself the dark shadows of leave-taking were lost in the golden light of hope as he rode out into the great world to seek his fortune.

CHAPTER III

A NEW ACQUAINTANCE

WHAT Myles remembered of Falworth loomed great and grand and big, as things do in the memory of childhood, but even memory could not make Falworth the equal of Devlen Castle, when, as he and Diccon Bowman rode out of Devlen-town across the great, rude stone bridge that spanned the river, he first saw, rising above the crowns of the trees, those huge hoary walls, and the steep roofs and chimneys clustered thickly together, like the roofs and chimneys of a town.

The castle was built upon a plateau-like rise of ground, which was enclosed by the outer wall. It was surrounded on three sides by a loop-like bend of the river, and on the fourth was protected by a deep, broad, artificial moat, almost as wide as the stream from which it was fed. The road from the town wound for a little distance along by the edge of this moat. As Myles and the old bowman galloped by, with the answering echo of their horses' hoof-beats rattling back from the smooth stone face of the walls, the lad looked up, wondering at the height and strength of the great ancient fortress. In his air-castle building Myles had pictured the Earl receiving him as the son of his one-time comrade in

A NEW ACQUAINTANCE

arms—receiving him, perhaps, with somewhat of the rustic warmth that he knew at Crosbey-Dale; but now, as he stared at those massive walls from below, and realized his own insignificance and the greatness of this great Earl, he felt the first keen, helpless ache of homesickness shoot through his breast, and his heart yearned for Crosbey-Holt again.

Then they thundered across the bridge that spanned the moat, and through the dark shadows of the great gaping gate-way, and Diccon, bidding him stay for a moment, rode forward to bespeak the gate-keeper.

The gate-keeper gave the two in charge of one of the men-at-arms who were lounging upon a bench in the archway, who in turn gave them into the care of one of the house-servants in the outer court-yard. So, having been passed from one to another, and having answered many questions, Myles in due time found himself in the outer waiting-room sitting beside Diccon Bowman upon a wooden bench that stood along the wall under the great arch of a glazed window.

For a while the poor country lad sat stupidly bewildered. He was aware of people coming and going; he was aware of talk and laughter sounding around him; but he thought of nothing but his aching homesickness and the oppression of his utter littleness in the busy life of this great castle.

Meantime old Diccon Bowman was staring about him with huge interest, every now and then nudging his young master, calling his attention now to this and now to that, until at last the lad began to awaken somewhat

MEN OF IRON

from his despondency to the things around. Besides those servants and others who came and went, and a knot of six or eight men-at-arms with bills and pole-axes, who stood at the farther door-way talking together in low tones, now and then broken by a stifled laugh, was a group of four young squires, who lounged upon a bench beside a door-way hidden by an arras, and upon them Myles's eyes lit with a sudden interest. Three of the four were about his own age, one was a year or two older, and all four were dressed in the black-and-yellow uniform of the house of Beaumont.

Myles plucked the bowman by the sleeve. "Be they squires, Diccon?" said he, nodding towards the door.

"Eh?" said Diccon. "Aye; they be squires."

"And will my station be with them?" asked the boy.

"Aye; an the Earl take thee to service, thou'lt haply be taken as squire."

Myles stared at them, and then of a sudden was aware that the young men were talking of him. He knew it by the way they eyed him askance, and spoke now and then in one another's ears. One of the four, a gay young fellow, with long riding-boots laced with green laces, said a few words, the others gave a laugh, and poor Myles, knowing how ungainly he must seem to them, felt the blood rush to his cheeks, and shyly turned his head.

Suddenly, as though stirred by an impulse, the same lad who had just created the laugh arose from the bench,

A NEW ACQUAINTANCE

and came directly across the room to where Myles and the bowman sat.

“Give thee good-den,” said he. “What be’st thy name and whence comest thou, an I may make bold so to ask?”

“My name is Myles Falworth,” said Myles; “and I come from Crosbey-Dale bearing a letter to my Lord.”

“Never did I hear of Crosbey-Dale,” said the squire. “But what seekest here, if so be I may ask that much?”

