

## CHAPTER II

### THE LADY BLANCHE

So I went, with a sore heart, for I remembered that when my father and brothers were drowned, although I was then but a little one, my mother had foreseen it, and I feared much lest it might be thus in her own case also. I loved my mother. She was a stern woman, it was true, with little softness about her, which I think came with her blood, but she had a high heart, and oh! her last words were noble. Yet through it all I was pleased, as any young man would have been, with the gift of the wonderful sword which once had been that of Thorgrimmer, the sea-rover, whose blood ran in my body against which it lay, and I hoped that this day I might have chance to use it worthily as Thorgrimmer did in forgotten battles. Having imagination, I wondered also whether the sword knew that after its long sleep it had come forth again to drink the blood of foes.

Also I was pleased with another thing, namely, that my mother had told me that I should live my life and not die that day by the hand of Frenchmen; and that in my life I should find love, of which to tell truth already I knew a little of a humble sort, for I was a comely youth, and women did not run away from me, or if they did, soon they stopped. I wanted to live my life, I wanted to see great adventures and to win great love. The only part of the business which was not to my taste was that command of my mother's, that I should go to London to sit

in a goldsmith's shop. Still, I had heard that there was much to be seen in London, and at least it would be different from Hastings.

The street outside our doors was crowded with folk, some of the men making their way to the market-place, about whom hung women and children weeping; others, old people, wives and girls and little ones fleeing from the town. I found the two sailormen who had been with me on the boat, waiting for me. They were brawny fellows named Jack Grieves and William Bull, who had been in our service since my childhood, good fishermen and fighters both; indeed one of them, William Bull, had served in the French wars.

"We knew that you were coming, Master, so we bided here for you," said William, who having once been an archer was armed with a bow and a short sword, whereas Jack had only an axe, also a knife such as we used on the smacks for cleaning fish.

I nodded, and we went on to the market-place and joined the throng of men, a vast number of them, who were gathered there to defend Hastings and their homes. Nor were we too soon, for the French ships were already beaching within a few yards of the shore or on it, their draught being but small, while the sailors and men-at-arms were pushing off in small boats or wading to the strand.

There was great confusion in the market-place, for as is common in

England, no preparation had been made against attack though such was always to be feared.

The bailiff ran about shouting orders, as did others, but proper officers were lacking, so that in the end men acted as the fancy took them. Some went down towards the beach and shot with arrows at the Frenchmen. Others took refuge in houses, others stood irresolute, waiting, knowing not which way to turn. I and my two men were with those who went on to the beach where I loosed some arrows from my big black bow, and saw a man fall before one of them.

But we could do little or nothing, for these Frenchmen were trained soldiers under proper command. They formed themselves into companies and advanced, and we were driven back. I stopped as long as I dared, and drawing the sword, Wave-Flame, fought with a Frenchman who was in advance of the others. What is more, making a great blow at his head which I missed, I struck him on the arm and cut it off, for I saw it fall to the ground. Then others rushed up at me and I fled to save my life.

Somehow I found myself being pressed up the steep Castle Hill with a number of Hastings folk, followed by the French. We reached the Castle and got into it, but the old portcullis would not close, and in sundry places the walls were broken down. Here we found a number of women who had climbed for refuge, thinking that the place would be safe. Among these was a beautiful and high-born maiden whom I knew by sight. Her

father was Sir Robert Aleys who, I believe, was then the Warden of the Castle of Pevensey, and she was named the lady Blanche. Once, indeed, I had spoken with her on an occasion too long to tell. Then her large blue eyes, which she knew well how to use, had left me with a swimming head, for she was very fair and very sweet and gracious, with a most soft voice, and quite unlike any other woman I had ever seen, nor did she seem at all proud. Soon her father, an old knight, who had no name for gentleness in the countryside, but was said to be a great lover of gold, had come up and swept her away, asking her what she did, talking with a common fishing churl. This had happened some months before.

Well, there I found her in the Castle, alone it seemed, and knowing me again, which I thought strange, she ran to me, praying me to protect her. More, she began to tell me some long tale, to which I had not time to listen, of how she had come to Hastings with her father, Sir Robert, and a young lord named Deleroy, who, I understood, was some kinsman of hers, and slept there. How, too, she had been separated from them in the throng when they were attempting to return to Pevensey which her father must go to guard, because her horse was frightened and ran away, and of how finally men took her by the arm and brought her to this castle, saying that it was the safest place.

"Then here you must bide, Lady Blanche," I answered, cutting her short.

"Cling to me and I will save you if I can, even if it costs me my life."

