

One

M. de Guyenne

1

The children had been sent to play in the herber with Kate Puncherdown. The damsel hired to serve the youngest of four nobly born imps was glad to escape from indoor tasks on a bright June day, but she thought it due to her dignity to tell Agnes Rokster that it did not lie within her duty to wait upon the Lord John. Agnes said: 'I am sure it is never my lording who makes unease in the nursery! You may take him to oblige me.'

'You may take him because you are bid!' said Johanna Waring.

'Oh, well, to oblige *you*, Agnes – !' said Kate.

Johanna resented this, and took an unthinking revenge. 'And if I were you,' she said disastrously, 'I would not let my lord Humfrey go a step without you hold his leading-strings, for he looks so baggingly, poor sweeting, that I dread to see him walk into a wall and break his sely nose!'

This was importable provocation. My lord Humfrey had an irregularity in his left eye, but to say that he squinted was a piece of wicked despite. My lord Humfrey – he was not two years old – was a child of singular promise: intelligent, well grown, and (Kate said significantly) so lusty that he had never caused his mother to feel an hour's anxiety.

The rush of colour to Johanna's cheeks should have told Kate that it was needless for her to add: 'What a pity that my lord Harry should be so sickly, and he the eldest!'

3

It was fortunate that the nursery-tower lay at some distance from the Countess of Derby's chamber, for the jangle of strife would not have pleased her. But the Lady Blanche's nurse, swaddling the infant in fresh bands; and Johanna Donnesmere, who had charge of my lord Thomas, listened to the quarrel with unshadowed enjoyment, for each knew herself to be unassailable. No one could find fault with the fair babe in Isobel Staines's lap; and no one could deny that of all the Lancaster brood my lord Thomas was the stoutest as he was the most well visaged. From the day that he had come fighting into the world (so unlike the Lord Harry, who had had to be slapped before he would draw breath!) he had not suffered a day's illness. My lord Thomas's nurse had never been obliged to sit through a distressful night because a fond grandparent had stuffed her charge with marchpane. While my lord Harry retched and retched, my lord Thomas, more than a year his junior, slept soundly beside him, no more disturbed by a surfeit of doucets than by a tumble from his pony. The worst anyone could say of my lord Thomas was that his was not an influence for peace in the nurseries; and not the most jealous nurse could pretend that a hot temper and a determination to have his own way were characteristics to be regarded with anything but pride.

When everything that could possibly be said in disparagement of one boy of seven and one infant who had just learned to walk out of leading-strings had been uttered, the quarrel ended, and Kate took the children into the garden, carrying Humfrey down the newel-stair, and giving John her hand to hold.

The inner court was flooded with sunshine, and seemed oven-hot after the cool of the castle. It was almost surrounded by buildings, so that there was not enough stir in the air even to ruffle Kate's coif. Most of these buildings were new, including those on the south side of the court, which housed the family. Indeed, neither the Chapel, situated towards the base-court to the east, nor the Great Hall, occupying most of the western side, were quite finished. Masons and dauberers were always at work; and the ninety-foot front of the Hall was still masked by a

scaffolding. Behind this, the walls, like the rest of the castle, glowed pink in the sunlight. The old Hall had looked much like the Keep, which towered at the north-east angle of the court, and had been built hundreds of years before, when even kings' palaces were lit only by slit windows; but the new Hall was quite a different style of building, with an oriel, and four other windows with pointed arches and many lights. They were richly ornamented; and ever since the family had removed from Peterborough to Kenilworth the Countess's ladies had not ceased to complain that they could hear the 'chip-chip' of the masons' hammers even in their dreams. The nurses were not behindhand with their grutchings. It was predicted that while the Lady Blanche lost her sleep the lordings would break their necks, clambering over the scaffolding, and losing their footholds. But the Lady Blanche slept through the worst of the hammering; and although the lordings fulfilled the expectations of those who knew them best by swarming all over the scaffolding, and driving every honest craftsman out of his five wits by the pertinacity of their questions, not one of them had yet been picked up lifeless in the court.

The lordings loved Kenilworth: loved it so much that throughout their lives it remained in their hearts a place of happiness, rosy-hued, and soaked in sunshine.

2

To reach the herber, which lay beyond the inner curtain wall, the little party had to pass the base of the Grand Staircase, which led up to the door into the Great Hall, traverse the kitchen courtyard, and go through a postern. It took time to accomplish the journey, since Kate allowed herself to be detained in the kitchen-court by a man-at-arms in the blue-and-white livery of the family; but the herber was reached at last, and my lord Humfrey set upon his feet. Too young to be interested in the disports of his brothers, he toddled off on some play of his own,

and was soon happily engaged fast by the Swan Tower, a lookout built in the angle of the barbican. John paid no heed to his away-going, but squatted down with the toy he had found in the depths of a hutch in the nursery.

It was a fascinating toy, originally one of a pair, given to Thomas by Cousin Richard, the King: two puppets, clad in armour, each holding in one hand a sword and in the other a buckler. The limbs were jointed, and there were strings attached to them, so that if you learned to manipulate them cunningly the puppets could be made to fight, like real knights. Only God and the devil knew what Cousin Richard had paid for them, had said *Bel sire*, their grandfather, when he saw them. Fool-largesse, he called the gift; but perhaps that was because it had been bestowed on Thomas, rather than on Harry, or on John, who was his namesake, and his favourite grandson. Only one of the mamnets had survived Thomas's rough handling, and that one had long outworn its novelty, and had been tossed into the hutch, to lie forgotten there until John discovered it.