“I come seeking service,” said Myles, “and would enter as an esquire such as ye be in my Lord’s household.”

Myles’s new acquaintance grinned. “Thou’lt make a droll squire to wait in a Lord’s household,” said he. “Hast ever been in such service?”

“Nay,” said Myles, “I have only been at school, and learned Latin and French and what not. But Diccon Bowman here hath taught me use of arms.”

The young squire laughed outright. “By’r Lady, thy talk doth tickle me, friend Myles,” said he. “Think’st thou such matters will gain thee footing here? But stay! Thou didst say anon that thou hadst a letter to my Lord. From whom is it?”

“It is from my father,” said Myles. “He is of noble blood, but fallen in estate. He is a kinsman of my Lord’s, and one time his comrade in arms.”

“Sayst so?” said the other. “Then mayhap thy chances are not so ill, after all.” Then, after a moment, he added: “My name is Francis Gascoyne, and I will stand thy

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friend in this matter. Get thy letter ready, for my Lord and his Grace of York are within and come forth anon. The Archbishop is on his way to Dalworth, and my Lord escorts him so far as Uppingham. I and those others are to go along. Dost thou know my Lord by sight?"

"Nay," said Myles, "I know him not."

"Then I will tell thee when he cometh. Listen!" said he, as a confused clattering sounded in the courtyard without. "Yonder are the horses now. They come presently. Busk thee with thy letter, friend Myles."

The attendants who passed through the anteroom now came and went more hurriedly, and Myles knew that the Earl must be about to come forth. He had hardly time to untie his pouch, take out the letter, and tie the strings again when the arras at the door-way was thrust suddenly aside, and a tall thin squire of about twenty came forth, said some words to the young men upon the bench, and then withdrew again. Instantly the squires arose and took their station beside the door-way. A sudden hush fell upon all in the room, and the men-at-arms stood in a line against the wall, stiff and erect as though all at once transformed to figures of iron. Once more the arras was drawn back, and in the hush Myles heard voices in the other room.

"My Lord cometh," whispered Gascoyne in his ear, and Myles felt his heart leap in answer.

The next moment two noblemen came into the anteroom followed by a crowd of gentlemen, squires, and pages. One of the two was a dignitary of the

A NEW ACQUAINTANCE

Church; the other Myles instantly singled out as the Earl of Mackworth.

CHAPTER IV

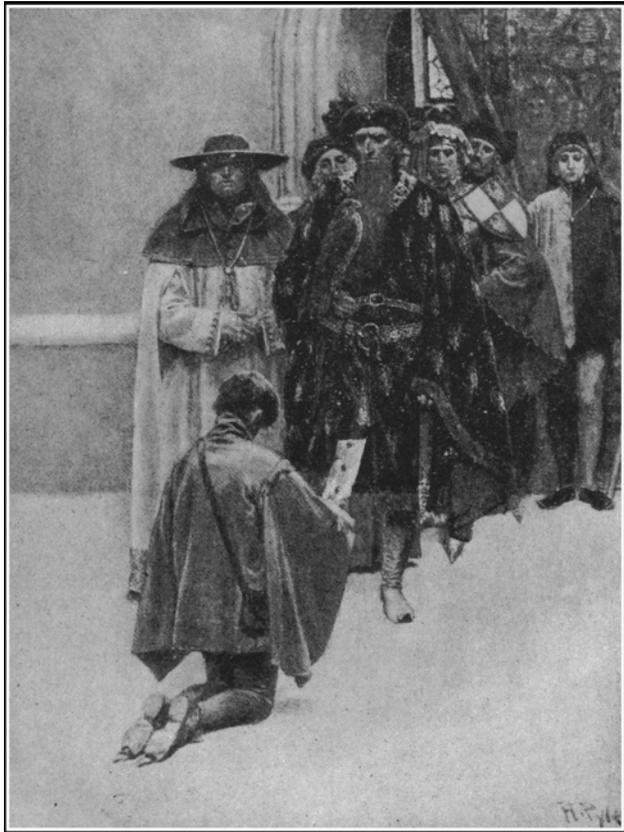
A PARTING

HE was a tall man, taller even than Myles's father. He had a thin face, deep-set bushy eyebrows, and a hawk nose. His upper lip was clean shaven, but from his chin a flowing beard of iron-gray hung nearly to his waist. He was clad in a riding-gown of black velvet that hung a little lower than the knee, trimmed with otter fur and embroidered with silver goshawks—the crest of the family of Beaumont.

