

## CHAPTER III

### HUBERT COMES TO LONDON

When the lady Blanche was out of sight, followed by the women who had sheltered with us in the cave, William and I went to a stream we knew of not far away and drank our fill. Then we walked to the three whom I had shot with my big bow, hoping to regain the arrows, for I had none left. This, however, could not be done though all the men were dead, for one of the shafts, the last, was broken, and the other two were so fixed in flesh and bone that only a surgeon's saw would loose them.

So we left them where they were, and before the men were buried many came to marvel at the sight, thinking it a wonderful thing that I should have killed these three with three arrows, and that any bow which arm might bend could have driven the last of them through an iron shield and a breastplate behind it.

This armour, I should tell, William took for himself, since it was of his size. Also on the morrow, returning to the Castle Hill, I stripped the knight whom I had slain with the sword, Wave-Flame, of his splendid Milan mail, whereof the plastron, or breast-plate, was inlaid with gold, having over it a camail of chain to cover the joints, through which my good sword had shorn into his neck. The cognizance on his shield strangely enough was three barbed arrows, but what was the name of the knight who bore it I never learned. This mail, which must have

cost a great sum, the Bailiff of Hastings granted me to keep, since I had slain its wearer and borne myself well in the fight. Moreover, I took the three arrows for my own cognizance, though in truth I had no right to any, being in those days but a trader. (Little did I know then how well this mail was to serve me in the after years.)

By now night was coming on, and as we could see from the cave mouth that the part of Hastings which lies towards the village of St. Leonards seemed to have escaped the fire, thitherward we went by the beach to avoid the heat and falling timbers in the burning town. On our way we met others and from them heard all that had befallen. It would seem that the French loss in life was heavier than our own, since many of them were cut off when they tried to fly to their ships, and some of these could not be floated from the beach or were rammed and sunk with all aboard by the English vessels. But the damage done to Hastings was as much as could scarcely be made good in a generation, for the most of it was burnt or burning. Also many, like my own mother, had perished in the fire, being sick or aged or in childbed, or for this reason and that forgotten and unable to move. Indeed on the beach were hundreds of folk in despair, nor was it only the women and children who wept that evening.

For my part, with William I went beyond the burning to the house of a certain old priest who was my confessor, and the friend of my father before me, and there we found food and slept, he returning thanks to God for my escape and offering me consolation for the loss of my mother and

goods.

I rested but ill that night, as those do who are over-weary. Moreover, this had been my first taste of battle, and again and again I saw those men falling before my sword and arrows. Very proud was I to have slain them, wicked ravishers as they were, and very glad that from my boyhood I had practised myself with sword and bow till I could fence with any, and was perhaps the most skilled marksman in Hastings, having won the silver arrow at the butts at the last meeting, and from archers of all ages. Yet the sight of their deaths haunted me who remembered how well their fate might have been my own, had they got in the first shot or blow.

Where had they gone to, I wondered? To the priest's Heaven or Hell? Were they now telling their sins to some hard-faced angel while he checked the count from his book, reminding them of many that they had forgotten? Or were they fast asleep for ever and ever as a shrewd thinker whom I knew had told me secretly he was sure would be the fate of all of us, whatever the priests might teach and believe. And where was my mother whom I had loved and who loved me well, although outwardly she was so stern a woman, my mother whom I had seen burned alive, singing as she burned? Oh! it was a vile world, and it seemed strange that God should cause men and women to be born that they might come to such cruel ends. Yet who were we to question His decrees of which we knew neither the beginning nor the finish?

Anyway, I was glad I was not dead, for now that all was over I trembled and felt afraid, which I had never done during the fighting, even when my hour seemed very near.

Lastly there was this high-born lady, Blanche Aleys, with whom fortune had thrown me so strangely that day. Those blue eyes of hers had pierced my heart like darts, and do what I would I might not rid my mind of the thought of her, or my ears of the sound of her soft voice, while her kisses seemed still to burn upon my lips. It wrung me to think that perhaps I should never see her again, or that if I did I might not speak with her, being so far beneath her in condition, and having already earned the wrath of her father, and, as I guessed, the jealousy of that scented cousin of hers whom they said the King loved like a brother.