It was hard for the fingers of a four-year-old to manipulate the mamnet, but impatience was not one of John's failings. He set himself to master the toy; and Kate, seeing him thus absorbed, presently yielded to the becks of the man-at-arms, and left the curtilage. The children were quite safe: neither was old enough to climb the wall, and so tumble into the mere which lay at the foot of the castle mound; and if John took it into his head to explore the scaffolding round the Great Hall he would be obliged to pass through the kitchen-court on his way to it, and must so come under her eye again.

No such ambition crossed John's mind; he was engrossed with the puppet, and would have continued to struggle with the wayward movements of its limbs had he not been interrupted. Thomas, released from his lessons, came bounding across the greensward, pulled up short beside his brother, stared for a moment, and then exclaimed: 'That's mine!'

A mulish look came into John's face. He clutched the mamnet to his chest, but said nothing.

‘Give it to me!’ ordered Thomas, stretching out his hand.

‘No!’ said John.

This seemed to Thomas a monstrous thing. ‘Why, you buzzard, you – you hell-puck!’ he cried, borrowing from the vocabulary of those worshipful craftsmen at work on the Great Hall. ‘Give it to me at once!’

Abusion left John unmoved; but as Thomas snatched at the mannikin he quickly laid it down behind him on the grass. Unlike Thomas, who would have torn it asunder in the struggle to get possession of it, he was determined that it should not be broken in the inevitable fight. The next instant both the noble lordings were locked in what bore all the appearance of a death-grip. Thomas was a year older than John, but John was the more powerfully built, able to hold his own for several minutes. In the end, Thomas would overpower him, but he had once succeeded in tripping Thomas, and although he had been too much surprised to take advantage of this triumph he hoped one day to do it again, and to follow it up in a suitable fashion.

Neither combatant was destined on this occasion to bring the other to the ground; they were wrenched suddenly apart, and found that their eldest brother, Harry, was between them. ‘Fliting again!’ said Harry, in mimicry of Johanna Waring. ‘What’s amiss?’

Thomas, always jealous of Harry, said, ‘Nothing to do with you!’ and tried to close with John again.

Harry held him off. He was a slim boy, but surprisingly strong. ‘Stint!’ he ordered. ‘I said, what’s amiss?’

Thomas might resent Harry’s assumption of authority, but he knew better than to provoke his anger. He said: ‘He stole my mannikin!’

Harry turned his eyes towards John. ‘I did not!’ John declared, going very red in the face at such a knavish accusation.

‘What mannikin? Whose is it?’ demanded Harry.

‘Mine!’ shouted Thomas.

‘John?’ said Harry, keeping his eyes on him.

Harry had very bright eyes, the colour of hazel-nuts. When he

was pleased they were as soft as a dove's, but when anything angered him their expression would suddenly change, and then they more nearly resembled the eyes of the lions painted on Bel sire's shield. The smallest feeling of guilt made it impossible to meet their challenge. John did not attempt the feat. He began to dig a hole in the greensward with the toe of one foot, and kept his gaze lowered. 'Well,' he said. '*Well . . .*'

He was almost felled to the ground by the buffet Harry dealt him. 'Give it to Thomas!' Harry commanded.

He picked it up, and held it out rather blindly, since his eyes were watering. By the time he had blinked away this moisture Harry had gone, and Thomas, the mammet lying disregarded at his feet, was staring in astonishment towards the postern.

John eyed him, but without much fear of reprisals. Thomas fell out of his rages as quickly as he fell into them, and never bore malice. He turned to look at John, exclaiming, 'He took my part!'

John sniffed. 'You knew he would!'

'No, I never thought it! Why did he?'

'He knew it was your mannikin,' said John, manfully owning the truth.

'But he likes you best!' said Thomas.

This put all thought of the puppet out of John's head. There was no one whom John loved as he loved Harry, but it had not occurred to him that a brother removed from him by such a span of time as three years could prefer him to Thomas. He said: 'No, *d-does* he?'

'No force! I was sure he would give the mammet to you!'

'No,' said John. 'It was yours.'

'Well, if I liked anyone best I would take his part!' declared Thomas.

'Harry wouldn't.'

'He ought to!'

'Not if it is wrong. Not Harry.'

'Oh, wrong!' said Thomas. Tired of the discussion, he added: 'Here, you may have the mammet! I don't want it!'

But when they looked for the mannikin it had vanished,

because Humfrey, who had deserted his play to watch the fight between his brothers, had borne it off while they argued. By the time it occurred to them that he must have taken it, he had grown tired of a toy too intricate for him to manage, and had abandoned it in a bed of gillyflowers. When Thomas demanded to be shown where he had dropped it, his lip trembled, and he said piteously, '*Kate!*' which was one of the few words he knew.

'I daresay he doesn't understand,' observed John.

'Yes, he does,' said Thomas, giving Humfrey a shake. 'Show me, Humfrey!'

Whether or not Humfrey understood what it was that Thomas wanted, he perfectly understood that Thomas was displeased with him, and he broke into lamentation. His cries brought Kate Puncherdown to his rescue, her kirtle caught up in both hands, and her coif askew. She snatched him up, calling him her pig's eye, her cinnamon, her honey-hive, and scolding Thomas for having hurt him.