A light shirt of link mail showed beneath the gown as he walked, and a pair of soft undressed leather riding-boots were laced as high as the knee, protecting his scarlet hose from mud and dirt. Over his shoulders he wore a collar of enamelled gold, from which hung a magnificent jewelled pendant, and upon his fist he carried a beautiful Iceland falcon.

As Myles stood staring, he suddenly heard Gascoyne's voice whisper in his ear, "Yon is my Lord; go forward and give him thy letter."

Scarcely knowing what he did, he walked towards the Earl like a machine, his heart pounding within him and a great humming in his ears. As he drew near, the



Myles, as in a dream, kneeled and presented the letter.

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nobleman stopped for a moment and stared at him, and Myles, as in a dream, kneeled, and presented the letter. The Earl took it in his hand, turned it this way and that, looked first at the bearer, then at the packet, and then at the bearer again.

“Who art thou?” said he; “and what is the matter thou wouldst have of me?”

“I am Myles Falworth,” said the lad, in a low voice; “and I come seeking service with you.”

The Earl drew his thick eyebrows quickly together, and shot a keen look at the lad. “Falworth?” said he, sharply—“Falworth? I know no Falworth!”

“The letter will tell you,” said Myles. “It is from one once dear to you.”

The Earl took the letter, and handing it to a gentleman who stood near, bade him break the seal. “Thou mayst stand,” said he to Myles; “needst not kneel there forever.” Then, taking the opened parchment again, he glanced first at the face and then at the back, and, seeing its length, looked vexed. Then he read for an earnest moment or two, skipping from line to line. Presently he folded the letter and thrust it into the pouch at his side. “So it is, your Grace,” said he to the lordly prelate, “that we who have luck to rise in the world must ever suffer by being plagued at all times and seasons. Here is one I chanced to know a dozen years ago, who thinks he hath a claim upon me, and saddles me with his son. I must e’en take the lad, too, for the sake of peace and quietness.” He glanced around, and seeing Gascoyne, who had drawn near, beckoned to him. “Take me this

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fellow," said he, "to the buttery, and see him fed; and then to Sir James Lee, and have his name entered in the castle books. And stay, sirrah," he added; "bid me Sir James, if it may be so done, to enter him as a squire-at-arms. Methinks he will be better serving so than in the household, for he appeareth a soothly rough cub for a page."

Myles did look rustic enough, standing clad in frieze in the midst of that gay company, and a murmur of laughter sounded around, though he was too bewildered to fully understand that he was the cause of the merriment. Then some hand drew him back—it was Gascoyne's—there was a bustle of people passing, and the next minute they were gone, and Myles and old Diccon Bowman and the young squire were left alone in the anteroom.

Gascoyne looked very sour and put out. "Murrain upon it!" said he; "here is good sport spoiled for me to see thee fed. I wish no ill to thee, friend, but I would thou hadst come this afternoon or to-morrow."

"Methinks I bring trouble and dole to every one," said Myles, somewhat bitterly. "It would have been better had I never come to this place, methinks."

His words and tone softened Gascoyne a little. "Ne'er mind," said the squire; "it was not thy fault, and is past mending now. So come and fill thy stomach, in Heaven's name."

Perhaps not the least hard part of the whole trying day for Myles was his parting with Diccon. Gascoyne and he had accompanied the old retainer to the outer

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gate, in the archway of which they now stood; for without a permit they could go no farther. The old bowman led by the bridle-rein the horse upon which Myles had ridden that morning. His own nag, a vicious brute, was restive to be gone, but Diccon held him in with tight rein. He reached down, and took Myles's sturdy brown hand in his crooked, knotted grasp.

