



SIR HUGH ON HIS WAY TO THE CORNER CROFT.

[See p. 18.]

DEARER THAN LIFE.

A Tale of the Times of Wycliffe.

BY

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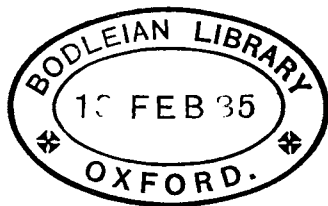
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DEARER THAN LIFE.



CHAPTER I.

MIDDLETON HALL.

TOWARDS the close of a warm day in the summer of 1366, a party of travellers were winding their way through the wooded slopes of Oxfordshire. They had left the chalky downs of the Chiltern Hills behind them, and now their road lay through woods of oak and beech, and the horses had to step warily, for the ruddy weed-grown bridle path was known to have several dangerous bits of bog and morass here and there; and although it was the high road between London and Oxford, these were not the greatest dangers that beset a traveller who was bold enough to go so far from home.

As the horses and sumpter mules stepped cautiously along the ruddy road, master and servants kept a sharp eye on the trees and undergrowth of bracken, for thieves and bandits found a convenient shelter in these woods, and it was not for display alone that Sir Hugh Middleton and his son travelled with such a retinue of

servants. The thrushes and linnets flew out before them, and they caught occasional glimpses of the wild duck and moor-hen, but nothing more formidable than a few wild swine dashed across their path, and threatened to upset the order of the cavalcade. Nevertheless it was a great relief to reach the clearing on the edge of the forest, for now the dangers of their long weary journey from London were over, and not until King Edward summoned his next parliament would these have to be encountered again.

At the stone cross that marked the boundary of the village and of the forest clearing stood a palfrey with a young lady mounted upon it, and beside her was a lad, evidently her brother, from the strong likeness between them. There were the same dreamy blue eyes and bright golden hair; the lad's tresses falling in long careless ringlets on his shoulders, the lady's gathered back under the band that crossed her forehead and passed under her chin. A sweet, thoughtful, though somewhat anxious face looked out from the broad-brimmed summer hat; but at the first glimpse of the travellers a bright smile dispelled the anxiety, and the palfrey was at once urged into a gentle trot to meet them.

"Maud, Maud, thou art beyond the stone cross," cried her father in some dismay, as he recognised his daughter. Close as they were to the village, they were scarcely beyond the reach of danger, if an extra strong party of bandits should spring upon them from the wood.

The young lady reined in her palfrey, and waited until her father's tired horse should reach them; and

then followed embraces and congratulations, until Sir Hugh suddenly inquired, "Didst thou get my letter, Maud, that I sent by the pedler going to Oxenforde Fair?"

"Yes. My grandame thought some one might bring tidings of thee, and so she sent Roger and Diggory with the pack-horse, to buy a plenishing of salt; but a sore mischance happened while they were gone."

"Nay, nay, Maud," whispered her brother, "ill news will keep; vex not my father ere he hath rested."

But the knight had overheard the whisper, and said quickly, "Now, tell thy news, Maud. Is little Madge well?" he added, with a slight quaver in his voice.

"Yes, yes, father, Madge is well," said Maud, reassuringly; "'tis only another story about the begging friars."

"They have been selling their pardons in the village again, I trow, and Father Ambrose is wroth that his penances are despised, and absolution is got at a cheaper rate than he can sell it;" and the gentleman laughed.

"Father Ambrose is wroth enough," said the lad, hoping by this means to put an end to the discussion, until his father should reach home, and hear the whole story in quiet.

But Maud was too full of the news she had to tell, and hastily added, "Oh, it is much worse than Father Ambrose being angry."

"Well, tell us all about it," said her elder brother, who was riding beside his father, but who had hitherto held

his peace, as became a traveller returning from so hazardous a journey, and to whom village news was of small consequence now.

Maud looked from her father to her brother, and seeing both were impatient to hear her story, she dashed into it. "The friar sold old Gillian a bone—a 'Jew's sheep bone,' he said it was—which, if thrown into the well where the cattle drink, they will never ail aught again."

"And the witless old woman paid him a good round sum for it, I doubt not," said Sir Hugh, with a smile.

"Yes, he persuaded her to give him a mark for it; but the worst was, it was her son Roger's money, for she had none of her own, and Roger had saved this to rent the corner croft, which you had promised he should have. Well, when he heard where the money had gone, he made such a rabble and stir about it, that the manciple of the monastery heard about it, and accused Roger as well as Gillian of encouraging the friars to come about the village selling false pardons, and so, to punish him, they have begun to take in the corner croft."

"Take in the corner croft!" exclaimed her brother, while her father, in his surprise and anger, dashed the rowel of his spurs into the horse's flanks, without much regard to the poor weary beast, as he exclaimed, "By the holy rood, I will not brook this insult!"

"The prior hath long wanted that corner croft, my father," said Harry, the elder son.

"Aye, and he hath taken this as an excuse for seizing it; but, by my halidame, it shall never be joined

to the monastery lands. Lend me thine horse, Stephen, lad, and I will to the croft now, and beat down the fence they have put up."

"Nay, my father, they have but marked out the place for the posts to be driven, and cut down part of the monastery hedge, that it may march the better with it," said Maud, quickly.

"Hugh Middleton's land shall never be seized by a pack of fat, hooded crows while he has a strong right arm to defend it;" and mounting his son's horse, which was far less weary than his own jaded beast, he galloped on, leaving the rest of the party to follow at leisure.

Maud looked from one brother to the other in some dismay, as the three went along in silence. "What will my father do, think you?" she asked.

"Give the monks a sound rating, and perchance the knaves who are at work a taste of his good whip," said Harry, with a laugh.

"And bring upon us a lawsuit that will eat up every rood of land before it is over," said Stephen, somewhat ruefully.

Harry looked more sober as he thought of this contingency. Certainly it was possible, nay, even probable, for there was nothing that a convent of monks loved better than a lawsuit by which something was to be gained for the honour or profit of the house to which they were attached.

Now, the monastery had long desired to possess this little corner croft, and every monk in the establishment would, if possible, fight tooth and nail rather than give it

up, now that it had once been claimed, although the pretext was a slender one.

So the brothers and sisters may be forgiven for looking anxious and concerned; even Maud, who was the youngest, was old enough to understand that it was no light matter to be at feud with the neighbouring monastery, to say nothing of the fact that their uncle was one of these monks, and would be sure to side with his brethren of the monastery—ah! and be upheld in it too by their grandame, who ruled over them, and would be sure to make them feel her displeasure. So they rode through the village, each lost in thought, and scarcely noticing the greetings of the villagers, who turned out to welcome the travellers.

As they rode up through the courtyard of the Hall, a stately old lady appeared at the door, and asked in an imperious tone for Sir Hugh.

“He hath gone to the corner croft, I doubt not,” said Harry, springing from his horse, and bending before the old lady, as he took her hand to kiss it dutifully.

“And wherefore hath he gone thither?” she demanded, raising her head out of the ample folds of her gorget, and casting a searching look at Maud.

The young lady dropped her eyes, for she knew she had offended her grandame grievously by laying aside the cumbrous head- and neck-gear known as the gorget, and adopting the newer fashion of a band of Flemish ribbon across her forehead and under her chin. Such worldly frivolities as a fashion in head-gear changing every few years, was unheard of in her young days;

and the old lady protested against the vanity of the new fashion by wearing her gorget higher than ever, so as almost to cover her ears and mouth as well as her chin. But, in addition to this, Maud knew that her grandame wished to give her own version of the appropriation of the corner croft by the prior of St. Anselm's; and although it would be difficult to convince her son that this was anything but unjust, still the old lady believed she could make him acquiesce quietly—or with only a little grumbling—in this arrangement, if she talked to him first about it; but if he had heard Maud's account of the transaction, there was no telling what might be the end of the matter. So she said, in a sharper tone, addressing her granddaughter, "Wherefore hath thy father gone in such hot haste to the corner croft?"

"I have told him about it, grandame," said Maud, in a subdued tone.

"And wherefore didst not thou bridle her tongue?" she said, turning quickly upon Stephen. "Did I not tell thee but yesterday that we must proceed warily in letting thy father know of this matter? and now this girl's witless tongue hath spoilt it all. Go to thy chamber!" she commanded, turning again to the young lady.

Maud slowly descended from her palfrey, wishing now that she had followed her father at once, to see what was going on at the corner croft, instead of coming home with her brothers first. But, much as she wished to go on to this part of the home farm, no thought of questioning her grandame's command ever crossed

her mind. With a silent, regretful pat on her palfrey's neck, she resigned him to the servant who came to lead him away, and passed through the great hall, where her brothers stood playing with their numerous dogs, and went up to her chamber.

Middleton Hall was no bad emblem of the times of which we write, combining as it did something of the old Saxon grange with the later Norman castle, fitly typifying the blending of the two estranged races that Edward the Third's long and costly French wars had done so much to bring about. Brothers in arms, Saxon and Norman forgot their mutual jealousies, and remembered only that they were English, fighting against a common enemy; and so, when times of peace returned, they could settle down together; and the gloomy donjons of the Norman castle were abandoned, and dwellings were built more comfortable and commodious, with large windows instead of mere slits in the masonry. Middleton Hall was one of the first of these mansions, for Sir Hugh was thoroughly abreast of the times in which he lived, and, having inherited both Saxon and Norman blood from his ancestors, he had gladly quitted the old castle for the more commodious house he had built for himself near it, and had sunk the proud Norman baron in the more genial Saxon franklin; or rather, the two had been combined in Sir Hugh Middleton, as it was in many another English gentleman and sturdy yeoman.

And now the strength that had been worse than wasted in internecine quarrels was being roused against a foe that had grown to leviathan proportions. Eccle-

siastical power threatened to dominate king, lords, and commons, not to mention the supremacy it claimed over the individual souls of men. King John had consented to hold the crown of England as a fief of Rome, and in token of his submission had paid a yearly tribute of seven hundred marks, with three hundred more for Ireland; and this tribute, with some few intermissions, had been paid by his successors, until Edward the Third attained his majority, when it again lapsed, and little was heard of it for thirty-three years. But now Pope Urban had sent to demand the payment of this year's tribute, and all the arrears since the king's majority.

Had his holiness possessed but a little common sense instead of the boasted infallible wisdom, he would have known enough of the present temper of England to let well alone, and not arouse public attention to the power that was stifling the liberties of the country, and was at the same time an enormous drain upon her resources.

The demand for the payment of this tribute had roused all the fiery independence of the king and his parliament; and Sir Hugh Middleton had returned from attending the meeting of parliament, thoroughly determined to resist all ecclesiastical claims that might be made upon him; so it may be imagined in what temper he received his daughter's story of monastic aggression upon his paternal acres. His proud Norman blood instantly made itself felt, and was not likely to be speedily cooled, with the Saxon obstinacy and tenacity of purpose to back it up; and Dame Middleton, his mother, watched for his return with no small anxiety.

She knew nothing of the larger question that was exercising the minds of statesmen and the wisest in the land ; but she knew enough of her son to believe that whatever he might do about the corner croft in his anger to-day, would be followed up by the cooler steps taken to-morrow ; while the monks would be equally tenacious, and only too ready to rush into the costly luxury of a lawsuit. So while Maud dressed herself in a new white linen dress to greet her father's home-coming, his mother awaited him in the great hall, more than usually anxious over his prolonged absence.

CHAPTER II.

A PRESENT FOR MARGARET.

“**H**OW now, my mother?” exclaimed Sir Hugh, heartily, as he strode into the great hall, doffing his cap as he entered the lady’s presence as deferentially as Harry or Stephen would have done.

39 A faint smile flitted across the lady’s face at sight of the fine stalwart figure; for she was very proud of Sir Hugh, although he did vex her sometimes. “How now, my son?” she said, returning his greeting, but looking at him rather anxiously; “wherefore didst thou not return with Harry and the knaves?” she asked.

“Did not Maud tell thee whither I had gone?” asked the gentleman, in some surprise.

“Aye, she said something of the corner croft,” said the lady, evasively; but the very mention of the disputed plot of land was enough to arouse Sir Hugh’s anger, and he paced up and down the great hall without venturing to reply for some minutes.

At length he broke out, “I will teach this arrogant prior a lesson he is not likely to forget! He and his French master, the pope, will both learn that Englishmen will turn at last, an the heel be set too hard upon them. They have thought of us, and treated us, like

mere earthworms ; but the worm will turn, and his holiness will find it so, and this proud prior too."

"But—but, my son, what wilt thou do?" asked Lady Middleton, clasping her hands.

Sir Hugh laughed. "What have I done? thou shouldest ask, my mother," he said. "I trow the hooded crows will not try to meddle with my corner croft again, after the good taste I gave them of the strength of my riding-whip and right arm," he added.

"Hugh, Hugh, what hast thou done?" said the lady, with whitening lips.

"Done! Why, beat off the robbers who were tearing up my hedge-stakes. I would that it had been the prior or the lord abbot himself, by my halidame! I should not have stayed my hand even now; but the monks have had a taste of my boar's hide they are not likely to forget."

"And Reginald, hadst thou no thought of him?" asked the lady, reproachfully.

"I thought of nothing but my corner croft, I tell thee," said Sir Hugh, impatiently. "Reg can take care of himself. He will doubtless take sides with his brethren of the monastery, though it be to the despoiling of his own brother. How is my little Madge?" he suddenly asked, by way of turning the conversation; and then, scarcely waiting for his mother's reply, he passed through one of the doors opening into the great hall and went in search of his daughter.

Madge was an invalid. She had been frail and delicate from her birth, but she was able to move from her own chamber to her sister's, both of which opened into what was known in the family as Madge's bower,

although it was the joint possession of the two sisters, and was certainly the most luxuriously furnished room in the house. The walls were hung with arras, somewhat faded and worn in places, but the floor was well covered with fresh green rushes, and there was a couch and sundry cushions—not often found even in a lady's bower; but Madge was her father's darling, and anything that could add to her comfort was at once obtained by Sir Hugh.

And here he found the sisters, Maud dressed in a white linen kirtle, embroidered at the neck with black silk, and a girdle of the same costly material, from which was suspended a large pouch or pocket. What her grandame would say when she presented herself in the great hall at supper time, she did not care to think; but it would please her father to see her in her fresh white dress, she knew, more especially as she could tell him that it was the fruit of her own distaff, and nearly as fine and even of thread as Flanders linen. Her grandame would think it a shameful waste of time, more especially as it might have been presented to the monastery for the prior's own use; indeed, the old lady had more than once hinted that this should be its destination; but Madge had urged that it should be made into a kirtle, and worn to welcome her father's return from London, and Maud was quite willing to follow her sister's suggestion.

Madge herself wore a dress of scarlet cloth—linen was too cool for her—but it was the best she had, for nothing but the best would do for such a holiday as their father's return from his perilous journey; and so both daughters

were waiting to greet him with a glad welcome when he pushed aside the arras that hung before the door, and made his appearance in the bower.

"Well, my Madge, and how art thou?" he asked, tenderly kissing his younger daughter, and stroking her pale thin face as she nestled in his arms.

"Hast been to the corner croft, my father?" asked Madge, who had heard all about the affair from her sister.

"Yes, yes; let not the corner croft trouble thee," said the gentleman, a little impatiently. "See what I have brought thee from London; it cost me the price of a load of my best hay, but naught is too costly that can pleasure my Madge." And as he spoke Sir Hugh drew from under his cloak a clumsy-looking book, and presented it to his daughter.

"A book! a book, Maud!" exclaimed the young lady, in a tone of delight.

"Oh! where didst thou get it?" asked Maud, in a tone of awe, as though she feared her father had robbed the scriptorium of some monastery during his stay in London.

Sir Hugh laughed. "Art frightened at the sight of a book, Maud?" he asked. "Nay, nay, wench, I would that every lad and lass in the land had a book and could read it too, an it were such a book as that of Piers Plowman."

The sisters looked at each other, scarcely knowing what to think of such a speech as this; but they took refuge in the thought that such a thing as everybody possessing a book, and being able to read, was never likely to happen; and so they opened the parchment

leaves of their own treasure, and looked at the crabbed writing, and Maud at once discovered that it was a poem. She was more eager than ever now to learn something of its contents. "I thought it was only the legend of some saint that we might have heard about before from Uncle Reginald," she said; and she turned to the title page of the book and read, "The Vision of William concerning Peter the Plowman, and His Vision concerning Do-wel, Do-bet, and Do-best." "Madge, did you ever hear of such a thing?" she exclaimed; "a book about a ploughman, and not about a saint!"

"But what if the ploughman found out how to be a saint without leaving his plough?" said her father, with a quiet smile.

"A saint and not a monk! How could that be, my father?" asked Madge, with sparkling eyes, for she had listened to her uncle's tales of saints, until she had wished that she could leave her home and join some sisterhood; only who would have her, a helpless invalid, and what would her father do without her? For, invalid as she was, she was more to him than all his other children, and she knew it.

"A ploughman and yet a saint," she repeated, meditatively, turning the leaves of the book.

"Hast thou read it, my father?" asked Maud.

"Most of it, my wench. And now thou dost want to know what it is about. Well, I know not what thy grandame would say about it, but it's true, Maud—true as any monkish legend thou hast heard from Uncle Reginald; only this is not likely to please him so well, for it tells of all sorts of wrongs—especially the wrongs

committed by popes, monks, and begging friars. This Peter the story tells of is like our own ploughman, only he goeth not to the alehouse so oft, I trow, or he would not have attained unto the truth he here tells of; for he hath made it plain to any who will see, that, guided by conscience and good sense, we may grow more like the saints while doing our duty where God hath placed us than running off upon pilgrimages, or shutting ourselves up to keep vigils in a monastery."

This was new and strange doctrine to Maud and Margaret Middleton, for they had been carefully taught by their grandame and uncle that no secular life, however holy, could be as pleasing to God and the saints as a monastic retirement from the world; and not to reverence and yield to those who had chosen this better part was a great sin, and Maud ventured to say something of this.

"So thou dost think a ploughman is too poor or too common to attain unto this; but listen to what the book doth say—that grace grows only among the lowly;" and Sir Hugh took the book, and turning over the coarse parchment leaves he read:

"And ricchesse right so · but if the Rote be trewe;
As grace is a grasse ther- of · tho grevaunces to abate
As grace ne groweth noughte · but amonges lowe;
Pacience and poverte · the place is there it groweth,
And in lete living men · and in lyf holy,
And through the gyfte of the holy goste · as the gospel telleth

John iii. 8. *Spiritus ubi vult spirat*, &c.

Clergye and mother witte · comth of circumstances and techynge,
As the boke bereth witness · to bairns that can rede."

John iii. 11. *Quod scimus, loquimur, quod vidimus, testamur.*

Of *quod scimus* cometh clergye · and connyng of heune,
And of *quod vidimus* cometh moother witte · of sithe of divers
peple."¹

When her father had finished reading these lines, Maud took the book and read on a little further—indeed, both the girls seemed so eager to read it that Sir Hugh soon left them, and went in search of his reeve, or land steward, to give him directions about the fencing of the corner croft.

Soon after he had gone, Maud heard her brother Stephen calling her, and at once fetched him to the bower, to show him Margaret's present. But, dearly as the studious lad loved books, he had news to impart that was of more importance to him just now than looking at his sister's treasure.

"Hath father told thee the news, Maud?" he asked, eagerly. "He told Harry, while they were in London, he should send me to Oxenforde, to study under one who was at the parliament taking notes, Dr. John Wycliffe, for he thinks he must be like the profound Dr. Bradwardine, who went with the king to the French wars, and used to preach to the soldiers before a battle began."

"Oh, I remember hearing about him," said Madge, quickly; "my father hath said he used to preach so differently from the monks, never telling stories of the saints, but taking a text from the Bible, and preaching about life and duty, so as anybody could understand.

¹ These lines are copied from the text of "Piers Plowman," published in 1362. This is the first English poem, and was very popular at the time of which we write.

That is how it is he likes this 'Piers Plowman' so much, I trow," she added; "it reminds him of what he heard in France from Dr. Bradwardine."

"But I have not told thee all the news yet," said Stephen. "We are likely both to leave ye, for Harry, it may be, will take service under the Duke of Lancaster. It can be so, an my father pleases, Harry saith."

"But what doth Harry say to leaving home?" asked Madge.

"He will be pleased, I trow, to live in London, and ruffle it with court gallants, and learn the new fashion of things. The great duke's court is like unto the king's, and the palace of the Savoy is nearly as grand as King Edward's at Westminster, so why should he not be pleased?" asked Stephen.

"But would such things please thee?" asked Madge.

"Nay, nay, little sister, that question is not a fair one. Thou knowest that Harry and I but seldom like the same things. Thou knowest it was a hard matter for him to learn to read, and it would scarce grieve him if all the books in the world were burned to-morrow. But see, when there is a mystery play to be acted, how blithe he is. Dost remember last Christmas Eve, when they played the Shepherds, how gaily Harry played the shepherd lad, and uncle said he would never do for a monk or a learned man; but in the great world outside he would have wit to hold his own, so that this post of page in the duke's household will please him, I doubt not."

"And thou wilt be a monk, I trow, like Uncle Reginald," said Maud, with a sigh, for she had no leaning to a monastic life herself, and could not help

dreading it for her brother, although he seemed quite indifferent about the matter himself.

“I have heard my grandame say the land is not large enough to divide, and that was why my Uncle Reginald went into the monastery, and——”

“Who is that talking about the monastery?” suddenly demanded another voice; and looking round the sisters saw their eldest brother’s head pushed between the folds of the arras.

“Oh, Harry, come and tell us something about London,” cried Madge, eagerly; “father hath seen it so many times, as well as other places when he went to the wars, that it hath ceased to be wonderful to him; but to thee—oh! tell us what it is like,” said his sister, coaxingly.

“But we did not live in London—not in the city, but in the village of Charing, hard by Westminster.”

Madge looked disappointed. “And thou didst not see London after all?” she said.

“Nay, nay, I said not so, little sister; I rode thither often—though not so often as I fain would have gone, for Charing is beyond the liberties, and the way lay along the Strand, where the thickets and bushes afford convenient shelter for footpads and robbers of all sorts. There the road in wet weather is worse than that through our own woods, and a horse can scarce keep his feet for ruts and holes; so thou seest that even from Westminster to London the journey is not without its dangers;” and Harry looked as though he felt himself already a famous man, for the hairbreadth escapes he had encountered in his late journey to London.

“But thou hast told us nothing of what thou didst

see," said Maud, impatiently. "Tell us about the shops, and London Bridge. Is it true that there are houses builded on the bridge, and yet it is so high that barges and boats can go under it?" asked Madge.

"An thou dost know all about the sights of London, wherefore dost thou ask me to tell thee about them?" demanded Harry.

"But the shops—the shops, are there rows of them, as my father saith there are? Wherefore can they need so many?" exclaimed Maud, who, never having been beyond their own village, had but vague ideas of what a town could be like.

"I know naught of the need," said Harry, loftily; "but the shops are there, two rows of them in Chepe, where there is a conduit in the middle of the road, and malapert 'prentice lads bawling their masters' wares, and eke thrusting them into your face, 'What d'ye lack? what d'ye lack?' cries one. 'Buy my best wool hats,' cries another saucy knave; and Maud could get all she needed in silk girdles and such like finery at the haberdashers. My father says, sometimes the merchants try to sell bad goods, but they are soon found out, and then the officers of the guild come, and seize all that is not true, and burn it. Some years ago more than fifty hats were burned, and since then some fish panniers, and only last year some wine measures for not being true. There are woeful fights too, sometimes, between the 'prentices, and oftentimes their masters, when clubs and swords are used, and two or three are killed before the fray ends."

CHAPTER III.

TABLE TALK.

THE brothers and sisters sat talking over the wonders and dangers of London until a messenger summoned them to the great hall to supper. It was not often that Madge made her appearance at the family table, but this was no ordinary day in the Middleton household, and Madge felt so much better for the home-coming of her father and brother, that she went to supper with the others, to the delight of her father, who placed her chair beside his own at the cross table, to the slight annoyance of his mother, to whom rules of precedence were as the laws of the Medes and Persians; and, although Maud was in no favour with her just now, that was no reason why her younger sister should have the seat of honour. She ventured to whisper something of this to her son while the servants were filing in to take their places at the lower table, but he only laughed, and said that Maud would not mind.

All the household retainers took care to be present at supper to-day, for it was Sir Hugh's custom, after a journey like this, to relate the news as soon as the meal was over, ostensibly to his mother, who sat on his right hand, but taking care to speak loud enough for every-

body in the hall to hear. In this way the news of the great world of London, and of parliament, filtered down among the peasants of the village, for before curfew tolled what the master said would be the subject of discussion in the alehouse, where the villagers met to hear the news brought from the Hall. Public opinion was slowly being formed, although as yet few ever ventured to think for themselves, but adopted the views of their masters unquestioningly. One or two had ventured to express a fear that Sir Hugh would be so taken up with the business of the corner croft that they would hear nothing of what was going on in London; but their fears were soon set at rest, for as soon as the huge venison pasty off which Sir Hugh had supped had been removed, and the sweets and confections placed before Lady Middleton, he turned to her as usual, and said—

“Now, seeing I care for nothing less toothsome than a venison pasty, I trow thou dost expect me to relate somewhat of the news, whiles thou art nibbling thy confections and sweetmeats.”

Whether the haughty dame would not rather have had the news related to her in a less public manner, is not very doubtful; but she knew it was useless to object, and so she prepared herself to listen in silence, for she rarely made any comment upon what she heard, whatever she might think.

“I did not tell thee in the letter sent by the pedler what hath occupied us in the parliament this year, for I knew not that any would be at Oxenforde Fair to bring the letter hither; but men can talk of naught else in

London but the malapert demand of the French pope for the payment again of King John's tribute."

"And wherefore should it not be paid?" asked Lady Middleton, quickly, for she thought it unseemly to question the right of the Church in the presence of these retainers, and would fain have stopped her son from talking of such a dangerous subject.

"Art thou an English woman, and askest wherefore the crown of England should be held in fief of yonder pope, who doeth the bidding of our enemies there in Avignon?" demanded Sir Hugh.

"But the pope is the head of the Church, and we are bound to yield obedience to his commands," protested the lady, with scarcely less warmth.

"The pope is a Frenchman, and three years ago, when his master John was a prisoner here in the duke's palace of the Savoy, and two other kings were suppliants to our great Edward, he had no thought of making such a demand. For three and thirty years not a groat of this tribute hath been paid, though the revenues of our abbeys hath flowed like water to comfort our enemies. By my halidame! they have forgotten the battle of Cressy, and I would that my noble master would lead us to the gates of Avignon, as he led us then, and we would let this French pope see what it is to claim as his right to dispose of the English crown."

Lady Middleton glanced down the long table below the dais, and the sight of the eager, gaping serving men, who were listening with eyes and ears, even to the forgetting of their ale and mead that stood untasted in

their drinking horns, was anything but reassuring, and she said quickly—

“The king is doubtless advised to pay the thousand marks, and——”

“A thousand marks! His holiness claims all arrears since our king reigned in his own name—thirty-three thousand marks, not a groat less!”

“Hadst thou not better tell me further of this when the knaves have gone to their work?” whispered the lady.

“And wherefore should they not know what every malapert ’prentice in London is talking of?” said her son, loud enough for everybody to hear.

Lady Middleton sighed, but raised her gorget in silence, and prepared to listen to the inevitable story, that was so plainly related for the benefit of the servants rather than herself.

“Ah! I would that this quarrel could be settled by our English archers and spearmen; not that the king will yield—parliament would not let him do that, an he were disposed,” went on Sir Hugh.

“Parliament!” repeated the lady, as though she had a grudge against that institution. Her son smiled.

“Ah! parliament is something more than a name now, my mother,” he said. “Our French wars have cost us much treasure, and little has been gained; but for every grant of money to carry on these wars parliament has won some concession from the king, so that it hath come to this, no king dare govern without a parliament; and king and parliament hath both said this tribute shall not be paid;” and Sir Hugh brought down his fist on the table with such force that the silver dishes and tankards

clattered again, and at the same moment there went up such a ringing cheer from the servants at the lower table that the hall echoed with their shouts.

Lady Middleton rose in high dudgeon. Such unseemly behaviour was not to be tolerated by her, however much her son might smile at the delinquents, and she took the hands of Maud and Margaret and led them from the hall, although the young ladies would greatly have preferred waiting, to see and hear the end of this exciting table talk.

But the departure of Lady Middleton was the signal for the party to break up, and the servants went to their work, and the brothers to look at their falcons and hounds, while Sir Hugh sauntered down the courtyard, hoping to see his brother from the monastery walking over before vespers; for the brotherhood took life very easily, and Uncle Reginald spent a good deal of his leisure time at the Hall, gossiping with his mother and brother, or instructing his nephews and nieces in a leisurely sort of way. They could all read and write, thanks to the easy-going monk, for it had afforded him some pastime to teach them. It was a break in the monotony of the day to walk over and give Maud or Stephen a lesson in the art of reading the crabbed writing of some MS. that had lately been copied in the scriptorium; but the return of his brother from London had been red-letter days to the monk, and never, until now, had he failed to make his appearance when he was expected, sometimes walking, as Maud and Stephen had ridden to-day, to the old stone cross, to give him his first word of welcome.

Sir Hugh walked about the courtyard, visited the stables, looked at the hawks and hounds, but all with one eye on the entrance gate, that he might see the monk enter; but at last the shades of evening began to gather, and then the soft tinkle of the vesper-bell sounded from the monastery, and the deeper notes of the curfew followed, and the village alehouse turned out its customers, still excitedly discussing Sir Hugh's table talk, and then the varied sounds of village life subsided, and Sir Hugh knew that he should not see his brother that night.

Of course, he understood it well enough. The monk had waited to see what would be done about the corner croft, and what he had done was quite enough to offend every brother in the community. Sir Hugh sighed.

"Aye, well, it cannot be helped," he said to himself, as he groped along a narrow passage to his bedroom, for no lamps were lighted after curfew, and those who did not go to bed by daylight went in the dark.

Although Sir Hugh was as fully determined as ever to maintain his right to the corner croft, he could not help feeling disappointed that his brother had not come. He wanted to tell him all about the doings of parliament over this tribute question, for the little bit of talk at the supper table had but whetted his appetite for a discussion of the subject, with a suitable person; and if brother Ambrose had come up to the Hall after supper, he would not have heard a word about the corner croft, and his thirst for news would have been fully slaked.

But the next day passed, and the next, and the brethren at the monastery made no sign. But for the ringing of the bell for lauds, primes, nones, and vespers,

the monastery might have been in London itself, for all the villagers saw of the monks. The hedges and fences round the corner croft had been restored to their original condition without any interference from the monks and lay brethren; and Sir Hugh flattered himself that the authorities were going to let the matter pass without any further contention about it, beyond a temporary fit of the sulks, and the loss of his brother's company for a time.

Lady Middleton was even more disturbed than her son when the day for the weekly visit of the family confessor came and passed, and he did not make his appearance.

Father Dunstan had been father confessor to the whole family for many years. He was a little, shrivelled-up old man, with a far-off, disappointed look in his mild blue eyes, more given to gentle sermonising on the duty of loving and helping one another than imposing penances. Indeed, Lady Middleton had begun to think him rather lax, especially in his dealing with the young people, and she spoke to both her sons about the duty of choosing another family confessor, but neither would hear of any change being made. The monk declared there was not another brother in the community so fit for the office as Father Dunstan; so pure and gentle and tender of conscience was he, that he scouted the idea of any change being made.

Unconsciously to himself, Sir Hugh had trusted much to the coming of this gentle old monk to open communication with his brother again. He would send a message to Reginald by the family confessor,

and having made sure of the corner croft, he would not fail to mention it in his confession, and ask the holy father to impose a penance upon him for his rough handling of the monastery servants. This would smooth matters, and as an offset to the news about the refusal to pay the pope's tribute, he could tell them, what would not fail to please them, that the mendicant friars had been severely censured for their doings at Oxenforde, and that it was now made illegal for any one under the age of eighteen to join their Orders. Such a snub as had been administered to the begging fraternities by the late parliament would gratify every regular monk in the land, for they always viewed with suspicion and jealousy whatever the friars might do.

But Sir Hugh, like his lady mother, was doomed to disappointment, and the Hall began to realise how much they were dependent upon the monastery for the smooth flowing of their lives.

Harry and Stephen had been least affected by the change. They had been out to hawking parties nearly every day, but they missed Uncle Reginald when they came back ; while as for Sir Hugh, he had suddenly developed a distaste for all sport, and hung about the courtyard and stables, or followed the reeve over the farm, instead of entering with his usual gusto into his boys' amusement.

The sisters were chiefly disappointed because, having read a good part of their book, they wanted to tell both their uncle and confessor something of its contents. They would be far more tolerant than their grandame ;

and, greatly as they were charmed with the book, it was so different from anything they had ever read before, that they wanted to tell their spiritual director about Piers Plowman and his vision, and, if possible, gain his sanction to read it. This secured, they would enjoy it so much more, for at present it was rather a fearful pleasure than an unalloyed delight, to contemplate the wonderful allegory in which such truths were contained, that they had already begun to talk of their duty to the poor, and their right to be rescued from such oppression as was here depicted. It was this view of the matter that made them shrink from telling their grandame of the book, for she would be sure to disapprove of such teaching, as she was often regretting the times when all the peasants were thralls, and wore collars with their masters' names upon them firmly fixed round their necks. The "dear old feudal times that were fast passing away," Lady Middleton called them. But what the thralls would have said about them was another matter, that did not concern the lady, but of which "Piers Plowman's Vision" had made her granddaughters think a great deal.

But the day for their dear old confessor to come and hear the story of their week's misdoings, and trials, and difficulties, passed away without his appearance, or even a message to explain his absence; and Margaret began to wish that her father had let the monks have the corner croft, rather than things should be made so uncomfortable for them all at home.

But the next day, to the relief of the whole village, who knew everything that went on at the Hall, the

stooping form of Father Dunstan, with his black cowl drawn closer than ever over his head, was seen slowly wending his way up the lane leading to the Hall.

Never before had Sir Hugh met and welcomed him so warmly, and never had he been received so coolly. It was made plain to the gentleman at once that the old monk was stretching a point of some importance in coming at all, and that he came solely for the sake of the young people who needed his spiritual ministrations. How anxious the old man was about this their father did not know, but he was aware that he might soon be forbidden to hold any communication with a family who had deliberately robbed the Church. This was how the retaking of the corner croft had been spoken of in a chapter of the whole convent held the previous day; and whatever private opinion any individual monk might hold about this, not one would be so forgetful of his duty to the community as to express it, or do less than his share in maintaining the rights of holy Church and the Order to which he belonged.