'What a little swineshead he is!' remarked Thomas. 'I didn't hurt him!'

Kate wiped Humfrey's blubbered cheeks with the palm of her hand. He stopped crying, and suddenly chuckled. 'Thomas!' he uttered.

Thomas knew that it was cunning, not fear, which had prompted Humfrey to set up a yell, but he was unresentful. No one could be angry with Humfrey for long. He said: 'Oh, well! Make him show where he put the mammet, Kate!'

After some persuasion Humfrey pointed to the gillyflowers, but before his brothers had found the toy Kate said sharply: 'Listen!'

They stood still, their heads jerked up.

'In the base-court! Someone has arrived!' said Kate.

When my lord Derby was from home his castles were so quiet that the visits of such everyday folk as a pardoner, selling

indulgences; a chapman, with knacks to tempt the maids; or a wainsman, with a load of merchandize sent from London, were events of interest. The children made for the postern as fast as their legs would carry them. Thomas reached it first, and darted through it to the kitchen-court. Kate, hampered by Humfrey on her arm, brought up the rear. Her ears had not deceived her: someone had certainly arrived at Kenilworth, and someone of more importance than a chapman or a pardoner. The castle, which had before drowsed in the sunshine, now seemed to be alive with expectancy. Kate saw Thomas, and, shifting Humfrey to sit astride her hip, called out to him, 'Who is it, lording?'

'A herald!' shouted Thomas.

'Whose?' panted John.

Thomas was not sure. It was an important part of any young bachelor's education to learn to recognize at a glance the shield, the colours, and the badges of a gentle family, but it was not an easily-mastered lesson, and he was not six years old, after all. He said: 'Well, I only saw him a hand-while. They have taken him in to Mother.'

'Perhaps he has brought a letter from my lord,' said Kate, in the voice of one resigned to disappointment.

The lordings discarded this suggestion as unworthy. A herald would certainly be employed on such an errand, but it was more likely that this one had been sent to warn the Countess of the arrival of some distinguished visitor. A dizzy thought entered John's head, perhaps because Thomas's mannikin had brought Cousin Richard to his remembrance. 'Do you think it is the King?'

Thomas stood spellbound for a moment. It was impossible that children of quick in-wit, living in a large household, should not have grasped from the clapping of servants that Cousin Richard was not universally held in high esteem, but in their eyes he was a magnificent personage, distributing largesse with a lavish hand, and indulging small cousins in a manner as gratifying to them as it was displeasing to their preceptors. He was said to hold exalted ideas of his state; but whenever the

children had been in his company it had been with a conscience-stricken effort that they had remembered to say 'Sire,' and 'Pleaseth it your Majesty,' as they had been taught. Even Harry forgot the deference due to Cousin Richard when Cousin Richard called him his little nuthead, and played at kyle-pins with him, and pretended to hold him in awe, because (he said) he thought he must be the Henry of whom it was long ago prophesied that he would achieve such greatness that the world would be lit by the rays of his glory. It seemed strange that anyone so full of merry japes could have so many enemies.

The children suspected that even Father was not overly fond of Cousin Richard, although he always spoke of him with reverence. Yet there had been a time when Father had actually taken up arms, not, indeed, against Cousin Richard himself, but against the Earl of Oxford, who had been the King's dearest friend. He and the Earl of Nottingham had joined forces with the older Lords Appellant, the King's uncle of Gloucester, and the Earls of Warwick and Arundel, had led an army to the gates of London, and had been admitted, and had thrust their way into the royal palace of the Tower. Old Wilkin, who had been in the service of the family for longer than anyone could remember, said that their leader, Great-uncle Thomas of Gloucester, had soothed the King's mind by showing him the army drawn up on Tower Hill. The lordings knew what such ambages as that meant, and none of them wanted to hear more of a story that was so uncomfortable. It was splendid to hear how Father had routed the steerless Earl of Oxford at Radcot Bridge; but when it came to hearing that Great-uncle Gloucester had threatened the King with deposition it was no longer splendid. None of them liked Gloucester, who was an overbearing person, nearer to Father in age than to Grandfather, whose brother he was, and generally on bad terms with both of them. He had ruled the country for a year; but he had demeaned himself so intemperately that moderate men were driven off from their allegiance to him, and hardly anyone was sorry when Cousin Richard took the government back into his own hands.

That was another of Cousin Richard's japes: the children never wearied of that tale. They could picture Cousin Richard, playing with one of his jewels, perhaps swinging to and fro the sapphire which he sometimes wore round his neck, and suddenly unsensing his Council by asking them how old he was. When they told him that he was two-and-twenty, he thanked them, and said that he thought he was now old enough to govern for himself. Then he had taken the Great Seal away from my lord of Arundel, and had given it to the Bishop of Winchester, and nobody had dared to withsay him.

That had all happened in the year of John's birth, and no one had tried since then to wrest the government from Cousin Richard's hands. There was a good deal of grutching at his rule, but he had never brought back the favourites the Lords Appellant had made him banish, so the chief grievance they had held against him had disappeared. He had new favourites now: contemptible foppets, according to Bel sire, but a source of entertainment to the lordings. Some of them wore piked shoes so long and pointed that the toes had to be attached by silver chains to their garters; some had short pourpoints with dagged sleeves trailing on the ground; some affected hoods twisted to look like coxcombs or rabbits' ears; others preferred tall hats, with peacocks' feathers stuck up beside the crowns; and not one of them would dream of having a mantle lined with any less costly material than taffeta.