"Farewell, young master," he croaked, tremulously, with a watery glimmer in his pale eyes. "Thou wilt not forget me when I am gone?"

"Nay," said Myles; "I will not forget thee."

"Aye, aye," said the old man, looking down at him, and shaking his head slowly from side to side; "thou art a great tall sturdy fellow now, yet have I held thee on my knee many and many's the time, and dandled thee when thou wert only a little weeny babe. Be still, thou devil's limb!" he suddenly broke off, reining back his restive raw-boned steed, which began again to caper and prance. Myles was not sorry for the interruption; he felt awkward and abashed at the parting, and at the old man's reminiscences, knowing that Gascoyne's eyes were resting amusedly upon the scene, and that the men-at-arms were looking on. Certainly old Diccon did look droll as he struggled vainly with his vicious high-necked nag. "Nay, a murrain on thee! an' thou wilt go, go!" cried he at last, with a savage dig of his heels into the animal's ribs, and away they clattered, the led-horse kicking up its heels as a final parting, setting Gascoyne fairly alauding. At the bend of the road the old man turned and nodded his head; the next moment he had

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disappeared around the angle of the wall, and it seemed to Myles, as he stood looking after him, as though the last thread that bound him to his old life had snapped and broken. As he turned he saw that Gascoyne was looking at him.

“Dost feel downhearted?” said the young squire, curiously.

“Nay,” said Myles, brusquely. Nevertheless his throat was tight and dry, and the word came huskily in spite of himself.

CHAPTER V

A TRUE LORDLY GIFT

THE Earl of Mackworth, as was customary among the great lords in those days, maintained a small army of knights, gentlemen, men-at-arms, and retainers, who were expected to serve him upon all occasions of need, and from whom were supplied his quota of recruits to fill such levies as might be made upon him by the King in time of war.

The knights and gentlemen of this little army of horse and foot soldiers were largely recruited from the company of squires and bachelors, as the young novitiate soldiers of the castle were called.

This company of esquires consisted of from eighty to ninety lads, ranging in age from eight to twenty years. Those under fourteen years were termed pages, and served chiefly the Countess and her waiting gentlewomen, in whose company they acquired the graces and polish of the times, such as they were. After reaching the age of fourteen the lads were entitled to the name of esquire or squire.

In most of the great houses of the time the esquires were the especial attendants upon the Lord and Lady

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of the house, holding such positions as body-squires, cup-bearers, carvers, and sometimes the office of chamberlain. But Devlen, like some other of the princely castles of the greatest nobles, was more like a military post or a fortress than an ordinary household. Only comparatively few of the esquires could be used in personal attendance upon the Earl; the others were trained more strictly in arms, and served rather in the capacity of a sort of body-guard than as ordinary squires. For, as the Earl rose in power and influence, and as it so became well worth while for the lower nobility and gentry to enter their sons in his family, the body of squires became almost cumbersomely large. Accordingly, that part which comprised the squires proper, as separate from the younger pages, was divided into three classes—first, squires of the body, who were those just past pagehood, and who waited upon the Earl in personal service; second, squires of the household, who, having regular hours assigned for exercise in the manual of arms, were relieved from personal service excepting upon especial occasions; and thirdly and lastly, at the head of the whole body of lads, a class called bachelors—young men ranging from eighteen to twenty years of age. This class was supposed to exercise a sort of government over the other and younger squires—to keep them in order as much as possible, to marshal them upon occasions of importance, to see that their arms and equipments were kept in good order, to call the roll for chapel in the morning, and to see that those not upon duty in the house were present at the daily exercise at arms. Orders to the squires were generally

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transmitted through the bachelors, and the head of that body was expected to make weekly reports of affairs in their quarters to the chief captain of the body.