What had my mother told me? To leave this place and go to London, there to find my uncle, John Grimmer, goldsmith and merchant, who was my godfather, and to ask him to take me into his business. I remembered this uncle of mine, for some seven or eight years before, when I was a growing lad, because there was a plague in London he had come down to Hastings to visit us. He only stayed a week, however, because he said that the sea air tied up his stomach and that he would rather risk the plague with a good stomach than leave it behind him with a bad one--though I think it was his business he thought of, not his stomach.

He was a strange old man, not unlike my mother, but with a nose more hooked, small dark eyes, and a bald head on which he set a cap of

velvet. Even in the heat of summer he was always cold and wore a frayed fur robe, complaining much if he came into a draught of air. Indeed he looked like a Jew, though a good Christian enough, and laughed about it, because he said that this appearance of his served him well in his trade, since Jews were always feared, and it was held to be impossible to overreach them.

For the rest I only recalled that he examined me as to my book learning which did not satisfy him, and went about valuing all our goods and fishing-boats, showing my mother how we were being cheated and might earn more than we did. When he departed he gave me a gold piece and said that Life was nothing but vanity, and that I must pray for his soul when he was dead as he was sure it would need such help, also that I ought to put the gold piece out to interest. This I did by buying with it a certain fierce mastiff dog I coveted that had been brought on a ship from Norway, which dog bit some great man in our town, who hauled my mother before the bailiff about it and caused the poor beast to be killed, to my great wrath.

Now that I came to think of it, I had liked my Uncle John well enough although he was so different from others. Why should I not go to him? Because I did not wish to sit in a shop in London, I who loved the sea and the open air; also because I feared he might ask me what I had done with that gold piece and make a mock of me about the dog. Yet my mother had bidden me go, and it was her last command to me, her dying words which it would be unlucky to disobey. Moreover, our boats and house

were burnt and I must work hard and long before these could be replaced. Lastly, in London I should see no more of the lady Blanche Aleys, and there could learn to forget the lights in her blue eyes. So I determined that I would go, and at last fell asleep.

Next morning I made my confession to the old priest that, amongst other matters, he might shrive me of the blood which I had shed, though this he said needed no forgiveness from God or man, being, as I think, a stout Englishman at heart. Also I took counsel with him as to what I should do, and he told me it was my duty to obey my mother's wishes, since such last words were often inspired from on high and declared the will of Heaven. Further he pointed out that I should do well to avoid the lady Blanche Aleys who was one far above me in degree, the following of whom might bring me to trouble, or even to death; moreover, that I might mend my broken fortunes through the help of my uncle, a very rich man as he had heard, to whom he would write a letter about me.

Thus this matter was settled.

Still some days went by before I left Hastings, since first I must wait until the ashes of our house were cool enough to search in them for my mother's body. Those who found her at length said that she was not so much burned as might have been expected, but as to this I am uncertain, since I could not bring myself to look upon her who desired to remember her as she had been in life. She was buried by the side of my father, who was drowned, in the churchyard of St. Clement's, and when all had

gone away I wept a little on her grave.

The rest of that day I spent making ready for my journey. As it chanced when the house was burnt the outbuildings which lay on the farther side of the yard behind escaped the fire, and in the stable were two good horses, one a grey riding-gelding and the other a mare that used to drag the nets to the quay and bring back the fish, which horses, although frightened and alarmed, were unharmed. Also there was a quantity of stores, nets, salt, dried fish in barrels, and I know not what besides. The horses I kept, but all the rest of the gear, together with the premises, the ground on which the house had stood, and the other property I made over to William, my man, who promised me to pay me their value when he could earn it in better times.

Next morning I rode away for London upon the grey horse, loading the armour of the knight I had killed and such other possessions as remained to me upon the mare which I led with a rope. Save William there was none to say me good-bye, for the misery in Hastings was so great that all were concerned with their own affairs or in mourning their dead. I was not sorry that it fell out thus, since I was so full of sadness at leaving the place where I was born and had lived all my life, that I think I should have shed tears if any who had been my friends had spoken kind words to me, which would have been unmanly. Never had I felt so lonely as when from the high ground I gazed back to the ruins of Hastings over which still hung a thin pall of smoke. My courage seemed to fail me altogether; I looked forward to the future with fear,

believing that I had been born unlucky, that it held no good for me who probably should end my days as a common soldier or a fisherman, or mayhap in prison or on the gallows. From childhood I had suffered these fits of gloom, but as yet this was the blackest of them that I had known.