'Oh, I do hope it may be Cousin Richard!' exclaimed Thomas.

'Not when my lord is from home!' said Kate.

'Grandmother?' suggested John, not hopefully.

Thomas's face fell. A sister of my lord of Arundel and a Bohun by marriage, Grandmother was a very great lady, and one who set store by manners and learning. When she came to stay at Kenilworth the children went about on tiptoe; and if they so far forgot themselves as to fall into one of their hurlings the sight of her tall figure in its widow's weeds was enough to make them spring apart, smoothing tumbled raiment, and trying to look as if they had not been fighting at all.

‘No, no!’ said Kate. ‘It is only a month since my lady of Hereford left us!’

They brightened. Grandmother spent much of her time with Mother, her younger daughter, when Father was away, but she would hardly return to Kenilworth so soon, particularly when she had left it for Pleshy to visit her elder daughter, Great-uncle Gloucester’s wife.

At that moment Harry came strolling up. When his brothers shouted to him that someone had arrived, he said: ‘I know. Who is it?’

‘A herald,’ answered Thomas. ‘Well – a messenger, anyway!’ Harry cocked an eye at him; he reddened, and added: ‘I only saw him a paternoster-while!’

Harry grinned. Kate, seeing the Steward, ran to intercept him. ‘It is not my lady of Hereford, is it, good Master Greene? Is it a message from my lord?’

‘A’God’s half, woman, don’t spill my time with asking questions!’ he replied testily. ‘My lady of Hereford, indeed! It is M. de Guyenne, coming with a great company, no later than tomorrow!’

His words carried across the court to the ears of the children. Harry let out a shout, and flung his cap in the air; Thomas began to caper. ‘Bel sire!’ shrieked the noble lordings.

4

A visit from Cousin Richard would not have seemed to them an event of so much importance. Cousin Richard was the King, but he could not govern his realm without Bel sire’s support. He had thought, once, that he could, and had been glad to see Bel sire set sail to fight in Spain, for he was jealous of him, and ever and again suspected him of plotting to seize his power, though why he should do so was obscure. Perhaps it was because his favourites never ceased to drop poison in his ears; and perhaps he knew, at his heart-root, that he had nothing to fear from Bel

sire; for although he had several times fallen into one of his fits of rage merely because some brew-bale had hinted that Grandfather was imagining treason, these never endured for long; and when he found himself beset by the Lords Appellant he had not hesitated to recall Bel sire from Spain. Bel sire had been in favour with him ever since: he even wore Bel sire's collar of SS; and he had created him Duke of Aquitaine for life.

Many people supposed that it was these distinctions which were the cause of the enmity between Bel sire and my lord of Arundel, but old Wilkin knew better. 'Nay, nay!' he said. 'M. d'Espagne could not forgive the Earl the death of his friend Sir Simon Burley: that was what began the garboil! Yea, I warrant you! For when the Lords took arms against the Earl of Oxford and the other rushbucklers about the King, my lord of Arundel would have Sir Simon's head with all the rest, no force!'

So many of Bel sire's old servitors still called him M. d'Espagne that the lordings knew quite well whom Wilkin meant, and merely corrected him, saying: 'M. de Guyenne,' to which he paid no heed, because he was too old to master new-fangled titles. He had first followed Grandfather to Spain ferne-ago, with Great-uncle Edward, the Black Prince, who was Cousin Richard's father, and had parted his life so long ago that he was no more real to the lordings than Sir Theseus of Athens. It was sleeveless to remind Wilkin that Bel sire had relinquished his claim to Spain to his daughter, their aunt Katherine, when he had married her to the King of Castile's son, because the only thing Wilkin ever found to say of the Queen of Castile was that he remembered her as a puking infant.

'Yes, it was my lord of Arundel that would have Sir Simon's head off, mark me!' Wilkin said. 'My lord of Derby, your noble father, would have spared him, and the blessed Queen was three hours upon her knees, begging that he might not be headed. And my lord of Arundel said to her: 'M'amie, look to yourself and your husband: you had much better!' Ah, he is an orgulous man!'

The lordings nodded. They knew that my lord of Arundel had grown so orgulous that he had lately dared to marry the Earl of

March's sister, without licence. He had had to pay a large fine for his presumption, and no one had been more indignant at his conduct than Bel sire. To make matters between them worse, the new Countess of Arundel had behaved rudely to Dame Katherine Swynford, Bel sire's mistress, and that was an affront Bel sire would not readily forgive. It was true that the Countess was of the blood-royal; but, as Mother told Harry, when he ventured to enquire into these matters, so were other ladies, notably Aunts Philippa and Elizabeth, whose governess Dame Katherine had been, and who always conducted themselves buxomly towards her.

And to crown the rest there had been a rising in Cheshire only a month or two ago, which Cousin Richard had sent Bel sire to quell; and Bel sire was making no secret of his belief that my lord of Arundel was behind the insurrection.

'Let the Fitzalans look to themselves!' said Wilkin. 'Out of dread, M. d'Espagne will take order to them!'