CHAPTER IV.

FATHER AMBROSE.

THE girls' confession that day was rather an informal one, for the subject of the book they were reading was uppermost in their minds, and it was that subject upon which they were most anxious to consult their confessor. He at once admitted that he had never seen or heard of the book before, but, taking the girls' account to be a correct one, he pronounced it to be a good book. "For," said he, "any book that teacheth us to be gentle and compassionate, teacheth us to be Christ-like and to follow His example, which is our highest duty here. Saints can do no more, and maidens of gentle birth should do no less, and in especial to the poor witless knaves their neighbours, who often have little but bran and bean bread when they are sick, and need more plentiful dieting."

"Then we may follow the teaching of any book that doth help us to be gentle, and loving, and tender?" said Maud.

"That is what I am coming to, my daughter. Ye are no longer witless wenches, and wherefore should ye not judge righteous judgment in this matter? I know not how long I may be spared to guide ye

in this, and I say not that it were not wise always to tell thy confessor what thou dost read ; but still I would not have thee dependent upon the opinion of even a confessor, when thou shouldest judge for thyself ; and thou mayest safely lay it down as a rule, that whatever doth help thee to love God and love thy neighbour better, that is good for thee, whatever be the opinion of others about it."

Sir Hugh's confession was certainly a more full and humble one than the old monk had ever before received, and did much to mollify him ; and the talk they had afterwards about the doings of parliament with the mendicant friars made the old man's eyes twinkle, and he went home to impart the important news to his brethren, and to express warm admiration for Dr. Wycliffe, who had first ventured to oppose their scandalous doings at Oxford. Not a word had been said about the corner croft, and the old monk quite forgot it in the importance of the news he had heard.

The next day Father Ambrose was seen walking towards the Hall in a rather shamefaced fashion. The tidings brought from his brother had proved too strong for him to resist, and he had come at last to hear the news from London, for which the whole community was longing, and which they had greatly missed, for they were almost as dependent upon the Hall for news of the outside world as the villagers themselves.

When the brothers met the corner croft was for a time forgotten, for Sir Hugh was quite as eager to tell the news as Father Ambrose was to hear it.

"There's a man come to the front who hath gotten

these friars a proper drubbing, for their doings at Oxenforde hath long plagued him," said Sir Hugh, in a glow of satisfaction, partly at the recollection of the "proper drubbing," and partly that his brother was once more sitting with him.

"Ah! these false pardoners have caused us much trouble and travail," said the monk, "and I am rejoiced that this Dr. Wycliffe hath had the courage openly to oppose them, for it is no secret that the pope doth greatly favour them, and therefore hath it been that no man cared to raise his voice against them."

"But John de Wycliffe, I trow, is not of that number," said Sir Hugh, rubbing his hands and smiling; "he hath not only resisted the friars, but the pope himself, inasmuch as he hath said concerning this tribute which is claimed, that princes and people are not to be slaves to priestly authority in any of the affairs of this life; and as for the life to come—well, things are not so much in the hands of priests and monks as we have hitherto supposed. What dost thou think of that for plain speaking, Reg?" asked Sir Hugh, who always insisted upon calling his brother by his boyish name, instead of the one he had assumed when taking the monastic vows.

But the monk was too much surprised to say anything for a minute or two. At last he exclaimed—

"It is little less than blasphemy—if it be true!" he added, with a severe look at his brother, for he was unwilling to believe that, now a champion had been found who would fight their battles with the friars, he should use such a two-edged sword as this would imply.

“Dost thou doubt my word, Reg?” said Sir Hugh, angrily.

“Nay, nay, not thy word, but thy discretion,” said his brother.

“By my halidame, what I have said concerning Dr. Wycliffe and this tribute is true, and he doth argue that it is an unjust demand, and by no means to be complied with. And look you, Reg, this is the argument of another godly man whom I heard speak among the lords of the council, about this same tribute: ‘Feudal tribute,’ he said, ‘can be only due where feudal protection can be rendered. This protection the pope cannot afford to us, though he yet claims us as his vassals, and ought not if he could, since the character distinguishing his holiness should be that of chief in the following of Christ; and the Saviour, having nowhere to lay His head, hath taught His ministers by His example the contempt with which they should regard all earthly power and possessions.’”

Sir Hugh related a good deal more of what had been said by other noble lords, from which the monk gathered that whatever shadow of temporal power the pope had held before was at an end now, and he was not slow to construe the reason of his brother's high-handed resistance to the claims they had put forth for the corner croft. The dangerous topic was broached at last, and then Sir Hugh heard that the matter was by no means at an end, as he had supposed. Such an opportunity for a lawsuit was not to be missed, and little wonder was it that these monasteries were so fond of lawsuits, for all the higher posts in

the administration of the law were in the hands of Churchmen, and so it was not to be wondered at that other people were forced to put up with any injustice rather than go to law, for they were invariably mulcted in the costs of the whole transaction, besides having to yield whatever was in dispute.

Sir Hugh knew all this, and so it was with no enviable feeling that he heard from his brother that they were busy in the scriptorium preparing the necessary legal documents, prior to taking proceedings against him.

“But Father Dunstan hath already granted me absolution, after due confession of the wrong done to the monastery servants; and, more than that, I have sent a relay of candles for the shrine of our Lady, besides reciting fifty Aves and Paternosters before I went to bed last night by way of penance, as ordered by Father Dunstan,” protested Sir Hugh.

The monk only shook his head. “That hath little to do with it,” he said; “and I fear me Brother Dunstan hath, in his well-known tenderness, exceeded his power in granting thee absolution for the ill done to our holy Order.”

“What!” exclaimed the knight, “wouldest thou tell me that the clouting a few lay brethren was a mortal sin?”

“It were a nice point to decide,” said the monk, meditatively, inwardly wondering what the old monk could have been thinking of, when he so speedily gave his brother absolution for this insult to their Order. “I know not what may be thought of such a question—whether the absolution be valid, or whether——”

"I am living in mortal sin!" interrupted Sir Hugh, impatiently, and yet with something of terror in his tone.

But whatever spiritual fears he might have were quickly subdued, as he recollected that the powers of the monks and priests over the eternal destinies of people were not quite so certain as he had once supposed. At all events, wise and godly men doubted it now, and he thought he might profit by the doubt in the present crisis; and so, after a silence, which the monk hoped would be broken by his brother declaring that he was willing to yield everything to have this matter set at rest, Sir Hugh said, slowly, "I'll doubt thy power to harm me in the next world; and for this world, I trow thy monastery will ruin me an it can, and thou wilt hold with thy brethren."

The monk looked horrified. "Hugh, Hugh, thou art beside thyself," he said; "thou knowest the Church doth hold the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatsoever she doth bind can by no means be loosed, and whatsoever she doth loose can by no means be bound."

"Ah! thou art a monk, and believest that thou hast a share of this power. I, too, believed it once, but the world is growing wiser, Reg, and the very lives of Churchmen doth make people doubt," said Sir Hugh, calmly.

Father Ambrose looked sorely distressed. "Oh, my ill-advised brother, who hath besotted thee? Yield, yield this paltry little corner of land, and be at peace with holy Church again," he implored.

But the knight shook his head. "An it be such a

paltry corner of land, why doth thy prior covet it so much?" he said. "The monastery lands are wider and richer than mine, why steal this?"

"Thou knowest that our lands nowhere give us right of water-way, and the corner croft doth reach to the river," said Brother Ambrose, thinking he saw a chance of bringing his brother to reason.

Sir Hugh laughed and rubbed his hands. "Thy prior is a keen man," he said; "an he could steal my corner croft, he would seize the river next, and forbid my poor knaves taking fish, not only from the croft pool, but from all the reaches within miles of the village."

The monk looked thunderstruck. "Could Father Dunstan have been so foolish as to betray what had passed in the chapter of the convent?" he asked himself; for this was precisely the view that had been advanced as an argument for leaving no stone unturned to secure this insignificant plot of land, since the want of a good fish-pond had long been felt by the whole community. How it was that a right to the river that flowed so near to their lands had not been secured before was a matter of wonder, but now it could no longer be allowed to rest, the claim to the corner croft having once been put forth.

Sir Hugh laughed at his brother's amazed looks. "I know the ways of you monks," he said; "you may not have declared the matter to each other so plainly as I have spoken it to you, Reg; but this is what it would come to in the end, and when my poor witless knaves were forced to make their bread of bran and beans they

would not be allowed to take a paltry trout to help it down."

The monk looked somewhat relieved when he heard this, for it was plain enough now that the secrets of the chapter had not been betrayed, and so he tried to persuade his brother that he was mistaken in this view; but Sir Hugh was a shrewd man, and knew too much of the general grasping policy of the monasteries, although he might not have heard anything in this particular instance.

After a good deal of talk upon the subject, the monk thought he would propose a compromise. "Stephen will be coming to us shortly, I trow," he said; "and, as thou knowest, it is always the custom of the Middletons to present some gift when its sons devote themselves to the service of holy Church; give us therefore with Stephen this small corner of land, and I trow the prior will accept it rather than a more costly gift."

But Sir Hugh shook his head dubiously. If he had been undecided before as to whether Stephen should go to Oxford or enter the monastery, this conversation with his brother had settled the matter, and he said decidedly, "No son of mine shall become a monk, an I can help it. The world is changing, Reg, and needs workers, not drones, and my lads shall be among the workers, an I can help them to it. Stephen is going to Oxenforde to learn what he can under Dr. Wycliffe, for he is England's champion, I trow."

Poor Father Ambrose's discomfiture was complete now, for he had always assumed a half proprietary right in his younger nephew, in view of his one day belonging

to the same community, and he felt as though his brother was robbing him when he said Stephen should not become a monk. The matter had been overlooked, in the interest of the corner croft dispute, until it suddenly occurred to him as a means of settling the matter amicably, and no doubt of Stephen being finally given over to them had ever crossed his mind, and so to hear that such an important matter was settled in an altogether different way was a shock indeed.

“But, Hugh, my brother, art thou well advised to set thyself against our community as thou art doing?” he asked, after a lengthened pause.

“Nay, it is thy community setting itself against me, an what thou sayest be true,” retorted the baronet.

“But about Stephen,” began the monk.

“I have said naught about the lad. Thou and my mother, mayhap, have settled that he should become a monk, but I have said neither yea nor nay to it, for I knew not what would be best; but, unless he hath a strong leaning to this vocation, he shall never now become a monk, and certainly not till he be come to the years of discretion.”

“Of the lad’s discretion I say naught, but of thine I have sore doubt,” said the monk, rising; and without another word he went in search of his mother, to tell her what had passed.

He was sure of the sympathy of Lady Middleton, and was not without hope that she might be able to help him in bringing Sir Hugh to a more reasonable frame of mind, not only with regard to the corner croft, but also in the matter of Stephen being sent to the University.

The lady's horror of all new-fangled ways was enough to make her dislike the teaching of Dr. Wycliffe, and a little exaggeration of what he had heard from his brother concerning this gave the monk a plausible excuse for arousing her fears, more especially when he told her of the dangerous doubts concerning the powers of the Church Sir Hugh was now cherishing. The poor lady wrung her hands, and prophesied that nothing short of ruin to body and soul could follow such daring sin ; but at the same time promised to do all she could to avert it by bringing her son to repentance, and her grandson to the monastery, with the corner croft as his entrance gift.

CHAPTER V.

LADY MIDDLETON.

THE grief and terror of Lady Middleton were by no means unreasonable from a fourteenth century point of view; for, according to the popular belief, civil authority, in all its departments, was subordinate to the Church. The theory was that the Church was the mother of the State, her bishops the fathers of princes, to whom they were bound to yield obedience. This was the view of Lady Middleton, and that of many others who had been brought up in unquestioning obedience to the Church; and that any should dare to question this, or refuse to yield the most absolute obedience to the commands of the pope and his authorised servants, was to be guilty of the most flagrant sin. She had been shocked by what she had heard of the doings of parliament, in refusing to pay the tribute demanded by his Holiness; and the account her son brought her of what had passed between him and his brother, when she had hoped for such a different result, filled her with grief and consternation. She forgot to grumble about Maud's embroidered linen dress, and the new-fashioned pouncet-box that Harry brought her from London, in her anxiety about these more

weighty affairs, and she took the first opportunity of imploring her son to set her mind at rest, by yielding obedience to the demands of the Church, and doing what he could to induce the king to yield in the matter of the tribute.

Sir Hugh looked at her, as though he did not comprehend the meaning of what she said; but after a minute's silence he said, "My mother, I will ever strive to yield all due obedience to thee, but thou must believe that there are things passing woman's wit to understand, and this is one of them."

"It is not a question of obedience to me, but to holy Church," said Lady Middleton, quickly.

"And dost thou know who doth rule the Church now, and through her seeks to rule our merry England?"

"We are bound to yield obedience to the holy father," replied the lady.

But Sir Hugh went on without heeding the interruption: "The pope and most of the cardinals are Frenchmen, and many of these have by his holiness been forced upon us as bishops, who never even visit their sees. More than half the land in England belongs to the Church, and consequently to these Frenchmen, and wouldest thou have me give them more? By my halidame, my little corner croft shall never go to swell the income of any French abbot while I can hold it; and thou knowest it would be so an it passed over to the monastery. Look you, my mother, Father Dunstan told me when he was here that the manciple was well-nigh at his wit's end to provide wax for the candles of our Lady's shrine, because the tribute demanded by the abbot

of Cluny—who, as thou knowest, rulest all the Cluniac priories in England—was so heavy this year that they have little left for themselves. Now, wherefore should the produce of our fields go to provide wastel bread for our enemies, the French, while honest English knaves eat loaves of ground beans and bran, as thou knowest many a one did in our village last winter?”

Lady Middleton looked as though she could not comprehend her son now. What did he mean by comparing common people—peasants, and such like—to abbots and priors, who, if they were French, were people of high and noble birth, like themselves, and whom as a knight he was bound by his oath of chivalry to protect at all hazards? Every law of chivalry would compel him to do what he could for the help of the high and noble of all lands, but it took no cognizance of any but these. What! consider the poor, who were mere thralls, and speak of their eating bean and bran bread as though it were a hardship? And as she thought of it, a new fear began to creep into the lady's mind. Her son must be possessed, or going out of his mind. This certainly was the only solution of the problem that presented itself to his mother; and Sir Hugh's next words seemed to confirm it. “I mean to fight these monks for the corner croft,” he said; “and so I have decided that Harry shall go to my Lord of Lancaster with small delay.”

What connection this could have with the corner croft Lady Middleton could not perceive, for a royal prince was not likely to trouble himself about such an insignificant matter. Indeed, the fuss that was made

about it all round was out of all proportion to the value of the land, she thought ; but to suppose that Prince John was going to add to it merely because the owner had fought with his father and brother in France, was one of the wildest ideas Lady Middleton had ever heard of.

But Sir Hugh was not so crazy as this view of the matter seemed to imply, even in the project of allowing Harry to enter the household of the great Duke of Lancaster. He had taken a fancy to the bright handsome lad during their recent visit to London, and had offered him an honourable position among his gentlemen pages. Sir Hugh had no thought of the boy leaving home at that time ; but what he had heard afterwards made him think that this might be a favourable opening for him, and he had made some remarks about this in Harry's hearing—enough, at least, had been said for the lad to base some hope upon when talking to Stephen about it ; but the plan for this, as well as for the younger son to go to Oxford, was by no means so matured as their sisters were led to believe, and might never have been carried out but for the seizure of the corner croft.

But now Sir Hugh recalled with much pleasure all he had heard regarding the Duke of Lancaster's jealousy of the inordinate power of the clergy, and his determination to curtail it if possible. Now, what could be more diplomatic than to make a friend of this powerful nobleman ? He was the wealthiest man in England, had great influence at his father's court, was young, enthusiastic, and a thorough hater of papal pretensions,

and had hinted to one or two that he should never rest until he had removed the Lord Chancellor, William of Wykeham, Bishop of Winchester, whose skill in architecture and finance had so recommended him to Edward the Third that he made him Lord Chancellor ; but this office the duke now decided the bishop must resign.

Among the western nations of Europe, all the most important civil offices were held by dignitaries of the Church. The offices of Lord Chancellor, Lord Treasurer, Keeper and Clerk of the Privy Seal, the Master of the Rolls, the Masters in Chancery, the Chancellor and Chamberlain of the Exchequer, were at this time all held by the clergy, so that it was no slight innovation, and no small curtailment of clerical powers, that the Duke of Lancaster proposed. But the temper of the people was favourable to the change at this time, and so Sir Hugh hoped that by making a friend of the great duke, and delaying the hearing of the lawsuit that the monastery was bent upon instituting until civil judges had been appointed, he might obtain a verdict in his favour, which he certainly could not expect under the existing state of things.

He was scarcely prepared, however, for the determined opposition of Lady Middleton to the carrying out of his plans. Having once made up his mind, he told the lads to enjoy their hunting and hawking as much as they could, as they would both be leaving in a few weeks ; and of course the news soon spread through the village, and before nightfall the next day the blacksmith came, begging that his son Roger

might be allowed to go to London in the train of Master Harry Middleton, if it should be decided that he should go.

"Thou hast heard, I trow, that the matter is settled beyond question?" laughed Sir Hugh.

But the blacksmith stood twirling his cap, and looking very uncomfortable, until at last he blurted out, "My Lady Middleton told the wenches there was naught in the story, and Roger heard it, and——"

"Thou hast come to me to know what is to be done? Well, my son is going to learn the duties of a knight in the household of my Lord of Lancaster. But what of Roger? I thought the knave was learning to sharpen coulters at thy forge."

"An it please thee, sir, Roger hath a hankering to see the great world. He can sharpen a coulters or shoe a horse, but I can teach him little of the trade of an armourer now," said the blacksmith, with a sigh and a half-reproachful look at Sir Hugh.

The knight laughed good-humouredly. "Thou mayest come and furbish up the armoury," he said; "but I trow there is little for an armourer to do now. We have fought with the Black Prince in France, Diccon, but his brother the great duke will fight with other arms than pikes and lances. But what of Roger? He is a likely knave, and wherefore doth he desire to go ruffling it to London?"

"Nay, nay, master, the lad is a honest knave, and no ruffler; but his uncle hath a smithy and armourer's shop hard by the monastery of the Black Friars in London, and once he could come there, his fortune would be

made, for my brother was ever quick and clever, and hath learned all the newest fashions in breast-plates and head-gear, to say nothing of the repairing of mail-shirts, and he would gladly teach my Roger, for he hath nought but wenchcs of his own, and 'tis an ill thing for such a trade to go out of the family."

"So it is ; so it is, Diccon," said his master, heartily ; "and though we may lose a good blacksmith by the exchange, he shall go to London to learn his uncle's business. Tell the good wife to get the knave's things ready, for it may be that a party of travellers will be passing this way shortly, and the lads can join them for better safety."

The blacksmith thanked his master, but still stood twirling his cap in a sheepish, half-frightened manner. But at last he managed to say, "My good wife hath been at work with the distaff, and I have told Timothy Allpress to prepare a good leathern jerkin for my lad ; but—but my lady hath told the wenchcs to lay aside the distaffs, for no plcnishing of linen or woollen shall be made for such an evil errand as thou art sending the lads upon."

The knight's genial face flushed with anger as he heard this. Perhaps nobody but Diccon, the blacksmith, would have had the courage to tell him, but they had served together under the king and the Black Prince in the French wars, and he was a favoured individual. Moreover, Lady Middleton was by no means popular among the villagers. They feared her, and believed that she carried things with too high a hand even at the Hall. Tales had even been carried

by the servants of her harsh and arbitrary treatment of her grandchildren ; so perhaps Diccon was not sorry to have to tell what he did about her countermanding her son's orders, as soon as she heard that he had issued a general command for all things necessary to be prepared for the speedy departure of Harry to London and Stephen to Oxford.

She was not present in the great hall when the order was given, but her waiting women went to tell her of it at once, when she instantly stopped all the distaffs, and sent a gift from the linen chest to the monastery. The latter item of news was not told to Sir Hugh, for it was not known in the village.

As soon as Diccon was gone, Sir Hugh went in search of his daughter, for he did not wish to have a dispute with his mother, but to Maud he could speak more freely.

"How now?" he exclaimed, suddenly presenting himself in the girls' bower ; "what is this that I hear concerning the wench's distaffs being idle? Who is preparing the plenishings needful for the lads?" he demanded.

Maud shook her head in amazement. "I asked my grandame only this morning to let me help, but she bade me leave such things to those whom it concerned," she said.

"And whom should it concern but thee?" exclaimed Sir Hugh. "Where dost thou keep thy store of linen?" he demanded, quickly.

"In the great store closet near the muniment room. Grandame doth carry the key at her girdle."

“Then run and fetch it,” said her father, impatiently, “and you and I will see to this matter. I have this morning received tidings of friends journeying hither shortly on their way to London, and such an opportunity may not occur again for Harry to go by such safe conduct. A few servants and sumpter mules are all that will be necessary for him, with a strong party of friends; so haste thee, Maud, and bring the key hither quickly, and tell the wenches they must set to work with despatch upon the plenishings.”

But Maud returned from her grandame's room without the key, and her ears smarting from a sound slap she had received for daring to ask for it. She did not tell her father of the chastisement inflicted upon her, but he had a pretty shrewd guess as to what had taken place, for Maud's hot, indignant face, and her flashing, angry eyes told the tale, though her lips kept silence. She merely said that her grandame refused to give up the key of the linen store; and without a word Sir Hugh drew aside the arras, and passed out of the room. He was away nearly an hour, but he came back with the key in his hand. What had passed between the haughty lady and her son nobody ever knew, but as he placed the key in Maud's hand he bade her fasten it to her girdle, for henceforth the care of the linen was to be in her hands. Without a word of further explanation they went together to the linen room; but Maud held up her hands in amazement when she saw the almost empty chests. Linen and fine woollen cloth had both been stolen, she felt sure, for she had been here with her grandame a few weeks

before, to help carry some linen that had been bleached in the sun.

She said as much to her father, but he only shook his head. He knew nothing about linen stores, and if he believed things had been removed, he thought it wiser to say nothing about it, only he told Maud to guard the key carefully in future, and privately informed Diccon that he must make another lock and key, lest the room should be again entered. Maud looked over the store of linen left, but the best had all been taken, and what remained was for the most part coarse and unbleached. It would do well enough for Stephen, and so would the cloth that was left, for Oxford scholars did not have the best in the land in those days ; but what to do for Harry, who wanted much finer clothes, Maud did not know, until she thought of her own new linen dress, and decided to cut that up to supply the deficiencies of her brother's wardrobe.

CHAPTER VI.

NEW FRIENDS.

A WEEK after the events narrated in our last chapter, the little village of Meadowlea was startled by the arrival of a party of travellers from London on their way to Oxford. Although it lay only about half a mile off the main road from the metropolis, it was so rarely that they saw any but those who were coming to visit the Hall or the monastery, that the sight of a cavalcade of horses and mules, gentlemen and servants, brought everybody out into the road staring with wondering eyes and open mouths at the gaily caparisoned horses and the rich doublets of the riders. Sir Hugh, who happened to be in the village, was scarcely less surprised than the peasants, and reined in his horse to exchange a greeting with the travellers and ask after the health of the king. To his astonishment and pleasure, he recognised a friend whose acquaintance he had made in London during the recent parliament, Sir Roger Clifford, and his son, on their way home to the family seat in Durham; but taking Oxford in their way, that his son, Master Lewis Clifford, might be left there to study under the Evangelical doctor, Master John Wycliffe.

All this was explained in a few words, and in a

little while the whole party were on their way to the Hall, for Sir Hugh insisted that they should stay for a few days, and rest themselves and their horses before proceeding on their journey.

There was a great bustle among the Hall servants when Sir Hugh appeared with his large number of guests; but Lady Middleton was equal to the occasion. Without speaking to her son, she ordered a crane and a peacock to be killed at once. Huge fires were made and ovens heated, while cooks and turnspits and house wenches were all pressed into the service of preparing supper. A slight repast of cold boar's head and brawn, washed down by plentiful potations of strong ale, was set out at once in the great hall, and then, while the gentlemen went to look at the farm and discuss the latest news, their grooms and attendants saw to the horses, and the Hall servants bent all their energies to the task of preparing a supper worthy of their master's name and fame.

Even Maud and Margaret were pressed into the service, for while Margaret prepared some of the delicate confections, Maud helped her grandame to make venison pasties, castles and tigers of jelly, and even angels of the same materials, varied in some slight degree. Then there were some curious concoctions of vegetables, herbs, and spices, which a modern epicure would gladly avoid, but without which no supper table was considered properly furnished in those days. In addition to these were more substantial dishes for the lower table, huge joints of roast and boiled, the inevitable boar's head holding the place of honour among them.

The sisters were very glad when the duties of the kitchen

at last released them, and they were free to return to their own bower. Margaret was too tired now to go to supper in the great hall, but Maud promised to report the table talk fully to her, and tell her all about the guests.

But her father and his guests seemed to have exhausted all the popular topics of conversation before coming to the table, and all Maud heard was a discussion on the dangers of travelling, when it was incidentally mentioned that Stephen would go to Oxford with Sir Roger and his son, and both would study under Dr. Wycliffe.

Now Stephen's "plenishings" were by no means in a forward state. Several pairs of hose had been cut out, but the cloth needed stitching, and his cloak and doublets of substantial homespun were not yet made; but Maud resolved that they should be in readiness by the third day, which was the time fixed for the departure of their guests—not that she wished to speed her brother's departure, but she liked what she saw of Master Lewis Clifford, and she felt sure that Stephen had taken a great liking to the lad, and so she thought if she could help them to form a friendship by entering the University together she would do so.

Lady Middleton had noticed that their guests' talk was all about this Dr. Wycliffe, and how his opinion had strengthened the hands of the king and parliament in rejecting the pope's claim to the tribute, and she determined that Stephen should not become friendly with them, if she could prevent it; and so she decided that all the servants of the household should be pressed into the cook's service, under the plea of suitably providing for her guests.

She had also heard another thing. Dr. Wycliffe had been chosen Warden of Canterbury Hall by its founder, Dr. Islip, but on his death he had been removed, and a monk appointed in his place. He had appealed to the pope to remedy the injustice of this, while at the same time he had done everything likely to offend the holy father, if it was only known, which Lady Middleton decided at once that it should be.

They were about sending a messenger from the monastery to the parent abbey in France, and it would be as well to let him journey as far as Avignon to the court of the pope, that the holy father might know at once who was working against his supremacy in England.

It was very rarely that Brother Ambrose came to visit the Hall now, but he often came to meet his mother after vespers, and the two would exchange confidences, so that the monastery was kept informed of everything that transpired at the Hall; and Lady Middleton did not forget to tell her son that night what she had heard about the wardenship of Canterbury Hall as they walked together in the lane.

"The prior shall be at once informed about it," said the monk, rubbing his hands with satisfaction; "and even if it should be that the holy father hath already been informed of what is going forward, it were well, I trow, to send the messenger forward to Avignon to inform his holiness of the doings of this Master Wycliffe, and we will see what he thinks of the wardenship after hearing this. One of the brethren, too, hath prepared a question for this Master Wycliffe concerning this same tribute, and doth demand an answer," he added, evidently thinking that the monk's "question" would prove such

an unanswerable argument that the bold denouncer of the friars would be completely silenced.

The monastery had already sat in judgment on the whole question, and had arrived at the conclusion that he must be a very simple man, or he would never attack the favourites of the papacy, and one of the pope's most treasured prerogatives, while the court of Rome had under its consideration the question of the disputed wardenship. This proved him to be anything but an astute, calculating man, whatever might be said for his honesty. Certainly, no man anxious to stand well with those who had the decision of such a matter in their hands would have taken the course this Oxford professor had done; and so Lady Middleton and Brother Ambrose settled between them that he was greatly overrated, and when this dispute was over, no more would be heard of this troublesome innovator.

But, meanwhile, Lady Middleton must try to prevent Stephen going to Oxford, for there was no knowing what new notions he might learn there, and if she could hinder his wardrobe being got ready in time, it would be a great step gained.

So when Maud summoned the maids the next morning, and bade them use all despatch in getting Master Stephen's plenishing ready, she heard to her dismay that her grandame had already issued her orders, and there would be no time for sewing in the household, in the multiplicity of dishes to be cooked for the different meals.

In vain she went and pleaded that the services of one or two maids who were not accustomed to cooking might be dispensed with, that they might help her and Mar-

garet with the sewing. Her grandame smiled, and patted her with her fan, but shook her head.

"Thou dost know nothing of what is necessary for the honour of the family," she said, "and I have no wish that thou shouldest be troubled about it; but then I must not be teased with thy small complaints about Stephen's cloth hose, and doublets, and gowns. There is no such haste for these."

"But—but, grandame, Stephen doth ride away to Oxenforde with Sir Roger Clifford and his son," exclaimed Maud, in great surprise that her grandame was not aware of this important fact.

But the old lady only shook her head. "There is no such haste for Stephen to depart for Oxenforde," she said. "It were better, I trow, that he went to the monastery."

But Maud had her own opinion about this. She, too, had caught something of her father's enthusiasm concerning Dr. Wycliffe, and was anxious that her favourite brother should have the benefit of his instruction; but she saw now that her grandame did not like this, and therefore it would be useless to ask her help in preparing his wardrobe. What to do in the difficulty she did not know; but at last she summoned up courage enough to say, "Bess, my bower maid, must work with us, and Madge will need the help of Molly, and——"

"Thou malapert wench!" exclaimed Lady Middleton. "Wilt thou dare to disobey me? Go to the kitchen, and I will give thee a lesson in the making of confections."

But Maud felt that her brother's whole future might depend upon her resolute defence of his interests now.

They had had a talk about it that morning, and he was most anxious to go with Lewis Clifford, that they might enter the same college together ; and, moreover, he had heard that Dr. Wycliffe's lectures were attracting so many scholars, that Maud feared her brother might be shut out if he did not secure his entrance now. All this flashed across her mind as she stood before her angry, haughty grandame.

"Go to the kitchen, thou malapert wench!" commanded the old lady ; but Maud still stood firm.

"No, grandame," she said ; "my father hath commanded me to look to my brother's plishings, and I will do it, and I will have my maid and Madge's Molly to help me;" and, without waiting for her grandame to recover from her astonishment, Maud turned and went in search of her bower maidens at once, and ordered them to leave the work of cooks and turnspits, and return to their own proper tasks.

Swiftly the needles flew in and out, and Sir Hugh, who came in search of his elder daughter to join the hawking party in the afternoon, found the four girls busily employed on hose and doublets, gown and cloak.

"Come, come, Maud, we want thee ; Master Lewis Clifford hath been asking Stephen where he hath hidden his sister."

"Master Lewis is like to be disappointed of Stephen's company to Oxenforde, an I go gadding to the hawking party," said Maud, with a smile.

"My father, canst thou not get us some help with these hosen and doublets?" asked Margaret, who had begun to grow weary of the long task.

“Why, why? Are there not house wenches to do this, besides thy own two bower maidens?” exclaimed Sir Hugh. It was explained to him, with a meaning glance from Madge, that their grandame had pressed everybody into the service of the kitchen; but Sir Hugh solved the difficulty by sending for help to the village, and releasing Maud from her share in the sewing, for he was particularly anxious to please his guests, who were people of some importance about the court of the Savoy Palace.

To the great annoyance of Lady Middleton, Stephen's wardrobe was in readiness by the time their guests took their departure, and a sumpter mule, in the care of a servant, followed Stephen's palfrey as the party rode through the village. Sir Hugh and Harry rode with them as far as the old stone cross, on the edge of the forest clearing, and beyond this it was scarcely safe to go without a strong escort. There was an affectionate parting here between the two brothers, for when they might meet again neither could tell. Stephen might come home sometimes between the terms, but when Harry would return to his old home no one could say. He would see his father when he went to London to attend the sitting of parliament, but journeys were not to be rashly undertaken in those times.

When Sir Hugh returned home, after seeing the travellers safely through the village into the forest, he was startled by being summoned to his mother's chamber. He feared she must have been seized with a quartan ague, but was not at all prepared for the sudden announcement that was made to him. “Hugh, I am going on pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Thomas of

Canterbury," said the lady, when her son stood before her.

"To the shrine of St. Thomas!" repeated Sir Hugh, in a bewildered tone; "but wherefore, my mother, wouldest thou undertake so perilous a journey at this season?"

"My family need the intercession of the saint," said the lady, haughtily; as though Sir Hugh had nothing to do with the "family," and could not be expected to understand its need.

He looked as though he thought his mother must be losing her wits, but said quietly, "I will send a messenger for Reg, an it please thee."

"But it doth not please me. I bid thee prepare for my journey when Harry doth depart for London. I may, perchance, fall in with a party of pilgrims bound for Canterbury while on my way to London, and if not, I trow I may hear of such at Southwark, at a certain hostelry where they do mostly tarry the first night of the journey."

"But, my mother, wherefore shouldest thou go on so perilous a venture? Surely our Lady can aid thee——"

"No, no," interrupted the lady. "The prayers of St. Thomas are all-powerful, and can avert the evil coming on my family and this nation through their impious defiance of authority. What could be expected, when my son doth help to defy the holy father, but that his children should defy all lawful authority?"

Sir Hugh understood it now. His mother had never spoken to Maud since the day that she claimed the service of her own maid to help in preparing Stephen's wardrobe, and as a protest and a punishment she would leave them for a time, to go on pilgrimage.

CHAPTER VII.

OXFORD.

ANYTHING more uninviting than the streets of Oxford, when our travellers entered the far-famed city, cannot be imagined. The weather had suddenly changed, and a cold drizzle had been falling for hours when the weary, mud-bespattered cavalcade entered its streets. Here they were obliged to pick their way more carefully even than in the open country, for the high timber houses, with their overhanging storeys, well-nigh shut out of view the dull leaden sky above; and the narrow roadway, with its overflowing sewer running down the middle, and its piles of rotting vegetables and other refuse, afforded anything but a sure foothold for the weary horses and mules. Loud objurgations about the darkness of the street and ill-kept condition of the road broke alike from our travellers and the foot passengers whom they met, and who had to dodge between the horses' heads, and occasionally leap across the wide-streaming sewer, to avoid being trampled under foot. There was no regular footway for the passengers; only the nooks and recesses formed by the buildings afforded them an occasional place of refuge.