From this overlordship of the bachelors there had gradually risen a system of fagging, such as is or was practised in the great English public schools—enforced services exacted from the younger lads—which at the time Myles came to Devlen had, in the five or six years it had been in practice, grown to be an absolute though unwritten law of the body—a law supported by all the prestige of long-continued usage. At that time the bachelors numbered but thirteen, yet they exercised over the rest of the sixty-four squires and pages a rule of iron, and were taskmasters, hard, exacting, and oftentimes cruel.

The whole company of squires and pages was under the supreme command of a certain one-eyed knight, by name Sir James Lee; a soldier seasoned by the fire of a dozen battles, bearing a score of wounds won in fight and tourney, and withered by hardship and labor to a leather-like toughness. He had fought upon the King's side in all the late wars, and had at Shrewsbury received a wound that unfitted him for active service, so that now he was fallen to the post of Captain of Esquires at Devlen Castle—a man disappointed in life, and with a temper embittered by that failure as well as by cankering pain.

Yet perhaps no one could have been better fitted for the place he held than Sir James Lee. The lads under his charge were a rude, rough, unruly set, quick, like their

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elders, to quarrel, and to quarrel fiercely, even to the drawing of sword or dagger. But there was a cold, iron sternness about the grim old man that quelled them, as the trainer with a lash of steel might quell a den of young wolves. The apartments in which he was lodged, with his clerk, were next in the dormitory of the lads, and even in the midst of the most excited brawlings the distant sound of his harsh voice, "Silence, messieurs!" would bring an instant hush to the loudest uproar.

It was into his grim presence that Myles was introduced by Gascoyne. Sir James was in his office, a room bare of ornament or adornment or superfluous comfort of any sort—without even so much as a mat of rushes upon the cold stone pavement to make it less cheerless. The old one-eyed knight sat gnawing his bristling mustaches. To anyone who knew him it would have been apparent that, as the castle phrase went, "the devil sat astride of his neck," which meant that some one of his blind wounds was aching more sorely than usual.

His clerk sat beside him, with account-books and parchment spread upon the table, and the head squire, Walter Blunt, a lad some three or four years older than Myles, and half a head taller, black-browed, powerfully built, and with cheek and chin darkened by the soft budding of his adolescent beard, stood making his report.

Sir James listened in grim silence while Gascoyne told his errand.

"So, then, pardee, I am bid to take another one of

ye, am I?" he snarled. "As though ye caused me not trouble enow; and this one a cub, looking a very boor in carriage and breeding. Mayhap the Earl thinketh I am to train boys to his dilly-dally household service as well as to use of arms."

"Sir," said Gascoyne, timidly, "my Lord sayeth he would have this one entered direct as a squire of the body, so that he need not serve in the household."

"Sayest so?" cried Sir James, harshly. "Then take thou my message back again to thy Lord. Not for Mackworth—no, nor a better man than he—will I make any changes in my government. An I be set to rule a pack of boys, I will rule them as I list, and not according to any man's bidding. Tell him, sirrah, that I will enter no lad as squire of the body without first testing an he be fit at arms to hold that place." He sat for a while glowering at Myles and gnawing his mustaches, and for the time no one dared to break the grim silence. "What is thy name?" said he, suddenly. And then, almost before Myles could answer, he asked the head squire whether he could find a place to lodge him.

"There is Gillis Whitlock's cot empty," said Blunt. "He is in the infirmary, and belike goeth home again when he cometh thence. The fever hath gotten into his bones, and—"

"That will do," said the knight, interrupting him impatiently. "Let him take that place, or any other that thou hast. And thou, Jerome," said he to his clerk, "thou mayst enter him upon the roll, though whether it be as

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page or squire or bachelor shall be as I please, and not as Mackworth biddeth me. Now get ye gone."

"Old Bruin's wound smarteth him sore," Gascoyne observed, as the two lads walked across the armory court. He had good-naturedly offered to show the newcomer the many sights of interest around the castle, and in the hour or so of ramble that followed, the two grew from acquaintances to friends with a quickness that boyhood alone can bring about. They visited the armory, the chapel, the stables, the great hall, the Painted Chamber, the guard-house, the mess-room, and even the scullery and the kitchen, with its great range of boilers and furnaces and ovens. Last of all Myles's new friend introduced him to the armor-smithy.