Certainly she did cling to me for all the rest of that terrible day, as

will be seen.

From this height we saw Hastings beginning to burn, for the Frenchmen had fired the town in sundry places, and being built of wood, it burnt furiously. Also we saw and heard horrible scenes and sounds of rapine, such as chance in this Christian world of ours where a savage foe finds peaceful folk of another race at his mercy. In the houses people were burnt; in the streets they were being murdered, or worse. Yes, even children were murdered, for afterwards I saw the bodies of some of them.

Awhile later through the wreaths of smoke we perceived companies of the French advancing to attack the Castle. There may have been three hundred of them in all, and we did not count more than fifty men, some of us ill-armed, together with a mob of aged people and many women and children. What had become of the other men I do not know, but orders had been shouted from all quarters, and some had gone this way and some that. Some, too, I think, had fled, lacking leaders.

The French having climbed the hill, began to attack our ill-fenced gateways, bringing up beams of timber to force them in. Those of us who had bows shot some of them, though, their armour being good, for the most part the arrows glanced. But few had bows. Moreover, whenever we showed ourselves they poured such a rain of quarrels and other shafts upon us that we could not face it, lacking mail as we did, and a number of us were killed or wounded. At last they forced the easternmost gate which was the weakest, and got in there and over a place in the wall

were it was broken. We fought them as well as we could; myself I cut down two with the sword, Wave-Flame, hewing right through the helm of one, for the steel of that sword was good. Here, too, Jack Grieves was killed by my side by a pike thrust, and died calling to me to fight on for old England and Hastings town; after which he said something about beer and breathed his last.

The end of it was that those who were left were driven out of the Castle together with the women and children, the murdering French killing every man who fell wounded where he lay, and trying to make prisoner any women they thought young and fair enough. Especially did they seek to capture the lady Blanche because they saw that she was beautiful and of high station. But by good fortune more than aught else, I saved her from this fate.

As it chanced we were among the last to leave the Castle, whence, to tell the truth, I was loath to go, for by now my blood was up, and with a few others fought till I was driven out. I prayed the lady Blanche to run forward with the other women. But she would not, answering that she trusted no one else, but would stay to die with me, as though that would help either of us.

Thus it came about that a tall French knight who had set his eyes on her, outclimbed his fellows upon the slope of the hill, for they were weary and gathering to re-form, and catching her round the middle,

strove to drag her away. I fell on him and we fought. He had fine armour and a shield while I had none, but I held the long sword while he only wielded a battle-axe. I knew that if he could get in a blow with that battle-axe, I was sped, since the bull's hide of my jerkin would never stand against it. Therefore it was my business to keep out of his reach. This, being young and active, for the most part I made shift to do, especially as he could not move very quickly in his mail. The end of it was that I cut him on the arm through a joint in his harness, whereon he rushed at me, swearing French oaths.

I leapt on one side and as he passed, smote with all my strength. The blow fell between neck and shoulder, from behind as it were, and such was the temper of that sword named Wave-Flame that it shored through his mail deep into the flesh beneath, to the backbone as I believe. At least he went down in a heap--I remember the rattle of his armour as he fell, and there lay still. Then we fled on down the steep path, I holding the bloody sword with one hand and Lady Blanche with the other, while she thanked me with her eyes.

At length we were in the town again, running up my own street. On either side of us the houses burned, and behind us came another body of the French. The reek got into our eyes and we stumbled over dead or fainting people.

Looking to the left I caught sight of the elm tree of which I have spoken, that grew in front of our door, and saw that the house behind

it was burning. Yes, and I saw more, for at the attic window, which was open, the flames making an arch round her, sat my mother. Moreover, she was singing for I heard her voice and the wild words she sang, though this was a strange thing for a woman to do in the hour of such a death. Further, she saw and knew me, for she waved her hands to me, then pointed towards the sea, why, I did not guess at the time. I stopped, purposing to try to rescue her though the front of the house was flaming, and the attempt must have ended in my death. But at that moment the roof fell in, causing the fire to spout upwards and outwards. This was the last that I saw of my mother, though afterwards we found her body and gave it burial with those of many other victims.

There was no time to stay, for the conquering French were pouring up the street behind us, shooting as they came and murdering any laggards whom they could catch. On we went up the steep slope of the Minnes Rock. I would have fled on into the open country, but the lady Blanche had no strength left. Twice she sank to the ground, stricken with terror and weariness, and each time prayed me not to leave her; nor indeed did I wish to do so. The end of it was that William Bull and I between us half carried her with much toil to the cave of which I had spoken to my mother. The task was heavy and slow, since always we must scramble over sheer ground. What is more, a party of the French, seeing our plight, followed us. Perhaps some of them guessed who the lady was, for there were many spies in Hastings who might have told them, and desired to capture and hold her to ransom.