The lordings thought that it must go ill with Arundel if Wilkin were right, for they could not conceive of anyone more powerful than Bel sire. The chain of his castles stretched across the land, from remote Kidwelly, in the Welsh Marches, up and up to Dunstanburgh, which was so far north as to be almost in Scotland. Bel sire himself could not recite the full tale of them; and the children, coached by his retainers, who knew them all so much better than he did, could never carry more than a bare dozen in their heads. There was Grosmont; Kenilworth, which they considered their own; Hertford, Bel sire's favourite; Leicester, Bolingbroke, where Father had been born; Tutbury; High Peak; Chester; Halton; Liverpool; Clitheroe; Pontefract; Knaresborough: all these, and many more besides, garrisoned by the men in Lancaster blue-and-white; to say nothing of the manors, the franchises, and the advowsons which were dotted all over England.

People called him M. d'Espagne before he relinquished his claim to the throne of Castile; they called him M. de Guyenne now that he was Duke of Aquitaine; but when his herald announced his coming in full state he named him John, by the

grace of God, Duke of Lancaster, Duke of Aquitaine, Earl of Lincoln and Leicester, Baron of Hinckley, Lord of Beaufort and Nogent, of Bergerac and Roche-sur-Tonne, Lord High Steward of England, and Constable of Chester.

And some spoke of him familiarly, by the name of his birthplace, Ghent, or their English version of it, and called him John of Gaunt.

5

In all that great household only Mother remained undisturbed by the news of Bel sire's coming: everyone else, from the Marshal down to the meanest kitchen scullion, was thrown into such a state of agitation that one might have supposed that the visit was as unwelcome as it was unexpected. It was not, of course. The Marshal might wring his hands over the state of the Great Hall; the head cook inform the Clerk of the Kitchens that no mortal man could devise and execute subtleties for the high table in one day; the Yeoman of the Cellar declare by the faith of his body that if my lord Duke should call for a cup of muscadelle he would be totally undone; and the Gentleman Usher demand where he must finding lodgings for the ladies, if my lord Duke, as was all too probable, brought a bevy of them in his train; but no one acquainted with these persons doubted that they were all of them a- charmed by the prospect of several days of unremitting toil and contrivance.

The only thing which caused the Countess anxiety was the demeanour of her sons. She gathered the three elder ones about her, and reminded them of the things they must and must not do. M. de Guyenne was a haughty prince, but he showed another face to his grandsons, and could be trusted to encourage them to take all manner of liberties with him. But, like many other indulgent grandparents, he would be more than likely to censure their parents for malapert behaviour which he had himself invited. So the Countess warned her sons that they must not

speak until spoken to; and must then stand still, not allowing their eyes to wander, not forgetting to bow to their grandfather, and not forgetting to call him *Bel sire*. *M. de Guyenne* belonged to the generation that clung to the Norman-French which was falling into disuse, and this would please him.

‘And at table,’ pursued the Countess, ‘take heed that you lay the bones on the voider, and wipe your mouths before you drink! Don’t leave your spoons in the dish, or dip your meat in the salt, or lean on the table!’

‘Shall we dine in the Hall, madam?’ asked Thomas eagerly.

‘Yes, you and Harry,’ replied the Countess.

A lump rose in John’s throat. He said nothing, but stared woodenly before him.

‘And John, madam!’ said Harry.

The lump swelled to uncomfortable proportions. There was no service John would not have performed for Harry at this moment, but he did not look at him; he turned his eyes upon his mother.

She hesitated; and then, reflecting that her woman, *Mary Hervey*, could share a mess with Thomas and John, and might be trusted to keep them in good order, nodded. ‘Yes, if he will mind his manners.’

‘I will!’ John said.

‘And Harry must not eat of the boar’s head, or the *viand royal*,’ added the Countess, remembering a fell day when a messenger had been sent foot-hot to London to summon a physician, *Master John Malvern*, to Harry’s sick-bed.

His colour rose; he said quickly: ‘No, madam, no!’

‘But I may eat of both, for I am never sick!’ boasted Thomas.

‘Madam, madam, *Doucet* is tangling your skein!’ John interrupted.

All three boys dived for the little spaniel at the Countess’s feet. It darted away, the skein of silk between its teeth, and the children in pursuit. The popinjay in its cage nearby began to screech; and in the confusion Harry’s queasy stomach was forgotten. He said nothing to John; but later in the day, when it

was learned that Bel sire's Yeoman-at-horse had arrived at the castle, with two fewerers in charge of greyhounds, a ymerer, and several grooms and chacechiens, he allowed John to go with him and Thomas to visit these interesting officials. They were lodged with the parker, by the Chase, but there were more ways out of the castle than by the great gate at the end of the causeway. There was a postern on the southern side of the base-court which opened on to the slope above the mere: trust my lords Harry and Thomas to know where the key to it was to be found!

When it was discovered in the nurseries that the lordings were missing, consternation reigned, all the nurses rushing about the castle precincts like so many flustered hens. Happily for the Countess's peace of mind, none of them dared tell her that her sons were lost. It was Johanna Waring who had the wit to run to the lordings' tutor. Father Joseph was a cheerful person, with plenty of kind-wit, and he did not for a moment suppose that the lordings had been drowned, or stolen by robbers. He bade the nurses stint their clapping, and himself sallied forth to bring home the truants. They were in the kennels, of course, the hounds all over them, and their raiment smutched out of recognition. Father Joseph's eyes twinkled, but he pointed awfully towards the castle. The lordings went meekly up the steep slope to the postern, and Father Joseph came after, his long robe brushing the nettles beside the path. He whipped them all, and for several hours they lived in dread lest he should have disclosed their villainy to Mother. It seemed probable that none of them would be permitted to dine in the Hall while Bel sire was at Kenilworth. Only Harry maintained that Father Joseph was no carry-tale, and he was right: Father Joseph held his peace; and when M. de Guyenne's meiny was reported to be at the gate next day, the Countess waited in the inner court to receive him with her three elder sons grouped touchingly round her, all dressed in their best gowns of scarlet tartarin, with silver-gilt girdles of Father's forget-me-not badge round their waists; all redolent of the rose-water with which they had been scrubbed; and all looking as sely as saints.

