

For Merrie England

Chapter I

Archery Practice

“**N**OW, Roger, you take those long-fleeced sheep to the south paddock today, and mind they don’t get into the wood to tear half the wool off their backs, for if they do your back shall smart for it, I can tell you.”

“Can I go too, Mother?” whispered another boy, who sat crouching on the ground near the back door.

Softly as the words were spoken, however, his father overheard them, and replied

Paddock: a small, enclosed field

sharply, "No, you can't go, you're of no use, but you'll manage to keep Roger from looking after the sheep, and he must keep his eye on them, for old Tops must mind the rest in the home field, so there'll be no dog to do his work for him."

Roger made a wry face at having the sheep to mind all day without Tom or Tops to keep him company, but he did not dare say a word against the proposed arrangement, and went off whistling with about a dozen of his father's sheep, and his day's provisions wrapped in a wisp of straw, for cotton handkerchiefs were an unknown luxury in the times of which we are writing.

It was a bright day in the year 1357, and Roger Woodhouse lived in a little midland town that was scarcely more than a collection of a few farmhouses huddled closely together, but it considered itself important, because of its growing trade in wool, and

Roger's father was one of its most thriving merchants.

The south paddock was in the outskirts of the town—a little meadow surrounded by woods, on three sides of it, and a steep hill on the fourth led to the castle and town.

Roger managed to cut himself a reed as he passed the stream, for he wanted to make poor little Tom a whistle, and as soon as the meadow was reached he seated himself on a hillock and began whittling away at his reed, for he was the fortunate possessor of a knife, and consequently, much envied by Tom, who could never hope to have such a costly plaything. So to console his brother a little he would make him a whistle, he thought, and he was busy over this when the distant sound of a horn attracted his attention.

He left off cutting at the reed to listen, and look round at the sheep. They were all contentedly grazing near the middle of the

HILLOCK: *a small hill*

field, and the breeze brought the sound of the horn again nearer and clearer this time.

Roger closed his clumsy knife, and put it into the leather pouch with the half-cut whistle, and started up the hill leading to the road, for the chance of seeing a grand sight did not often occur.

He had heard a whisper in his father's shop the day before, that the great earl who ruled the town, and owned most of the country round, was expected home from the wars, but he had hardly hoped to be able to see the return of the heroes, for his father would never let him go if he could help it, he knew.

So he thought himself very lucky to be able to run away and see the grand cavalcade of knights in their glittering armor, and men-at-arms with their pointed lances and streaming pennons, and the brave archers who had done so much for the honor of merrie England.

CAVALCADE: *procession*

PENNONS: *banners*

What did it matter about a few sheep straying, he thought, as he looked back from the top of the hill? for he could see that the sheep, led by an artful old ram, were already turning their heads towards the woods from where he had been obliged to drive them. They would spoil their long fleeces if they got in among the brambles, he knew, and his father would be very angry; but what did it matter, what were a few sheep when there was such a glorious sight awaiting him at the top of the hill?

He had hesitated for a moment when he saw Fags the ram leading the rest into mischief; but the nearer sound of the horn, and the trampling of the horse-hoofs that the breeze brought with it over the hills, decided the matter, and Roger ran on, forgetful of his father's commands not to let the sheep stray.

Hot and panting, he reached the winding road at last, and then sat down to wait for

the coming of the travelers. The moment they appeared he threw up his arms and cheered them, for he had heard that their glorious Black Prince had captured the King of France, and brought him prisoner to London; and this was part of his victorious army on their way home.

Lustily the boy cheered, to the amusement and satisfaction of the archers and spearmen, as well as the knights in the gleaming armor, for the sound of their home tongue was very sweet after their wanderings, and Roger was the first to greet them in it.

So it happened that more than one noticed the lad as they passed, and gave him a condescending nod, for though they might be only common archers, they were victors today, and not likely to forget it for some time to come. They were dusty and travel-stained, their clothes were ragged, and they looked altogether a poor remnant of an army, but a train of sumpter mules followed

LUSTILY: *enthusiastically*

SUMPTER: *pack*

behind them, and Roger had no doubt that these were loaded with the spoil they had brought home from France.

His head was so full of this, and watching the slow moving mules laden with the baggage, that an hour had passed at least before he thought of turning round to look in the direction of the valley-meadow where he had left his sheep.

The last of the mules had passed then, and there was nothing more to be seen, and Roger had time to think of his sheep and his half-made flute, which he had tucked inside his stout leather jerkin.

He pulled that out safe enough and then turned and ran down the hill in some consternation, for not a sheep could be seen or heard. He made straight for the neighbouring wood, vowing vengeance against Fags the ram who had led them into the mischief.

The worst of it was he had no dog with him, and though he ran and called up and

JERKIN: *short, sleeveless jacket*

SOME CONSTERNATION: *sudden alarm and dismay*

down the clearer spaces of the wood, not a bleat came to reward him, nor could a solitary bit of wool be found sticking to a thorn to tell him whether they had passed that way.

He had eaten his dinner of rye bread and hard cheese as he wandered through the wood, and at last the shades of evening began to gather, and then in despair Roger sat down and burst into tears.

He was half-afraid and half-ashamed to go home, for what could he say by way of excuse for losing the whole of the sheep? If it had been one or two it would be different, but to go home and tell his father that *all* the sheep were missing was impossible, he thought.