At length, the sun that had been hidden shone out and with its coming my temper changed. I remembered that I who might so easily have been dead, was sound, young, and healthy, that I had sword, bow, and armour of the best, also twenty or more of gold pieces, for I had not counted them, in the bag which my mother gave me with Wave-Flame. Further, I hoped that my uncle would befriend me, and if he did not, there were plenty of captains engaged in the wars who might be glad of a squire, one who could shoot against any man and handle a sword as well as most.

So putting up a prayer to St. Hubert after my simple fashion, I pushed on blithely to the crest of a long rise and there came face to face with a gay company who, hawk on wrist and hound at heel, were, I guessed, on their way to hunt in the Pevensey marshes. While they were still a little way off I knew these to be no other than Sir Robert Aleys, his daughter Blanche, and the King's favourite, young Lord Deleroy, with their servants, and was minded to turn aside to avoid them. Then I remembered that I had as much right to the King's Highway as they, and my pride aiding me, determined to ride on taking no note of them, unless first they took note of me. Also they knew me, for my ears being very sharp, I heard Sir Robert say in his big voice:



"Here comes that young fisherman again. Pass him in silence, Daughter"; heard, too, Lord Deleroy drawl it, "It seems that he has been gathering gear from the slain, and like a good chapman bears it away for secret sale."

Only the lady Blanche answered neither the one nor the other, but rode forward with her eyes fixed before her, pretending to talk to the hawk upon her wrist, and now that she was rested and at ease, looking even more beautiful than she had done on the day of the burning.

So we met and passed, I glancing at them idly and guiding my horses to the side of the road. When there were perhaps ten yards between us I heard Lady Blanche cry:

"Oh, my hawk!" I looked round to see that the falcon on her wrist had in some way loosed itself, or been loosed, and being hooded, had fallen to the ground where one of the dogs was trying to catch and kill it. Now there was great confusion, the eyes of all being fixed upon the hawk and the dog, in the midst of which the lady Blanche very quietly turned her head, and lifting her hand as though to see how the hawk had fallen from it, with a swift movement laid her fingers against her lips and threw a kiss to me.

As swiftly I bowed back and went on my way with a beating heart. For a few moments I was filled with joy, since I could not mistake the meaning

of this signalled kiss. Then came sorrow like an April cloud, since my wound which was in the way of healing was all re-opened. I had begun to forget the lady Blanche, or rather by an effort of the will, to thrust her from my thought, as my confessor had bidden me. But now on the wings of that blown kiss thither she had flown back again, not to be frightened out for many a day.

That night I slept at an inn at Tonbridge, a comfortable place where the host stared at the gold piece from the bag which I tendered in payment, and at first would not take what was due to him out of it, because it bore the head of some ancient king. However, in the end a merchant of Tonbridge who came in for his morning ale showed him that it was good, so that trouble passed.

About two in the afternoon I came to Southwark, a town that to me seemed as big as Hastings before it was burned, where was a fine inn called the Tabard at which I stopped to bait my horses and to take a bite and drink of ale. Then I rode on over the great Thames where floated a multitude of ships and boats, crossing it by London Bridge, a work so wonderful that I marvelled that it could be made by the hand of man, and so broad that it had shops on either side of the roadway, in which were sold all sorts of merchandise. Thence I inquired my way to Cheapside, and came there at last thrusting a path through a roaring multitude of people, or so it seemed to me who never before had seen so many men and women gathered together, all going on their way and, it would appear, ignorant of each other.

Here I found a long and crowded thoroughfare with gabled houses on either side in which all kinds of trades were carried on. Down this I wandered, being cursed at more than once because my pack mare, growing frightened, dragged away from me and crossed the path of carts which had to stop till I could pull her free. After the third of these tangles I halted by the side of the footway behind a wain with barrels on it, and looked about me bewildered.

To my left was a house somewhat set back from the general line that had a little patch of garden ground in front of it in which grew some untended and thriftless-looking shrubs. This house seemed to be a place of business because from an iron fastened to the front of it hung a board on which was painted an open boat, high at the prow and stern, with a tall beak fashioned to the likeness of a dragon's head and round shields all down the rail.