It had not occurred to M. de Guyenne that his daughter-in-law might like to know the number and the degrees of the persons he was bringing to visit her in her seclusion, so the lordings were not the only members of the household to scan with anxiety the cavalcade that swept presently into the court. There was a horse-litter: that might mean that the Duchess had come with her lord, but more probably it carried Dame Katherine, his mistress, decided the Countess's ladies. The Duchess – she was not the children's grandmother, but the Duke's second wife, a Castilian princess – rarely accompanied her lord on his progresses. She lived mostly at Leicester, and was very pious: quite unlike her younger sister, who was married to the Duke of York, and of whom some merry tales were told. No one could feel surprise that M. de Guyenne had looked beyond the marriage-bed, for he was one who liked a lady to be witty and well visaged, and the Duchess, poor soul, was as dull as she was dish-faced. His first wife, the heiress of Lancaster, had been one of the loveliest of the Court dames: my lord Harry was said to resemble her.

Riding beside M. de Guyenne, on one of the strange ladies' saddles brought into England by King Richard's good Bohemian Queen, was a lady of great beauty, at sight of whom the Countess's heart sank. One would never wish to speak despitously of one's lord's own sister, but it was impossible to forbear the thought that if Bess had not been M. de Guyenne's daughter she must have hidden her head in a nunnery, seven years ago, instead of marrying the King's half-brother, and riding about the country in a mantle lined with ermine, and a wired coif of such preposterous dimensions that her hood would not cover it, and was allowed to hang carelessly down her back. Handfast to the Earl of Pembroke she had been, and had played him false with Sir John Holland, half-brother of the King. She had been found to be with child by Sir John, and M. de Guyenne had had to delay his departure for Spain to settle the affair. So well had he done it that although everyone knew she was divorced from Pembroke very

few people knew just what had happened to bring about this sad state of affairs. The infant had not survived; and the marriage to Sir John was celebrated with as much pomp as if it had been a decently arranged contract instead of the hasty union which it really was. King Richard had created his half-brother Earl of Huntingdon, so that it seemed as though it was true that the wicked flourished like bay trees.

There was no doubt that the Earl of Huntingdon was a wicked man. Besides being a spouse-breaker, he had certainly one murder to his discredit, and probably two; and no one could doubt that it was her desperate attempt to induce King Richard to pardon him the death of young Stafford which had killed their mother, the Dowager Princess of Wales. To make matters worse, he claimed kinship to my lady of Derby, his elder brother having married one of her Fitzalan aunts. This gentleman, the Earl of Kent, although not, as far as anyone knew, a murderer, was generally held to be as great a cumberworld as Huntingdon. A bad, upsprung family, the Hollands: the Countess hoped that Bess had not brought her husband with her to Kenilworth.

She would have been startled had she guessed that her sons' eyes were just as swiftly searching the cavalcade for signs of Huntingdon as her own; and shocked to have known that he figured in their minds as an ogre whom it was a terror and a delight to see. They knew quite as much as she did about his plunging his sword into Hugh Stafford's heart, and riding off with the echo of his own fiercely uttered name still quivering on the night air; for they had had it all from Wilkin.

'Yes, yes,' said old Wilkin, 'that was what slew the Princess of Wales, dead as a stone, for she was a corpulent dame, look you, and all that running about to save Sir John from having his head took off was what killed her, poor soul! Ay, I remember her when they named her the Fair Maid of Kent, so lovesome she was, and her middle no thicker than two hands might span! But so it goes! Three ells of cloth it took to make her a gown at the latter end! Ah, well! God assoil her! She lies in her grave now, and King

Richard for very grief gave Sir John his life, more's the pity, for mark me if he does not work a greater mischief yet!

The lordings knew not whether to be glad or sorry that the Earl had not accompanied Aunt Bess to Kenilworth. They accepted their aunt's arrival with indifference, and craned their necks to see who else was following Bel sire. A fleshy young man, with a look of sleepy good humour, rode immediately behind him: Cousin Edward of Rutland, Great-uncle York's elder son. If he could be coaxed to talk he had enthralling stories of the chase to recount, for he was a great hunter, and already knew more of the ways of harts, hounds, and horses than men twice his age. Beside him rode Uncle John Beaufort, about whom there hung a mystery the lordings had not yet unravelled. There were three Beaufort uncles, and also Aunt Joan Beaufort, who had lately married the Lord Ferrers of Wem; but why they should be called Beaufort instead of Lancaster was a problem no one had satisfactorily explained to the lordings. Johanna Waring said that it was because they had been born at Beaufort, and that children who asked questions would go supperless to bed; Agnes Rokster said that it was because Dame Katherine was their mother, but that answer was no better than Johanna's, because Dame Katherine's son was Thomas Swynford, as everyone knew. He was one of Bel sire's retinue, but certainly not his son, which the Beauforts as certainly were.