At the least they came on after us and a few others, women all of them, who had joined our company, being unable to travel further, or trusting to William Bull and myself to protect them.

We reached the cave, and thrusting the women along it, William and I stood in the mouth and waited. He had no bow and all my arrows were gone save three, but of these I, who was noted for my archery, determined to make the best use I could. So I drew them out, and having strung the bow, sat down to get my breath. On came the French, shouting and jabbering at us to the effect that they would cut our throats and carry off la belle dame to be their sport.

"She shall be mine!" yelled a big fellow with a flattened nose and a wide mouth who was ahead of the others, and not more than fifty yards away.

I rose, and praying my patron, good St. Hubert after whom I was named because I first saw light upon his day, the 23rd of November, to give me skill, I drew the great bow to my ear, aimed, and loosed. Nor did St. Hubert, a lover of fine shooting, fail me in my need, for that arrow rushed out and found its home in the big mouth of the Frenchman, through which it passed, pinning his foul tongue to his neck bone.

Down he went, and cheered by the sight I refitted and loosed at the next. Him, too, the arrow caught, so that he fell almost on the other.

I set the third and last arrow on the string and waited a space. Behind these two was a squat, broad man, a knight I suppose, for he wore armour, and had a shield with a cock painted on it. This man, frightened by the fate of his companions, yet not minded to give up the venture for those in rear of him urged him on, bent himself almost double, and holding the shield over his helm which was closed, so as to protect his head and body, came on at a good pace.

I waited till he was within five-and-twenty yards or so, hoping that the roughness of the ground would cause him to stumble and the shield to shift so that I could get a chance at him behind it. But I did not, so at last, again praying to St. Hubert, I drew the big bow till the string touched my ear, and let drive. The shaft, pointed with tempered steel, struck the shield full in the centre, and by Heaven, pierced it, aye, and the mail behind, aye, and the flesh it covered, so that he, too, got his death.

"A great shot, Master," said William, "that no other bow in Hastings could have sped."

"Not so ill," I answered, "but it is my last. Now we must fight as we can with sword and axe until we be sped."

William nodded, and the women in the cave began to wail while I unstrung my bow and set it in its case, from habit I think, seeing that I never hoped to look upon it again.

Just then from the French ships in the harbour there came a great blaring of trumpets giving some alarm, and the Frenchmen of a sudden, ceasing from their attack, turned and ran towards the shore. I stepped out of the cave with William and looked. There on the sea, drawing near from the east before a good wind, I saw ships, and saw, too, that from their masts flew the pennons of England, for the golden leopards gleamed in the sun.

"It is our fleet, William," I said, "come to talk with these French."

"Then I would that it had come sooner," answered William. "Still, better now than not at all."

Thus were we saved, through Hamo de Offyngton, the Abbot of Battle Abbey, or so I was told afterwards, who collected a force by land and sea and drove off the French after they had ravaged the Isle of Wight, attacked Winchelsea, and burned the greater part of Hastings. So it came about that in the end these pirates took little benefit by their wickedness, since they lost sundry ships with all on board, and others left in such haste that their people remained on shore where they were slain by the mob that gathered as soon as it was seen that they were deserted, helped by a company of the Abbot's men who had marched from Battle. But with all this I had nothing to do who now that the fight

was over, felt weak as a child and could think of little save that I had seen my mother burning.

Presently, however, that happened which woke me from my grief and caused my blood which had grown sluggish to run again. For when she knew that she was safe the lady Blanche came out of the cave and addressed me as I stood there leaning against the rock with the red sword Wave-Flame in my hand, as I had drawn it to make ready for the last fight to the death. All sorts of sweet names she called me--a hero, her deliverer, and I know not what besides.

In the end, as I made no answer, being dazed, also hurt by an axe blow on the breast which I had not felt before, dealt by that Frenchman whom I slew near the Castle, she did more. Throwing her arms about me she kissed me thrice, on either cheek and on the lips, doubtless because she was overwrought, and in her thankfulness forgot her maidenly reserve, though as William Bull said afterwards, this forgetfulness did not cause her to kiss him who had also helped her up the hill.

Those kisses were like wine to me, for it is strange how, if we love her, by the decree of Nature the touch of a beautiful woman's lips, felt for the first time, affects us in our youth. Whatever else we forget, that we always remember, however false those lips afterwards be proved. For then the wax is soft and the die sinks deep, so deep that no after-heats can melt its stamp and no fretting wear it out while we live beneath the sun.