While I was staring at this sign and wondering emptily what kind of a boat it was and of what nation were the folk who had sailed in her, a man came down the garden path and leaned upon the gate, staring in turn at me. He was old and strange-looking, being clad in a rusty gown with a hood to it that was pulled over his head, so that I could only see a white, peaked beard and a pair of brilliant black eyes which seemed to pierce me as a shoemaker's awl pierces leather.

"What do you, young man," he asked in a high thin voice, "cumbering my

gate with those nags of yours? Would you sell that mail you have on the pack-horse? If so I do not deal in such stuff, though it seems good of its kind. So get on with it elsewhere."

"Nay, sir," I answered, "I have naught to sell who in this hive of traders seek one bee and cannot find him."

"Hive of traders! Truly the great merchants of the Cheap would be honoured. Have they stung you, then, already, young bumpkin from the countryside, for such I write you down? But what bee do you seek? Stay, now, let me guess. Is it a certain old knave named John Grimmer, who trades in gold and jewels and other precious things and who, if he had his deserts, should be jail?"

"Aye, aye, that's the man," I said.

"Surely he also will be honoured," exclaimed the old fellow with a cackle. "He's a friend of mine and I will tell him the jest."

"If you would tell me where to find him it would be more seasonable."

"All in good time. But first, young sir, where did you get that fine armour? If you stole it, it should be better hid."

"Stole it!" I began in wrath. "Am I a London chapman----?"

"I think not, though you may be before all is done, for who knows what vile tricks Fortune will play us? Well, if you did not steal it, mayhap you slew the wearer and are a murderer, for I see black blood on the steel."

"Murderer!" I gasped.

"Aye, just as you say John Grimmer is a knave. But if not, then perchance you slew the French knight who wore it on Hastings Hill, ere you loosed the three arrows at the mouth of the cave near Minnes Rock."

Now I gaped at him.

"Shut your mouth, young man, lest those teeth of yours should fall out. You wonder how I know? Well, my friend John Grimmer, the goldsmith knave, has a magic crystal which he purchased from one who brought it from the East, and I saw it in that crystal."

As he spoke, as though by chance he pushed back the hood that covered his head, revealing a wrinkled old face with a mocking mouth which drooped at one corner, a mouth that I knew again, although many years had passed since I looked upon it as a boy.

"You are John Grimmer!" I muttered.

"Yes, Hubert of Hastings, I am that knave himself. And now tell me, what

did you do with the gold piece I gave you some twelve summers gone?"

Then I was minded to lie, for I feared this old man. But thinking better of it, I answered that I had spent it on a dog. He laughed outright and said:

"Pray that it is not an omen and that you may not follow the gold piece to the dogs. Well, I like you for speaking the truth when you are tempted to do otherwise. Will you be pleased to shelter for a while beneath the roof of John Grimmer, the merchant knave?"

"You mock me, sir," I stammered.

"Perhaps, perhaps! But there's many a true word spoken in jest; for if you do not know it now you will learn it afterwards that we are all knaves, each in his own fashion, who if we do not deceive others, at least deceive ourselves, and I perhaps more than most. Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."

Then, waiting for no reply, he drew a silver whistle from under his dusty robe and blew it, whereon--so swiftly that I marvelled whether he were waiting--a stout-built serving man appeared to whom he said:

"Take these horses to the stable and treat them as though they were my own. Unload the pack beast, and when it has been cleaned, set the mail and the other gear upon it in the room that has been made ready for this

young master, Hubert of Hastings, my nephew."

Without a word the man led off the horses.

"Be not afraid," chuckled John Grimmer, "for though I am a knave, dog does not eat dog and what is yours is safe with me and those who serve me. Now enter," and he led the way into the house, opening the iron-studded oak door with a key from his pouch.

Within was a shop where I saw precious things such as furs and gold ornaments lying about.

"The crumbs to catch the birds, especially the ladybirds," he said with a sweep of his hand, then took me through the shop into a passage and thence to a room on the right. It was not a large room but more wonderfully furnished than any I had ever seen. In the centre was a table of black oak with cunningly carved legs, on which stood cups of silver and a noble centre piece that seemed to be of gold. From the ceiling, too, hung silver lamps that already had been lit, for the evening was closing in, and gave a sweet smell. There was a hearth also with what was rare, a chimney, upon which burned a little fire of logs, while the walls were hung with tapestries and brodered silks.