Of the three Beauforts it was Henry whom the children liked the best. In spite of the fact that he was not a knight, but an oblate priest, he was better company than Sir John. Sir John was a disappointing uncle. He was very handsome, and so notable a jousting man that when he was only fifteen years old he had been Father's and Sir Harry Percy's only rival at the great jousts held at St Ingelvert. He had been on a crusade to Barbary, too, and had helped to take Tunis; but he was taciturn, and could never be lured into divulging his adventures. The children were shy of him, finding his grave smile more awesome than his youngest brother Thomas's horse-play.

M. de Guyenne, alighting from his hackney, raised his daughter-in-law from her curtsy, and embraced her. He approved of the Countess: she was pretty, and shamefast; she had borne her lord four sons; and she was heiress, with her sister of Gloucester, to the possessions of the great house of Bohun. It was not a small thing to have married the Earl of Hereford's daughter. Henry of Bolingbroke was first cousin to the King, but he did not disdain to add the Bohun Swan to his badges. Indeed, he taught his children to be as proud of the Swan as of his own Antelope, or the single Ostrich Feather of Lancaster.

'Well, and so I find you in good heart, *ma mie!*' said the Duke, holding Mother at arm's length, and looking her up and down. 'You will not lack a husband many weeks now, let me tell you!' He laughed to see the glow in her cheeks, and added: 'Yes, I have had letters from my son! You shall see them presently.'

'He is in Venice,' disclosed Lady Huntingdon, who had been lifted from her palfrey by her cousin Rutland. She offered her cheek to her sister-in-law, saying: 'I hope he may remember to buy some gold fringe there, but I daresay he won't: men never think of anything! Edward, why don't you help Dame Katherine down from that stuffy litter, instead of standing awshape? Is there a freckle on my nose that you stare so?'

Rutland assured her that there was not, and turned to do her bidding. The fact that he stood high in the King's favour had led him to embrace all the extravagances of fashion, but it could not have been said that a pourpoint scarcely reaching to mid-thigh, with sleeves padded high at the shoulders and their dagged ends brushing against his ankles, flattered his burly figure. Bess Holland gave a giggle, and exchanged a mischievous look with my lady of Derby.

M. de Guyenne had turned to survey his grandsons. The three elder boys louted till their noses nearly touched their knees; and Kate Puncherdown, who was holding Humfrey in her arms, curtsied to the ground. 'Well, my mannikins, you have grown!'

said M. de Guyenne, seeing this as a praiseworthy thing. 'What have you all learned since I saw you last, eh? Are you scholars yet? Can Harry play another air on the gitern?'

Harry, like Mother, was musical. He said: 'Not the gitern, sir, but the harp!'

'And I can ride my pony, Bel sire!' said Thomas, forgetting Mother's precepts.

'Thomas, not so hardy!' Mother said.

But Bel sire was in a benign humour, and he only laughed, and said that before he went away he would see all their accomplishments. After that the noble company trooped into the Great Chamber; the Countess's ladies begged those who attended Dame Katherine and my lady of Huntingdon to accompany them to the bower; the Steward and the Yeoman took the gentlemen of the Duke's household in charge; horses were led off to the barmekin; chests and coffers were carried into the several buildings of the castle; but just as the nurses were trying to remove the children out of the bustle they caught sight of an elderly man, rather thickset, and dressed in sober raiment, who was watching them with a smile in his eyes; and they broke from restraining hands, and ran across the court, shouting: 'Master Chaucer! Master Chaucer!'

8

Only Father could have been more welcome, and not even Father could tell such stories, much less have them transcribed in bound volumes. Bel sire, who possessed these, said that one day they should be allowed to read them, a promise which they received with more civility than enthusiasm. None of them wished to struggle with the written word when they could listen to the stories from Master Chaucer's own lips. Sometimes he would tell them as their nurses might, only much better; and sometimes his expressive voice would drift into poetry, reciting lines that made the lordings' ears tingle, even though they might not always understand them.

He was not one of Bel sire's household, but Bel sire was his patron; and at one time his wife had been in attendance on Spanish Grandmother. He did not seem to have liked his wife very much, but he was on good terms with Dame Katherine, who was her sister. His purse was a farthing-sheath, yet he had held several good appointments in his time. Bel sire, who had given him one of the pensions he had sold in a moment of stress, said that he was unthrifty; but he said it indulgently, because Master Chaucer had thought no lady the peer of Grandfather's first wife, and had written a long poem about her death, and Grandfather's grief for it. There were some good bits in the poem about hunting; but far too much of it was taken up with the moan of a Man in Black, who appeared to be Bel sire, bewailing the death of Grandmother Blanche of Lancaster. It did not sound at all like Bel sire, and the lordings disliked it. Master Chaucer quite understood their feelings, and he never inflicted the poem on them, unless commanded to do so by Bel sire, when he naturally obeyed, but with such a twinkle in his eye that the lordings forgave him.

The nurses knew that there would be no hope of wresting their charges away from Master Chaucer without a brawl, so although they knew the poet to be a mere scrivener, and (if report did not lie) at one time guilty of a scandalous fetching, they raised no objections to his taking care of the lordings for an hour. The lordings dragged him off to see all the wonders of the Great Hall; and here Bel sire, who had himself come to cast an eye over the stonemasons' work, found them. 'Ah!' said Bel sire. 'So you have met a friend, have you? Well, Master Chaucer? Do you see something of my lady in this knave?'