"My Lord hath sent a piece of Milan armor thither to be repaired," said he. "Belike thou would like to see it."

"Aye," said Myles, eagerly, "that would I."

The smith was a gruff, good-natured fellow, and showed the piece of armor to Myles readily and willingly enough. It was a beautiful bascinet of inlaid workmanship, and was edged with a rim of gold. Myles scarcely dared touch it; he gazed at it with an unconcealed delight that warmed the smith's honest heart.

"I have another piece of Milan here," said he. "Did I ever show thee my dagger, Master Gascoyne?"

"Nay," said the squire.

The smith unlocked a great oaken chest in the corner of the shop, lifted the lid, and brought thence a

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beautiful dagger with the handle of ebony and silver-gilt, and a sheath of Spanish leather, embossed and gilt. The keen, well-tempered blade was beautifully engraved and inlaid with niello-work, representing a group of figures in a then popular subject—the dance of Death. It was a weapon at once unique and beautiful, and even Gascoyne showed an admiration scarcely less keen than Myles's openly-expressed delight.

“To whom doth it belong?” said he, trying the point upon his thumb nail.

“There,” said the smith, “is the jest of the whole, for it belongeth to me. Sir William Beauclerk bade me order the weapon through Master Gildersworthy, of London town, and by the time it came hither, lo! he had died, and so it fell to my hands. No one here payeth the price for the trinket, and so I must e'en keep it myself, though I be but a poor man.”

“How much dost thou hold it for?” said Gascoyne.

“Seventeen shillings buyeth it,” said the armorer, carelessly.

“Aye, aye,” said Gascoyne, with a sigh; “so it is to be poor, and not be able to have such things as one loveth and would fain possess. Seventeen shillings is nigh as much by half again as all my yearly wage.”

Then a sudden thought came to Myles, and as it came his cheeks glowed as hot as fire. “Master Gascoyne,” said he, with gruff awkwardness, “thou hast been a very good, true friend to me since I have come to this place, and hast befriended me in all ways thou mightest do,

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and I, as well I know, but a poor rustic clod. Now I have forty shillings by me which I may spend as I list, and so I do beseech thee that thou wilt take yon dagger of me as a love-gift, and have and hold it for thy very own.”

Gascoyne stared open-mouthed at Myles. “Dost mean it?” said he, at last.

“Aye,” said Myles, “I do mean it. Master Smith, give him the blade.”

At first the smith grinned, thinking it all a jest; but he soon saw that Myles was serious enough, and when the seventeen shillings were produced and counted down upon the anvil, he took off his cap and made Myles a low bow as he swept them into his pouch. “Now, by my faith and troth,” quoth he, “that I do call a true lordly gift. Is it not so, Master Gascoyne?”

“Aye,” said Gascoyne, with a gulp, “it is, in soothly earnest.” And thereupon, to Myles’s great wonderment, he suddenly flung his arms about his neck, and, giving him a great hug, kissed him upon the cheek. “Dear Myles,” said he, “I tell thee truly and of a verity I did feel warm towards thee from the very first time I saw thee sitting like a poor oaf upon the bench up yonder in the anteroom, and now of a sooth I give thee assurance that I do love thee as my own brother. Yea, I will take the dagger, and will stand by thee as a true friend from this time forth. Mayhap thou mayst need a true friend in this place ere thou livest long with us, for some of us esquires be soothly rough, and knocks are more plenty here than broad pennies, so that one new come is like to have a hard time gaining a footing.”

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“I thank thee,” said Myles, “for thy offer of love and friendship, and do tell thee, upon my part, that I also of all the world would like best to have thee for my friend.”

Such was the manner in which Myles formed the first great friendship of his life, a friendship that was destined to last him through many years to come. As the two walked back across the great quadrangle, upon which fronted the main buildings of the castle, their arms were wound across one another’s shoulders, after the manner, as a certain great writer says, of boys and lovers.