A traveller who was exceptionally tall, and mounted

on a high horse, had scarcely less need of dodging, for poles were stretched across the road, on which dyers and fullers hung their cloth, and occasionally household linen might be seen fluttering and flapping across the principal street. To-day, however, the poles were almost bare, and smoke might be seen issuing from windows and doorways, for those who could do so were indulging in the unwonted luxury of a fire.

Slowly the weary horsemen picked their way to the hostelry that had been recommended to Sir Roger ; and Stephen, stiff and sore, and almost wet to the skin, stumbled into the house, too thankful for shelter and the rest afforded by a wooden settle, to grumble about the few comforts to be found at the inn. People's ideas of comfort seemed for the most part confined to the quantity and quality of the meal that was set before them, so that no one had seriously considered yet whether the smoke from a fire could not escape by other means than doors or windows.

Sir Roger Clifford ordered a fire to be kindled in the centre of the room into which they had been ushered by their host, but they were soon coughing and choking with the fumes of the burning logs, and glad to open the casement for a breath of fresh air, to allow it to escape. But a plentiful repast was soon served, and no one could find fault with the ale and mead that came with it.

After dinner, the gentleman asked the host if he could tell him where Dr. Wycliffe was holding his lectures, and whether many attended them.

“ Aye, aye, I hear 'tis said there are more lads coming

to Oxenforde to learn of our Evangelical doctor than have ever been here before," replied the landlord, in a tone of satisfaction.

"And thou dost know the hall where he doth hold forth to them?" asked the baronet.

"Aye, aye, 'tis not a stone's cast from hence; an it please your worships, you can go thither shortly and hear the devout Master Wycliffe. A right worshipful man is he, I trow—one that will hold fast by the liberty of an Englishman, and for this our Oxenforde, too," added the host, with all the pride of a townsman in his native place.

Sir Roger looked at the two lads drying their clothes by the glowing logs. "What say you, knaves? Shall we sally forth in quest of Dr. Wycliffe, or shall we abide here until to-morrow?"

"I am ready, an ye will go," said Stephen, who felt much better now he had eaten his dinner.

Lewis Clifford was quite as willing to turn out again as his companion, and their cloaks being almost dry by this time, they put them on and sallied forth under the guidance of a lad provided by the landlord. The halls of learning, like the houses and shops, were by no means grand specimens of architecture; but when the lad stopped at a low-browed doorway, and they looked up at the coarse thatch of the roof, even Sir Roger was constrained to ask whether he had not made a mistake.

"Nay, worshipful sirs; thou mayest see Master Wycliffe, an thou push open yonder door;" and with that he turned and left them.

They entered the low doorway, and soon found them-

selves in a long, low, dimly-lighted room, with rough benches placed round the walls and in parallel lines, facing an equally rough platform, on which stood a desk. Until their eyes grew accustomed to the semi-darkness of the room, they could make out nothing but the bench against which they stumbled; but a voice came from the platform—not a powerful voice, but clear and resonant, so that not a tone was lost, even in the farthest corner of the room—and Sir Roger whispered to the boys, “The lad was right; it is the Evangelical doctor.

The discourse, or lecture, was evidently upon charity and, leaning forward, our three visitors could now descry a thin, frail-looking man, but with a face of intense earnestness, resting his hand upon the desk, and saying, “Let us see now whether the man calling himself a Christian pilgrim is more anxious about his own private advantage than obedience to the law of Christ. When so judged, it is plain that the greater portion of mankind are devoid of charity; and if a man be so rooted in this habit of perverseness, by reason of his continued failure in attention to, and obedience of, the Divine law, who can doubt whether that man should be deemed a heretic or not? And as to the defence of this law, if we look to the higher orders, who can hesitate to say that not only the laity, but still more our prelates, show much greater concern to protect their private interests than to uphold the law of Christ? If this were not so, they surely would destroy, as far as they have power, whatever is opposed to that law; but we everywhere see both prelates and civil digni-

taries exalting and defending the laws and interests of men, placing them before the law of God. Hence we see the civil law executed with such scrupulousness, a trifling amount of evidence being sufficient to bring down penalties upon anything that infringes on the good of society. From the far greater pains which men thus take to put merely human laws into execution, we see plainly the great preponderance they have in men's estimation, and how false is the assertion of such men when they pretend that they love God with all their heart. In truth, all, or the greater number among our religious Orders will fall under this condemnation in the day of the Son of man; inasmuch as they all seek their own, or the interests of their own Order, neglecting the defence of the Divine law. Christ wished His law to be observed willingly, freely, that in such obedience men might find happiness. Hence He appointed no civil punishment to be inflicted on transgressors of His commandments, but left the persons neglecting them to a suffering more severe, that would come after the day of judgment."

The room was hushed to the deepest attention while the professor was speaking, and when he paused the audience drew a deep breath, and then settled down to listen again with the same intentness.

When at length the lecture was concluded, and the audience began to disperse, Sir Roger stepped forward and seized Dr. Wycliffe's hand. They were but dimly visible to each other in the semi-gloom of the hall, but the professor recognised the knight as one of the friends he had seen in London during the recent sitting

of parliament, and warmly welcomed the lads to Oxford, when they were introduced to him.

He advised that they should be entered at Queen's College, where they would be lodged and boarded—if not very sumptuously, at least with as much comfort as was considered necessary.

The look of the audience who had attended the lecture this afternoon did not suggest that the students of Oxford were very wealthy. The thin, coarse, thread-bare cloaks and doublets bespoke them for the most part as being "poor scholars," who had been drawn thither by the love of learning, and not for the acquirement of mere fashionable polish. The lads who had filled the rows of benches were earnest-looking, though, perhaps, somewhat sad-faced; but Stephen felt that he should be more at home with them than he should if they had been more like his brother Harry.

The next day was occupied in the necessary business of entering our two scholars at Queen's College. Their rooms were then selected, and the few necessary articles of furniture secured. Only bedrooms were considered needful in those days; a tiny bed with a table and chair, and some half-dozen school-books, and the room was furnished. Whatever he might want beyond these things, or in the way of clothes during his stay at college, he would buy of the hucksters and pedlers who attended the fair. To keep themselves warm during the winter, they could run races with each other, or engage in wrestling or jumping; but no one thought of wanting a fire, and many a "poor scholar" did not see the ruddy glow of burning logs, except as he

might catch a glimpse of them through the open windows of the town, from one year's end to the other.

All this Stephen and Lewis had heard before they came, but, in spite of these incidental hardships, they considered themselves much to be envied when they found themselves ensconced in adjoining bedrooms at Queen's College, and duly entered as scholars under Dr. Wycliffe.

They spent the next day in going about the town with Sir Roger, and examining the fortifications that frowned over the wide, flat plain that adjoined the city on the landward side. But the knight, while he peered around the bastions, was far more interested in gauging public opinion about Dr. Wycliffe here in the city, where he was known so well.

One holy friar spat upon the ground at the mere mention of his name, and, divining that the party were strangers to Oxford, warned them against being entrapped into listening to the "vile heretic's" lectures. "He doth teach the most pestilent heresy," went on the friar; "nothing less than rebellion against his holiness, whom all Christian men doth own is the head of the Church and father of Christian people."

Sir Roger would soon have got into an argument with the friar, but he had a more profitable trade to drive than dealing in arguments. He soon produced from a pouncet-box the shavings of a saint's toe-nails, which he warranted to be a certain cure for all agues and fevers, to which strangers coming to Oxford were especially liable.

Stephen would have bought some of these, but Sir Roger bade him put his money into his purse again. "I'll warrant thee a shred from thine own nails will do thee as much good, an thou shouldest have the ague," he said, with a laugh.

"Thou dost doubt about the ague," said the friar, angrily. "Look at yonder mist rising from the river, and if thou dost know aught of the matter thou wilt believe it is no vain story I am telling thee."

"Thanks, sir pardoners; I see thou mayest be right in this matter of the ague."

"Then wilt thou not purchase this precious medication? Worn in a pouncet-box, or even carried in the pocket, it will guard thee from all attacks of the malady," he said, addressing himself to Stephen.

But Sir Roger would not see the lad robbed before his eyes. Doubtless they would be cheated by these artful begging friars again and again; but at least he would give them a word of warning, and prevent them trusting for health or anything else to the spurious charms sold by these false pardoners. So, turning to the man, he said, "I will pay thee all thou dost ask for these precious shavings, an thou wilt swear on the holy rood that thou didst not scrape them from a bone thyself."

The man muttered something about having no dealings with heretics, but he had too much conscience left to take the required oath.

The lads laughed when they saw him shuffling off. "How didst thou know he had scraped them off a bone?" asked Stephen.

"I did but guess it; but I know these friars are ever

selling some rubbish of their own invention ; they will do anything to get money. Not that I would grudge paying what he asked for his shavings ; for the hint about the ague hath reminded me that ye are both like to have it, and will need a physician to cure thee quickly ; and such an one I know in this same town, and will take ye both to him at once, that if either of ye fall sick the other may know where to go for help. Thou hast heard me speak of Isaac ben Israel, Lewis, who did cure me of a sore sickness, and thy mother also."

"But is he a Jew?" asked Stephen, with a scarcely repressed shudder.

"Yea, thou dost know that few equal these people in the art of healing. Hast thou ever met with a Jew?" asked Sir Roger.

Stephen shook his head. "One sought shelter of us once, but my grandame forbade him passing the threshold, for fear he should bring a curse upon us. Dost thou think we ought to seek counsel and help of these people?" asked Stephen, timidly.

"Certainly, if none else can give us what we need. They are God's creatures, at least," added the knight, "whether the Church own them or not."

While they had been talking, Sir Roger had led the way back to the heart of the town, and here he inquired for a certain street, bidding both lads remember it, and also the way to it. The latter, however, was not so easy, for there were so many turnings and windings, and so much dodging and jumping to avoid the horses and the open sewers, that when at last they found themselves in a low, miserable out-of-the-way street, it was not



THE VISIT TO THE OLD JEW.

surprising that Stephen should wonder how they were going to find their way back again.

At last they stopped before a high wood and plaster house, and blowing a horn that hung by a chain at the door, a grating was slipped aside, and a thin, piping old voice asked who was there and what was wanted.

"I seek thy master, Isaac ben Israel. Tell him Roger Clifford waits."

As soon as he had mentioned his name the door opened, and a little old man with a long white beard bowed himself almost to the ground, as Sir Roger stepped over the threshold. "Thy servant is not worthy," he began; but Sir Roger quickly interrupted him with the question, "Is thy master in, Ephraim?"

"Yea, your excellency, thy servant."

"Lead us to him then with all speed," said the knight.

The entrance hall was as bare and miserable as the exterior of the house; but, passing through a door beyond this, they were suddenly ushered into a scene of Oriental luxury. Soft carpets lay upon the floor. Tiny silver lamps, burning perfumed oil, shed a soft radiance, fragrance, and warmth throughout the apartment. Not a ray of daylight penetrated the thick arras that lined the walls, and there were several couches and piles of cushions scattered about the room.

"Ye are cautious knaves, I trow, or I would not have brought ye hither, for I need scarcely tell ye that few but Jews ever penetrate into this house."

Stephen hardly knew what to think or say, but bowed and crossed himself as he muttered a prayer to

our Lady to preserve him from the spells of the evil one, who was believed to have frequent dealings with all Jews. Sir Roger's next words were rather a severe shock to him, and he wondered whether his father knew anything about this, and whether he ought not to look out for a pedler who might be going to the neighbourhood of Meadowlea, to take a letter for him at once, informing his father of the strange circumstance.

"Isaac ben Israel is a friend of mine," said the knight, impressively; "a very good friend hath he been to me, and I should not like evil to happen to him through my son, and ye must both bridle your tongues, if ever ye should think of aught ye may see here. Tell it to none, for a bird of the air may carry it; and I should grieve to hear that my old friend had been driven forth again upon the wide world."

"But would our talking about this beautiful room bring so much evil?" asked Lewis.

"None could tell how much evil it might bring," said Sir Roger, gravely; "an the mob, urged on by the rascally friars, should learn that a wealthy Jew lived here in such state, they would rouse the whole town to riot, and naught but pulling the house about his ears, and robbing and killing him, would satisfy their greed; so be warned—be cautious—be secret, but be sure ye will find a friend in the old Jew."

CHAPTER VIII.

LEWIS CLIFFORD.

THE old Jew himself as deeply impressed the lads as the sight of the room had startled them. The long white hair and beard, the sad, venerable, grave face reminded Stephen of the pictured saints he had seen in the illuminated missals at the monastery. It seemed that he was under a deep obligation to Sir Roger for saving his life at the time of some popular outbreak years before, and readily promised to befriend the lads, should they ever need his help or medical skill; but, at the same time, he warned them never to mention his name, or to recognise him, should they meet in the public streets, for it would bring ridicule upon themselves, and rouse public attention to the fact that there were Jews living in Oxford; and their only hope of escaping the blind fury of the mob at the time of any riot or disturbance was in their remaining comparatively unknown.

Before they left, the Jew physician gave them a small phial containing a few drops of dark-looking liquid, one drop of which, he assured them, would cure the ague, if taken when the first shivering fit came on. This phial was intrusted to Stephen's care,

for Sir Roger had a shrewd suspicion that his son would be more likely to lose it than his companion, and such precious elixirs as were compounded by the Jews could not be obtained every day.

"Now I know ye have a friend to whom ye can apply in any need ye may have for money or medicines I shall be more content," said Sir Roger; for it had been arranged with ben Israel that he should hold the money Lewis might need, and act as banker for him and his father.

The next day the knight, with his cavalcade of servants and sumpter mules, took their departure for the north, and the lads were left to their own devices.

"Now tell me what thou hast come to Oxenforde for," exclaimed Lewis, as soon as his father had departed, and he felt himself at liberty to take Stephen into his confidence.

His companion stared at the question. "Have we not both come hither for the same purpose," he asked, "to study under Dr. Wycliffe?"

Lewis Clifford shrugged his shoulders. "I would I had lived a hundred years ago, and could have studied under the noble friar Roger Bacon. I have read somewhat of his 'Opus Majus;' and I know somewhat of mathematics, as taught by the invincible Dr. Occam, another Franciscan monk. I have a Flanders horologe too, and we will take it to pieces; who knoweth but the mechanicals of this may teach us to find out other things, other secrets?" added Lewis.

To say that Stephen was shocked would not express half the alarm he felt as he listened to his companion,

and at his concluding words, "find out other secrets," he crossed himself, for he had heard some of the monks at the monastery say this Friar Bacon was more than half a wizard; and as for Occam, he had heard his name mentioned, too, as one whom the pope had cursed and excommunicated; and he said something of this to Lewis.

But the lad made very light of it, as though it was not worth a second thought. "The holy father would fain keep us all as children—ah! and helpless, ignorant children too," he said; "but there are secrets in the world and in Nature that cannot always be hidden. Now, some have of late discovered the way of measuring time better than by hour glasses, that need turning each time the sand doth run out, and we have horologes now, which we had not a hundred years ago. But dost thou think that this is the last discovery to be made? Nay, nay, there are other secrets by which the world may be helped, I trow," concluded Lewis Clifford; "and whether it please the holy father, or nay, I shall study mechanicals, and try to find out some of those secrets that Roger Bacon discovered; and who knoweth but I may be able to help the world too?"

For some little while Stephen was kept in a state of anxious alarm more easily imagined than described, for all the time that could be snatched from the needful study and attendance on Dr. Wycliffe's lectures, Lewis spent at the library of Durham College, poring over Roger Bacon's "Opus Majus," and everything he could find upon the subject of mechanics.

He knew all about this library before he came to Oxford, for the Bishop of Durham, who founded the college, and bequeathed his valuable library for the benefit of Oxford students, had been a friend of his father, and was known throughout England as the friend and patron of "poor scholars," who were always welcome to the use of his library, and often enjoyed his hospitality while reading his books. This learned bishop had been tutor to the king, and went as ambassador to the pope at Avignon, where he had met Petrarch and many of the learned men of Italy. This mission had also enabled him to gather many valuable books, so that when he retired from court to his diocese, he was enabled to be of much service to those who could not afford to buy books for themselves.

But Stephen, while he sat poring over the works of Aristotle and Duns Scotus, which were the usual educational works of the time, worried himself not a little over the uncanny studies of his friend, and thought of his wild talk about the power of steam and mechanicals, until he crossed himself, and pattered an Ave on behalf of his friend, hoping these unholy studies would soon come to an end. And after a time it seemed that Lewis as well as Stephen was charmed away from other studies by the eloquent lectures of Dr. Wycliffe, the substance of which long years afterwards was thrown into his celebrated treatise entitled "Trialogus," that is, a colloquy between three persons—Alithea, or Truth; Pseudis, or Falsehood; and Phronesis, or Wisdom.

This allegorical form of teaching was most popular at that time, and afforded ample scope for what most

of the teachers of the day mainly aimed at—a clever use of words ; but Wycliffe had a higher aim than this. Mighty truths must be conveyed to the hearts of his hearers, or the Evangelical doctor was not content. But still, we should think these dialogues wonderfully prolix, and oftentimes tedious in their wordiness ; but to the students of that day they must have been marvellous revelations of truth ; and Lewis Clifford listened with as deep attention to the professor chosen by his father as his instructor as he would to Friar Bacon himself, had he been living.

Still, the mechanicals were by no means neglected. He was determined to put in practice what he had learned ; so the horologe was taken to pieces and put together again, and then he set himself the task of making one himself, for he knew he could never do anything towards carrying his idea into practice until he had learned smith's work, the turning of brass, and working in wood, like a carpenter. So, to Stephen's surprise, after the horologe was taken to pieces and put together again, Lewis announced that he was going to work under a carpenter as soon as he could find one able and willing to teach him his trade thoroughly.

He had learned by this time that it would be better not to tell all he had in his mind, or what his ultimate object was in learning the trade of a carpenter ; and, surprised as Stephen might be that one of gentle birth like Lewis Clifford should desire to learn this ignoble art, it was at least less dangcrous than being a wizard, as he had at one time feared his friend would become, and

after a little persuasion he agreed to share his friend's lessons.

Before the winter was over they both needed the Jew physician's medicine, for the mists rising from the river and the low-lying marshy ground surrounding it soon spread ague and marsh-fever abroad, and most of its victims were among the newly arrived students. Stephen was the first to be seized with the ominous shivering fit, but he promptly took the medicine as prescribed, wrapped himself in a blanket, as he had been told, and went to bed at once, and the next morning all the dreaded symptoms had left him. Lewis, however, laughed at Stephen's alarm, when the malady seized him, and persisted in going to take his first lesson of the carpenter, although his teeth chattered as he drew his mantle round his shoulders. Of course he was worse the next day, and Stephen was afraid he would have to seek further advice from the old Jew, for all their stock of medicine was exhausted before the malady was subdued. Lewis lay in his cold, comfortless little bedroom, shivering and grumbling, or tossing with the restlessness of the fever all through the week; but the powerful medicine conquered at last, just when Stephen was about to set out for another supply. A quartan ague was of such common occurrence in those days that no one thought anything of it, and so the lads were left to nurse each other as best they could, and, thanks to the vigorous out-door life that both of them had lived, they fared better than might have been expected.

Lewis had soon forgotten all about his ague attack in the interest of cutting, and carving, and joining; but

Stephen wisely paid another visit to the old Jew, to renew his stock of medicine, for fear they should again fall victims to the insidious foe. Lewis likewise paid a visit to the Jew, to obtain some money to buy tools at the next fair; but it was not so easily obtained as he had imagined it would be. To the Jew there were only two things in life worth striving for—money and liberty—and how either was to be obtained by learning the trade of a carpenter he could not understand, even though Lewis talked of mechanicals helping the world, and making him a rich man by-and-by.

The Jew gave him a few broad pieces rather reluctantly, handling each as though grieving to part with it, until Lewis almost lost his temper and his manners too.

“The old miser!” he exclaimed, when he was safe outside the door, and he could talk to Stephen without fear. “One would think money was made of heart’s blood, to see him handle it. I trow the varlets who pull down Jews’ houses have some excuse too for their unmannerly carriage, an they are all like this ben Israel.”

But they had obtained some money to spend at the fair, and this consoled Lewis for the old Jew’s grumbling, and warned them, too, that they ought to write home letters, for some pedler or huckster might be found who was likely to journey northwards; and to receive a letter from Lewis the Cliffords would gladly welcome any packman, and purchase of him too. Of course, Stephen’s home being nearer, there would be even greater likelihood of finding a messenger for his mission—it was even within the bounds of possibility that their own reeve might be there, buying

plenishings of some kind or other needful on the farm ; so both lads expended some money in the purchase of parchment, for nothing so cheap as letter paper was known then, and when the price of parchment was added to the entertainment of, or bargain made with the pedler who carried the letter, it became a costly affair.

It was with high glee that the two lads set out to the market place, their letters written and duly bound with strong silk thread, in search of a packman who would carry them, and of whom they could make their needful purchases, if possible. Stephen hoped that he might receive a letter as well as send one—might even see a home face in the crowd clustered round the pack-horses and laden mules which stood patiently waiting among the eager mob until their panniers should be emptied. All Oxford was here, as it seemed—the students pushing, laughing, joking, bargaining over a doublet or cap, or playing merry pranks on their companions ; the pedlers screaming their wares, each trying to outdo the other in lusty vociferation in their calls upon customers to buy, and the eager demand, “What d’ye lack? what d’ye lack?”

Lewis was as ready as any to join in the fun, but until he had disposed of his letter and bought his tools he felt he had no time for less serious business ; and as for Stephen, he was always disposed to take his pleasure quietly, and could far more enjoy looking on at the fun than joining in it. Many, of course, had come for this alone, merely purchasing some cakes, or wastel bread, or other little luxury ; but many more,

like Lewis and Stephen, were on the look out for those who could carry letters for them, or had brought them from friends.

At length Lewis was so fortunate as to catch the familiar sound of the rough northern speech, and he elbowed his way up to the man at once. He had come from Sheffield, and carried knives and edged tools—just what Lewis needed—but his speech was of a county farther north. In a moment the lad of noble birth had forgotten the distinction of rank in the joy of hearing the dear home tongue once more, and using a north-country idiom, he grasped the man's hand, almost taking his breath away with surprise. He had not come direct from Durham, and had no letters for a Master Clifford, as Lewis had fondly hoped; but he readily agreed to become the bearer of his missive, more especially when he found that the lad was likely to prove a good customer. He was not going direct to Durham—it might be months before his trade took him so far north—but he had a brother, also a pedler, who frequently journeyed between Sheffield and the northern towns, and to him the letter should be confided the next time they met.

Stephen was lucky enough to meet their own reeve, who had not only brought a letter from his father and sisters, but could also tell him all that had happened at Meadowlea since his departure. Of course, he knew nothing of his grandame's sudden announcement to his father, and when he heard that she had gone on pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Thomas at Canterbury he was greatly surprised. Surely the world was being turned

upside down, or such a thing as this could never happen! The news of Harry's departure for London he had expected, but this about his grandame set him musing very seriously, and he feared some great trouble must be impending, to take her so far from home. He asked about the quarrel over the corner croft, but the reeve knew nothing fresh about it. For the rest, everything was going on as usual; his father and sisters were well. And so the day at the fair was a happy one for both the lads.

CHAPTER IX.
IN LONDON.

AT the time of which we write the Savoy Palace, the hereditary home of the Dukes of Lancaster, stood in the midst of pleasant orchards and fruitful gardens, which surrounded the half-fortified mansions of the nobility and gentry in the Strand. This was a pleasant, aristocratic neighbourhood, connecting the little village of Charing and the palace at Westminster with the thriving, bustling port and city of London. So when Harry Middleton came here as page to John of Gaunt—or Ghent—it did not present a very striking contrast to his country home. True, the houses were more pretentious, most of them being adorned with carved stone fleurs-de-lis, to perpetuate the victory of Agincourt; but beyond this they differed little from the country home at Meadowlea, except the palace of the Savoy itself; and Harry was startled to see the extent of the gloomy-looking castellated mansion that was built on the slope of a rather steep hill that ran down to the very brink of the river.

He was surprised, too, by the number of the duke's retainers. To his inexperienced eyes, it seemed like an army, sitting, or lounging, or walking about in the

open square, all wearing the great duke's livery or bearing his badge.

Harry had dressed himself in his bravest attire at the hostelry before setting out on his journey that morning, and he had ordered Roger, the blacksmith's son, who acted as his servant, to don his new leather jerkin, that they might both appear suitably dressed; but Harry had scarcely entered the great hall before he felt half ashamed of his country-cut clothes, while his servitor was growing more angry every minute as he stood holding his master's horse, and listening to the rude jests and banter of the idle loungers, who were ever on the look-out for some fresh amusement.

Meanwhile his master was undergoing a no less painful, though more polite scrutiny, for in the great hall nearly fifty gentlemen—pages and esquires in attendance on the duke—were gathered in various groups, some playing chess or dice, and others talking apart in the recesses of the windows; but none were so much occupied as to let Harry Middleton pass unnoticed. He had to wait here and endure all these curious glances while a servant carried his father's letter to the duke; but at length he was conducted through the vast hall, and at the door of an ante-chamber he was received by a splendidly-dressed chamberlain, who at once ushered him into the presence of the duke.

John of Gaunt was at this time about twenty-six years of age, a fine tall young man, of dignified presence, but pleasant, affable manners. He received his new page very kindly, asked after his father, and almost before he

was aware of it, Harry had told him the family trouble about the corner croft.

The duke smiled at the lad's ingenuousness, as he said, "So thy father is by no means willing to resign all to the ravenous maw of these rapacious monks."

"Nay, he doth declare he will suffer them to go to law about it, an they will ; but my grandame would fain give it up without more ado, for she greatly feareth this new way of thinking."

"And what dost thou mean by the new way of thinking?" asked the duke, with an amused smile.

"The fashion that is abroad now of contemning the claims of the holy father and the monks and friars."

John of Gaunt shrugged his shoulders. "An the Church can keep to her own concerns, and meddle not with other matters, men, I ween, will be willing to obey her behests. So thy grandame doth fear the teaching of clever Master Wycliffe?" he added.

"Aye, so greatly doth she fear it that she hath even now gone on pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Thomas of Canterbury, because my brother hath gone to study under Master Wycliffe, at Oxenforde."

The duke did not smile at this intelligence, as the Evangelical doctor might have done. He fully shared in the superstitions of the age, and, however willing he might be to avail himself of any help he could get in his efforts to curtail the power of the pope and clergy, he by no means doubted the power of the saints ; and St. Thomas of Canterbury had been a sturdy champion of the pope, and was not at all likely to view with satisfaction the movement the duke desired to inaugurate. To hear,

therefore, that people were going on pilgrimage to implore of the saint what he would only be too ready to grant, was by no means welcome news; but he nevertheless resolved to carry out his plans, if possible; and this fresh tale of the monks' greed seemed to inspire him with renewed energy, inasmuch as it would give him at least a few more adherents among the commonalty. So the sale of the friar's sheep bone was not likely to prove a very insignificant matter, either for their Order or for their sworn foes the monks, for it helped to rouse up against them a relentless foe, who left no stone unturned until the administration of civil law was released from the trammels of the Church.

John of Gaunt was so pleased with his new page, that he appointed him to a position that would bring him into close attendance on his own person. Every office that was ever heard of in a king's palace was to be found in the duke's household; and Harry Middleton might well be puzzled as he heard of chamberlains, treasurer, pursuivant, seneschal, heralds, captain of the guard—posts all held by gentlemen, many of them of higher rank than himself, and all aspiring to personal attendance upon the royal duke.

From his first interview with him, Harry might have imagined that he would frequently have opportunities for private converse with his master; but he soon found that it was not so. He took his place with other pages, and soon learned his duties, which, if they took him into the immediate presence of the duke, consisted of little beyond the silent handing of various articles to his superior in attendance. True, the duke would laugh

and chat with his gentlemen sometimes, like any other mortal; but there were no more inquiries about the corner croft, or whether he had heard of his grandame on her pilgrimage.

There was the usual gossip that prevails in all circles, and from this Harry soon gathered that the duke was held to be as wise and clever, as his brother the Black Prince; but there being no room for two such soldiers, John of Gaunt had turned his attention to the study of statecraft, and his object was to elevate the power of the nobility, and release them from their subservience to the Church. He, like Lady Middleton, viewed with suspicion the rising power of the Commons, and was anxious to restore the good old feudal times, when the great barons were the actual rulers, and king counted for little and parliament for nothing in the disposition of affairs.

Harry did not learn this all at once, of course, and the latter portion was told him by Roger, who, now duly installed as an armourer's apprentice, heard all the gossip that went on in his uncle's shop, and was not slow to tell Harry all he learned concerning his master. The lads did not often meet, but sometimes Harry would be glad to leave the tilting-yard or the bowling-green for an hour, and mounting his palfrey would ride along the Strand to the great monastery of the Black Friars, close to which nestled the little shop where Roger was always to be found furbishing or riveting armour, or making a key, or cleaning a ponderous lock. Roger loved his handicraft, and had not yet learned to love the cry of "Clubs! clubs!" that usually set a London 'prentice lad's blood on fire; but, glad as his uncle was to find his nephew so

steady and reliable, this quiet indifference rather annoyed him.

One day, just as Harry rode up, and was dismounting from his palfrey, the well-known cry was raised, and out they flew from every shop, and shed, and booth near, each taking up the cry of "Clubs! clubs!" and flourishing the thick stick that always lay near at hand, whatever the task might be that they were engaged upon. It was a warning to the masters that they might come and look to the shops themselves; but Roger's uncle kept on with his task of riveting a casque, for Roger himself only lifted his head to glance at the door, and see which way they were running this time. As he did so, Harry stepped in laughing, and pointing to the flying apprentices.

"Run thee too, Roger," said his uncle, in an irritable tone, at the same moment; then, perceiving their visitor, he laid aside the casque, and broke into open grumbling. "He is naught but a hilding," he said, "or he would join the varlets sometimes when they cry clubs."

Harry could not but feel surprised that Roger's steadiness should be looked upon as a fault by his uncle. "Wouldest thou have him like these wild blades that have just shown their masters a clean pair of heels?" he asked.

"Aye, that would I, rather than he should be a tame squirrel, doing any man's bidding. They be lads of spirit now, Master Middleton, and right masterful citizens will they make anon—men that will uphold the rights of our charter, and bate not one jot for king or baron. Your worshipful Master of Lancaster liketh

not us London citizens, I trow. The king, in his need of gold, hath given us many privileges and rights, which my Lord of Lancaster doth sorely grudge us, and ——”

“Nay, nay, thou doest my gentle lord great wrong!” exclaimed Harry, hotly, while Roger paused in his work to listen to the argument. “It is but the great bishops who hold offices that beseemeth them not that he would remove—even that they may dwell among the people over whom they should preside.”

But the armourer shook his head. “Thou art but newly come to the court,” he said; “it may be that thy lord doth purpose somewhat of what thou sayest; but this is not the talk among our guilds; and thou wilt know it, an it ever comes to a tussle between our stout London ’prentices and ye gentlemen of the great duke’s train.”

Harry laughed. “Ye would settle all disputes with fists and clubs; and here they come back,” he said, “the varlets of the club and flat caps,” as a noisy troop of lads turned into the street.

The fight was over, whatever it might have been about, and the ’prentices were returning to their work once more. It did, no doubt, as the armourer said, make the lads masterful and jealous of their rights as citizens, at a time when, if they had not been held by a strong grip, they would soon have been snatched away by king or barons; but these frequent cries of “Clubs! clubs!” were a constant interruption to work.

The special object Harry had in coming to the armourer’s to-day was to inquire whether a band of

pilgrims had arrived, with whom his grandame expected to travel. It had been an ill-omened pilgrimage for Lady Middleton, since by the time she reached Canterbury she was so worn with the fatigue of the journey that she at once fell a victim to an attack of ague; and the returning pilgrims brought a letter to Harry, telling of her illness and her inability to visit the shrine of the saint, although she was in the town. To return was impossible while she was so ill; but another party returning later brought another letter, saying she was better, had been able to present her offering to St. Thomas, and would return with the first party that left the city after Christmas; and Harry thought it was time for this party to have reached the Tabard. At this hostelry they usually separated, and went their different ways; but it had been arranged that his grandame should stay there until an escort could be found for her to return to Oxfordshire, and Harry was to visit her as soon as he heard of her arrival, and the armourer had promised to apprise him of this as soon as he heard that a party of pilgrims had reached London.

But neither Roger nor his uncle had heard any talk about the pilgrims, and they had been to London Bridge every day lately, where news of them would certainly be heard; but the armourer promised to walk as far as the Tabard, in Southwark, the next day, and whatever he might learn there, Roger should carry the news to the Savoy.

Two days later Roger arrived in hot haste at the palace, and Harry was summoned to meet him. "The Lady Middleton hath arrived at yonder hostelry, weak



HE KNELT DOWN BESIDE THE BED.

and worn from the journey, and would fain see thee without delay," he said.

"Is she ill again, Roger?" said Harry, in some alarm, vaguely wishing that Maud or his father were at hand—for what could he do? "I had rather tend my palfrey or my falcon," he said, helplessly; "and I know not that I can leave the palace at once."

"Nay, but the poor lady lieth there among strangers," said Roger. Small pity would the "poor lady" have got from the lad if she had been at home, but being among strangers altered the case entirely, and Roger was ready to go to her himself, if Harry could not be released from attendance on his master.

But the chamberlain made no difficulty about his leaving the palace for a few hours, and mounting his palfrey, with Roger running at the side, they made all speed to London, for it had been arranged that Roger should go to the Tabard as well, in case Harry should need a trusty messenger when he got there.

They found the lady very ill, but by no means so destitute of help and comfort as they supposed. Mine host and his wife had done all that they could for her, and Harry found a stout serving-maid installed as nurse to his grandame. He knelt down beside the bed, and dutifully kissed the thin white hand she held towards him; but having done that he was at a loss to know what to do next. Perhaps, if her rule had been one of love rather than fear, Harry might have thrown himself beside her, and kissed the thin, hollow cheeks, and she would not have felt that painful longing for something, she knew not what, quite so intensely as she

now did. The human love, though it could not have satisfied the craving that had made itself felt, would yet have soothed the pain; but Harry had always stood in too much awe of his grandame to think of going beyond the due bounds of deference, and so he waited and helplessly twisted the tassels of his silken girdle, while he asked a few formal questions which he thought would be expected of him. At length he took his departure; but once outside the chilling influence of his grandame he was altogether another being.