He dropped his hand on to Harry's head, and Master Chaucer, pulling off his hood, said: 'Verily, monseigneur.' He added, in a soft voice: "'So steadfast countenance, So noble port and maintenance!'"

'Well, well, we shall see!' Bel sire said. 'What was it that you wrote? "Ruddy, fresh, and lively hued," eh?'

The lordings resigned themselves. Bel sire was going to recite

the lines which described Grandmother's golden hair. He would falter for a word, and call upon Master Chaucer to take up the tale; and after that they would be lucky if they escaped hearing the whole of the poem.

9

M. de Guyenne supped in the Great Chamber, with only his kinsfolk and the more important members of his household to bear him company. When the roasted apples were set upon the table, the blanch-powder, and the cheese, the ladies withdrew. Bess, who had exchanged waitings of eyes with Rutland throughout the meal, grew weary of him, and went away to her bedchamber, regretting the whim that had prompted her to accompany her father on this journey.

Dame Katherine was left with her hostess in the bower, eating dragés from a silver bowl. She was able to give the Countess good rede on the cure of infantile complaints, for before he had raised her to be his mistress she had had the care of the Duke's daughters by his first marriage; but in-wit told her that it was not of her children that the Countess wanted to talk; and she was not surprised when Mary of Derby dismissed the ladies who attended on them. She said: 'Well, and now we can be cosy! Out of dread, madam, you will be blithe to have your lord home again!'

'Yes,' Mary said. She paused, and then said, almost inaudibly: 'Oh, yes! If I were not so much afraid!'

This did surprise Dame Katherine, for although my lord of Derby's wooing had been hasty, she had always supposed Mary to have tumbled headlong into love with him. 'Afraid?' she repeated.

'Of the King!' said Mary, staring at her.

'Oh, come, come!' said Dame Katherine. 'The King is well disposed towards your lord!'

'No,' said Mary. 'He does not love my lord.'

‘Well,’ said Dame Katherine, ‘I daresay he is jealous of him, for they are exactly of an age, and your lord has won so much worship that it is no wonder the King should have envy at his heart.’

‘The King will never forgive my lord for Radcot Bridge,’ said Mary.

‘Oh, now, what a foolish gaingiving! They say the King has never spoken Oxford’s name since the day he broke in on him, crying that he had been betrayed, and his army scattered. Oh, dear, what a miserable creature Oxford was found to be, wasn’t he? No, no, I warrant you the King never spares him a thought!’

‘But my lord joined the Lords Appellant, and the King doesn’t forget that. My lords of Arundel, and Gloucester, and Warwick stand out of his grace, and sometimes, madam, I cannot help but wonder – and fear!’

‘Oh, I am sure you are wrong! I should not say it, but you may take it for truth that no one was ever yet able to ’scape quarrelling with Gloucester! Handsome is as handsome does – people used to say he was the fairest of all the old King’s sons: well, those golden curls *do* take the eye, don’t they? – but whenever I hear of the borel-folk raising a cheer for him as he rides past, I can’t forbear thinking to myself, Yes, it’s very well to smile, and look so debonairly, but if ever there was a man with a sturdier temper may I never meet him! No, no, you can’t wonder at the King’s setting him from his grace! And as for Arundel, it’s time someone took order to him, or he will grow so large there won’t be room for another in the realm. Content you, the King looks on your lord with quite another eye. He and Nottingham were never in so deep!’

‘Madam, I wish he had not joined Thomas Mowbray of Nottingham! I don’t trust the Mowbrays!’

That gave Dame Katherine a moment’s pause. ‘Well, no, there I don’t say you are wrong, and a strange alliance I always thought it, for there has never been any love lost between Lancaster and the Mowbrays. You can’t explain these things! I’ve seen it happen oft and lome: one family will just naturally

mislike another, and if they were all holy saints it wouldn't make any difference, for no force but that one of them would chew his meat in a fashion that gave offence to another, or some such witless thing! But as for these thoughts of yours about the King, my dear, put them from your head! Why, there's no one stands higher in his grace than Monseigneur, and would he do his son scathe, think you?'

'Richard,' said Mary, 'never forgets, and he never forgives. He waits.'

Dame Katherine reflected that Mary must have been thinking of the way in which Richard had brought down the Lords Appellant four years ago. It was true that Richard had waited: rather surprisingly, for he was a man of impetuous temper. But he had been younger then and the poor boy had had a fright. Dame Katherine knew what perhaps Mary had never been told, that his uncle Gloucester had threatened him with the death of Edward II. No wonder he had stayed quiet for the whole year! The only wonder was that he had dared to raise his head again. But he had dared, choosing his moment. Dame Katherine, about to pop another dragé into her mouth, put it back in the bowl. Mary was rousing uncomfortable thoughts. She said uneasily: 'Well, he is a strange man, but there is always the Queen, and she is one for peace, give her her due!'

'I have heard Monseigneur say that the Queen is too easy, will not do what she might.'

'Oh, now, that is not just! I daresay she has her troubles, like the rest of us, and does as she may!'

'He is asotted of her,' said Mary.

That was true, and oddly true, thought Dame Katherine, for you would be hard put to it to find a plainer woman. Such a shock as it had given them all when they had first clapped eyes on her! She was a German, sister of the Emperor Wenzel, and of Sigismund, King of Hungary, and platter-faced, like so many of her race. She did what she could to distract attention from her lack of beauty, but neither the dimensions nor the magnificence of the coifs she had made so fashionable had deceived critical