Whilst I stared about me, my uncle took off his cloak beneath which he was clothed in some rich but rather threadbare stuff, only retaining the velvet skullcap that he wore. Then he bade me do the same, and when I

had laid my outer garment aside, looked me all over in the lamplight.

"A proper young man," he muttered to himself, "and I'd give all I have to be his age and like him. I suppose those limbs and sinews of his came from his father, for I was ever thin and spare, as was my father before me. Nephew Hubert, I have heard all the tale of your dealings with the Frenchmen, on whom be God's curse, at Hastings yonder; and I say that I am proud of you, though whether I shall stay so is another matter. Come hither."

I obeyed, and taking me by my curling hair with his delicate hand, he drew down my head and kissed me on the brow, muttering, "Neither chick nor child for me and only this one left of the ancient blood. May he do it honour."

Then he motioned to me to be seated and rang a little silver bell that stood upon the table. As in the case of the man without, it was answered instantly from which I judged that Master Grimmer was well served. Before the echoes of the bell died away a door opened, the tapestry swung aside, and there appeared two most comely serving maids, tall and well-shaped both of them, bearing food.

"Pretty women, Nephew, no wonder that you look at them," he said when they had gone away to fetch other things, "such as I like to have about me although I am old. Women for within and men for without, that is Nature's law, and ill will be the day when it is changed. Yet beware of



pretty women, Nephew, and I pray you kiss not those as you did the lady Blanche Aleys at Hastings, lest it should upset my household and turn servants into mistresses."

I made no answer, being confounded by the knowledge that my uncle showed of me and my affairs, which afterwards I discovered he had, in part at any rate, from the old priest, my confessor, who had written to commend me to him, telling my story and sending the letter by a King's messenger, who left for London on the morrow of the Burning. Nor did he wait for any, for he bade me sit down and eat, plying me with more meats than I could swallow, all most delicately dressed, also with rare wines such as I had never tasted, which he took from a cupboard where they were kept in curious flasks of glass. Yet as I noted, himself he ate but little, only picking at the breast of a fowl and drinking but the half of a small silver goblet filled with wine.

"Appetite, like all other good things, for the young," he said with a sigh as he watched my hearty feasting. "Yet remember, Nephew, that if you live to reach it, a day will come when yours will be as mine is. Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher, all is vanity!"

At length, when I could eat no more, again he rang the silver bell and those fair waiting girls dressed alike in green appeared and cleared away the broken meats. After they were gone he crouched over the fire rubbing his thin hands to warm them, and said suddenly:

"Now tell me of my sister's death and all the rest of your tale."

So as well as I was able I told him everything from the hour when I had first sighted the French fleet on board my fishing-boat to the end.

"You are no fool," he said when I had finished, "who can talk like any clerk and bring things that have happened clearly to the listener's eye, which I have noted few are able to do. So that's the story. Well, your mother had a great heart, and she made a great end, such an one as was loved of our northern race, and that even I, the old merchant knave, desire and shall not win, who doubtless am doomed to die a cow's death in the straw. Pray the All-Father Odin--nay, that is heresy for which I might burn if you or the wenches told it to the priests--pray God, I mean, that He may grant you a better, as He did to old Thorgrimmer, if the tale be true, Thorgrimmer whose sword you wear and have wielded shrewdly, as that French knight knows in hell to-day."

"Who was Odin?" I asked.

"The great god of the North. Did not your mother tell you of him? Nay, doubtless she was too good a Christian. Yet he lives on, Nephew. I say that Odin lives in the blood of every fighting man, as Freya lives in the heart of every lad and girl who loves. The gods change their names, but hush! hush! talk not of Odin and of Freya, for I say that it is

heresy, or pagan, which is worse. What would you do now? Why came you to London?"

"Because my mother bade me and to seek my fortune."

"Fortune--what is fortune? Youth and health are the best fortune, though, if they know how to use it, those who have wealth as well may go further than the rest. Also beauteous things are pleasant to the sight and there is joy in gathering them. Yet at the last they mean nothing, for naked we came out of the blackness and naked we return there. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!"