“Roger, I must get a litter to carry her home at once!” he exclaimed; and they went back to the armourer’s shop to consult him about it.

Roger took the matter up at once, for a Middleton to die away from home was something too dreadful to think of, and before night a litter, and the necessary servants, were engaged to carry Lady Middleton back to Meadowlea—to die, the armourer doubted not; but in this he was mistaken, for she soon began to improve under the gentle care and tendance of Maud; but it was long before they heard aught of her pilgrimage to Canterbury.

CHAPTER X.

DR. WYCLIFFE AND HIS CHAPLAIN.

BRUGES in the fourteenth century was the grand emporium of Europe, rivalling Paris as the centre of fashion and London in its commerce, while no other town or city on the Continent could claim such freedom and independence. It was also leader of the Hanseatic League, which at this time comprised sixty towns in Flanders and Germany—a league that the free towns had formed among themselves for each other's mutual protection, against the rapacity of the bishops and the tyranny of the nobles.

In the early summer of 1374, the busy city was all astir with preparations for the reception of two embassies from England; one political, the other ecclesiastical. The latter was to meet the papal legate, and to debate certain points concerning the liberty of the English Church. Some few of the inhabitants of Bruges had heard that a champion for religious liberty had arisen in England, and liberty was dearer than gold, to all true-hearted Flemings; and so the news that this Dr. Wycliffe was to be one of the English delegates caused a little flutter of expectation among thoughtful people,

who cared little for the jousts and tournaments planned for the amusement of the visitors. Perhaps they were somewhat disappointed when they saw the spare, fragile-looking man, with the keen, yet far-off look in his eyes; while as for his chosen friend and attendant, the young priest, Master Stephen Middleton, he had nothing but scorn for their fashionable frivolities, and did not take the trouble to conceal it.

Our old friend Stephen had never left Oxford for any length of time until now, and to be plunged into the midst of fashionable courtier-like life, such as the bishop of their own embassy and the cardinals from Avignon alike affected, was to him like descending into a land of fogs and shadows, after living in the uplands of truth and eternal verities.

As the weeks went on, and little progress was made in the matter of curtailing the pope's claim to present whom he pleased to English benefices, and receive first-fruits, Dr. Wycliffe and his chaplain withdrew more and more from the society of their companions, preferring the quiet of their own rooms to the gossip and scandal that formed the staple of conversation among their more fashionable friends; and so it happened that for some time they had little or no intercourse with the members of the embassy that had come from England to negotiate terms of peace with the ambassadors of France. In the tumult and excitement of the congress between princes, the ecclesiastical envoys were in some danger of being slighted or forgotten: in fact, the interviews between the Duke of Lancaster, supported by the Earl of Salisbury, and the Dukes of

Avignon and Burgundy, brothers of the French king, were completely engrossing public attention. The citizens might well be proud that their free town was considered the only neutral ground upon which such weighty matters could be debated.

Stephen was full of hope that his brother, being one of the great duke's esquires, would have accompanied his master to Bruges. The brothers had only met twice during the last eight years, for Stephen seemed to have taken root at Oxford, while Harry had grown deeply attached to his master, and rarely spent more than a week at his old home without longing to get back to the Savoy. And now he was possibly at Bruges, and they would have ample time to talk over all the past, and hear the court news, and discuss many things that at present had only been talked of between himself and his beloved Dr. Wycliffe.

Under the stimulus of this hope, Stephen went about the town, and took more interest in things generally, for he knew that Harry would be eager to explore in all directions. He mentioned something of this to his master, and was rather surprised to find that Dr. Wycliffe was already deep in the study of the problem as to how a people apparently so frivolous and luxurious, should yet evince such a passionate love of liberty, as all their institutions plainly declared they did. Why, to these prelates and nobles who were gathering within its walls, the whole town was a standing rebuke! It had fought against their rapacity and tyranny, and thus had developed its splendid commerce, and could hold its own against the world. This was what Dr. Wycliffe told

Stephen, adding, at the same time, that he had learned much from these fashionable Flemings.

At length, to his great joy, among the splendid retinue of the Duke of Lancaster—men-at-arms, pages, and esquires—Stephen discovered the well-known form, but little changed, of his brother Harry. The young churchman and the young soldier greeted each other with fraternal affection, and soon they became closely intimate, for it had been no easy task to accommodate so many distinguished visitors, each bringing a small army of servants and gentlemen attendants, and Stephen's offer to share his bedroom with his brother was at once gladly accepted.

Stephen, in his plain russet gown, looked with mingled feelings of awe and contempt upon his brother's splendid attire, and wondered whether the accommodation of his room would satisfy a gentleman wearing a fine lawn shirt and satin doublet slashed with silver. But he soon learned that, however much they might differ as to outward appearances, there was much the same comfort—or rather lack of it—in the palace as in the cottage, and Harry was only too glad to secure his present quarters.

“Now tell me all about Meadowlea,” he said, as soon as they were quietly settled. “Thou didst pay them a visit last summer, I hear, for one of my lord's reeves brought a letter from my father. Hast heard of Maud's betrothal to Master Lewis Clifford?”

Stephen nodded and smiled. “Thy first lawn shirt did that, I trow, for I told Clifford how Maud cut up her new linen kirtle to make thee liveries fitting for my Lord

of Lancaster's page, and the tale pleased him mightily, and he ever after spoke of Maud with a reverence befitting a saint."

"And now about the corner croft—the very name hath grown hateful to me," said Harry, with a sigh, remembering how often he had been told that all the surplus revenue of the estate was being swallowed up in law expenses. Each party had been following similar tactics—the monks with the idea that by protracting the suit as long as possible, Sir Hugh's patience would be tired out, and he would be willing to give up the land if they only waited long enough. They knew, also, that their claim to it was of the slenderest, and would scarcely bear the light of day, even in an ecclesiastical court; and so it suited them to run the whole gamut permitted by law to postpone the trial; and when at last it seemed as though the case must come before the court, Sir Hugh himself would interpose some obstacle, for his hope lay in the removal of all ecclesiastical judges; and so the case had dragged its weary length along the intervening years, and had already cost both parties five times its value in law expenses. But Sir Hugh still sowed and reaped the corner croft with the greatest satisfaction to himself; although his mother and son would fain have seen it transferred to the monastery rather than it should cost so much as it did.

Harry grumbled about it now, although at the same time he expressed his hope that the matter would soon be settled, and in his father's favour too. "Thou hast heard the news, I doubt not, that my Lord

Bishop of Winchester will resign his office of chancellor, or be removed; and other clerical judges will quickly follow; so it may be, before we return to England, this vexatious business about the corner croft may be settled. And now concerning thyself," continued Harry, glancing at his brother's russet gown.

Stephen understood the look. He knew that this russet gown and his whole manner of life were scarcely less vexatious to his brother than the corner croft business. He had firmly refused to enter the monastery, to the great vexation of his uncle, and the secret satisfaction of his father; but a secular priest, without patronage, was almost a beggar, for unless he could secure some post which Stephen held to be inconsistent with the sacred duty of a clergyman he was never likely to obtain a benefice, however learned and devoted he might be. Indeed, under existing conditions, an earnest, conscientious man would be excluded through the possession of these qualifications; while one who cared nothing for the souls of those intrusted to him, but could hunt so as to please his patron, or dance so as to gratify his lady-wife, or give them both costly presents, would, without difficulty, obtain the charge of some parish.

But Stephen was never likely to do any of these things, and so he would always remain a "poor priest" without a benefice, and his brother knew it. "Thou art too particular in thy notions," he said, in a petulant tone, after they had gone over the old objections once more. "I would not have thee a mere hunter or dancer, but of a truth——"

"Nay, nay," interrupted Stephen, "thou knowest my mind upon this. I am content to be a poor priest, and——"

"But to waste thy life at Oxenforde," objected Harry, to whom "Oxenforde" meant no more than a collection of boys' schools.

"But I may not always dwell at Oxenforde," said Stephen, with a smile. "Dr. Wycliffe and I have had much converse of late on this matter, for I am not the only poor priest who, having been taught of him the true duty of a priest, doth scorn to hold a benefice as men must in these days."

"Then why become priests?" demanded Harry, sharply.

"Because we would fain teach poor perishing souls that God hath more love to them than they have ever conceived possible. We would preach the Gospel. Yea, I will preach it, though death be my recompense!" added Stephen, his face glowing and his eyes sparkling as he spoke.

Harry was astonished. Could this be his quiet, reticent brother? True, he had always shown a dogged persistence in this determination, but Harry had never credited him with anything like enthusiasm. "Well, well, an ye will, ye will, I trow," he said, after looking at him in some surprise for a minute. "But can ye tell me how ye are all going to live, an ye hold no benefice and have no patrons?"

"Our patrons we will seek among the poor. For myself, I know somewhat of mechanicals, thanks to Lewis Clifford and his love for them. I can weave

a basket of osiers or mend a chair with any village carpenter. I can stay a leaky pot too with Jack tinker, or take a turn at blacksmith's work, and for one or other of my crafts I shall, I trow, find customers in any village."

The look of horror and dismay that gradually over-spread Harry's face as he listened to this speech would have been altogether ludicrous, if the subject had not been a serious one.

"Art—thou—mad?" he gasped at length. "Thou, of gentle birth—a Middleton—talk of mending varlets' pots and chairs!"

"An they will listen to my story of the love of God afterwards, I will," said Stephen, coolly.

"And I tell thee thou shalt not!" said Harry, rising in his anger and stamping his foot. "I will have some word to say in this. Preach the Gospel an thou wilt—go into the monastery—turn friar—but work with thine hands! nay; no Middleton hath ever yet done varlet's work, and wilt thou begin?"

"Ah, that will I, and deem it no shame to mine honour, if so be that I may win some souls to the Lord Christ my Master," said Stephen, with equal warmth.

Harry was dumb. What could he say to this brother, who was ready to trample family name and family honour under foot for the sake of the Gospel? He felt thoroughly inclined to leave him at once, and start by the next ship sailing for England, and go and tell his father; but a second look at Stephen's pale, earnest, but resolute face, seemed to convince him that that would

be of little more service than his own argument in turning Stephen from his purpose, and he sat down again.

Stephen was sorry to have vexed his brother, and after a few minutes' silence he said, "Harry, an thou canst tell me a better way whereby I may preach the Gospel and keep mine own soul clean, I will fain try to follow thine advice."

But Harry shook his head. "I know little of men's souls, I trow; 'tis for their bodies I take thought;" and then, being as anxious as his brother to avoid a quarrel, he said, "Hast thou heard anything concerning this town of Bruges? I was told by one, as we came hither, that its proud citizens doth set at defiance bishop and baron alike, and no king doth care to measure swords with these free towns of the League."

"Aye, and Dr. Wycliffe doth greatly admire this people for their love of liberty," exclaimed Stephen, glad to find that his brother had started a safe subject for conversation.

"It is not overpleasing to my Lord of Lancaster, for, look you, Stephen, an the people get a taste of this liberty, there is small power left to the great barons. They are shorn as closely as my master would fain shear the Church; and, whatever thy master and mine may think about other matters, they are alike in this, I trow."

But Stephen shook his head. "Nay, nay, my noble master doth long to see the Church purified from its manifold corruptions that like a canker doth eat out the vital strength of the whole. He would purify it

of these, that it may grow strong, and rule in the hearts and lives of men, through the love of God which it is its business to declare ;” then, feeling that he was touching upon dangerous ground again, he said quickly, “What doth thy master think of these same free towns ?”

“I have heard naught from him as yet, but the Duke of Lancaster is the richest and greatest baron in England, and, moreover, doth love the old feudal rule ; therefore it were passing strange an he would stomach this new love of liberty that hath grown so rampant of late.”

“And thou, what dost thou think of it, Harry ? There is, as thou sayest, a strange stirring in men’s minds for this same freedom. Our grandame saith the king hath set the example, in the matter of the pope’s tribute, and he cannot marvel an his subjects follow it.”

Harry laughed. “I have heard somewhat like this from a good citizen of London ; but I trow my grandame and he doth not draw the same moral from the tale. I know my Lady Middleton fears that sore judgments will yet come upon the land for that same robbery of holy Church, but Master Pepperer¹ seems to run in another line. An the king can get so much exemption from the pope’s claim, wherefore cannot the people demand some freedom from the king ?” he asks.

“But I thought that London by its charter did claim, and was allowed, many liberties denied to other towns,” said Stephen.

¹ Pepper seems, in Wycliffe’s days, to have formed one of the most distinctive of a grocer’s wares. Hence, probably, the name.

“Yes, it doth ; but cannot ye see that when each has been wrung from a reluctant giver, it must needs be grasped firmly, and that merchants coming hither to buy cloth and other merchandise, and so learn of the greater freedom these towns enjoy, are by no means content when they return, but are ever on the look-out to snatch some coveted privilege ; and so their talk of the tribute and my grandame’s doth lead to different conclusions ? But let us to bed, for I must attend my master early in the morning ;” and in a short time the brothers were in bed and soon fast asleep.

CHAPTER XI.

THE TOURNAMENT.

THE business regarding the claim of the pope to present whom he pleased to English bishoprics progressed very slowly—all too slowly for Dr. Wycliffe. It seemed to him, also, that his coadjutors, and especially the Bishop of Bangor, were inclined to yield far too much to the demands of the cardinal legate, and so the discussion was adjourned from week to week.

But during the intervals of this wearisome business Dr. Wycliffe was not idle. This free, independent city had awakened a deep interest in his mind. To the steady resistance of its citizens against every form of exaction and tyranny, whether civil or religious, it owed its present proud position; and it was to a similar feeling growing in the minds of his own countrymen that Wycliffe's present errand owed its origin; and so, as he went about the city and talked with one and another of its merchants, his mind would be quickened, and he would be less than ever disposed to yield a jot to the papal claims to their jurisdiction over the English Church. He would doubtless remember, too, how the pope had overridden the choice of the founder of

Canterbury Hall, and confirmed his dismissal, upon the death of the founder; and this would not lessen his desire to press the full demands with which they were commissioned. Had the rest of the embassy been of Wycliffe's mind, much more would doubtless have been gained; but had he yielded, as his coadjutors were disposed to do, the papal party would simply have reinforced their claims. As it was, be sure this sturdy Englishman's name soon grew to be hated in the papal court, and, to add to their vexation, these French cardinals would hear of the growing friendship of this foe with another whom the Church had begun to hate—the great Duke of Lancaster. John of Gaunt had heard of Wycliffe, but now he made his acquaintance, and resolved to help him in his efforts to free the Church of England from the domination of the pope; and although the duke had come to Bruges on totally different business, he did all in his power to further Wycliffe's efforts in this direction.

All this would not escape the notice of the wily prelates from Avignon; but it would not suit their purpose to treat Dr. Wycliffe otherwise than politely and courteously; but Harry heard a whisper from a young page in attendance on one of the French cardinals, which, although he laughed at it in the presence of his informer, he did not forget, and the next time he met Stephen he took him aside and whispered, "Hast thou ever heard thy master called a heretic, Stephen?"

The young priest looked horrified at the question.

"Who hath dared ——" he began; but Harry quickly stopped him, for he saw the cardinal's page coming

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towards them across the great hall, bringing a letter for his master.

The ambassadors from England and Avignon were now sitting in solemn conclave, and the hall was half full of the pages, esquires, chaplains, and heralds of the cardinals and bishops ; but Harry noticed that his brother stood alone in his russet gown, the sole attendant upon Dr. Wycliffe, evidently shunned by all the rest. Doubtless, Stephen's own uncompromising manner had led to something of this, but he would scarcely have been left so utterly alone among these whispering, laughing groups of courtier-like attendants had not the whisper he had heard already gone abroad. Great men, he thought, with some vexation, could afford to laugh at the cry of heretic being raised against them ; but to a man in Stephen's position it was quite a different matter. People who would not dare to breathe a syllable against Dr. Wycliffe would treat with scorn and derision his "poor priest," if they suspected him of holding opinions that were known to be heretical ; and Harry Middleton standing there, or striding angrily up and down the long hall, watched with growing wrath how one and another glanced suspiciously at the figure in the russet gown, shrugging their shoulders suggestively, or whispering to a companion every now and then, while Stephen stood there diligently reading, totally ignorant of what was passing around him.

No one guessed that the superbly-dressed gentleman wearing the badge of the great English duke was brother to the "poor priest" in the russet gown ; and so Harry, in his impatient march up and down heard many a

whispered word that would not have been uttered in his hearing had the speakers guessed his relationship to him of whom they were talking so freely.

"The English were ever prone to heresy, I have heard my master say," replied a French page to some remark of his companion. "I have heard of their Roger Bacon, and Grossteste, and Duns Scotus, and Occam—all heretics; and the English king's famous chaplain, who came with him to the wars in France, Bradwardine: I have heard my father say he was little better than a heretic, so it is no marvel an we find that this Wycliffe is tainted."

"Aye, but 'tis a fearsome sin to fall into," said another and more serious-looking gentleman.

Harry wondered whether his brother had heard anything of the conversation, for the two were standing not far from his elbow. But if he heard, Stephen gave no sign, for he went on turning the yellow parchment leaves of his book, as deeply absorbed as though he was in his own room at Oxford instead of this strange world of Bruges.

Harry lost his patience at last, and went in search of more congenial society; but he could not forget the ominous whispers that had been uttered; and when they met at night in Stephen's room he began at once about what he had heard during the day.

"Stephen, what is it thy master doth teach contrary to the commands of holy Church?" he said, in a somewhat peremptory tone.

The young priest looked up in astonishment at the question.

“My master doth teach naught but what is contained in Holy Scripture,” he said.

“Art thou sure of that?” asked Harry.

“Aye, that am I, for my master hath exhorted all who ever listened to his teaching, and especially all priests, to study the Word of God for themselves, and I have done so.”

“Aye, thou hast read the Bible, Steve?” said Harry, with some interest; “I have sometimes thought I would fain know what it doth contain.”

“I can tell thee this, Harry, there is naught in it concerning the pope’s domination, or the worship of images, or the celibacy of the clergy, or the praying to saints; and for confession to a priest I have searched in vain for commandments enjoining this; but I have heard Master Wycliffe say that confession made to those who are true priests, and understand the will of God, doth much good to sinful men, so long as contrition for past sins come therewith; but, seeing that many men often confess themselves to their confessors in vain, confess thyself to God with constancy and contrition, and He may not fail—He will absolve thee. These are my master’s own words,” added Stephen, “and the Bible doth accord therewith, and the Church doth found her claims on the teaching of Scripture; so thou needest have little fear concerning my master being a heretic.”

But Harry did not look satisfied. “The whisper hath gone abroad that he hath this taint,” he said, in a petulant tone. “Look ye, Stephen, cannot ye both—you and Dr. Wycliffe—accord thyselves more with the times? It is no secret here in Bruges that the

papal legate hath no love to thy master, and the French cardinals will, without doubt, hear that he teacheth heresy."

"We care not for French cardinals," said Stephen; "and all they care for us is the revenue they obtain from our bishoprics. I grant thee that my master hath sore offended them; that he will not yield their pope the right to make these appointments; but to declare this is no heresy."

Harry shook his head. "I know naught of these matters," he said; "but I hear from one and another the whisper of heresy, and so I bid thee beware."

But in his secret heart Harry was reassured by what his brother had told him. Stephen was learned in all the lore of the Church by this time, he thought; and if Dr. Wycliffe sent his scholars to the Bible—upon the authority of which the Church professed to base all its claims—well, there could not be much fear of heresy. It was eminently fair and straightforward, too, to tell these young priests to search for themselves into the foundations of their faith, and discover whether what he taught was according to the written Word of God. Nothing could be fairer, thought Harry; and before he went to sleep he made up his mind to put a stop to this cry of heresy by the help of that art he had learned in the tilt yard. He would treat this as he would any other slander brought against a gentleman of honour; and, as his brother could not take up lance or battle-axe in his own defence, he, as a knight, was bound by the laws of chivalry to take up his quarrel, and challenge the first who dared to breathe the hateful word to

single combat, and so settle the question at once and for ever.

He did not say a word to Stephen about this, but the next time the conclave of bishops met he took care to saunter down to the hall where the attendants were likely to be gossiping. Stephen was not among them to-day—he seldom was—for it was his duty to sit near his master and take notes of the proceedings; but Harry paced up and down, and, as he expected, he soon heard the words “russet gown” and “heretic.” Facing round upon the speaker, he said, in a calm but peremptory tone, “Wilt thou tell me to whom these words doth apply?”

“Not to thee, sir knight,” said the other, laughing; “no one would suspect thee of wearing a russet gown, with all those braveries;” and he nodded towards the silver-hilted dagger that hung from his girdle.

“But if I wear not the gown myself, it doth as nearly concern mine honour,” said Harry, haughtily; “and I demand to know what thou hast to say concerning Dr. Wycliffe’s chaplain.”

“Aye, aye, thou shalt hear it, for ’tis no secret in this noble company that both Wycliffe and Master Russet-gown are rank heretics.”

“I say thou liest; they are faithful sons of holy Church!” exclaimed Harry, hotly.

But before he had finished speaking his antagonist had stepped forward.

“Who art thou who callest me a liar?” he demanded.

“My name is Henry de Fulke Middleton, the brother of Master Stephen Middleton, Dr. Wycliffe’s chaplain,

whom thou hast just branded as heretic. For my condition, I am of noble birth, and in the service of my Lord of Lancaster."

His antagonist looked him over from head to foot. Had he been alone, he would probably have made some apology for the insult he had offered to the name of Middleton, and there the affair would have ended; but a crowd of his companions had gathered round, and he could not eat his words before them, and so he said, with exasperating coolness, "Well, Sir Henry Middleton, what hast thou to say for thy heretic brother?"

"That!" exclaimed Harry, drawing his dagger from its scabbard, and striking him across the face with the flat of the blade.

In a moment the hall was a scene of tumult and confusion, in which Harry would have stood a small chance of escape; but in loud ringing tones he exclaimed, "I demand thy condition, and challenge thee to single combat in the tournament to be holden without the city gates three days hence!"

This challenge none could gainsay or dispute, and so the antagonists fell asunder, and Harry, having gained his point, walked away, hoping Stephen would hear nothing of what had taken place in the outer hall.

Fortunately for his peace of mind, Stephen was too much occupied just now in copying and transcribing the proceedings of the late meeting to think or talk about the projected tournament. Of course, he knew that his brother would take some part in this splendid display of martial skill, for Harry was passionately fond of the sports of the tilt-yard; but it was one thing to join in

the *mêlée*, and show off his dexterity with lance and battle-axe, but quite another matter to fight in single combat to avenge a private insult; and so it was well for Stephen that he was out of the way of hearing the gossip that was circulating just now concerning his brother and Sir Raoul de Malines.

The day of the tournament came at last, and hundreds of the citizens of Bruges poured out of the gates to the field beyond the walls, where the lists had been set. A whisper had gone abroad, even among the populace, that some insult to a brother was to be avenged in one of the trials by single combat; but no one thought of connecting it with the quiet young priest attending Dr. Wycliffe, until somebody's curiosity was aroused to ask more particularly what the insult was; and at the word "heretic," suspicion at once pointed to Stephen, though few could believe that the tall steel-clad knight who rode into the lists wearing the badge of the great duke was brother to the quiet, studious young priest so often seen with Dr. Wycliffe.

As the two combatants sat facing each other on their splendidly-caparisoned horses, a hearty cheer went up from the bystanders, who took a keen interest in these displays of martial prowess. For a minute or two they stood facing each other, the impatient horses pawing the ground; but at a signal from the heralds they each sprang forward, their long lances pointed full at each other's breasts. But they met and passed, wheeled round and faced each other again; but by that time it became evident that the Frenchman was by no means equal to his antagonist in horsemanship. Again

they met, and the lances rang against the armour of each; but, beyond a few dints and bruises on corslet and shield, no harm was done to either for some time. At length, however, the Frenchman seemed to gain more control over his horse, and then the battle began in deadly earnest. Harry was unhorsed, but contrived to regain his seat, and then the Frenchman went down before a well-directed thrust of Harry's lance, and did not attempt to rise again; and when the customary time had elapsed, and he made no movement, the attendants went to his assistance. It was found that he was wounded in the side, and he was at once carried out of the lists, and his horse led away for the next combat to begin.

At the close of the tournament, Harry rode back to the city in high spirits. He had ascertained that his antagonist was not mortally wounded, and he himself had only received a few scratches, so that altogether it had been a very tame affair, according to Harry's ideas of such encounters; but still enough had been done to avenge the family name and honour, he thought; and this cry of "heretic" had been disposed of for ever.

So it was with no small satisfaction that he went to Stephen's room that night, for, weary and tired as he was with his day's exertions, he flattered himself that he had done his brother no insignificant service in silencing his traducers.

Whether men's opinions can be changed by a trial of martial skill, I leave my readers to judge; but certainly, whatever might be thought, the papal attendants took care not to let any of the Duke of

Lancaster's household hear them speak of the English heretics again; and after some further delay in the negotiations, both embassies returned home, neither quite satisfied with the result achieved, but thankful to be back once more in their native land.

Here, at least, Dr. Wycliffe's labours were duly appreciated, for the rectory of Lutterworth, having recently fallen into the gift of the Crown, the king at once offered him this piece of preferment. The prebendary of Aust, an honorary sinecure, had also been conferred upon him during his absence—a sufficient proof that the king and parliament fully approved his doctrines.

CHAPTER XII.

AT LADY CLIFFORD'S.

IN a pleasant, sunny room, opening upon a broad grass plat, surrounded by high walls, sat a gentle but grave-looking lady, busily writing. The carved oaken table was nearly covered with sheets of parchment, some written upon, some clean and lying ready for use. At another table sat a young girl, also writing.

“Thou wilt be very careful to transcribe every word plainly,” said the lady, in a pause of her work; “for my brother doth need these tracts mostly for simple country folk, who have been taught to read in some monastery school, but are not well skilled in deciphering unknown words.”

These tracts were portions of Dr. Wycliffe's lectures, for the use of some of his “poor priests,” in their itinerating labours among the country towns and villages; and this was what the lady was writing, concerning trusting in Christ: “Here we must know the story of the old law—how the people were hurt by the stinging of adders, and Moses prayed God to tell him a medicine, and God bade him take an adder of brass, and, raising it high on a tree for the people to look to, to tell them that those who looked on that adder should be healed. And all

this was a figure of Christ's hanging on the cross. He was in the form of the venomous adder; but in His own person was no venom, even as the adder of brass had no venom in it. But as a right looking on that adder of brass saved the people from the venom of serpents, so a right looking by full belief on Christ saveth His people. Christ died, not for His own sins, as thieves die for theirs, but as our brother, who Himself might not sin, He died for the sins that others had done. The righteousness of God, therefore, and His grace, and the salvation of men all thus moved Christ to die."

The lady evidently enjoyed her task, for a petulant exclamation escaped her as she heard a noise in the outer hall. The next moment the door was thrown open, and a handsomely-dressed gentleman walked in. "Oh, Harry, I had no thought of seeing thee to-day," exclaimed the lady, turning to greet him.

"Well, my lady sister, I had small thought of seeing thee an hour since, but I have been sore vexed;" then noticing for the first time that they were not alone, he led the way out to the grass plat and walked to the terrace that flanked it, where a peacock was displaying his gorgeous plumage, but where they could talk undisturbed. "Maud, didst thou know our witless brother was journeying Londonwards?" he asked.

Something like an amused smile flitted over the lady's face at the question. "It is hard to say what one may expect from Stephen," she said; "thou knowest he has given his life to the teaching of the Gospel."

"And doth that include being a Jack tinker?" demanded her brother.

“Now, Harry, art thou quite fair in this question? Thou knowest that although the suit concerning the corner croft was at length decided in my father’s favour, the cost of it hath made it impossible to keep Stephen and thee as becometh the sons of a knight, and Lewis took me almost dowerless.”

The gentleman bit his lip at this gentle reminder of his own extravagance, for there was no disguising the fact that he was extravagant.

“But—but to come to a fashionable place like the Holy Well to preach and do tinker’s work!” grumbled Harry.

“Art thou sure it was Stephen?” asked Maud; “thou knowest that he seldom chooseth the resorts of the gay and rich, but little villages and poor towns are the places where he doth love to set forth the Gospel message.”

“Am I sure thou art Lady Clifford? thou mightest ask. For thy sake, if not for mine, he might do his tinker’s work further off.”

“Nay, Stephen doth know that neither Lewis nor I will object to aught he may deem needful for the spread of the Gospel, as taught by Dr. Wycliffe. Am not I trying to aid in the good work by transcribing with my maidens? and Madge, in her bower at home, doth spend many an hour in writing and copying Dr. Wycliffe’s lectures. Ah, shall I ever forget the sermons I heard him preach! I wish everybody in England could learn of him, as Stephen, and Lewis, and I have. But, Harry,” she suddenly exclaimed, “people everywhere are learning to love the new doctrine. Nay, nay, what am I saying? it is no *new* doctrine, but

God's eternal truth, that Dr. Wycliffe is bringing to light once more. England now is like our corner croft after the spring rains, when the river has brimmed over. The grass is green and fresh and inviting, but look closely, and there are gleams of shining light in places where the blades are not quite so close together; and such is the work being done by 'poor priests' like Stephen for England. They are quietly spreading the Water of Life over all the land, and by-and-by we shall cease to be called Lollards, because all England will be Lollard," concluded Lady Clifford.

Her brother gave a dissatisfied grunt. "I am not so sure as thou art. Hast thou not heard that the pope is about to send an envoy to England concerning this very thing? At Bruges it was whispered that Stephen and his master were both heretics."

Maud smiled. The word was not so terrible to her as to her brother. "My Lord of Lancaster can protect him, I ween, for since the death of the Black Prince last year, he is no less powerful than the king himself."

"And thinkest thou my master would extend his protection to a known heretic? His confessor is of the order of the Black Friars. But, Maud," suddenly broke off Harry, "is it true that thou and thy husband have no confessor now?"

The lady shook her head, but a troubled look came into her eyes as she said, "Dr. Wycliffe doth think it may be left to a Christian's own conscience, this confession to a priest, an we do but confess our sins, with all true contrition, to God Himself."

But it was easy to see that this liberty, which her

husband had hailed with such joy, was anything but a boon to Maud. The swaddling bands of the confessional had wrapped her round all her life ; her experience of it, too, had been exceptional, and she missed the gentle ministrations of the old monk, who, all unwittingly, had done much to open the minds of his pupils to the further teaching of Dr. Wycliffe. Through all the years of litigation between the monastery and the hall, nothing had been allowed to interrupt the weekly visit of the old monk to his penitents. Perhaps his brethren thought they might gather some scraps of useful information concerning the lawsuit, if he continued to be the family confessor ; but, truth to tell, the old monk was far more interested in hearing about what Dr. Wycliffe was teaching, or what his former pupil Stephen was doing, than the long-contested question of the corner croft.

Sorely, therefore, did Maud miss the wise, loving counsel of this ripe old Christian, who, in spite of all the rubbish of Romanism that overlay his creed, had penetrated to the heart of Christ Himself, and brought forth from this treasury things new and old, to feed these lambs of the flock.

When she married her brother's old friend, who had recently become Sir Lewis Clifford, he told her laughingly that he would be her confessor, and Maud had nodded her head ; but she soon found, to her dismay, that neither in the family mansion at Durham nor their London house here in the Strand, was there a confessor attached to the household. All the images, too, and pictured saints, had been removed from the family chapel, and just before his death Sir Roger had

also removed them from the parish church, of which he was the patron—a proceeding that rather shocked Maud, but which Lady Middleton pronounced as sacrilege.

Sir Hugh himself scarcely knew what to think of his old friend's proceeding at first ; but when he heard that no evil had resulted from thus discarding the images of the Virgin and saints, and that Dr. Wycliffe had fully approved of the deed, he took the same steps in their own village church, with the full approbation of the little community ; for Stephen's labours here among his father's tenants, aided by his sister's awakened interest in the affairs of their poorer neighbours, had been abundantly blessed, and more than one village lad was now studying at Oxford during the terms, and returning to labour in the fields, or at some trade, in vacations, that they might join Dr. Wycliffe's band of "poor priests," who went up and down the country, preaching in the churches, where they were permitted, or else in an empty barn, or at the corner of some village green.

Many of these were indebted to Maud for the ability to do this, and to the sweet, gentle invalid Margaret, whose whole time now was given up to superintending the spinning wheels of her bower maidens, that the supply of strong useful linen for the poor might never fail ; and so it was, when Stephen came with some story of want and sore distress, or a lad in all things suitable, by the aid of a little teaching from Dr. Wycliffe, to become an earnest energetic "poor priest," except that he had but a leather jerkin to his back, the store of linen and home-spun woollen cloth would at once be drawn upon to supply the need ; and thus girls and bower maidens, as

well as village lads, and Oxford students, with Dr. Wycliffe at their head, had been helping to water the land from the Fountain of Life.

Such a busy, useful, happy life had Maud's grown to be down in that Oxfordshire village, that she doubted at first whether she ought to leave it. But Sir Lewis had persuaded her that greater usefulness awaited her in London, and she had consented, and the first trial that met her was this one of a confessor.

Harry saw that his sister was not easy in her mind about it, and he pressed his advantage. "I deem Dr. Wycliffe a wise man in many things," he said, cautiously, "and especially where it doth concern the temporal power of the pope and bishops; but we must beware how we question their spiritual power. Now this matter of a family confessor, I must see Clifford about it, for the whole thing is a dangerous innovation—such an one as my Lord of Lancaster would in no way countenance. But I have not yet told thee about my meeting with Stephen. I was riding out this morning with the young Prince Henry, Sir John Oldcastle, and Master Geoffrey Chaucer, and we went as far as the village of Holywell, when a crowd well-nigh stopped the road. Master Geoffrey was for clearing a passage, but Sir John and the prince both cried, 'Hold!' And then, like madcap boys as they are, jumped from their horses, and pushed their way through the crowd. Needs must that I should follow, to see that no evil befell them; so, calling a varlet to hold the horses, I pushed my way among the leather jerkins, when who should I hear but Stephen preaching, as usual, the prince and Oldcastle listening as

earnestly as any village varlet among them—ah, and they stood near upon an hour, in spite of my efforts to get them away. Stephen can preach, as thou knowest—albeit he is poor company. I well-nigh forgot the shabby old russet gown he wore in listening to his stirring words, and at length I whispered to Sir John, ‘That is my brother.’ He turned, and stared incredulously, as though it was a tilt-yard joke; but the young prince, who had heard me speak of Stephen before, said seriously, ‘Wilt thou ask him to come and preach at the Savoy?’