Now my young blood being awakened, I was minded to return those kisses, and began to do so with a Jew's interest, when I heard a rough voice swearing many strange oaths, and heard also the other women who had sheltered with us in the cave begin to titter, for the moment forgetting all their private woes, as those of their sex will do when there is kissing in the wind.

"God's blood!" said the rough voice, "who is this that handles my daughter as though they had been but an hour wed? Take those lips of yours from her, fellow, or I'll cut them from your chops."

I looked round astonished, to see Sir Robert Aleys mounted on a grey horse, and followed by a company of men-at-arms who appeared to be under the command of a well-favoured, dark-eyed young captain with long hair, and dressed more wondrously than any man I had ever seen before. Had he put on Joseph's coat over his mail, he could not have worn more colours, and I noted that the toes of his shoes curled up so high that I wondered however he worked them through his stirrups, and what would happen to him if by chance he were unhorsed.

Being taken aback I made no answer, but William Bull, who, if a rough fellow, had a tongue in his head and a ready wit, spoke up for me.

"If you want to know," he said in his Sussex drawl, "I'll tell you who he is, Sir Robert Aleys. He is my worshipful master, Hubert of Hastings,

ship-owner, householder, and trader of this town. Or at least he was these things, but now it seems that his ships and house are burnt and his mother with them; also that there will be no trade in Hastings for many a day."

"Mayhap," answered Sir Robert, adding other oaths, "but why does he buss my daughter?"

"Perchance because he must give as good as he got, which is a law among honest merchants, noble Sir Robert. Or perchance because he has a better right to buss her than any man alive, seeing that but for him, by now she would be but stinking clay, or a Frenchman's leman."

Here the fine young captain cut in, saying,

"Whatever else this worshipful trader may need, he does not lack a trumpeter."

"That is so, my Lord Deleroy," replied William, unmoved, "for when I find a good song I like to sing it. Go now and look at those three men who lie yonder on the slope, and see whether the arrows in them bear my master's mark. Go also and look upon the Castle hill and find a knight with his head well-nigh hewn from his shoulders, and see whether yonder sword fits into the cut. Aye, and at others that I could tell you of, slain, every one of them, to save this fair lady. Aye, go you whose garments are so fine and unstained, and then come back and talk of

trumpeters."

"Pish!" said my Lord Deleroy with a shrug of his shoulders, "a lady who is over-wrought and hangs to some common fellow, like one who kisses the feet of a wooden saint that she thinks has saved her from calamity!"

At these words I, who had been listening like a man in a dream, awoke, as it were, for they stung me. Moreover, I had heard that this fine Deleroy was one of those who owed his place and rank to the King's favour, as he did his high name, being, it was reported, by birth but a prince's bastard sprung from some relative of Sir Robert whom therefore he called cousin.

"Sir," I said, "you know best whether I am more common than you are. Let that be. At least I hold in my hand the sword of one who begat my forefather hundreds of years ago, a certain Thorgrimmer who was great in his time. Now I have had my fill of fighting to-day, and you, doubtless through no fault of your own, have had none; you also are clad in mail and I, a common fellow, have none. Deign then to descend from that horse and take a turn with me though I be tired, and thus prove my commonness upon my body. Of your nobility do this, seeing that after all we are of one flesh."

Now, stung in his turn, he made as though he would do what I prayed, when for the first time, after glancing at her father who sat still--puzzled, it would seem--the lady Blanche spoke.

"Be not mad, Cousin," she said. "I tell you that this gentleman has saved my life and honour, twice at least to-day. Is it wonderful, then, if I thanked him in the best fashion that a woman can, and thus brought your insults on him?"

He hesitated, though one of his curled-up shoes was out of the stirrup, when suddenly Sir Robert broke in in his big voice, saying:

"God's truth, Cousin, I think that you will do well to leave this young cock alone, since I like not the look of that red spur of his," and he glanced at the sword Wave-Flame. "Though he be weary, he may have a kick or two in him yet."

Then he turned to me and added:

"Sir, you have fought well; many a man has earned knighthood for less, and if a fair maid thanked you in her own fashion, you are not to blame. I, her father, also thank you and wish you all good fortune till we meet again. Farewell. Daughter, make shift to share this horse with me, and let us away out of this stricken town to Pevensey, where perchance it will please those French to call to-morrow."

A minute later they were gone, and I noted with a pang that as they went the lady Blanche, having waved her good-bye to me, talked fast to her cousin Deleroy and that he held her hand to steady her upon her father's



horse.