“‘Aye that will I, an my master bids me,’ I answered, well pleased that Stephen should have a chance of being something better than a ‘poor priest.’

“With that we mounted our horses and rode on, while the crowd of villagers and fashionable folk, who are staying there to drink the waters, wandered off, some looking after us, for two or three heard me say Stephen was my brother. I would fain have ridden home by another road, but the young prince had set his heart upon going through the village again, and was on the look out for Stephen, I well knew. Maud, it passeth my patience to tell thee, but close to the place where he had preached one of the noblest sermons ever spoken in England, he sat with a brazier at his side, mending some varlet’s old pot, and singing softly to himself, wholly unmindful of what was going on around him. A village wench stood near him with a pewter platter of coarse bread and cheese—his dinner, I weet—but he was too intent upon his pot and his hymn to notice even this, and he never saw me at all.”

“Poor Harry! I cannot help pitying thee, even though I laugh at thee;” and as she spoke the young matron broke into a merry peal of laughter that wholly disconcerted her brother. He had thought to arouse an indignant protest at least, against Stephen putting his peculiar notions into practice in a fashionable London suburb, where his relationship to Sir Lewis and Lady Clifford might easily be discovered; but, instead of being angry and offended, here she was treating the whole thing as a joke, or at least nothing to be ashamed of!

“I will go and see Clifford,” he said, in a vexed tone, turning towards the house.

“Thou wilt find him a tinker, too,” laughed the lady, “for he is busy with his mechanicals again.”

Harry sighed. “One would deem that the world was an old pot, that all these tinkers set about the work of mending it,” he grumbled. “Lewis, with his machine that is to pump water, and——”

“Nay, nay, speak not so loudly, brother mine, in the hearing of yonder maiden,” interrupted Maud, cautiously. “To hear thee talk of a machine pumping water will make her deem there is some witchcraft at work, and thou knowest *that* cry was raised against Lewis once in Durham.”

“And now he doth come to London, to be called a wizard and heretic to boot; why not leave the world as ye find it, and not trouble yourselves for what the world will never thank ye for?”

“Nay, nay, Harry, that is not the opinion of Stephen and my husband, nor thine either, when thou art thyself.

I trow thou wouldest not grudge Stephen to this work, an thou knewest more of the blessedness of it, my brother," she added, in a low, serious tone.

"I know more than sufficeth of its vexations," said Harry, as they re-entered the sunny parlour. The room was empty now, and Harry paused. "Thou knowest I have long wanted to marry Isabel Deane; but this latest trick of Stephen's will, I fear, put an end to my hopes."

"Nay, but if Mistress Isabel doth love thee, wherefore should it do so?" asked his sister.

"She was at Holywell to-day, and her uncle is rector of the parish. He will doubtless hear that one of Wycliffe's 'poor priests' hath been preaching without his leave or license, and mending the pots of his parishioners afterwards; and Mistress Isabel will hear the tale, and learn the poor priest's name, and—oh, I know all she will say!" added Harry, too vexed to enlarge further upon what the young spoilt beauty would do to tease him.

It was useless to argue with him, and at last Lady Clifford led him to her husband's little room in the turret, where a furnace was burning, and Sir Lewis in a leather jerkin looked like a veritable tinker, as he hammered at the metal he was shaping.

CHAPTER XIII.

PORTENTOUS NEWS.

THE news Harry had to communicate to his brother-in-law was what he had hinted to his sister concerning a papal envoy who had lately arrived in England, and who was said to be charged with bulls from the pope, calling upon the University of Oxford, the bishops, and the king, to put an end to the dangerous teaching of Dr. Wycliffe.

Sir Lewis dropped his hammer and forgot his furnace as he listened to Harry's tale. He scarcely knew what to think of it. Harry had heard it from a servant attending the duke's confessor, and his own servant had heard a similar tale; but whether these were mere idle boasts, uttered to frighten the Lollards of the household, it was hard to tell.

Dr. Wycliffe had already been formally charged with holding and teaching erroneous doctrines, and he had appeared before a convocation of bishops held in St. Paul's the previous February; but it was an open secret that this citation was a blow struck at the Duke of Lancaster, for depriving the clergy of the highest offices of state, by the Bishop of London, who could not otherwise attack the duke than through Wycliffe,

whom he was known to favour. So clear was this to the duke himself, that he and Lord Percy, Earl Marshal of England, appeared with Dr. Wycliffe, and the whole proceeding resolved itself into an angry altercation between the duke and the bishops, Wycliffe remaining a silent spectator, until the assembly broke up in disorder.

Then the tumult spread beyond the cathedral walls to the unreasoning mob outside, and the unpopularity of the Duke of Lancaster among the citizens, added to the fact that he had forced his way into the cathedral, was enough to produce a riot; and the half-mad, infuriated populace and 'prentice lads poured through the Lud Gate, and on beyond Temple Bar, the confines of the liberty of the city, on through the Strand to the Savoy, which they attacked. But the worst they could do was to reverse the arms of the duke, as though he were a traitor, and then, after killing a 'poor priest,' whom they mistook for Lord Percy, they marched back to the city; and this demonstration against his foe had apparently satisfied Courtenay, the bishop, for no more had been heard of summoning Dr. Wycliffe, until this whisper Harry had heard among the servants of the household.

Sir Lewis scarcely knew what to think or what to do. Of course Wycliffe had the whole hierarchy against him, for he denounced alike the laziness of the cloistered monks and begging friars, while for the secular clergy who held secular offices and gave little heed to the care of the souls intrusted to them, he dealt out equal denunciation; so that it was quite possible that what Harry had heard was true; and if so, it behoved the friends of the reformer to find out what friends they

might rely on, in case some fresh danger should threaten their cause.

“It were best to give a word of warning and caution to Dr. Wycliffe. He hath already given much offence to the pope and bishops; but——” began Harry.

“Nay, nay, this religion of Rome was very well, I trow, when the nation was young; but it is like a growing child, I weet, and if its religion does not fit, the seams must e’en burst. It is not a question of Dr. Wycliffe’s teaching, so much as the nation growing. Dost thou not perceive it all around—this panting struggle for liberty, this yearning for knowledge? Oh, that Roger Bacon had lived in these days! Together we might have helped on the dawn of a brighter day;” and as he spoke Sir Lewis cast a lingering look at the clumsy machine he was fashioning, and which he hoped would in another department of life help forward the emancipation of the world from the trammels of ignorance.

Harry looked upon this enthusiasm as sheer madness. To him just now the whole interest of the struggle centred in what Mistress Isabel Deane would think of it. He knew she was not favourably disposed towards Lollardism. The old religion was so much easier, it was so much more convenient to hand over the charge of one’s soul to the priest. Of course there was the trouble of confessing and enduring penance sometimes; but then for all but the poor this was generally a matter of purchase, and so why should anybody trouble their heads with Lollardism?

This had been the outcome of all Harry’s arguments with the lady he desired to make his wife. She was

wealthy, of course, and a beauty, besides being gifted with a sharp tongue of her own, which could utter cutting sarcasms as well as merry jokes. Taking all this into consideration, Harry's annoyance at his brother playing the part of a tinker to pay for his dinner at Holywell under the eyes of this young lady can well be understood. He could face a foe in the lists, but not a lady's ridicule.

He was trying to explain something of this, but it is doubtful whether Sir Lewis heard much of what he said. He looked upon Harry as little more than a mere fine gentleman, whose opinion was not worth hearing ; and so he went on thinking out a plan until Harry finished his tale, when he said abruptly, "I must don a silken doublet in place of this leather jerkin. Await me in the hall while I put on my braveries, and I will go with thee to the Savoy."

Sir Lewis Clifford was not long putting off the garb of a workman, and he soon appeared in the hall soberly, but not less richly, attired than Harry Middleton himself. But his plans had undergone some modification while he had been dressing. Wycliffe had many disciples among the citizens of London. They had embraced his doctrines more fully than the Duke of Lancaster, who went little beyond the political aims of the reformer. Now, if he was to be attacked on the ground of what he had taught in his lectures at Oxford, the duke would probably counsel, as Harry did, that these extreme views should be given up. But Sir Lewis trusted that among those who had learned to love spiritual as well as civil freedom, some would be found

ready to stand up in behalf of this champion of the truth. At all events, it was the duty of friends to concert measures for his protection, in case of an attack ; and so, after due consideration, he resolved to go and see Master Geoffrey Chaucer, Comptroller of the Customs for the Port of London.

Master Chaucer would be a safe man to consult. He was a friend of the duke, and he was also known to many of the foremost citizens. His occupation would bring him into daily contact with the merchants, for his office was no sinecure ; and so Sir Lewis Clifford bade Harry farewell at the door, and rode off at once towards the city.

The two gentlemen were already acquainted, and it was not long before Master Chaucer had decided what to do. He would see two or three of his friends in the city, who he knew favoured Dr. Wycliffe—steady, reliable merchants, who would be better acquainted with the feeling of the citizens upon this point than any outsiders could be. He tried to find out what had given rise to the alarm in Sir Lewis Clifford's mind ; but he did not feel at liberty to disclose what he had heard.

It was drawing near supper-time when Sir Lewis rode through the Lud Gate homewards, but soon after he had crossed the little bridge spanning the Fleet a messenger met him from his wife, bringing the news that the king was dead—had died that day at Sheen.

The man was one who could be trusted with a secret, and it seemed that a confidential message had been sent to the Savoy that the king was dead ; but no one could vouch for its truth as yet.

“And thou hast not spread the report among the idle varlets as thou camest hither?” said Sir Lewis.

The question was a needless one, and the man smiled as he shook his head.

“Go back to thy mistress now, and advise her that I will ride on to the Savoy, and make further questions about this report; but heed well that no other doth hear aught of this, for it may not be true, I trow.”

Ralph the Silent, as he was called by his fellow-servants, never indulged in words when a nod, or a shake of the head, or a shrug of the shoulders would serve the purpose; and so, with a silent bow, he turned away; and Sir Lewis paused for a moment until the rest of his attendants could join him—for as soon as he had seen Ralph coming to meet him he had gone forward, bidding his servants stay at a distance until he should summon them. Now, as they came up, he said, “On to the Savoy with all speed;” and they went along the Strand at a canter.

The Duke of Lancaster had already left and gone to the palace at Sheen, which was considered, so far, a confirmation of the news that, if the king was not dead, he must be near his end.

He was an old man, and since the death of his eldest son, the Black Prince, he had almost entirely resigned the cares of state to the Duke of Lancaster. Indeed, a question had arisen whether he would not succeed his father; for the rightful heir—the only son of the Black Prince—was but a lad of twelve, and it needed a firm, wise, strong hand to hold the reins of government in the present state of the kingdom.

Chatting with one and another of the gentlemen standing about in the great hall, Sir Lewis Clifford soon found that the bent of their opinion was in favour of the duke seizing the present opportunity, and causing himself to be proclaimed king, before Prince Richard and his mother should hear of the death of Edward the Third.

But Sir Lewis shook his head. "Nay, nay, it would not be right," he said.

"Ye Lollards would stand by the duke," said one.

"Aye, aye, in anything but this, for my Lord of Lancaster hath been a good friend to us, and dealt right trusty blows at the papacy; but we may not do evil that good may come, even to pleasure such a friend."

Whether such a project was of the duke's own devising, or whether it merely emanated from the gentlemen of his court, who saw in this a chance of advancement for themselves, Sir Lewis did not stay to inquire. If such a plot was in contemplation, it would be best to frustrate it before there was time for any one to compromise themselves; and so he rode back to the city to his friend, Master John Philpot, and told him of the king's death.

The aldermen of the city needed no urging to send and announce the momentous fact to Prince Richard and his mother. They were living in retirement at Kingston; but a journey thither would be no obstacle at such a time as this. Anything would be better than to have their foe, the Duke of Lancaster, proclaimed king; for every action of his was viewed with suspicion by the Londoners. So, by the dawn of the next day, Princess Joan knew that she was the queen-mother, and her boy

the King of England. The same day, June 22nd, 1377, the lad of twelve was proclaimed as Richard the Second.

The Londoners received their new monarch with every demonstration of joy, for his mother was very popular, and his father, the Black Prince, had been deeply loved. They regarded it also as a triumph over the Duke of Lancaster, and songs and ballads, holding him up to derision, were sung by the 'prentice lads, to the no small amusement of the citizens, who heartily sympathised with this part of the demonstration.

To the queen-mother, however, it was anything but pleasing; and a few days afterwards Sir Lewis Clifford, who had once before acted as peacemaker between the duke and the Londoners, arrived in the city with a message from Joan, begging the citizens to become reconciled to her son's powerful uncle; and, after some preliminaries, a public reconciliation took place in Westminster Abbey.

It was doubtless an annoyance to the bishops and clergy, to see the queen-mother thus evince her favour towards the despised Lollards, by employing one so well known as Sir Lewis Clifford as her messenger and peacemaker; but it afforded great comfort to many, who had begun to grow anxious lately concerning the bulls that were said to have been sent from Avignon denouncing Wycliffe's doctrines. It doubtless had some influence, too, with those who had charge of them. They saw that this would not be a propitious time for their publication. There was no doubt now that these papal thunders had been despatched. The secret was being talked of in other places, and by others besides

the duke's servants. It was reported that no less than three bulls had been sent—one addressed to the University of Oxford, one to the bishops and clergy, and one to the late king, but all upon the same subject—the heresy being taught by Wycliffe.

The friends of the reformer were on the alert, daily expecting to hear that they had been published ; but day after day and week after week passed, and nothing was heard of the threatened attack.

Meanwhile, the boy-king was crowned, and a council of regency appointed, Parliament claiming the right to appoint all officers of the Crown during the minority, and that two citizens of London should be treasurers of the moneys raised for the war ; for, alas! England was at this time in a chronic state of warfare with her old foe, France, and Scotland was now seizing all the English ships that came in her way, and burning and harrying upon the border again. A sadly unpropitious time for a boy-king, and still worse for his poor subjects, who had to provide the sinews of war by the sweat of their brow, often by the starvation of themselves and their children.

CHAPTER XIV.

A POOR PRIEST.

AFTER Harry's visit, when he detailed his adventure at Holywell, Lady Clifford expected that Stephen would speedily follow, and she grew somewhat alarmed, and also felt a little hurt when curfew rang and he did not make his appearance, for he had promised to stay and rest a few days with her whenever his journeyings brought him near London. And this, in truth, had been his intention when he arrived at Holywell, for he was greatly fatigued with the hard work and often hard fare he had to put up with.

Dr. Wycliffe's "poor priests" or "simple priests" were everywhere welcomed, now that they were becoming known, for, in addition to breaking the bread of life to them, the poor villagers had to thank them for the repair of many a pot or stool that otherwise would have remained broken. All these good men asked in return was a meal or a night's shelter, rather than deny which all the family would have turned out; but often a meal for the priest meant a hungry stomach for their children, for bread was dear, and widows abounded, owing to the long, cruel wars with France; so it was little wonder that, after spending a day in a village, preaching, teaching, and mending some household goods, the "poor priest" should at last return the

coarse bread that was given to him when he saw the involuntarily eager glances of the children watching every mouthful he swallowed, and tramp on to the next village, in hope of better entertainment.

The numerous bands of beggars and thieves who infested the woods had begun to distinguish between Dr. Wycliffe's "poor priests" and the ordinary begging friars; possibly they had learned by experience that it was useless to try and rob a man whose sole wealth consisted of a few slips of parchment containing portions of Holy Scripture. His wallet was pretty sure to be empty, or only contained a loaf of coarse bread at the best, and so they could walk unharmed through places that an ordinary traveller dare not venture near, except with a numerous escort. Sometimes when they had been preaching at one village a messenger would arrive from another, begging them to go there and visit the sick or dying. Such a message had reached Stephen as he was preparing to leave Holywell, and instead of journeying on to London, he had to turn aside and go to a hamlet lying a mile or two out of the direct road.

The small group of houses, or rather wooden huts, without chimneys, and with slats of wood nailed across checker-wise for windows, looked dull and miserable even in this summer weather. The previous winter had been a hard one, and little beyond bread made of beans and bran had fallen to the lot of these poor peasants, and now sickness had appeared among them, and there being no convent near, they knew not where to seek help or relief. But some one had passed through Holywell that day, and told the poor despairing people that

one of the new preaching friars was there, and, like a drowning man catching at a straw, they sent a messenger begging him to come to them.

A little crowd of gaunt, half-crippled, hungry-looking old men and a few women and children came to meet him when they saw him coming. He had seen many a miserable village before, but the sight of this dumb misery seemed more than he could bear, and as he met them he exclaimed, "Oh, my friends, my friends!" and burst into tears.

The poor half-starved creatures looked at each other dumbfounded, while Stephen leaned against a tree by the roadside, and sobbed like a girl.

"Is it for us he doth shed these tears?" at length asked an old man, bowed almost double. The truth seemed slowly to dawn upon them that their misery had gone right to the heart of this stranger.

"May the saints and holy mother bless him for his mercy to the poor!" said a widow, wiping her eyes with her ragged kirtle.

This roused Stephen. "Nay, nay, pray that God's blessing may come, an ye will," he said, drawing the sleeve of his gown across his eyes, as if half ashamed of his weakness; "an the saints could help us, they must first get the help of God; and wherefore should we not go direct to God Himself, since He hath invited us, and moreover doth love us? Oh, my friends, an ye could know the yearning, pitying love of God, how He hath given up His Son to die for us, ye would think no more of praying to saints, or even to the mother Mary, sweet, gentle woman as she was."

"Aye, aye, come and tell us more about it," said one old cripple. "I have been to the wars, and heard godly Master Bradwardine, and thy words hath a smack of his teaching, I trow;" and he led the way to a half-ruined barn, where most of them could find shelter from the cold wind that was rising, and made them shiver under their ragged garments.

For once Stephen had a wallet full of really good food, since fashionable Holywell could afford to pay for its repairs, and so when all his congregation were seated, he divided it among them as far as it would go, reserving only a little white bread for the sick woman he had come to see.

While they were eating he stood in the midst of them, and read from one of the slips of parchment he carried a portion of the Gospel of St. John, which he himself had translated into English, under the sanction of Dr. Wycliffe, for use among those whom he visited. Sometimes on leaving a town or village he would give a tract culled from the lectures of his master, such as Lady Clifford was writing, to some responsible person who could read, and was willing to read it aloud for the benefit of his neighbours.

The half-famished congregation had soon swallowed the few mouthfuls of bread that had fallen to the share of each, but they sat and listened with eager attention to the words of Him who declared Himself the living bread sent down from heaven. It was something new in the history of preaching that the priest should read from the Holy Scriptures; and while all listened with rapt attention some began to feel a little uncomfortable, for a friar had visited them a few days before,

and vehemently denounced Wycliffe's poor priests, because he had heard that some of them dared to read the Scriptures to the poor, when the Church had forbidden them to be read by the unlearned.

They crossed themselves and muttered a Paternoster as a charm against the poison working in them; but they were too deeply interested to tear themselves away, for it was a new thing to hear that God loved them—loved them so much as to send His Son to die for them.

When the discourse was ended, Stephen took his nearly empty wallet, and went to see the sick woman. She was a widow with two boys, her husband having died in France serving under the Black Prince, and now she was dying of slow starvation, aggravated by ague. The neighbours had done what they could for her, for the poor are ever helpful to each other, and the evening being cold, they had gathered a bundle of sticks and lighted a fire in the middle of the room, a few yards from the heap of straw and leaves that formed her only bed. The floor was nothing but the earth trodden hard, so there was no fear of the flooring catching fire, and the two boys (one about ten and the other twelve) sat crouching over the flickering flames to watch that the sparks did not fall on their mother's bed.

In the dim smoky room Stephen could see nothing for some minutes but the half-naked children; but a groan from the bed directed him to where the sufferer lay, and he went across and took her cold shaking hand in his, and fed her with some of the bread he had saved.

But at the sound of the word "bread" the two half-famished boys threw themselves upon him, begging

him to give them some, and at the sound of their voices the poor woman closed her lips, and refused to take another morsel.

"Give it to them," she gasped; "don't waste it upon me! I shan't live to see another sunset—give it to Robin and Dick."

Stephen saw that nothing would satisfy her but to see the boys eating the bread, and he divided what remained between them; and as she watched them eagerly devouring it a smile of sweet content—made visible by the sudden leaping up of the flaring wood fire—overspread her worn, pinched features.

"May the saints bless thee, holy father!" she gasped; "it is not often that a friar will give the hungry bread, but they are ready to take from any they can."

"I am not a friar, but one of Dr. Wycliffe's simple priests. Canst thou listen while I read thee a message from God Himself?" and Stephen drew forth his parchment again, and read from the Gospel of St. John.

Whether the woman heard anything of what he read he could not tell. She lay silent and passive, except for an occasional shiver. Presently a neighbour came in, and, taking up one of the flaming sticks, held it aloft to look at her face. "She's been like that all day," she said.

"She spoke when I first came in," said Stephen. "I believe she is conscious still. Let us pray;" and they all kneeled down to commend the departing soul to the mercy of God; for Stephen knew she was dying—that she would scarcely live to see another sunrise.

He and the neighbour sat with her during the night,

the two boys sleeping across the foot of the bed ; and whenever there was the least movement, or the patient gave any sign of being conscious of their presence, Stephen tenderly whispered a few words of Scripture, in the hope that some might penetrate the darkness enshrouding it, and lead the soul home to its God.

Just as the dawn was pencilling its first rosy rays in the east there was a flutter, a sigh, a faintly-gasped "My boys," and then all was still. The hard, cruel life was over, and the widow had returned to God.

Her boys had been the mother's last thought, as they had been her constant care in life. For them she had toiled, and struggled, and starved herself ; but who was to provide for them now ? This was the question that presented itself to the little community the next morning ; and Stephen then saw another phase of village life, and a scene that was only too often enacted throughout the length and breadth of England at that time.

The men hobbled to their doorways, for they were all feeble or crippled, the able-bodied men having been taken to the wars ; and when they heard of Widow Sprunt's death they asked each other the question, "What is to become of the boys ?"

"Ah, what ? " grunted one ; "we cannot feed our own, so 'tis useless to think of taking more."

"I could take 'em, if we all turned robbers or beggars," said another.

"It's what they'll have to come to, I trow," remarked a third. "Let 'em take to the woods at once, I say and they won't be long without masters."

"Nay, nay," interrupted Stephen ; "they are likely lads ;

send them not to such masters. An ye will let them bide among ye until I can journey to London, I will fetch them anon, and provide them with decent homes."

"An ye could take us all, holy father, it were better, I trow," said one poor woman, who nevertheless offered to shelter the boys with her own family until their mother was buried.

"An ye come not then to rescue them we shall all join a band of beggars, I trow," said the woman; for, alas! although the poor had to contribute indirectly to the taxes raised to pay for the wars, no provision was ever thought necessary for them in their time of need, so that it was little wonder that England abounded with bands of beggars and robbers.

As soon as the orphans had been thus far provided for, Stephen hurried forward on his journey to London, hungry and weary; for how could he take a meal from these poor people who scarce knew where to get breakfast for themselves, whereas, when he reached his sister's house, abundance of everything would be spread before him? Never perhaps in his whole life did Stephen long so for a good substantial meal as he did to-day. But he did not return to Holywell, although he would doubtless have soon obtained a breakfast there. He was too anxious to see Maud, and discuss with her the possibility of providing for the two boys.

It was against the rule of the Order—and Dr. Wycliffe's "poor priests" were bound by rules of obedience—to accept alms, as the mendicant friars did, and thus the necessity was laid upon them to learn some handicraft; and so to-day Stephen must needs earn his breakfast

before he could eat it. It happened, however, that a farmer's wife in the next village wanted a milking-stool repaired, a job that did not take long, and was well repaid with a breakfast of barley bread and new milk, during which Stephen ventured to tell the goodwife of the distress prevailing a mile or two away.

"Aye, aye, I've heard tell of Holly Point—a sorry place, for most of the men were carried off to the wars, and what could women do at ploughing? so the fields were but scratched over, and the crops every year got poorer. So thou hast been preaching at Holly Point, and left it hungry enough, I trow," said the woman, as she bustled in and out the kitchen, setting the wooden bowls and platters ready for the servants' breakfast.

When it was ready they trooped in from the fields and foldyards—most of them old men and growing lads; and when they were all seated, Stephen asked the farmer if he might say a few words to them while they ate their breakfast, and then, by way of helping his suit, the farmer's wife told how she had got her milking-stool repaired by the holy father.

"Aye, aye, then; thou art not one of the begging friars, but a Lollard, I trow," said the farmer, with a merry twinkle in his eye. "But I hold that a man hath a right to work an he wish to eat, so I have no quarrel with the Lollards, and ye may speak an ye will to the varlets."

So, amid the dulled clatter of wooden spoons and trenchers, and the munch, munch of the ponderous slices of barley bread, Stephen once more drew out his parch-

ment, and read his chapter from St. John's Gospel, interspersing it with remarks suited to the slow, simple understanding of his audience.

The farmer and his wife at least were interested, and while the labourers slowly lumbered off to their work they paused in the kitchen to say a word to Stephen. "An ye would visit us again, sir, ye would be right welcome," said the farmer, casting a longing look at the parchment Stephen held in his hand.

He saw the look. "Can ye read?" he asked.

"Aye, that can I," said the farmer, "and would willingly read to the varlets such words as ye have read to them to-day."

Stephen knew not what to do about giving the Scriptures to be read; but he could safely promise to bring the man a tract of Dr. Wycliffe's writing when he returned to Holly Point; and with this promise the farmer was delighted.

CHAPTER XV.

THE PAPAL BULLS.

WHEN Stephen reached Lady Clifford's, he found the household full of the bustle incident upon the death of King Edward the Third. Sir Lewis had not yet returned from attending King Richard through the city, but Maud welcomed her brother, and was full of the news of the death of the poor old king. But Stephen was too tired, and too full of the sad story of the widow whose children he had promised to befriend, to pay very much attention to anything else just now.

"What canst thou do for the little knaves, Maud?" said Stephen, with all the old confidence that his sister would be able to see a way out of the difficulty. "The poor woman did in a way commit them to my care, and I shall never forget the look she cast upon me as she said, 'My boys!'"

Maud looked puzzled. Since she had been in London, it seemed as though the care of the poor had slipped away from her, and now the case of these two orphans was presented to her she had no help at hand, as she would have had at home.

"I fear me I have forgotten the homely lot of the

poor in the more weighty cares that press upon Lewis now," she said, with a sigh.

"Nay, nay, that can never be again, Maud," said Stephen; "bethink thee now, is there not some kitchen work thou canst find for the little knaves?"

"Aye, I might make one a turnspit, for the poor dog hath just died that did that office; but I trow I must seek something elsewhere for the eldest. If they are together, the meat will be burned, while they baste each other with the gravy."

Stephen laughed, but before anything more could be said the armourer was announced to be waiting in the hall. He had brought an elegant casque he had been repairing and polishing, in readiness for the festivities that were sure to follow upon the accession of a new king.

As the armourer was announced, a sudden thought occurred to Stephen. "Maud, let him be brought hither," he said, "and I will ask him to take the little knave, and teach him the trade of an armourer."

He scarcely knew how great a favour he was asking; but the old man, who felt he had been so largely rewarded in taking his nephew to learn his trade, could refuse no favour to those who had helped that nephew, to say nothing of the feudal feeling of allegiance that bound all the family to the Middletons. So without a word of demur he said, "An the knave be bright, and likely to be a credit to London 'prentices, he shall learn to be an armourer, an ye will, Master Stephen;" for he had known him as a little lad, and, moreover, was in doubt whether a priest like Stephen should be addressed as "holy father," not from any lack of respect to the reformers,

for he, like many another citizen of London, had learned to love the truth as taught by Dr. Wycliffe.

Now as he stood pointing out the beauties of the casque to Stephen, his eyes wandered to the table, where sundry sheets of parchment and writing materials lay scattered about.

Stephen caught these wandering glances at last, and to him all times were suitable for hearing or reading one of his beloved master's lectures, and he was soon talking about them.

"Here is one on 'Freedom,'" he said, taking up some sheets of parchment, well knowing that this was a subject specially dear to a citizen of London.

"Freedom is much coveted, as men know by nature, but much more should Christian men covet the better freedom of Christ. It is known, however, that Antichrist hath enthralled the Church more than it was under the old law, though then the service was not to be borne. New laws are now made by Antichrist, and such as are not founded on those of the Saviour."

At this point came another interruption, much to Stephen's disgust. Sir Lewis came in, hot and weary, and full of news about the young king and his mother. He could scarcely spare time to look at the casque; but as the armourer was leaving Stephen contrived to whisper, "I will bring the parchment and finish the reading at thy shop, an it please thee."

"Aye, aye, Master Stephen, an thou wilt honour my poor shop. I will bid a gossip or two come and listen to the goodly words," said the armourer, in high glee at the prospect of such a visit.

“ Bid them come as many as thou wilt,” said Stephen, “ and I will be with thee to-morrow at sunset.”

Never before had Stephen enjoyed warden pie and venison pasty as he did at supper that evening, for he had tasted little beyond barley bread and poor cheese for the last month or two. In truth, this timely rest and nourishing food was sorely needed just now, and a welcome haven was his sister's house to him—all the more welcome that his work would not be wholly suspended, for the armourer had a goodly company of well-to-do citizens assembled to hear Stephen read and preach; and the next evening they were all eager that the “ poor priest ” should pay them each a visit, to teach their families and 'prentices, and the friends who might assemble, something more of Dr. Wycliffe's doctrines; and this he promised to do when he returned with the orphans from Holly Point.

He did not forget the tract for the farmer when he went back; and the latter was so grateful for the almost priceless treasure, that he loaded Stephen with as much food as he could carry to the all but starving inhabitants of the village beyond.

He laid the poor widow in the grave, after distributing the food, and then he set off to London again with the boys—poor half-starved, half-stupid little things they looked, in spite of the tidy clothes Maud had sent to dress them in, and which made them the envy of all the other children in the village. Stephen often glanced at the elder of the two, and wondered whether the armourer would be able to detect any promise of the

bold London 'prentice lad in him. At present he was about as unpromising a specimen of a boy as could well be imagined.

Maud held up her hands in silent horror when Stephen reached home with them. Among the tenants and peasants around their own home in Oxfordshire she had been used to the sight of poverty, but never such poverty as the appearance of these children betokened. Her father took care that his retainers had at least something to eat, although the fare might be hard and coarse; but the feudal lord of Holly Point, with most of his followers, having been slain in the French wars, and the title become extinct, there was no one to look after these poor villagers.

"The little knaves must both abide here awhile," said Maud, looking down pityingly at the half-scared, pinched little faces. Stephen had been very kind and tender to them, and, by way of improving the time, had taught them the Lord's Prayer as they came along. Maud smiled when she heard it.

"Aye, but they need a taste of woman's love, I trow, before they can believe, or even learn about 'Our Father.' Come to me," she whispered, stooping down, and holding out her arms.

In a moment the two lads were sobbing on her neck, telling her about their mother in a way they had never ventured to do with Stephen, kind as he had been; she led them to her own room, and heard the story of their mother's illness and death, and then sent them to the kitchen to be regaled with such a meal as had never been dreamed of by them before.

"Thou art going to some merchant in Chepe, art thou not?" asked Maud, when she went back to her brother.

Stephen nodded. "These proud citizens seem to be as eager to hear the good news as the country folks," he said, "and I wot they need it, despite their riches and their power."

In truth, Stephen found that his message of God's unpurchased love to man—unpurchasable even by pope or priest—was more intelligently and more eagerly received among the London merchants and their families than even among the poor country folk, and Dr. Wycliffe's name grew to be almost a household word among them.

And thus the weeks of autumn slipped away, and nothing was heard of the pope's bulls that it was said had been issued against the new teaching; but early in the winter came tidings from Oxford that awoke the fears of the more timid. A bull had been received by the proud University that at once awoke its resentment, as an infringement of its right to judge of spiritual matters within its own precincts; for nineteen charges were brought against Wycliffe concerning his doctrines, and Oxford was simply called upon to proceed against him upon these conclusions. But at present the reformer had too many friends at the University for the pope's mandate to be obeyed at once; and the trifling alarm the news of this had caused among his friends in London was soon forgotten in the anxious concern felt as to what the bishops might do with a similar bull. To them, as being willing agents of the pope, a message had come that Wycliffe should be sent to prison at once,

and his principles inquired into afterwards. Doubtless, had the power of the bishops been at all commensurate with their wishes, the world would have heard little more of Wycliffe after this time ; but they knew that the English nation—so much belauded by the pope in this same bull—would by no means allow her champion to be treated in this summary fashion. They must at least have some good excuse for putting him in prison, and they must proceed warily about it too. It would be better altogether if his own University could be made to assume the rôle of persecutor, and so at last the Archbishop of Canterbury wrote to the Chancellor of Oxford, reminding him of the papal mandate, and insisting upon its being executed. He also required that the chancellor should obtain for him correct information concerning the heresies of which Wycliffe was accused, and, moreover, that the chancellor should summon him to appear before his ecclesiastical superiors to answer the same.

This mandate from the bishop was sent to Oxford in December, and, however much he might dislike it, the chancellor must needs comply at once ; and early in the ensuing year, despite the wintry weather and the difficulties of travelling, the Rector of Lutterworth journeyed to London, followed by the prayers of his poor people, as well as by hundreds of others throughout England.

The bishops congratulated themselves on the time chosen for this attack ; indeed, they had been waiting some months for a favourable opportunity to make it, for the papal bulls had been despatched from Rome the

previous May ; but while the Duke of Lancaster was in power, it would have been little use to institute a prosecution against one whom he was known to favour. Now, however, he was out of the Council, and much less able to protect the reformer, and so Wycliffe was summoned to appear at a synod convened at Lambeth, whence it was designed to convey him at once to prison.

But Stephen Middleton, who was still in London, preaching and teaching among the citizens, had not kept silence about the danger threatening his beloved master, and the citizens were by no means disposed to sit tamely by, and see such a brave champion of religious liberty trampled under foot ; and so, to the consternation of the reverend judges assembled to carry out this solemn farce of a trial, they found the chapel where they had assembled suddenly filled with well-to-do citizens and gentlemen from the court of the queen-mother, and they plainly intimated their belief in, and attachment to, the doctrines of Wycliffe, and that they had come there to protect him.

Meanwhile other friends were taking active steps for the assistance of the reformer. Sir Lewis Clifford hurried off to inform the queen-mother of what the bishops had done, and what it was believed they intended to do. Meeting Harry Middleton as he rode along the Strand, he told him what was going forward at Lambeth.

“ I'll hasten there with all speed, and take with me as many as I can muster of my lord's followers, and I trow we will overawe them for once ;” and Harry turned back towards the Savoy to get a company of the Duke of

Lancaster's retainers to accompany him to Lambeth, while Sir Lewis Clifford hurried on to Westminster to consult with the queen-mother. She had evinced her regard for Wycliffe and the doctrines he taught in many ways—not so prominently expressed, perhaps, as that of the Duke of Lancaster; but Sir Lewis believed that her heart was more deeply influenced than that of her noble relative, and therefore he had the more hope that, this being a matter in which the doctrines he taught were involved, she would exert her influence more actively than the duke had done. He had excused himself from interfering in the present instance, because the points upon which the reformer was accused mainly turned upon spiritual matters, and he professed himself unable to judge of such things. Had it been anything concerning the temporal power of the Church, he would have been as ready as ever to protect him.

As he rode along between the leafless hedgerows of the Strand, Sir Lewis could not help feeling a little angry with the duke, as he contrasted his present conduct with his course of action at the time when he went with the Earl Marshal of England to St. Paul's, and dared the bishops to do aught against his favourite. Would it be the same with the Princess Joan? Would she leave this brave champion of liberty to his fate? To Sir Lewis it seemed that the whole future of England trembled in the balance; and he urged on his horse to renewed speed as he thought of what might be happening at Lambeth. Happily, he was able to obtain an audience of the queen-mother immediately upon his arrival, and presently he went

riding on to Lambeth, armed as her special messenger to the bishops assembled.

An eager crowd was talking and gesticulating outside ; Harry Middleton and his followers, wearing the badge of the Duke of Lancaster, were just pushing their way in, cheered on by the mob outside, when Sir Lewis rode up to increase the tumult.

“Way for the messenger of the queen-mother ! way for Sir Lewis Clifford !” they shouted ; for Sir Lewis was well known now to the citizens of London, and the widow of the Black Prince was greatly beloved ; and when they heard the message she had sent to the bishops, such a ringing cheer went up as must have made the latter quake as they heard it. They were not left long in doubt as to the meaning of that ringing cheer, for Sir Lewis, having at length made his way into the court, respectfully informed them that the queen-mother forbade them proceeding to pronounce any sentence either on the Rector of Lutterworth or his doctrines.

The effect of this message is thus given by an old popish chronicler :—“They were shaken as a reed with the wind,” he says, “and became soft as oil in their speech, to the open forfeiture of their own dignity and the injury of the whole Church. With such fear were they struck, that you would think them a man who hears not, or one in whose mouth are no reproofs.” Thus did God answer the prayers of His faithful servants, and deliver their champion out of the hands of his enemies.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BETROTHAL PARTY.

IT was a happy and withal a merry party assembled at the house of Sir Lewis Clifford, to celebrate the deliverance of Dr. Wycliffe, and the betrothal of Harry Middleton to Mistress Isabel Deane. The new faith went in silver slippers now; for it was fashionable at the court of the king's mother, the Princess Joan, as well as at the palace of the Savoy; and so the wayward young lady who had been by turns the comfort and the torment of Harry's life for the last two years had at length consented to be betrothed to him, and a large party of friends were invited to celebrate the event.

It was not often that Dr. Wycliffe mingled with such gay company, and Harry had feared at first that the presence of a doctor of divinity would not conduce to the happiness of the party; but Dr. Wycliffe was eager to return to Oxford as soon as possible, and Sir Lewis Clifford was anxious that Sir John Oldcastle, Master Geoffrey Chaucer, and others among his London friends should make the personal acquaintance of the reformer; and so it was arranged that the party should be held to celebrate both events, and a truly delightful party it was. Many of the guests were startled when they were

introduced to Dr. Wycliffe; so spare and frail-looking was he, that it seemed impossible he could do such yeoman's service in the cause of truth and liberty as he had done. But when the calm, intellectual face lighted up with the glow of enthusiasm, everything else was forgotten but the charm that pervaded all he said. Other pleasures and innocent pastimes were neglected for the pleasure of listening to that clear musical voice that thrilled every heart, as the guests gathered round to listen to the words of kindly wisdom that fell from his lips.

Mistress Isabel pouted and frowned at finding herself almost forgotten, even by Harry, in the charm of listening to Dr. Wycliffe; and it needed all Maud's tact and management to prevent an open outbreak of the young lady's petulant temper.

"I am not sure that this new faith is so good as Harry doth pretend," she said, casting an angry glance to where her lover sat listening with a group of others to what Dr. Wycliffe was saying. "It seemeth to me a hard religion; for wherefore should I deny myself this and that, or take such care about my soul, concerning which I know so little, when the priests, who are learned in such matters, and whose business it is to look after men's souls, are quite willing to do it for me, if I only pay for masses and penances?"

Maud looked her astonishment at this blunt speech; but, knowing the quick temper of the young lady, she only said, "But what are the poor to do who have no money to pay for masses and penances?"

"What have we to do with such varlets?" said the

young lady, quickly; "an they cannot pay, they must perish, I trow. Chivalry hath naught to do with varlets and hinds, and wherefore then should religion?"

"Because the Lord Jesus Christ came especially to the poor and the helpless, and they that have no deliverer," said Maud, seriously.

Isabel shrugged her shoulders. "I like not meddling with varlets," she said.

"Nay, but we are not here to do as we like, but to follow the example of our Lord and Master, who went about among varlets, and lived as one of them; and herein doth the glory of this new faith consist, for it teacheth that the poor and unlearned, by doing their duty, and living to please God rather than themselves, may be the truly religious, more than monks and nuns, who shut themselves up from their duties, instead of living in them."

Again the shoulders went up with a contemptuous shrug, and the young lady exclaimed, "I never think of such disagreeable things as duties — wherefore should I?"

"Nay, but pardon me, Harry hath told me thou art the Lady of the Manor of Walden, in Essex — there are the poor of the village, surely they need thy care?"

Mistress Isabel laughed. "Harry hath told me how thou and thy sister toil for the varlets around Meadowlea, but I never heard of any other but ye, and wherefore should I concern myself for these hildings when they will work for me as well without it? My reeve pays them all dues, and ——"

"But in a hard winter, when work is scarce and food is dear?" interrupted Maud, eagerly.

"I know not when food is dear," said the heiress, carelessly, with a light laugh.

Maud felt it was useless to carry on the conversation any further, but she could not help wishing her brother had chosen some one less heartless, even if she had been less wealthy, than this beautiful, petulant Mistress Deane.

Harry sauntered towards them in a few minutes, and then Maud moved away when Isabel began the usual scolding, and joined a more congenial group of her guests to whom Stephen was talking.

"It is a large work, extending to nearly six hundred pages, and is now almost completed," her brother was saying, as Maud came up to where they were gathered.

"Hast thou seen any of it, Lady Clifford?" asked one of the ladies, as she made room for Maud on the oak settle.

"I know not of what Stephen is talking."

"Dr. Wycliffe's new work on 'The Truth and Meaning of Scripture,'" replied Stephen. "I was telling thee but yesterday how more and more my master is turning his attention to that fountain of all truth, and how many of us hope that, if his life be spared, and his enemies leave him in peace, he may be able to translate the Scriptures into English."

"For varlets and common people to read!" exclaimed one of the guests, in some surprise.

"Wherefore not, an they can read?" demanded Stephen.

“Nay, but will they not leave the plough and the sheep tending, an they become as wise as their masters?” asked another.

Stephen shook his head and smiled. “An they will but follow what they learn from God’s Holy Word, they will plough better, and tend the sheep more carefully.”

At this point Sir John Oldcastle edged his way up to Maud. “I would I might bring my lord, the young Duke of Hereford, to visit thee, Lady Clifford, before Master Wycliffe doth return to Oxenforde,” said the young man, earnestly.

It was easy to see that he was deeply impressed by what he had heard from the lips of Dr. Wycliffe, and it was not surprising that he should feel anxious that his young friend and master, the son of the Duke of Lancaster, should share in these teachings.

“Bring him by all means, Sir John,” said Maud, smiling at his earnestness. “Thou knowest that I would have all men hear our Evangelical doctor, an that were possible.”

Sir John Oldcastle bowed with courtly grace as he whispered, “Pardon, my lady, but who can tell but if my lord of Hereford should learn to love the truth, all England may follow his example? He is next heir to the throne, and should aught happen to my lord the king—which God forbid, but, as thou knowest, our young king is not so mighty in health and strength as his father or uncle, and so I say, should he die without leaving an heir, my lord of Hereford must needs succeed him.”

Ah! if the eager, handsome young man, who se

pleaded for his friend, had possessed the gift of prevision, he might have known that this friend's son would, a few years hence, sign his death-warrant for professing this doctrine he was now so eagerly learning. Blessed and most merciful is it for us that the future is hidden from our gaze, or more than one of Sir Lewis Clifford's guests would have shrunk in horror from the fate that awaited them. Near to Dr. Wycliffe sat gentle Master William Sautre, listening to the words for which he should afterwards lay down his life—the first of that noble army of martyrs to the cause that Wycliffe now proclaimed. But as yet no such fear could ever cross the imagination of the most timid, for there was no law in England to restrain discussion or coerce belief in spiritual matters, and just now everything promised well for the growth of the reformed doctrine.

Sir Lewis Clifford forgot his mechanics, and Geoffrey Chaucer his poetry, in the interest of discussing how this dawning light was to brighten all the world; not only England, but every country in Europe should have its share in this religious freedom. Wycliffe's stay in London was all too short for his friends, but Oxford and his own parish of Lutterworth had greater claims than London, and so, shortly after this meeting, he and Stephen set out together for Oxford.

But although for this time Wycliffe had escaped, Sir Lewis Clifford feared it would not be long before another process was issued against him, for the clergy were everywhere denouncing his doctrine, and many by

this means were aroused to inquire wherein it differed from that taught by the monks and friars. Doubtless fresh bulls would have been applied for and obtained from Avignon; but in the early spring, before any further steps could be taken against Wycliffe, came news of the pope's death. The election of his successor was bound to take place in Rome, and the next messenger brought the news that the cardinals, although three-fourths of them were French, had been forced by the clamour of the populace to elect an Italian instead of one of their own nation.

Of course this caused immense rejoicing in England. At the first whisper of it, Harry came hurrying in with eager congratulations. "No more French popes!" he exclaimed; "no more will our treasury be drained to comfort our enemies, and Rome, the capital of the world, will be restored to its rightful place now, I trow."

"Who is the new pope?" asked Maud; for as yet very little was generally known of the election.

"The Archbishop of Bari; he will assume the name and title of Urban the Sixth."

"Is he a godly man, who will shepherd the flock committed to his care without fear and without favour?" asked his brother-in-law, looking up from his drawing.

Harry stared at the question. "I know naught about that," he said; "it is enough for me, and I trow for all Englishmen, that he is not of our enemies the French; and should they set up another pope at Avignon, we shall declare for Rome and the Italian, let him be what he may."

"Two popes!" exclaimed Maud, in horror.

"Nay, nay, be not frightened; but it may be the French will try to set up another pope in their own town of Avignon; but we will have naught to do with him an there be but the shadow of one at Rome. Dr. Wycliffe may rest from his labours, now we are rid of the French pope," concluded Harry.

To him and, alas! to many others in England, Dr. Wycliffe's work had been valued and espoused chiefly because the reigning pontiff was a Frenchman, and consequently an enemy by race and sympathy.

To Sir Lewis Clifford and his friends it made very little difference whether a Frenchman or an Italian was pope, if both were alike corrupt; but to the Duke of Lancaster and most of the clergy the change was most welcome.

The hope that Urban the Sixth would prove any more accommodating than his predecessors was quickly dispelled, for as the weeks went on intelligence from Rome was simply some fresh tale of the new pope's stern severity. He proved to be a rigid, ascetic disciplinarian, and soon so disgusted most of the cardinals that they withdrew to Naples, where they elected a pope of their own, who established his court at Avignon, under the name of Clement the Seventh, the election of Urban at the same time being declared invalid, because it had been secured by coercion.

So the thing that seemed so incredible to Maud, when hinted at as possible by her brother, was soon known to be an actual fact. France, Spain, Sicily, and Cyprus declared for the new pope, while England and the rest of Europe adhered to Urban.

In the course of the summer more work came for Maud's pen arising out of this, for Dr. Wycliffe wrote a tract entitled, "On the Schism of the Popes." He made use of the division of the hierarchy as presenting the most powerful inducement to attempt the destruction of those laws and customs which had served so greatly to vitiate the Christian priesthood, and to afflict the whole Christian community. He also made a fresh attack in this pamphlet on papal infallibility, and the power of absolution claimed by priests. Copies of this were written as quickly as possible by numbers of willing hands besides Maud's, and so his friends were at no loss to understand what their leader thought of the present crisis; but that it would be made to yield the good he advocated seemed very doubtful.

Soon after this tract had been received came alarming news from Oxford. Dr. Wycliffe was dangerously ill. Stephen, who communicated the intelligence, had been away during the early stages of his illness, and when he reached the house where his beloved teacher was lying, met some half-dozen mendicant friars hurrying away in the greatest horror. Stephen was scarcely less alarmed when he reached the bedside of his master, and saw the almost transparent hands and the white, pain-drawn face on the pillow. But, weak and exhausted as he was, Dr. Wycliffe smiled as he whispered, "I have given the friars another fright, I trow."

"Ah! truly hast thou, my dear master," said his servant, who stood by; and he told Stephen that a

representative from each of the four mendicant Orders had just been to exhort their old enemy to repent on his death-bed, and recant the errors he had taught. "But truly my master seemed to be dying just before they came, but when he saw them it was as if new life had been given him. 'Raise me up,' he said to me, in a faint voice; and when I had lifted him he looked at them, and summoning all his strength he said, 'I shall not die but live, and shall again declare the evil deeds of the friars;' and without uttering another word, good or evil, they hurried out."

"Aye, I met them, looking greatly discomfited," said Stephen; "and now let us see what may be done to make our master's words prove words of truth and verity;" for at present it seemed much more likely that the evil wishes of the friars would be fulfilled, than that Dr. Wycliffe would ever be able to expose the wickedness of their doings again.

He asked the servant various questions about the leech who was attending him and the medicines that had been used, but was far from being satisfied with what he heard. The thought of the old Jew came to his mind, and how often he and Sir Lewis Clifford had been cured of ague by one dose of his medicine; and yet a doubt arose as to how far he would be justified in applying to an unbeliever and one whom he feared was accursed of God. But that night Dr. Wycliffe was worse, and, in the fear of losing his beloved master, he ran off to the well-known street at the lower end of the town without any more questioning.

The house looked just the same as when he had

first entered it with Sir Roger Clifford, and the old Jew did not look much older. He had not forgotten the lad brought to him by his old friend, and he had heard enough about Dr. Wycliffe to be willing to help him if he could. Stephen described his symptoms, and his usual spare, frail habit of body, and the old Jew shook his head ominously as he listened.

"Dost thou not think thou canst save him?" asked Stephen in alarm, as he noticed it.

"By the blessing of the God of Abraham on the cordial I shall give thee, I trust his life may be spared yet a little while, for he is a good man, I trow, and I would fain do what I could for him."

"Spared a little while," repeated Stephen, scarcely less alarmed. "Dost thou think——"

"Young man, an thou tellest me truly of his symptoms, he will not live many years unless he doth live quietly and restfully, taking his ease and troubling not himself about such questions as hath hitherto occupied his mind."

Stephen shook his head. "Rest himself," he repeated; "nay, nay, thou dost not know my master, or thou wouldest know that is impossible while there are so many evils to remedy—so much to be done."

"Then I tell thee fairly he cannot be a long-lived man, and he may be taken suddenly, without illness and without warning."

"But is there no cordial—no medicament that can prevent this? Ye Jews are skilled in the uses of medicines, I trow; is there nothing that my master can take to cure him?" pleaded Stephen.

The old Jew shook his head slowly and sadly. "The citadel of life itself is attacked, if what thou sayest be true," he said. "Hasten home with this potion, and give it to him at once, and afterwards give him three drops from this phial in a cup of water four times a day, and come to me again three days hence, and tell me how it fareth with thy master."

Stephen hurried back and gave the potion as directed, and while Dr. Wycliffe slept he wrote a letter to their friends in London ; but not a word did he say of anything beyond the present illness.

CHAPTER XVII.

A BLAZING HOMESTEAD.

THE medicine which Stephen obtained from the old Jew speedily wrought a most favourable change in the condition of Dr. Wycliffe, and when the messenger received the letter he was also charged with a message to Sir Lewis Clifford, saying he was a little better ; but, as it often happened, the messenger forgot the message, and merely delivered the letter, which brought fear and consternation to the reformer's friends in London ; and it was some time before these fears were relieved by further news from Oxford.

Public events, too, were no less depressing to a serious, thoughtful mind. The rival popes were hurling anathemas at each other, and each trying, by legal or illegal means, to strengthen his own power and make secure his tottering throne. It was a pain and grief to many a simple, earnest, devout believer in the pope's spiritual claims to see the Church thus riven, while to the reformers, who were eagerly watching for some signs of their master's advice being followed by the parliament and clergy, the outlook must have been equally unpromising. There was only one ray of light in this darkness, and that was, Urban, being so occupied in issuing bulls

against his brother pope, would forget an insignificant heretic in England ; and so, except for the friars, who were constantly attacking him in letters and pamphlets, which he was sometimes compelled to answer and refute, Wycliffe was left in peace. Beyond this there was little to fear at present. There were no more reports of bulls being issued and prosecutions ordered to stop the spread of heresy ; and when it was known that Dr. Wycliffe was better, and able to perform the duties of his cure at Lutterworth, visiting among the sick and poor, preaching from the pulpit of his own church, or that of some neighbouring parish, his friends were satisfied, for these were labours congenial to him, and he must in a great measure have recovered his wonted health and strength ; and thus most of his friends forgot his illness as an ugly dream.

But not so Stephen. He would not burden another heart with the fear and anxiety that constantly oppressed his own ; but he resolved to be near his master for the future, and, without giving any reason, he begged that he might give up journeying to a distance, and confine his preaching tours to the villages around Lutterworth and Oxford, as the case might be, and fill up his time by copying and translating portions of the Bible under the direction of Dr. Wycliffe.

The Rector of Lutterworth was by no means willing to accede to this request at first, for although warmly attached to Stephen, he valued his services too highly as a pioneer of the Gospel to be willing to keep him about his own person ; but at length Stephen prevailed upon him to allow him to follow this plan for the present,

assuring him that, in the work of translating the Scriptures into English, he would be even more usefully employed than in preaching.

This plan of translating the Scriptures had been the subject of earnest consideration for some time, but hitherto Dr. Wycliffe's multifarious labours had prevented him from attempting such a gigantic task. Now, however, with Stephen's help, he thought he might commence with the Gospels, and these, as they were finished, could be transcribed, and the various copies distributed among those who were hungering and thirsting for the Word of God.

"An it please thee, I should like to present my sister Madge with the first copy I transcribe," said Stephen. "She will, I know, at once set to work and faithfully copy it for use among the poor varlets of the village, for since reading the 'Vision of Piers Plowman,' she hath ever sought to give the poor a share of what she may possess."

"Aye, would that more of our English damsels were like-minded!" exclaimed Dr. Wycliffe. "The poor are in sorry case, I trow; and who can help them?" he added, with a sigh. Here, in his own parish of Lutterworth, things were bad enough, with hovels scarcely fit for a pig to inhabit; but there were hundreds of places far worse—places like Holly Point, where the people were in a chronic state of semi-starvation, and where a little extra pinch of poverty meant speedy death to hundreds of the inhabitants.

Such was the condition of the poor all over England when a demand was made for another grant of money from parliament to keep up the French fortresses still held.

This was refused, and a little later on an inquiry was ordered into the royal finances and expenditure, for the boy-king was known to be extravagant and fond of display, and the crown jewels had already been pledged to meet pressing demands. It was then discovered that the king was enormously in debt, and the exchequer involved to the extent of a hundred and sixty thousand pounds.

Nothing but an extraordinary system of taxation could meet this deficit, and a graduated poll-tax was imposed, a duke paying six pounds thirteen shillings and fourpence, and all the poor above the condition of beggars three groats for every male and female over the age of fifteen; and this was pressed with so much severity and cruelty, that a spirit of revolt was soon awakened among those who had hitherto borne their sufferings and privations meekly enough.

Harry Middleton had been married about six months, and he was living with his wife at her manor house in Essex, not far from the little town of Fobbing. Many stories of hardship resulting from the collecting of this tax had reached the ears of Mistress Isabel Middleton, but she had paid no heed to the cries of her poor impoverished tenants.

“I have to pay this tax—have to pay a pound instead of three groats!” exclaimed the lady, when her reeve ventured to plead for the abatement of some dues owing to herself, which her tenants were unable to pay as well as the poll-tax.

“But the winter hath been a hard one, and food hath been scarce, and though May Day be passed, we have had little sunshine to ripen beans or peas.”

“Nay, nay, trouble me not with varlets’ talk about peas and beans, but collect the dues. Shall the king have his tax, and I be defrauded of my own?” demanded the lady.

The reeve knew by past experience that it would be useless to plead with her further, and he went back to the village. There, in the little church, were gathered a group of girls and women kneeling before an image of the Virgin, imploring of the gaily dressed waxen image that mercy that living men and women alike denied them. They had taken sanctuary here from the insults and violence of the tax-gatherer, while the reeve went to plead their cause with the lady of the manor, their feudal mistress.

“Poor souls!” he muttered, looking at their pale, pinched, upturned faces, himself unseen for a minute or two.

There was no need to ask the result of his errand to Dame Isabel Middleton when they did see him. The sad, pitying face of their friend was enough to tell of his failure to win for them any help or deliverance; and with a deep wail the women would have thrown themselves forward on the ground before the image in more abject supplication for help; but at this moment they caught sight of the dreaded tax-gatherer and his assistants at an opposite door, and fearing that even the sanctuary of the high altar would not protect them from such insults as in the name of the law were inflicted upon many by these men, they uttered piercing shrieks, and fled in an opposite direction, away from the village and their homes, along the road towards Fobbing, which

they found in a ferment of excitement, only needing a slight incident to fan the whole town into a flame of revolt; and the screaming of these girls and women was like a torch to a magazine of gunpowder. Men and women went rushing and crying through the streets, denouncing the laws and the government and the gentry alike. A baker put himself at the head of this motley crowd, vowing to resist the law and punish the rich. One of Wycliffe's poor priests happened to be in the town, and tried to restrain their violence, but he might as well have endeavoured to stop the rising of the tide.

"Nay, nay, Master Wycliffe and his poor priests are the friends of the poor," said one.

And then another raised a shout, "God bless Wycliffe, and all 'poor priests!'" which was enough in the minds of many to identify the whole movement with the reformer himself; and many called themselves Wycliffites, with no better right to the name than that they had shouted it through the streets of Fobbing.

Pillage and destruction were all that the unruly mob could propose by way of redressing their wrongs; and those whose pleadings Dame Isabel had scornfully refused in the morning came back at night with a mob numbering several thousands at their heels. They were armed with every conceivable weapon, hastily snatched from shop or barn.

The obnoxious tax-gatherers had already been caught and killed, and now their fury was directed against the gentry who had selfishly ignored their wrongs, or were supposed to have advised the king to impose the poll-tax.

Dame Middleton's reeve saw the mob coming, and when they were a mile away from the manor house he guessed their intention, and ran to give his mistress warning.

"Haste thee to London with all speed! the mob are coming, and they are mad with hunger and fury!" panted the reeve.

Harry looked at him, evidently thinking he was mad.

"Thou hast been drinking too much mead," he said, sternly.

"Nay, nay, fly while there is time!" implored the man, turning to the lady.

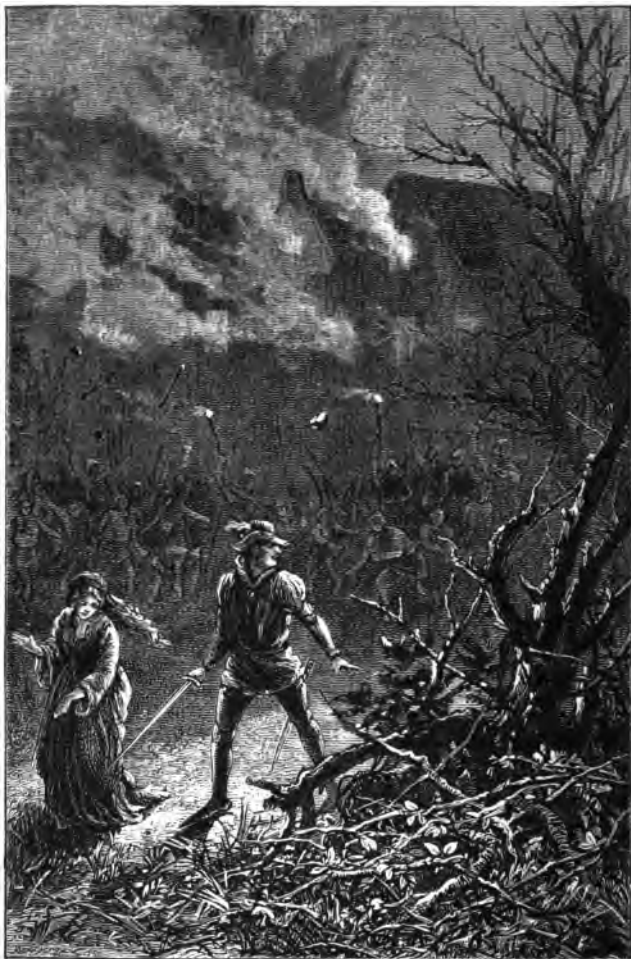
She laughed derisively. "Bid the knaves lock the gates, and arm themselves with crossbows. A few arrows sent among them will soon drive them home," she said.

But Harry, who had left the room to mount the turret now came hurrying back. "Saddle the horses for us, reeve; thou art right, we have no time to spare," he said. "The gates and doors would not stand an hour against such a mob."

"What! Thou wouldest bid me leave my house to the mercy of a mob of beggars?" exclaimed his wife, angrily.

"Come, Isabel, this is no time for quarrels. Let me wrap thy furred mantle about thee," said Harry, subduing his own vexation at her unreasonable petulance.

But the lady was obstinate. She would not move, and much valuable time was lost before Harry, finding reasoning and persuasion were alike useless, took her up in his arms and carried her out. By that time the



A BLAZING HOMESTEAD.

mob were thundering at the gates, and they could only escape by a little garden door, leaving their horses behind them. Harry carried his wife as far as he could, and then setting her on her feet, and drawing his sword, he panted, "Now, Isabel, run for thy life; canst thou not hear how they are clamouring against thee?" She could hear the loud angry shouts, and her name uttered with execration; and it needed little urging from Harry now to make her hurry through the long alley of the garden that led to the gate opening into the fields.

But, alas! alas! the rebels knew of this gate, and when they opened it the flare of torches and fierce angry words greeted the fugitives.

"Ye are Englishmen, and will not attack a woman!" said Harry, facing the angry crowd, and trying to protect his wife, though forbearing to use his weapon.

"We will not attack thee, for thou hast helped some of us; but she——" and the unutterable scorn thrown into that word almost made Harry's bold heart quail.

"She is my wife, and thou wilt let us pass," he said, quickly dragging Isabel after him as he tried to push his way along.

But at the same moment a stone came hurtling through the air and struck Isabel on the head. She cried out and fell into her husband's arms, but the horror and terror of the situation kept her from fainting away, and Harry was allowed to lead her through the crowd and out into the open fields.

Here she soon fell down, utterly exhausted with fright and the loss of blood from the wound in her head. To add to their misery, too, the night was cold, and Harry

had no covering but the satin doublet he wore when the alarm was given. His wife's furred mantle had been dropped in the garden as he carried her along, and so a more forlorn figure could not be imagined than the proud lady of the manor now presented—a fugitive in her own fields, and momentarily fearing capture by a band of rebels.

Harry carried her to the shelter of a hedge, where they were somewhat protected from the bleak wind, and were also out of the way of any straggling rebel who, from motives of private revenge, might be inclined to seek them. They had not been here long before a bright light was seen in the direction of the manor house, and in a few minutes they saw that it was on fire. Both uttered a loud groan, for their hope of being able to creep back when the rebels had dispersed was utterly at an end now, and whither they could turn their steps they did not know; but Harry soon perceived that their only chance of safety lay in finding some shelter during the night, for the next day all the villages would be aroused and the whole county in a blaze of revolt.

Poor Isabel was as much to be pitied now as any of her tenants. She burst into tears as she saw the flames leaping upwards and pouring out of the windows. "My clothes and jewels and the costly array of armour that my father was so proud of will all be destroyed!" she sobbed.

"Nay, nay, heed not those things just now, Isabel," said her husband. "Let me bind this lace ruffle from my sleeve around thy forehead, and then we will make our way to the high road while the rebels are busy up there. We must hasten to London with all speed."

“Hasten to London without horses!” exclaimed the lady, forgetting that she was the sole cause of the horses being left behind.

“An we would reach safety and succour we must, for I trow we shall not find safety this side of Mile End Green.”

“Nay, nay, but I cannot walk, Harry!” sobbed Isabel, helplessly.

“Try to get out of this field and into the high road. Peradventure we may find help and shelter in some convent, or it may be they will attack no more houses just now, and we may find succour for thee at least in some other mansion.”

Thus coaxing, and pleading, and humouring her whims as though she had been a fractious child, Harry got his wife to creep along in the shadow of the hedgerows, and by the light of the blazing house, ricks, and farm buildings that had all been set on fire, they managed to make out the path they ought to take; and with many groans and tears and reproaches on the part of the lady they at length reached the high road. All was comparatively quiet here except for the dull roar of the flames and the far-off shouts of the mob, which urged the fugitives to greater speed.

About a mile from Fobbing stood another mansion, and here Harry hoped he might obtain shelter for his wife, and a horse to continue his journey to London, so that the authorities might be at once informed of what was taking place. But the news of the riot had already reached this place, and the whole family had set forward to London, taking every available horse with them, to carry all that

could be hastily got together on such short notice. The house was shut up, and the servants just leaving to take refuge among the hovels of the village, for these were the only places of safety now.

Isabel had scornfully refused to set her foot in the dwelling of any of her tenants, but now in her sore need Harry at least gratefully accepted the offer of a bed from a poor old woman, whose cottage stood near the centre of the village. Here she would be safely sheltered for the present, while Harry pressed on towards London; and he promised the old woman a liberal reward if she would take care of his wife, and keep her hiding-place a secret from the rebel mob.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE REBELLION.

A MORE deplorable figure than Harry Middleton presented when day at length dawned cannot well be imagined. His dainty, parti-coloured satin doublet—one sleeve of blue, and the other of pink—was torn and travel-stained, and the remaining lace ruffle hung in shreds, while the upturned toes of his shoes had formed a convenient ledge for all the filth of the ill-kept roads along which he had travelled. His own home was left far behind now, but its blazing ricks and rafters had served as a beacon-fire to warn the other gentry to escape while they had the time ; and Harry had arrived at mansion after mansion, only to find its owners had left, and were flying to London for security.

On and on, though weary, hungry, and footsore, until at length he was glad to knock at a monastery gate, and crave rest and shelter for a few hours, and the loan of a horse to carry him to London. But when at length he arrived at the house of his brother-in-law, he found that only servants were left in charge, for news had come that there was a formidable insurrection in Kent, under Wat the Tyler, concerning this same poll-tax, and after hastily despatching Maud and her baby, under a

sufficient escort, to her father's house in Oxfordshire, Sir Lewis had gone to Eltham, where the king's mother was then living, to bring her in safety to London.

"And my sister's clothes—her kirtles and cloaks, hath she taken them all with her?" asked Harry in perplexity, for his plan had been, after giving notice to the authorities—which he found had already been done—to take a change of clothes and a horse back to fetch his wife at once.

But the man knew nothing about his lady's dresses. His whole time had been given to fortifying the house, in case the rebels should attack it; but he knew Harry, and readily agreed to let him go to his sister's room and take whatever he might need, or whatever he could find suitable for his wife in the present emergency.

He would scarcely stay for the necessary rest and refreshment before returning to Essex, for he had heard that a judge had already set out to restore order, and he was anxious to overtake him and journey with his escort as far as the village where he had left his wife. As he rode back he saw the devastation already wrought by the rebels. The sweet May sunshine was darkened by clouds of smoke, rising from the blackened ruins of what had been a stately family mansion only a few days before. Scarcely a manor house had escaped their fury; but the villages of huts and hovels were left unmolested, and so Harry hoped that his wife was safe in her hiding-place.

But, alas! another foe had attacked Isabel, and when Harry reached the cottage he found her dangerously ill from the combined effects of the wound on her head, a severe cold, and the restless, fretful dis-

content at being obliged to seek shelter in such a mean abode. The old woman declared she would never get better while she was there, and Isabel said the same ; and weak and unfit to travel as she was, she would scarcely let her husband have the necessary rest before setting out for London again. How that weary, anxious journey was performed, Harry never could tell. No one ever molested them, but they were in constant fear of an attack by the rebels ; and when they reached Sir Lewis Clifford's house, the news met them that the Savoy had been completely sacked by the insurgents under Wat the Tyler.

"Harry, I will never be a reformer again!" gasped Isabel ; "these mean varlets all call themselves reformers."

It was no time for argument, or Harry would have told her that during the last few days he had become more of a reformer than he had ever been in his life before, for he had learned practically that every man may have access to God without the intervention of a priest. In his sore trouble and perplexity he had called upon God, instead of invoking a multitude of saints, and God had heard and answered his prayer, giving him inward peace and rest in the midst of such trouble and excitement. Never before had Harry heard, or at least heeded, the Divine voice speaking in the silence of his own soul ; but now that he had once listened, nothing but Dr. Wycliffe's doctrines could satisfy him. To seek the intercession of priests or saints now would have been impossible ; and when he thought of what he had heard from the reformer's own lips about man having

the right through Jesus Christ of himself approaching God, and making known his wants and needs, he felt truly thankful that the way of access to the Father had been made known, for otherwise he would have felt desolate indeed at this time.

Soon after their arrival there was a change for the worse in Isabel, and the leech who had been summoned said she could not live many hours, and she at once desired that a priest might be sent for. In vain her husband assured her that God would hear their prayers without the intrusion of a priest. A confessor from the monastery of the Black Friars had to be fetched before she could be satisfied, and Harry was desired to leave the room while her last confession was made, and some hours elapsed before he was allowed to retire.

When he came back, she beckoned him to her bedside, and whispered, "I have made my peace with the holy father, and he hath promised that a mass shall be said for me every day for seven years to save my soul from purgatory. Farewell, Harry. Never forget Isabel."

Before the monk left—and he would not depart until Isabel had drawn her last breath—he informed Harry that she had made her peace with heaven and holy Church by leaving all her property—every farthing she possessed at the time of her death—to the Order of St. Dominic. A legally drawn will had been made immediately after her last confession, annulling all other documents previously made.

"Nay, nay, but my wife could not have been so unjust," said Harry, when he heard the news. "She

hath a cousin—her father's brother's only son, to whom she hath always promised certain lands. He is a poor but honourable gentleman, and should by right have inherited these at his grandfather's death, and my wife hath always promised to set right this wrong."

But the friar shook his head. "Holy Church hath naught to do with such matters," he said. "Thy wife hath given over all to our sacred Order, and her pious wishes must needs be fulfilled. Masses will be devoutly offered for the repose of her soul in the chapel of our monastery to-morrow and every day immediately after prime."

This was said by way of invitation to Harry, and also an intimation that the matter of the property was settled beyond dispute. He was certainly in no mood to enter into an argument with the friar just now, and was glad when he left, although it was lonely enough in that great house, with only the servants to keep him company.

Sir Lewis Clifford had brought his royal mistress safely through the camp of the rebels on Blackheath, and seen her duly lodged with the king in the Tower; and then, anxious for the welfare of his wife, he had hurried through London, pausing only for an hour to hear what his servants had to tell concerning the hasty visits of Harry Middleton, and then journeying on to Meadowlea to make sure that no evil had befallen his family.

The tumults that were causing such a general upheaval of society in Essex and Kent only produced a little ripple of excitement in Meadowlea; and when Maud reached

that place, and saw the pleased, happy faces that greeted her, and how each tried to outdo the other in little acts of service for her, she burst into tears that sorely puzzled the kindly souls who were doing their best to welcome her. Sir Hugh himself looked surprised too. A dozen village children, who had first seen her, had ran on to the Hall to tell the news of her coming, and Sir Hugh had hurried out to meet her at once, and found her in the midst of a crowd of villagers crying as though her heart would break.

Sir Hugh looked from one to the other of the crowd as they made way for him. "By my halidame, Maud, if any of these varlets have hurt thee——" he began.

But Lady Clifford smiled through her tears as she sobbed, "Hurt me! I cannot help crying, I feel so safe here. Oh, my father, dreadful things are being done there beyond London; but here I feel safe, for my dear friends here would never let such things happen to us."

A murmur went through the crowd, for something of what she meant had made its way to the slow understanding of her auditors, and the blacksmith, who had just left the smithy, exclaimed—"An thou dost mean we will never see thee or thine come to ill while we have an arm to fight, thou speakest truly, Mistress Maud."

It was a long speech for him to make, but having made it he felt proud of the notice it drew upon him, for Sir Hugh, clapping him on the shoulder, shouted—"Spoken like an Englishman, and a right trusty bowman."

"Aye, and we would all do bowmen's work an ye needed it," said another; and then a shout went up

from the sturdy men and women ; while Maud kept murmuring, "I feel so safe here, I shall be able to rest now." And had the tide of revolt swept its wild waves through Oxfordshire, it would have passed on and left Middleton Hall untouched, for Maud and Margaret had created a bulwark stronger than moat or masonry could afford—even the hearts of the poor, in whose affection they lived.

The hated tax-gatherer had been there, as well as to other parts of the kingdom, and there had been much grumbling in consequence ; but Sir Hugh took care that his people were not imposed upon by having to pay for those under age, to avoid insult ; and the tax-gatherer, finding the landlord was always at hand to be appealed to, and actually took an interest in the personal affairs of his retainers, did his unpleasant work much less roughly.

The day of Maud's arrival was a festival at Meadowlea. Sir Hugh gave a cask of ale and sundry huge joints of beef to be roasted, for eating and drinking formed the main portion of every merry-making among rich and poor alike ; only it often happened that after a feast came a fast, when the poor were left to their own resources.

Of course there was rejoicing at the Hall itself, for Maud's visits now were too unfrequent to be treated as a matter of small consequence. Sir Hugh was like a boy again, and Margaret's joy, though quieter and less demonstrative than her father's, was deep and heartfelt, for she had sorely missed her sister—her only companion. She was still frail and delicate-looking, but her health was decidedly better than it used to be, and

she declared the constant occupation that Stephen took care she should have had done her more good than all the herb tea and balsams prescribed by her grandmother.

"How is my grandame?" asked Maud, after the baby had been sufficiently admired and returned to her nurse, and the sisters were making their way to the familiar sitting-room—"Mistress Margaret's writing-room," as it was called now in the household, to distinguish it from the spinning-room, over which Margaret likewise held sway. "Shall we go and see my grandame at once?" asked Maud, with something of the old fear creeping over her, lest she had already given offence by not hurrying to greet her the moment she arrived.

But Margaret shook her head. "Not yet, dear; our grandame is growing old, and at this hour she sleeps, and nothing is allowed to disturb her;" and the young lady spoke in a whisper, although it would have been impossible for any sound to penetrate the thick oaken door of her grandmother's room, which they were at that moment passing.

When Maud had changed her travelling dress for something more comfortable, she went and looked at the parchment upon which her sister had recently been writing.

"Madge, what is this?" exclaimed Maud, eagerly, taking up a complete sheet of the MS. that lay on the table.

"Read it," said Margaret. "Nay, nay, let me read it to thee whiles thou art resting;" and her sister took the sheet of parchment from her hand and read—

¹ "In the bigynnyng God made of noughte hevene

¹ Wycliffe's translation,

and erthe, forsothe the erthe was idil and voyde, and derknessis weren on the face of depthe; and the Spiry of the Lord was borun on the wattris. And God seide Light be maad, and light was maad. And God saw the light that it was good, and He departide the light fro derknessis, and He clepide the light dai, and the derknessis, nyght. And the euentid and morwetid was maad one day. And God seide The firmament be maad in the myddis of wattris, and departe wattris fro wattris; and God made the firmament, and departide the wattris that weren undur the firmament fro those wattris that weren on the firmament, and it was don so. And God clepide the firmament, heuene. And the euentid and the morwetid was maad, the secounde day."

"What is it?" interrupted Maud at this point.

"The first chapter of Genesis—the first chapter of Dr. Wycliffe's Bible," said Margaret, laying aside the MS. and seating herself on the couch beside her sister.

"Is it really begun? Doth he really mean to translate the whole of the Bible into English, for poor people to read it for themselves?"

"Yes; Stephen saith Dr. Wycliffe is hard at work upon it now, and he and other poor priests who are learned are helping him. Maud, we shall live to see it—live to see the whole Bible in English" said Margaret, in a subdued rapture.

"And such a thing has never been before, Lewis saith. He almost doubts now whether it can be done."

"I am helping to transcribe, as thou seest, and this first copy is for our own people here in Meadowlea. When it is finished my father hath promised that a

stand shall be placed for it in the great hall, that any who can read may do so for himself or to his fellows, and sometimes my father or I may read also. I often go to read a chapter from the Gospels to old Gammer Lintorn, as well as to my own grandame."

"Will she listen to the reading of such a book?"

"Aye, that will she. Thou wilt see a change in her, Maud, I trow. But it is her hour for awakening. Tarry here, for she liketh no one but me near her when she first arouseth herself;" and as she spoke Margaret drew the arras aside and hurried to her grandmother's room.

In a few minutes she came back and fetched Maud. "Say naught concerning the baby yet; it will be enough to see thee to-day," whispered Margaret, as she drew her sister along the corridor to the well-remembered room.

Here sat Lady Middleton, but so changed from the stately, dignified mistress of the Hall that Maud scarcely recognised her. Some memory of what she had been seemed also to be awakened in the old lady, and she tried to draw herself up and assume something of her old authority, when her eyes fell upon Maud. But it would not do; the caressing tenderness of Margaret made her lapse soon into her usual quiet, restful placidity, that struck Maud as the greatest change of all in her grandmother. Physically she had never recovered from the fatigue of her pilgrimage to Canterbury; but what she had seen there and on her journey had made her more willing to listen to Margaret's reading of the Gospels, and by degrees rest had come to the proud, ambitious soul, for the pride was conquered, and Christ had given her the heart of a little child.

CHAPTER XIX.

AT MEADOWLEA.

A FEW days after Maud's arrival, her husband followed, and was greatly relieved to find the little village so peaceful and content, and his wife so well and happy. Of course, the news he brought about Harry and Isabel filled them with anxiety, but he had left word with the servants at home that a messenger should be sent with tidings of them as soon as they arrived.

But this was not the only source of anxiety to Sir Lewis Clifford, although he said nothing about it to his wife. To Sir Hugh Middleton, however, he could unburden himself freely, and he told him how—through his known sympathy with the poor—the rebels of Kent and Essex had used the name of Dr. Wycliffe, and how he feared the reformer and his followers might suffer through this by-and-by. The priests and monks would be only too glad of such a pretext to defame their leader, especially in view of this fresh attack he was making upon one of the many doctrines of Romanism.

“What is it? I have heard nothing of a fresh attack. I knew not there was anything left for our doughty

doctor to assail," said Sir Hugh, with a slightly nervous laugh.

"Did not Stephen tell thee how plainly Dr. Wycliffe hath assailed the doctrines of the Mass? The priests tell us that after the words of consecration the bread is changed into the body, bones, blood, and divinity of the Lord Christ; but Wycliffe saith nay, the bread is not to be considered as Christ, or as any part of Him, but as an effectual sign of Him."

Sir Hugh grunted by way of reply. In truth he would have Dr. Wycliffe stop any further attacks upon the papacy now. Things had gone far enough, and there had been changes enough, and now there was no longer a French pope things might be left to take their own course, provided the monks and friars were not allowed to send too much out of the country, or to seize by force or fraud all they could lay their hands upon.

Sir Lewis looked disappointed, but he saw it would be useless to argue the point with his father-in-law. It was but natural, too, perhaps, that he should think all was won that was worth contending for. He was getting an old man now, his fighting days were over, and it was excusable that he should look upon the younger generation as foolish for contending further; so they fell to the discussion of the favourite topic—the corner croft, and the embarrassments it had caused. By dint of careful expenditure and retrenchment where it was possible, the different mortgages were being gradually paid off, and Sir Hugh hoped to hand the estate on to Harry entirely freed from debt.

"Not that he'll ever want it," said Sir Hugh, with

something of a sigh. "His wife's property, I trow, is worth double what this is."

"What the Essex rebels leave them to enjoy may not be worth as much as this," said Sir Lewis. "Thou dost forget the house is burned down, and everything else that would blaze."

"And they will mortgage the land, I trow, to build another house. Aye, aye. If Mistress Isabel had been wise, she would have done like my wenches, built herself a nest in the hearts of her people. By my halidame, if those same rebels came here, I trow my trusty knaves would fight them to the death before they could come near Middleton Hall," said Sir Hugh, in a tone of proud exultation.

"Aye, they are almost my Maud's words," said Sir Lewis, with almost equal pride. "She feels safe and at rest here; safer than in the Tower itself, with all its bastions and archers."

The messenger from London did not arrive as soon as he was expected, but when he came he brought a letter from Harry, telling of his wife's death, and that all her property had been left to the Order of the Black Friars, and from Master Chaucer, detailing the public news of the day. Wat the Tyler had been killed, and the rebellion had been quelled, but not until many public buildings had been destroyed and most of the Flemish artisans massacred. The rage of the rebels had been specially directed against the Duke of Lancaster and the primate, and the palaces of both had been destroyed.

But the interest in public events that affected them only remotely was soon forgotten in thoughts of Harry

and his trouble; and as soon as a letter could be written, and the messenger rested, he was sent back to London with messages to Harry bidding him come to Meadowlea as soon as his wife's funeral was over.

A day or two later Stephen arrived with another poor priest and dear friend—Master Thorp, whom Wycliffe commended to their kind care at this time, he standing sorely in need of rest and refreshment, his own friends having renounced him for his attachment to the reformer and his doctrines. Of course, he was welcomed by Sir Hugh and his family—indeed, the hospitable mansion was now seldom without one or two of Dr. Wycliffe's poor priests, who came there to rest and recruit their health, often broken down by hard work and poor living.

But the visit of Stephen was not merely to introduce his friend, but to tell his sister what had recently taken place at Oxford.

“The teaching of Dr. Wycliffe hath been formally declared erroneous concerning the doctrine of the Mass. Last week he was lecturing as usual in the school of the Augustinians, when a messenger arrived from the chancellor and the divines who had sat with him to consider this matter, declaring that what our Evangelical doctor taught was opposed to the decisions of the Church, and that the true doctrine was this, ‘That by the sacramental words pronounced by the priest, the bread and wine upon the altar are transubstantiated, or converted, into the true body and blood of Christ, so that after consecration there is not the material bread and wine which before existed, but only the

species of the same, under which are contained the body of Christ and His blood, not figuratively nor tropically, but essentially, substantially, and corporeally, so that Christ is verily there in His own proper bodily presence;’ and, to protect this doctrine from all rude questioning, the chancellor had likewise decided that excommunication, suspension from all scholastic exercises, and the forfeiture of liberty, should be incurred by any member of the University who should dare to teach the heresy of the Rector of Lutterworth; and the same penalties were decreed against those who listened.”

“Then we are all heretics for listening to what thou hast told us, Stephen,” said Maud, with something like a gasp, for she was still half afraid of this spiritual artillery.

Not so her husband. Like a war-horse sniffing the battle afar off, he was eager to enter into the fray. “What said Dr. Wycliffe to this tirade?” he asked with a smile, and rubbing his hands in pleased anticipation.

“Our doctor was so taken by surprise at this unexpected attack, that for a minute he could do naught but stare at the messenger; but at length he arose, and demanded that there should be a fair discussion of the whole matter. He was willing to meet any opponent they might decide upon, but he denounced the employment of brute force to suppress discussion and protect their doctrine. He would give no promise to be silent; on the contrary, as the alternative of that was imprisonment, and the question was therefore one of force rather than reason, he bade the

messenger tell the chancellor that he should appeal to the equity of the civil power."

"A very pretty quarrel, by my troth, and one not likely to be settled quickly," said Sir Lewis, with supreme satisfaction.

"Nay, but would it not be better to persuade the chancellor to hear reason upon the matter?" asked Maud, a little anxiously.

"But what if he will not, sweetheart?" exclaimed her husband.

"There is nothing these proud priests fear so much as reasoning upon this doctrine of the Mass, for reason and logic alike are against them. As my master hath written, 'Christ saith, I am a very vine, wherefore worship ye not the vine for God, as ye do the bread? Wherein was Christ a very vine? or wherein was the bread Christ's body? It was in figurative speech. And thus as Christ became not a material nor an earthly vine, nor a material vine the body of Christ, so neither is material bread changed from its substance to the flesh and blood of Christ.'"

This discussion was held in Margaret's room, and it was tacitly understood that the matter should not be referred to at any length in the presence of Sir Hugh. His thoughts were mainly occupied with Harry's affairs now, and so the others often had an opportunity of discussing this question among themselves. Stephen and Sir Lewis were agreed that they could not yield on such a vital point as this, and Margaret, in a more quiet way, was equally firm; but Maud had grown a little timid of late, or was more firmly wedded to the

faith of her childhood, and she counselled caution and reticence.

“There are feeble folk among us,” she said, pleadingly; “we are not all wise and strong and learned, like thou and Stephen, and so, for the sake of these, speak not slightingly of the holy mystery of the Mass.”

“Nay, nay, sweetheart,” said her husband; “when didst thou ever hear me speak other than tenderly of aught that true and gentle souls may believe? But thou art not one of the feeble folk for whom thou pleadest,” he added, looking searchingly at his wife. He had taken it for granted that she would accept, as he did, the teaching of Dr. Wycliffe on this question, and the signs of indecision he now saw pained him exceedingly. But, like a wise and tender husband, he would not try to force her belief. “We will talk of this anon,” he said; “for the present, believe in that which helps thee best to love God as thy tender, compassionate Father. He looks at hearts, not creeds, I trow, and so rest in His love, little one, and forget the Mass an ye will.”

But Maud could not forget it. Her sister, she knew, had made up her mind; and with Margaret she could discuss the matter better than she could with her husband. Her old confessor was dead, or she might have gone to him with her difficulty, as she so often had before; but she thought over the advice he had so often given her, the substance of it being just what her husband had spoken—“Believe that which best helps thee to love God, and rest in His love to thee.”

The family had no confessor now, and there was not much communication between the Hall and the monas-

tery. Father Ambrose occasionally paid a ceremonial visit to his mother and brother ; but he was offended with the whole family at the Hall, and more especially with his niece Margaret, since she had dared to read the Gospels to the poor.

When Harry arrived, everybody was startled to see the change in him. He looked thin, old, and haggard, and altogether so quiet and subdued, so different from the free and easy, careless Harry of old, that his friends could only look and wonder—for grief at the loss of his wife could scarcely account for the great alteration in him. His father was deeply concerned. He thought the disposition of his wife's property had something to do with it, and advised him to contest the right of the Black Friars to hold it.

But the young widower shook his head. "I would that Isabel's cousin, Master John Deane, might have had this, for it is his of right ; and what my Bella could have been thinking of to give it to these friars, I know not," said Harry, with a sigh.

"But thou hadst surely a right to a portion of this wealth?" said his father. "And by my halidame I would not yield my right for all the friars in England."

A faint smile parted Harry's lips. "Hast thou so soon forgotten the corner croft, and what it cost thee?" he said.

"Aye, but the corner croft is mine own, and no monk dare set foot in it," said Sir Hugh, triumphantly.

"But it hath cost thee much, even the impoverishment of all the land these many years ; and did I but follow thine example with these Black Friars, it might be I should have to sell all these lands by-and-by."

"The saints forbid!" exclaimed his father. "By my troth, an I thought thou wouldest do that, Harry—nay, nay, thou art laughing at thine old father."

"I am telling thee what may happen an I go lawing with the Black Friars," said Harry, with a keen look at Sir Hugh.

"Nay, nay, then let it go. Thou art a Middleton, and 'tis meet thou shouldest abide on the old spot, and not on the lands of any stranger; so rest thee content, my knave, and——"

"I am content for myself; but Isabel hath done her cousin a sore wrong, and I know not how to set it right."

This was the way he talked to his father, but to his brother and Sir Lewis Clifford he soon unbosomed himself more fully. He could not take much interest in the discussion about transubstantiation. To him just now religion was a more personal matter than it had ever been before, and he wanted to know whether he had not been guilty of presumption in thinking God would listen to the prayers of a sinner like him. At first, peace and rest had followed his prayers, but lately doubts of fitness had arisen.

"Nay, nay, the only fitness God doth require is that the need of Him be felt. The Gospel doth ever picture Him as a father yearning for this return of His children to Himself. The Lord Christ is not the implacable Judge whom the saints and Virgin find it hard to appease, but a tender Saviour, who hath a fellow-feeling with us in all our sufferings; who hath borne our sins and carried our sorrows, and can be touched

with the feeling of our infirmities, having been a Man among men, subject to the same needs."

In this strain Stephen often talked to his brother, and the Gospel that Margaret read to the villagers was often diligently read by him, while his father was busy about the farm, or the rest of the party had gone out with the falcons. Harry avoided the hunting and hawking parties, and most of the simple merrymakings, which, to please Sir Hugh, his other guests indulged in. Indeed, these rural outdoor pastimes were of great service to Stephen and his friend, as well as to Maud and her husband, for they were all jaded and worn with the stress and turmoil of life; but after such a rest as was always to be had at Middleton Hall, they returned to the battle refreshed and strengthened. Stephen could even forget for a time the haunting fear that had never left him since his visit to the old Jew. Dr. Wycliffe was to all appearance quite restored; but Stephen dreaded every excitement, every occasion for anxiety that troubled his master, and never left him longer than he could help. This rest he was taking now had become absolutely necessary from his close application to the work of translation, and Dr. Wycliffe had insisted that he should go with Thorp for a time to Meadowlea, to see his friends and recruit his exhausted energies.

CHAPTER XX.

GATHERING CLOUDS.

A MERRIER place than London in January, 1382, it would be difficult to conceive. The Savoy and Lambeth Palace might be in ruins, and many a heart sick and sore, like Harry Middleton's, through the late rebellion; but to-day the fountains spouted ale and wine, and every comer was welcome to drink his fill, and then be amused by the shows provided at the king's expense; and although a few grumbled, the mob were for the most part willing to forget the past, and enjoy the fun of the hour, and drink the health of the king and queen at the fountains.

All this festivity had been provided by the king, on the occasion of his marriage to Anne, the daughter of the blind King of Bohemia; and whether their subjects were pleased or not, the youthful sovereigns at least were delighted with the tournaments and tilting matches, and the tricks of the mummers and merry-andrews, for they were just at an age when such things have a delightful charm; for Anne was but fifteen, and her husband scarcely more than two years older.

But the girl-queen had already proved herself the friend of the poor and oppressed, for she had obtained the release from prison of some hundreds of Wat the

Tyler's followers in the late rebellion ; and Maud had heard from some of her ladies that she was a most learned and devout princess. She daily read a portion of God's Word, and exhorted all the maids of honour to follow her example. The Princess Joan was, of course, delighted with her gentle, pious daughter-in-law ; and Sir Lewis Clifford and other friends of Wycliffe began to grow hopeful again, for during the last few months events had been anything but favourable to the reformer and his followers. Courtenay, the persecuting Bishop of London, had been raised to the see of Canterbury. Reports of Wycliffe's "poor priests'" complicity in the late insurrection had been industriously circulated by his enemies the friars ; and, worst of all, his powerful friend, the Duke of Lancaster, had grown cool of late. It was pretty evident that, having secured the political aims he had in view, he had no intention of helping forward that spiritual reformation that now engaged all Wycliffe's energies. With this he had no sympathy, and, unfortunately, too many were like him. It mattered little to them what Pope Urban was in character. That he was not a Frenchman was sufficient to cover all other sins, and they thought Wycliffe might be quiet now, and let things take their course.

So, to learn that the young queen was likely to sympathise with Wycliffe in his efforts to circulate the Scriptures was good news indeed, and they hoped that her influence with Richard would enable her to protect the reformer and help forward his plans.

But, alas ! they had not taken into account Richard's extravagance, weakness of character, and absolute

dependence upon the Church. His mother, the Princess Joan, had done all she could to influence his mind in favour of Wycliffe, and his uncle, the Duke of Gloucester, had doubtless done the same, and Richard may even have wished to oblige his royal relatives, for we know that he was affectionate and devotedly fond of his queen; but he dared not offend the mighty hierarchy which still was more powerful than lords and commons, because of the immense wealth it could command; and dearly as Richard might love his mother and his queen, he loved pomp and display more, and as money was required for these and the unsuccessful wars in which he was engaged, taxes *must* be imposed, and money must be obtained somehow.

Now these taxes had already alienated the common people, and it was told Richard that Wycliffe's "poor priests" had had a hand in the late rising; it was, therefore, more necessary to attach the clergy to the crown, neither could he afford to offend the pope at the present crisis; so, although everything was quiet just now, those who, like Sir Lewis Clifford, knew something of what was passing behind the pomp and pageantry of the court, were often a little uneasy and anxious concerning the future.

Harry Middleton had again entered the service of the Duke of Lancaster, and he and Sir John Oldcastle, Sir Reginald Hilton, Sir William Neville, Sir John Montague, and Sir John Trussel were close friends and frequent visitors at Sir Lewis Clifford's house in the Strand. They were well known as a little coterie of warm disciples of the reformer and his poor priests. Some

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of them, too, had already formed friendships with the Bohemian gentlemen about the court of Queen Anne, so there was little that took place in the higher circles of society which did not speedily become known to Sir Lewis Clifford.

But, alas! despite the consistent piety of the queen, and the known regard of the Princess Joan and so many of the nobility and cultured people for the reformer, the undercurrent was plainly set dead against them now, and the king was studiously subservient to the clergy, and the new archbishop equally so to the pope.

Less than a fortnight after his installation, an assembly of eight prelates, fourteen doctors of the civil and canon law, six bachelors of divinity, fifteen mendicant friars, and four monks, met at the monastery of the Dominican or Black Friars, to procure a formal condemnation of Wycliffe's doctrines, and also to organise an unsparing persecution of such as should hesitate to renounce them.

Scarcely, however, were the reverend judges assembled, when the whole city was shaken by an earthquake. The more timid took to counting their beads, and calling upon the saints for protection; while the superstition of the age made the whole company regard it as an omen from heaven against their project, and they would fain have hurried away from the council chamber at once. But the strong mind of the archbishop controlled them. Wycliffe had escaped his vengeance twice, but he should not a third time, and he wrung from the present convulsion of Nature a sanction for their plans. Twenty-four conclusions were read as containing the doctrines preached by Wycliffe and professed by his followers, and after

three days' consideration of these, ten were declared to be entirely heretical, and the rest erroneous. Of course, the impeached doctrine of transubstantiation headed the list of heresies, and round this the battle raged most fiercely for ages. Other minor points the reformers were often willing to yield, but they regarded this worship of the bread of the sacrament as the very Christ as the grossest idolatry, and refused to bow the knee to the modern Baal.

The next step was to write to the bishops commanding them, on pain of excommunication, not to admit any suspected person to the liberty of preaching within their dioceses.

For London and its proud independent citizens, who were known to be so favourably inclined towards Wycliffe and his "poor priests," another course was followed. It would have been almost useless to try and coerce them at the present time, and so the following Whitsuntide a procession, calculated to impress the populace with a deep sense of the sorrow and grief of the clergy, wound its slow length through the narrow, ill-kept streets. Bare-foot, with downcast eyes and drooping heads, chanting dirge-like psalms, the friars, monks, and clergy, followed by a multitude of the laity, walked to Paul's Cross, where one of the Carmelites or White Friars mounted the pulpit, and exhorted the mourning multitude to do their duty to the Church and her enemies at the present crisis.

Of course, the more timid were alarmed, and possibly impressed, by this display of clerical grief, and at the earliest opportunity hurried off to confession and mass, and astonished their neighbours with their orthodox

zeal. Others, fearing to offend good customers, or foreseeing that trouble was likely to follow, grumbled, but withdrew themselves from the various meetings that had been organised for prayer and the reading of God's Word. Others—and there were many of them—remained unmoved by this demonstration of power and hostility against the light of the Gospel; but even these, while holding fast to the blessed truths they had learned from Wycliffe, and scorning to bow the knee to Baal by attending mass or confession, nevertheless became more cautious in their profession of the new doctrines.

And so to all seeming the display of theatrical grief had had the desired effect; for there was an outward conformity to the laws of the Church, which of late had been often ignored. This was no small encouragement to the vigorous archbishop, and he at once despatched a letter to the Chancellor of Oxford, who was well known to be a friend of Dr. Wycliffe, calling upon him to loathe the opinions and intercourse of all his followers, that the reign of a sect against which the king and the lords had promised to unite their authority might at length be brought to a close. Just before this, sermons had been preached before the University by two clergymen who were warm adherents of Wycliffe, and they had been chosen by the chancellor, after it was known that the synod in London had condemned his teaching as heretical. All this the archbishop had doubtless been informed of, and so resolved to clear Oxford of heresy, as he had already made such a good beginning in London. Hereford and Repyngdon, the offending clergymen, were ordered to

be sent to him, and all others put to silence who were known to be favourers of Wycliffe.

Hereford and his friend could not be found when search was made for them; but we may be sure the reformer's old foes, the friars, lost no time in doing all they could to arouse the anger of the archbishop; and in the end the chancellor himself, Robert Rigge, was obliged to appear before the angry primate. Here, after he had been subject to various indignities, he was commanded to publish, in the head church of the University, the condemned conclusions as heresy.

But, to the astonishment of the archbishop, Rigge shook his head when he heard this. "I dare not do it! I should be killed if I did," he said.

"What!" thundered the archbishop, "is Oxenforde such a nestler and favourer of heresies that the Catholic faith cannot be published there?"

At all events, Master Rigge could give him no promise to publish what he desired in the head church; but he was obliged to pledge himself that Hereford and Repyngdon should be searched for, and others silenced. Meanwhile, Stephen had provided for the safety of these, by taking them round a circuitous route to London, avoiding the neighbourhood of Meadowlea, where Wycliffe himself, in feeble health, was now staying.

At present, although his doctrines and his followers had been attacked, no one had ventured to proceed against him personally; but Stephen was ever on the rack lest his beloved master, feeling himself somewhat stronger one day, should throw himself into the forefront of the battle that was now raging around.

Doubtless, the sorrow and disappointment and anxiety of the last few weeks had had much to do with his present enfeebled condition ; but, alas ! Stephen knew now that the old Jew's prediction was true, for the citadel of life was attacked, and partial paralysis had set in.

At the first suspicion of what the illness might be, he had hurried off to the old Jew again, imploring him for some balsam, some medicine, some potion, that might prolong a life so precious, and so needful in the present crisis. But, much as the Jew desired to help one whom he had learned to respect, in spite of their difference in creed, he could only shake his head to Stephen's importunities.

"Naught but quiet and rest will avail," he said, slowly and sadly ; "an ye can give him these, the potion I will give may help him to recover from this attack. But mark ye, it is quiet, rest, and sweet fresh air, I trow, that he needs more than all," added the old Jew, as he once more delivered a small phial to Stephen.

Rest and quiet ! Just what Dr. Wycliffe had so often prescribed for him, when he sent him home to Meadowlea to recruit his health ; and he was a young man, hale and strong, while his master was now turned sixty, with whitened hair, and more fragile-looking than ever.

Going home to his lodging, he ordered a horse litter to be got in readiness to start the next morning, resolving for once to carry things with a high hand ; for his master would never consent to go, if he waited for that.

Walking into his presence, he said in a matter-of-

course tone, "My master, we are sore needed at Meadowlea, and must needs start by cock-crow to-morrow."

"Aye, hath trouble fallen upon thy father?" asked Dr. Wycliffe. But Stephen busied himself about the room to avoid replying, and the question was not repeated.

The few preparations necessary for this sudden journey were soon made, for no sumpter mules were needed to convey the slender wardrobe of Dr. Wycliffe and his "poor priest," and no escort was required, for Stephen was too well known for robbers or beggars to attack him; and so their poverty saved them much trouble and anxiety, and was an effectual protection too. The greater part of their baggage consisted of books and parchments, for Dr. Wycliffe was still occupied upon the translation of the Scriptures, and Stephen knew that the only way to keep him at Meadowlea until he had fully recovered was to let him engage in his beloved study again.

So they set out the next morning, Stephen walking beside the litter, and a servant leading the mule laden with their books, parchments, and a few articles of clothing. He had informed no one, not even their friends, of what he was about to do, for if he had, numerous visits would have been paid to them, and excitement was very injurious in Dr. Wycliffe's present state of health. He also knew something of the archbishop's activity in London just now, and thought if he should turn his attention to Oxford, it would be just as well, perhaps, if no one knew where he had gone.

So in the sweet, soft May morning, they left Oxford behind them, jogging along the ill-kept country roads,

taking their meals at wayside hostelries or homely farmhouses, in many of which Stephen was well known, and where he readily obtained a drink of milk for himself or his master. No one recognised the feeble-looking old man in the litter, and Stephen took care not to mention his name until they were safe in Meadowlea.

By that time Dr. Wycliffe was already looking and feeling a little better. The fresh, sweet air had revived him; and a few days at Middleton Hall worked such a decided change for the better, that Stephen began to lose his fear, and grew hopeful once more. After a week's stay he left, and went back to Oxford; but when he got there, and heard what had taken place in his absence, he resolved to keep his master's whereabouts a secret from everybody; and when the archbishop's monition was issued against Hereford and Repyngdon, he boldly offered to escort them to London, and place them under the protection of his brother-in-law, Sir Lewis Clifford.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE ARMOURER'S SHOP.

As Stephen with the two fugitive clergymen were passing the village of Charing, on their way to Sir Lewis Clifford, they were met by Harry Middleton, who at once guessed their destination.

"Nay, nay, ye shall tarry awhile with me ; the Cliffords' house is already full of guests—poor timorous souls whom the first swoop of the hawk hath frightened to seek shelter and protection ; Maud is ill, too," he added, in a serious tone.

"Ill?" exclaimed Stephen, turning pale, for Maud was very dear to him.

"Aye, these troubles hath sorely frightened her, and her timorous company doth not mend matters, I trow."

"But, Lewis—what of him?" asked Stephen.

"Aye, his patience passeth my understanding, for he is so brave and fearless himself, and yet can bear with these weaklings and their frights and fancies. But who are these?" he asked, in an undertone, glancing at his two companions.

"Master Hereford and Master Repyngdon, two friends of Dr. Wycliffe, whom the archbishop doth think to

make ensamples of, that others may be warned against teaching this heresy," said Stephen, formally introducing his friends.

"I trow my Lord of Lancaster will afford them all needful protection," said Harry, bowing with courtly grace, which needed some care lest the silver chains fastening the pointed toes of his shoes to his knees should become entangled and suddenly throw him forward on the ground.

Stephen glanced contemptuously at the clumsy finery, and then at his brother's face. What he read there so far satisfied him that he said, "An thou deemest it wise to take these my friends to thy master, I will not gain-say it, but I must go and see Maud without delay;" and so he bade his two friends farewell for the present, and went on towards the Strand.

Sir Lewis was out when he arrived, but he was taken at once to his sister's room, where he found Maud lying on a couch, looking very worn and ill. At the sight of Stephen she burst into tears, and held out her hands imploringly. "Oh, Stephen, why didst thou venture hither?" she exclaimed; "thou who art so well known as a friend of Dr. Wycliffe."

"Nay, nay, my sister, thou art frightening thyself needlessly. One would deem it unsafe to walk through the streets an they could see thy fear," he added, with a smile.

Maud sobbed hysterically. "Thou dost think me weak and unfaithful, I trow, but it is for Madge I fear—my darling baby Madge. I had thought she would never know the troubles and perplexities of her mother,

but would learn without question the doctrines of Dr. Wycliffe."

"And wherefore should she not?" demanded Stephen, quickly.

Maud shook her head. "Who can tell what may be, now all these troubles are coming upon us?" she gasped.

"But, Maud——"

"Nay, nay, look not so frightened," hastily interrupted the lady. "Think not that I doubt the truth of these new doctrines myself. I have read the Scriptures, and compared them with what thy master doth teach, and know them to be the truth and no cleverly-contrived fable. Ah, thou knowest not, Stephen, what it hath cost me of doubt and perplexity before I could give up the old superstition, but having given it up I thought of a truth the worst was over, and my Madge would never know such troubles, for there would be naught heard of the old faith when she was a woman; but now the archbishop hath declared this to be naught but heresy, and forbidden any to preach or teach after this manner," concluded Maud, with a sob.

Stephen tried to soothe his sister with all the reassuring arguments he could think of. "This is but the spring-time of the good seed, I weet, and if a chilling blast doth come it is no marvel, for so we see it again and again in our gardens and farms."

Maud looked shocked and a little angry. "Are we senseless as the flowers or corn?" she demanded. "Have we not hearts that can feel, and doth not God love us?"

"Yea, verily He doth, my sister—loves us so much,

would put such honour upon us, that it may be He will permit some of us to become partakers of the sufferings of our Lord and Saviour."

"What dost thou mean?" asked Maud, in a startled tone.

Stephen sat down on the couch beside his sister and took her hand. "Maud, as thou knowest I have been helping Dr. Wycliffe with his translation of the Bible, and one day I came to words that could mean naught but this—'Fellowship with His death.' As thou knowest, Christ died to redeem the world; and as I thought of this, and then looked at the words of the apostle again, I could but fetch my master and ask him what it could mean—had I translated the words truly? He read it, and then looked at me, and his face grew radiant as that of an angel. 'Fellowship with His death!' he exclaimed, in a triumphant tone, 'then a life of toil and sacrifice is not in vain, even though *we* see naught but disappointment and failure in it. The world is redeemed by sacrifice and suffering, and we may have fellowship with His death, and so be fellow-workers with God. Oh, glorious hope! Oh, exalted honour!' I would thou couldest have seen my master then. Methinks if one had come and said he was to die that minute some violent death, he would have thanked and blessed him for the honour."

"But—but, Stephen, dost thou think——" gasped Maud, and then she stopped, a look of horror stealing over her face.

"Maud, Maud, wilt thou not trust God for this? Peradventure, to some of us the unspeakable honour

may come of a more intimate fellowship with His death than this even, every-day life will afford. Should God so honour me, thou wilt remember our talk to-day, and believe that I would not exchange my lot even with King Richard himself."

Maud clasped her brother's hand in a tighter grip as she whispered, "But—but, Stephen, thou wilt not throw thyself into the arms of the archbishop; thou wilt be wary and cautious?"

"Yea, for thy sake I will, my sister, for thou wilt suffer, I weet, against thy will, and I would have thee wholly with me, that it may be a willing sacrifice of both of us. Now thou art weak, and not thyself. But here comes thy little Madge," he added, as the arras was pushed on one side, and a nurse came in with the child.

After he had rested Stephen went to visit the armourer, and learn what he could of his friends among the citizens, and was agreeably surprised to find he was so eagerly welcomed by Roger and his uncle. They had seen the procession of barefoot priests and monks, but laughed at the hollow mockery of grief they had assumed.

"Nay, nay, we live too near the nest of the black crows," said the armourer, with a comical wink that made little Robin laugh as he rubbed at a rusty corselet.

"And—and the meeting?" said Stephen, in a lower tone, and drawing closer.

"Master Stephen, we are always busy after sunset," said the old man, with a jerk of his thumb over his shoulder; and then in a louder tone he added, "an thou wilt come by-and-by thou wilt see the corselet hath another face upon it."

Stephen nodded. He perfectly understood the old man's meaning, but it would not do to speak plainer under the existing state of things, for in the little booth-like shop no one could tell who might be listening outside.

The time for the meeting was warily chosen—supper-time in the monastery close by. As soon as the last straggling brother had entered the gates, the armourer's guests or customers began to arrive, and when they were all gathered in the shed, or back workshop, it was Robin's duty to keep watch at the front door, and if he saw any suspicious person approaching, he instantly darted in, shouting, "Clubs! clubs!" which was the preconcerted signal of danger; and then, to disarm all suspicion, he seized his own stick, and rushed off in pretended pursuit of his companions.

This evening Robin was more than usually on the alert, for his deliverer—whom he looked up to with a reverence little short of worship—was with the armourer at the back, and it behoved him to be extra cautious. He had learned, too, of the suspicion and distrust with which the citizens viewed everything connected with the Duke of Lancaster, and seeing a gentleman approach wearing the well-known badge, he scarcely waited for him to pause at the door and inquire for the armourer, before he darted in, shouted "Clubs! clubs!" most vociferously, and would have rushed away down the street, but the gentleman caught and held him firmly, in spite of his kicking and struggling, until the armourer made his appearance.

"This is the most malapert knave, and witless withal,



HARRY SEIZING THE ARMOURER'S APPRENTICE.

that ever was left in charge of a shop," said the gentleman, laughing. "The 'prentices are all, I trow, in Finsbury Fields, or practising archery at the butts in Newington, and yet this little knave doth cry 'Clubs, clubs,' as lustily as though a fight was going on in the next street."

The armourer chuckled and laughed too, as he came forward. "By my troth, Master Harry, it was the sight of thee, I trow, that raised the cry of 'Clubs.' The knave doth not know thee as he doth thy brother; and ——"

"Aye, Stephen is here, I weet," said Harry, interrupting the flow of talk; and the next minute Stephen came forward, for Roger, following his uncle, had recognised their visitor, and stepped back in time to prevent all the guests from leaving. "What is it, Harry—Maud is not worse?" asked Stephen, in an anxious tone.

"Nay, nay, but I would have a word with thee;" and while the brothers talked apart, the armourer posted the young sentinel with another word, in case of alarm.

"He—he won't hurt him?" said the orphan, glancing significantly at Harry, who had his hand on Stephen's shoulder; and as he spoke the boy grasped his stick the closer.

"They are brothers, witless," said Roger, scornfully.

But Stephen, as he came forward, patted him on the head. "Thou art a trusty knave," he whispered; "be watchful still."

The boy looked up gratefully at his deliverer. "I'll protect *thee*, never fear," he said.

Harry had come with the request that he might be

allowed to join the meeting, for as yet he had not openly allied himself with the more staunch followers of Wycliffe ; but, strange to say, the trouble that now threatened them had made him desirous to do so.

Of course, he was welcomed by the armourer, and they went back to the workshop together, where they found about twenty, sitting or standing, and Roger mounting guard over a clumsy-looking book, which proved to be the New Testament, from which Stephen was reading when Robin's cry interrupted them.

The service was short and very simple. After reading a chapter, Stephen engaged in prayer. Then, after the text was read, the book was carefully put away in a curiously-contrived chest in the wall, and securely locked. The single lamp was put out, and then the sermon followed—short, clear, forcible, and boldly evangelical, for Stephen had been too much with Dr. Wycliffe to cherish a vestige of Romanism now.

After the service, and a quiet good-night to each other, they silently departed, the shadows cast by the towering walls of the monastery affording a welcome darkness, and Harry and Stephen made their way towards the Strand. Stephen was anxious to hear how his friends fared.

“Hath thy master received them? Will he protect them?” he asked, anxiously.

“For the present they are safe enough, but, alas ! my master is as I was—willingly ignorant concerning the mighty import of these spiritual truths taught by Dr. Wycliffe. He doth honour and admire him for his

pure, true life, and noble defence of the liberties of the Church and nation; but having done so much, he doth marvel why he cannot rest now, and leave the archbishop and pope to settle these matters of doctrine."

"And he doth counsel that Hereford and Repyngdon should likewise submit to the archbishop, and call that heresy which is the very truth of God?"

Harry nodded. "I would it were otherwise," he said, "but I was of the same mind once. Oh, Steve! if I had but learned the value of these spiritual truths before, how different my life would have been. I, too, might have helped on the blessed work as thou art doing. I always meant to do it, and when I married and went to my wife's home, I had the chance of doing something for those poor knaves of hers; but it was never begun, the time went in hunting and hawking, or practising tilt-yard sports—I never found time to help the poor. Had it been otherwise—had I striven to follow my ideal, seeking the blessing and help of God upon it, that rebellion would at least have been less bitter. Aye, Steve, my life is over, and I have missed the good of it," said Harry, sadly.

"Nay, nay, say not so; thou art young yet, not forty; thou mayest do much good with the remaining years."

"Aye, but the freshness and beauty of life is over, and the chance I had before the rebellion can never come again; had I only known it then, I should have taught the knaves patience, and how to win true liberty. What I learned at Bruges, Steve, I never forgot, and I always intended teaching something of it to my own countrymen, for they are sorely oppressed and downtrodden,

and I marvel not that they should rebel ; but the saddest thought to me is, that the rebellion is all in vain, and I might have helped them without bloodshed to have won so much more." The tone in which he spoke was infinitely sad and remorseful, and for a time Stephen knew not what to say to comfort him.

He was altogether so much astonished at Harry's words—the glimpse it afforded him of his brother's inner life, his hopes and aspirations, so different from what he had ever supposed the mere fine gentleman, Harry, could entertain, was so surprising, that for a minute he could only whisper again, "Life is not over yet, and God can make our very faults and failures stepping-stones to something higher and better, and we will become fellow-workers with Him."

But Harry could not grasp at the hope held out in these words just yet. "The most I can hope for is not to be quite useless, I trow, and therefore I went to the armourer to-night. I know he succoureth those suspected of holding this heresy, and it may be I may afford him some poor help!"

"And so become a fellow-worker with God!" exclaimed Stephen, grasping his brother's hand. "Thou hast mounted one stepping-stone, I trow ; thou hast set thy foot upon thy pride, to be willing to help these despised citizens. God will help thee, Harry, for thou hast taken the first step in the right path."

CHAPTER XXII.

CONCLUSION.

LADY CLIFFORD'S health became so impaired by the series of shocks caused through the persecution that awoke against the Wycliffeites in 1382, that her husband decided at last to remove her from London for a time at least. The most serious blow fell when the curse of excommunication was solemnly pronounced against two of her brother's friends—Ashton and Hereford—at Paul's Cross, in July.

We can afford to smile at it now as words—mere words, that hurt nobody ; but it was quite otherwise in the days of which we write, when the popular belief vested all the powers of God Himself in the Church, and consequently in her bishops, let their lives be what they might. That this fear of the mighty and mysterious power of the Church was very real and very dreadful, is proved by the fact that Repyngdon—the brave clergyman who had so warmly eulogised Wycliffe and his teachings in his sermons—fainted and failed at the thought of that mysterious curse being pronounced against him ; and, in the presence of the archbishop, abjured as heresy what he had previously taught and still believed. The circumstances, too,

under which this awful curse was delivered, were calculated to strike dismay and terror to the hearts of the timid and imaginative; candles were lighted and suddenly extinguished, a bell was rung and a book closed, and every theatrical accessory likely to impress the audience was made the most of.

Lady Clifford did not go to Paul's Cross herself, but one of her servants did, and went home to her mistress half dazed with horror and consternation, and implored the lady to send for one of the Black Friars to confess the whole household at once.

Lady Clifford was worse the next day, but instead of sending for a confessor, Sir Lewis made immediate arrangements for removing his wife to Meadowlea, where she would at least have some rest from these constantly recurring alarms.

Sir Hugh was only too glad to receive his daughter, and tending her was a welcome task to Margaret, for her grandmother had recently died, and she had sorely missed her, although her death left her more unfettered to pursue the work of transcribing for Dr. Wycliffe.

Here, amid the quiet scenes of her early home, Maud began slowly to regain her health and strength, and gradually forgot her fears for little Madge, who was growing a strong, sturdy girl in the fresh country air.

Sir Lewis Clifford stayed a week with his wife, and then went back to London to watch events, and do what he could to protect those who fell under the archbishop's displeasure. The queen and her mother-in-law were likewise doing all they could to influence the king favourably towards the reviled Lollards—

the name given them by their foes ; but, alas ! they knew that the extravagant young monarch was at his wit's end for money to provide for the daily wants of his enormous household, to say nothing of the jousts and tournaments of which he was so fond. They knew that, to provide for these expensive tastes, Richard had arranged with the archbishop that he should summon the clergy in convocation at the next meeting of parliament, and ask them for a subsidy for the king ; and for this Richard would doubtless be expected to further their aims against Wycliffe and his followers.

The outlook was, therefore, gloomy enough, this autumn of 1382, for all who, like Sir Lewis, had the future of the Reformation at heart, for the clergy knew their power so well, that, without the consent of Parliament, they had succeeded in passing a statute, by which they had the right to command sheriffs to arrest any person whom they might accuse of heresy. The statute had been secretly passed, and even now was only known to a few ; but Sir Lewis Clifford did all in his power to extend this information, and at length succeeded in rousing a strong feeling against it, as a gross infringement of the liberty of the subject.

Parliament, as well as Convocation, was to meet at Oxford this year, and early in November Sir Lewis arrived at Meadowlea, on his way to that city. The following day Stephen arrived from Lutterworth with more MS. for Margaret to copy, and also bringing the news that his master had been summoned to appear before the Convocation at Oxford.

"Will he go?" asked Maud, with whitening lips, all her old terror returning.

"Nay, nay, sweetheart, tremble not so for our champion," said her husband, tenderly and anxiously, as he saw the old terrified look coming back to her face; "the Lord our God can protect him and thee."

"But thou and Stephen?" said Maud, with a gasp.

"Doth not God care for us as well as for thee?" asked her husband, with a smile.

"Yea, indeed He doth; but, oh! Lewis, this Oxenforde is a den of ravening wolves now, I weet!" said the lady, clasping her husband's arm as she spoke.

"We must be cautious for Maud's sake," said Sir Lewis, as he and Stephen were walking together afterwards; "these troubles have quite broken up her health, and she seemeth to have lost all her brave spirit."

"And yet if the trouble she feareth were really to come, she would be brave as a lion, I trow," said Stephen. "Maud is but an example of many others who disquiet themselves over troubles that never come. But hast thou heard that Master Repyngdon is to repeat his abjuration at this meeting of the bishops?" he asked.

Sir Lewis shook his head. He was anxious to hear more particulars concerning Dr. Wycliffe.

"Will he attend this Convocation, think ye?" he asked, anxiously.

"An he be not smitten with this sore sickness again, of a surety he will. He purposeth reaching Oxenforde before the day named, which is the 18th of this same month; and I have promised to meet him. I may

not tarry here over to-morrow, for I would fain have a comfortable lodging in readiness for my master, and so I must journey thither without delay."

"I will come with thee," said Sir Lewis; "and if thy father can spare one or two of the knaves to attend us who know the road, they might tarry awhile in the city, and then bring back letters telling of our welfare, for I weet my Maud will fret herself ill again."

But, strange to say, after her husband and brother had departed, Maud seemed to gather fresh strength.

"It is strange, passing strange," she said to Margaret one day, "but the trial I have lived in dread of is coming closer, and yet I feel it less. The name of 'Lollards' that our foes have lately given us—I can smile at it now—but it made me shiver once. How think you this can be, Madge?" she asked.

Her sister looked at her in some dread. "If, as thou sayest, the trial is coming, God is pouring His strength into thee to prepare thee for it, I trow," said Margaret.

"But I can rest, Madge; I can leave all the future to Him—all the things that used to trouble me, and that I felt could and ought to be managed so much better—I can leave it all now."

The messenger from Oxford was looked for with eager solicitude by all the family at the Hall, but none watched with such anxiety as Margaret; and when at last, near the end of the month, the mud-bespattered horses clattered into the yard, she was at the Hall door to receive the letters before they had time to dismount; and, oh! what a relief it was to see the well-known handwriting both of Stephen and Sir

Lewis, and to hear from the servants that both were quite well.

Sir Hugh had also come forward to meet the messengers, for one of them was his reeve, whom he had sent specially to learn what he could of the doings of parliament, besides the news the letters might contain, and while he was listening to the account of this, Margaret took the letters to her sister.

"They are both well!" she exclaimed, joyfully, pushing aside the arras, and holding up the letters as she went into the sitting-room. But to her horror, Maud, who lay back upon the couch white and rigid, neither spoke nor moved. She dropped the letters, and ran into the corridor, calling her father and her bower maid, who soon came hurrying in. Margaret had raised her sister's head by that time, and was murmuring over her all the old endearing names.

"Send to the monastery for a leech—fetch some burnt feathers!" commanded Sir Hugh, rubbing the pale thin hand that hung down at his side.

Alas! no leechcraft would avail here. The victim of persecution had slipped away, beyond the reach of foe's malice or friend's comfort—Maud, Lady Clifford, was dead!

Sir Hugh was almost frantic when the truth was at last conveyed to him, and Margaret forgot her letters for a time, lost in grief for her sister's sudden death; but when she at length opened and read them, she knew that Stephen's worst fears for his master's safety were at end for the present at least.

Dr. Wycliffe's examination upon the points of doc-

trine impeached, had simply ended in his re-asserting every one of them, and bringing forward proofs from Scripture to maintain his opinion. The assembly of bishops had expected a very different result, for they knew that the Duke of Lancaster had commanded him to yield to the Church upon these points of doctrine; and they were, therefore, wholly unprepared to find that he paid no more regard to the duke, in this particular, than he did to the primate. Instead of humbly submitting, he argued and refuted all the learned doctors who had undertaken the task of proving his heresy. The tone of the letter was very triumphant until near the close, and then Stephen had to tell his sister that neither himself, nor his master, nor any of the "poor priests," would ever be allowed to preach or teach in Oxford again, and that in future they must keep silence concerning these disputed matters, or the sheriffs of the counties would imprison them.

It was with almost a breaking heart that Margaret opened Sir Lewis Clifford's letter to his wife, and but that it might contain news of the doings in parliament important for them to know in the present crisis, she would have laid it unopened in her sister's coffin. As it was, however, she opened it. After affectionate inquiries, and many reassuring messages concerning their welfare, Sir Lewis told of the fulfilment of his hopes, and the accomplishment of the main object of his journey—Parliament had indignantly repealed the statute of the clergy, ordering the sheriffs to arrest heretics, and though not yet formally removed from the statute book, the king had willingly promised that

this should be done. Unfortunately, however, the king was willing to promise anything upon pressure, and equally ready to forget or ignore his promise if it suited his purpose better, and this was an instance of it. By the arts of the clergy this obnoxious statute was never formally repealed, and therefore remained practically in force for ages—a mighty weapon of persecution—the first of those cruel laws enacted to deprive men of all spiritual freedom.

It was winter in heart as well as in nature when Sir Lewis returned from Oxford. The news of his wife's death almost crushed him at first, and he always spoke of her as the first martyr of the Reformation. Alas! how many such domestic tragedies were enacted during the following years none can tell. Their names are not known on earth, but they swell the noble army of martyrs who had fellowship with Him who died to redeem the world.

Sir Hugh did not long survive his daughter. He never got over the shock of her sudden death, and the thought that the persecuting spirit so suddenly developed among the clergy might rob him of his sons as well as his darling Margaret, made the remaining days of his life bitter with apprehension and anxiety. He was sorely disappointed, too, in what looked like the utter failure of all Dr. Wycliffe's efforts at reform.

"Nay, nay, my father," said Stephen one day during the following spring, when Sir Hugh had been talking mournfully of the utter failure of their hopes, "my master is working harder than ever for this same reformation, so thou seest he hath not lost hope. Since

the bishop will not let us speak, we are but the busier writing and transcribing. My master hath now begun to rewrite his lectures delivered at Oxenforde, and many poor priests, who cannot now preach as they once did, are transcribing with all diligence tracts, and dialogues, and portions of the Scripture, that men may have the written Word, an they cannot hear it spoken."

"And thou, my son, what art thou doing?" asked Sir Hugh, anxiously.

Stephen tried to evade the question, for he knew the answer could not fail to distress his father, for he was one of those brave souls who would not be silenced, though he daily ran the risk of being arrested for his temerity and disobedience. "I am never far from Lutterworth," he said, "for, as thou knowest, my master's health is very frail; but, oh, my father, I have learned of late to thank God even for this. Didst thou know that since he appeared at Oxenforde he hath been summoned by the pope to appear before him at Rome? Had he been hale and strong, he would doubtless have complied——"

"Nay, nay, surely he would not have put his head into that lion's jaws?" exclaimed Sir Hugh.

"It sufficeth to know that he cannot," said Stephen, with something like a chuckle; "for should he attempt such a journey he would not live to reach Rome, and so he hath written a courteous letter to the holy father explaining this."

"And think you the bishops will leave him in peace when they know he is so busy writing and preaching at Lutterworth?" asked his father. He was very feeble

now, and full of anxious fears for the safety of his friends. He was anxious, too, about Harry. He knew that he and Sir Lewis Clifford were busying themselves on behalf of those poor Lollards who were comparatively friendless, and he feared lest his son should himself fall into the hands of the archbishop; and his fears were not ill-grounded.

While Stephen was with him, a messenger arrived with the news that Harry had been arrested and imprisoned by order of the Bishop of London, and this information was unfortunately blurted out by an incautious servant in the hearing of his master. It proved to be the knight's death-blow, for he did not live until further news could be obtained from London, but died the next day, another of those unknown martyrs to the cause of Dr. Wycliffe and the English Reformation.

A few days after Harry himself arrived, for by the exertions of Sir Lewis Clifford and the Duke of Lancaster he was released, with a warning not to offend again.

Through the death of his father, and the lonely condition of his sister, Sir Henry Middleton was not likely to prove so troublesome to the Bishop of London again, for he felt it his duty to stay at Meadowlea and protect his own household—more especially as Margaret had undertaken the charge of Maud's little girl until the times became more settled, and her father could claim her. Since his wife's death, Sir Lewis Clifford had been more active than ever in behalf of the despised and persecuted Lollards; but at present the efforts of friends could do little to abate the fierceness of the clergy against them. It may, however,

have convinced them that the reformer still had friends about the court, who would not suffer him to be disturbed with impunity; and thus it was, perhaps, to their vigilance that he owed that peaceful time at Lutterworth.

The crusade preached by the Bishop of Norwich on behalf of Pope Urban against the anti-pope Clement, and their hereditary foes, the French, in 1383, scarcely caused a ripple of discomfort around Lutterworth, although in many places business was suspended, and crops left to rot in the fields, owing to the eagerness with which men rushed off to join the crusading army; for, in addition to the spoils of victory held out before them, indulgences for every form of sin were promised, and even sold for money or jewels. But the indulgence-mongers got little from the neighbourhood of Lutterworth; and we may be sure they roused Wycliffe and his "poor priests" to renewed efforts in writing tracts to combat this traffic in infamy.

Beyond this he was left in peace to teach and minister among his people, and superintend the labours of his poor priests, until Sunday, the 29th of December, 1384, when, as he was attending Divine service in the church at Lutterworth, he was once more seized with paralysis. It was not wholly unexpected, for he had grown very feeble of late, and Stephen had been in close attendance upon him, watching him unseen, and he was at hand now to receive his beloved master in his arms as he staggered forward. He was gently carried out of the church, and the usual remedies applied; but he never recovered consciousness, although he lived until the last day of the year 1384.

Thus died England's grand reformer, John Wycliffe, the man who first planted the seed of that Divine truth, which, after a wintry season of persecution, issued in the glorious harvest of the Reformation two centuries later. By his translation of the Scriptures into English, Wycliffe did more than any other man to form our language, and by the distribution of his tracts and portions of Scripture through his "poor priests," gave an impetus to education, and awoke a love of learning among a class of the community hitherto untouched by these influences—the great middle-class of traders, by whom the future of England was to be so largely controlled. As a champion of civil and religious liberty, he stands second to none in the annals of our history, and we may well be proud that John Wycliffe was an Englishman.

We have only a word to add about his poor priest Stephen, and this may be taken as a type of many of his companions. After his master's death, he devoted himself with renewed energy to the work of distributing copies of the Scriptures, and teaching and preaching wherever he could that Gospel brought to light by Dr. Wycliffe. His brother and sister often begged him to give up these itinerating labours; but to preach the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ was his sole delight, and his Master's cause was dearer than home, dearer than honour, dearer than life!

THE END.



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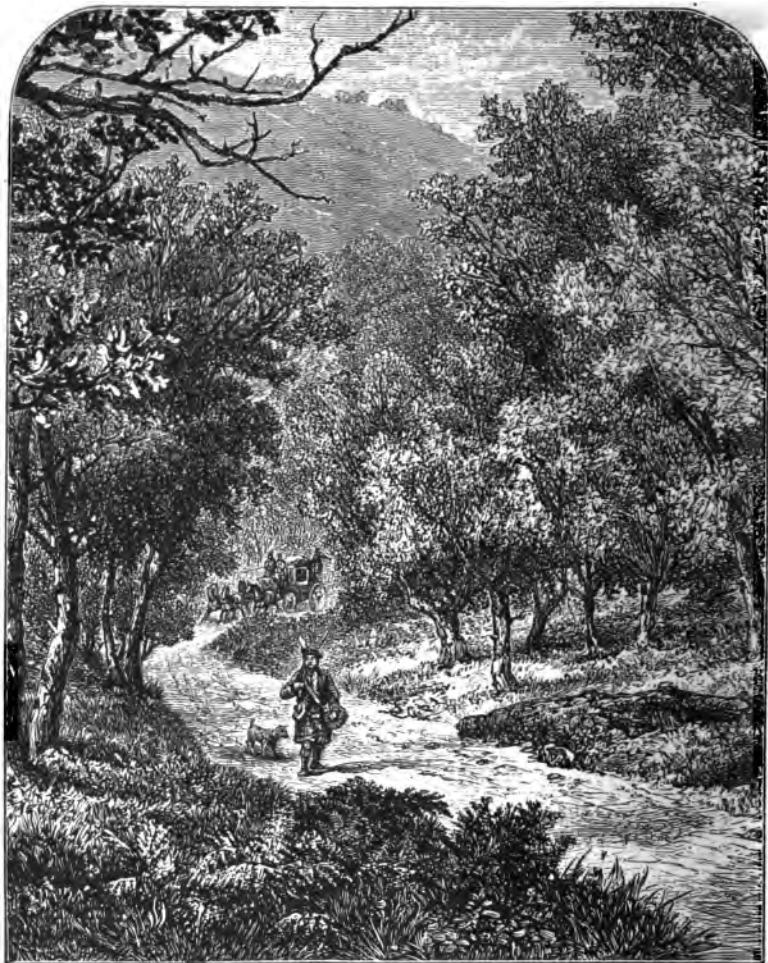
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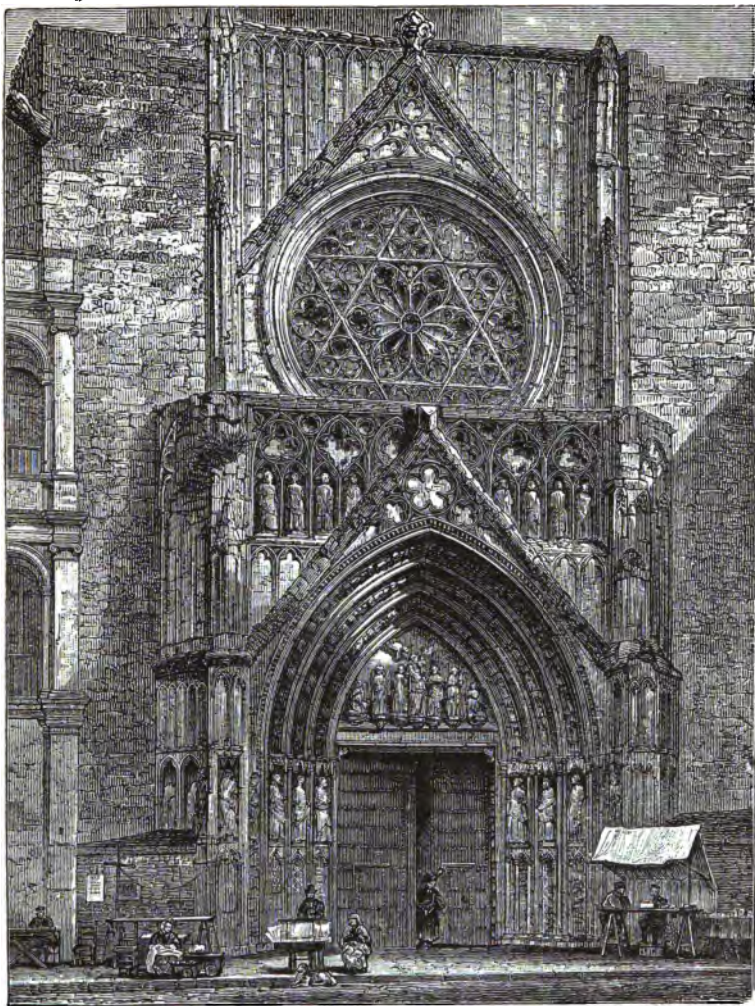
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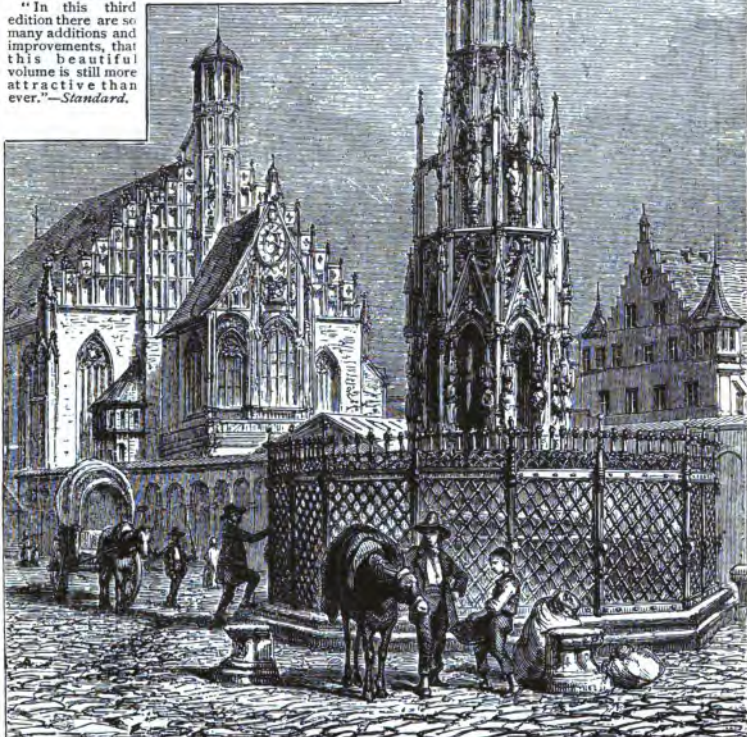
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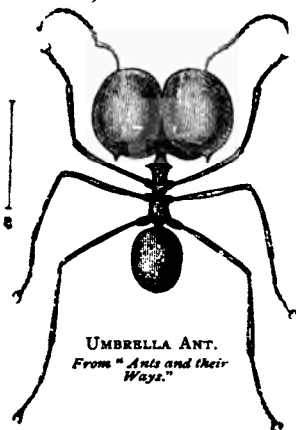
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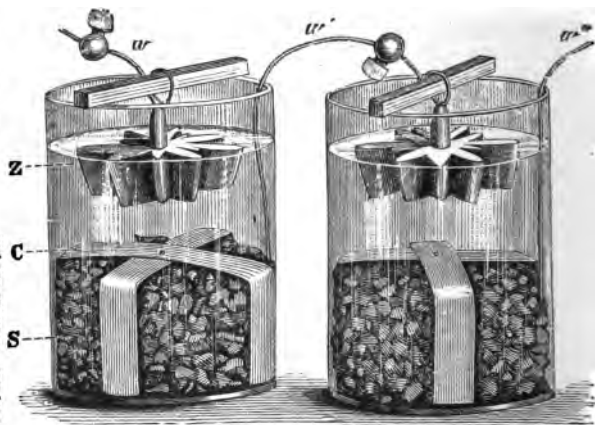
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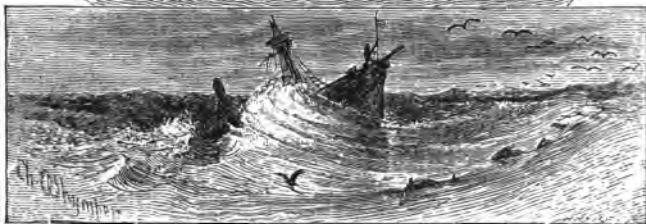
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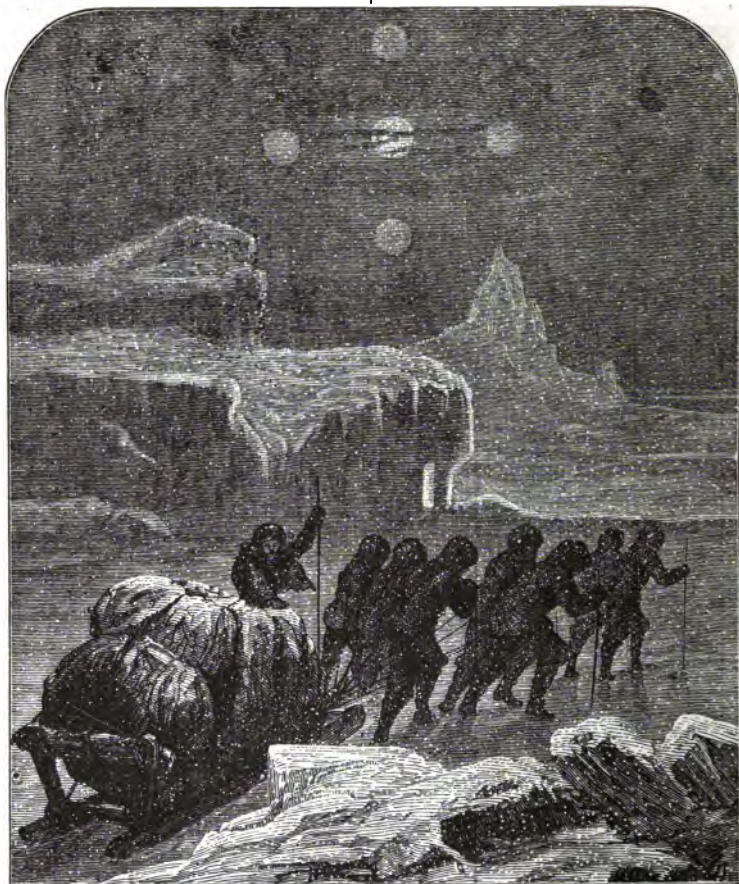
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