The *vesper* bell, when they all sat down to supper at home, had rung out long ago, and presently the curfew sounded from the belfry, and at that sound Roger started to his feet and set off toward the road at the top of the hill.

SHADES: *shadows*

VESPER BELL: *bell for evening prayers*

He was a well-grown lad of sixteen, but to be out after curfew had tolled was too great a trial for his courage, and so he made his way with all speed to the village surrounding the earl's castle, which lay a little way off from the town, for he had made up his mind not to go home tonight at any rate. He would wait and see what happened the next day.

So he followed the winding road or cart track, for it was little better than this, that led to the castle gates. They would be closed by this time, he knew, but some of the men who had just returned from the war would be sure to be about talking to their neighbours, and so he might hear some news, as well as pass the night away.

In this hope he was not disappointed. As soon as the little mud hovels were reached, he heard the sound of voices, and, in spite of curfew having rung, the village seemed all astir, making much of its heroes, who

CURFEW: a time in the evening when all fires were to be extinguished and everyone was to be indoors

HOVEL: huts

had just returned with their lord from France.

“Aye, we have brought the French king a prisoner to London,” said one; “but as soon as my lord’s wound is healed we shall be off again, I trow. We want more men though—good archers, and so while we are at home there will be plenty doing in the castle yard.”

“More men?” repeated one of his listeners; “where are they to come from, Martin? we have but women and lads here now to sow and reap, and do all the work of the fields,” and the woman sighed as she spoke, for this homecoming of the heroes of Cressy and many another fight, had brought as much sorrow as joy, for they had to tell of friends and comrades whose bones were whitening in the fields of France, whose dear ones had expected to see them return with the conquerors.

“Yes; we must have more archers,” went on the man, “for we should never have won

TROW: *believe or think*

CRESSY: *a famous battle, fought in 1346, where the English defeated the French near Cressy, France*



The Captive King Entering London

five hundred fights if we had not placed our trusty bowmen where they could send a flight of arrows among the foe as they marched along the road. Ah! our glorious prince knows how to place his men. At the battle of Cressy, and at Poitiers too, we archers were posted all along the road behind the hedges, and when the French dogs came along to meet our troops, we mowed them down like grass with a flight of arrows, every archer marking his man before he shot, and never missing him. I tell you the road was choked as they lay in heaps, and the French were struck with panic at the sight.”

“I am the best archer in the town,” burst in Roger, who had been listening to this account.

The men were startled at first to see the lad so suddenly appear in their midst; but the hero of Cressy was not to be frightened at the sight of a lad just because he came after curfew, and so he ordered him

POITIERS: another famous battle, fought in 1356, where the English once again defeated the French, this time near the city of Poitiers, France

to stand where he could have a good view of him.

“I have seen you before, though you are a town lad,” said Martin.

“I saw you today,” said Roger.

“Aye! you came to meet us, lad,” said Martin heartily; and he held out his hand, which Roger felt it a great honor to grasp. “So you are well practiced in archery,” went on the man, looking at his straight, well-formed figure; “you are nigh on seventeen, too, I trow.”

This guess at his age greatly flattered Roger.

“Not much more than sixteen,” he said, with a glow of pride, as he squared his shoulders and held his head erect.

“Well, sixteen will do, I trow, if you are a good archer. Would you like to go to France and catch another king for the honor and glory of merrie England?”

“Aye! that would I,” said Roger eagerly; “it would be a good deal merrier than minding

sheep or stuffing sacks with wool, which is all my father thinks I am good for.”

“What? keep a lad like you tied to a sheep, when England needs every brave man she can muster to help her hold her own! Fie on thee, lad!”

“But it is not my fault,” said Roger; “I would like to come with you when you go to France again.”

“And go you shall, my lad, if Martin can bring it to pass, and you prove yourself a true and trusty archer. We will see tomorrow what you can do; the targets will be set up at dawn for the knaves to practice, and you shall go with them.”

How much longer the soldier would have sat talking, if he had not been reminded that it was against all law and order for people to talk after curfew had rung, it would be hard to say; but the rest took the hint and went off to bed without further delay, and Martin invited Roger

MUSTER: *assemble for battle*

FIE: *shame*

KNAVES: *young men*

to share the shelter of his house for the night.

English cottages in those days were little more than mud hovels. A bundle of straw or leaves thrown down in one corner served for a bed, and a hole in the roof formed the chimney, and was all the ventilation possible, when the door was closed, for such a luxury as a window was unheard of as yet in any but the grandest houses; so Roger and his host crept into bed with the same speed as a couple of dogs might retire to their kennel, and, as both were tired, were soon asleep, though Roger could not help thinking of his mother and father, and wondering whether they were uneasy about his absence.

At the first peep of dawn the stir of the village began, and Roger got up. Shaking the bits of straw off his clothes, and bathing his face in the spring, his toilet was complete, and after munching a huge slice of rye bread, he was ready to take his place among

VENTILATION: *escape for the smoke*

TOILET: *grooming and dressing*

the archers who were to practice all day in the castle yard under Martin their captain.

Roger thought himself very fortunate in securing the favor of such a great man as Martin seemed to be, and therefore was the more anxious to please him. He followed him to the castle yard and helped to set up the targets and distribute the arrows among the men. He was a little disappointed when he was told that his task at first would be to stand beyond the targets and gather up the arrows that went beyond the mark; but he was so anxious to please his new master, that he took his place without a word of grumbling, though it was rather worse than minding sheep, he thought. But at last his turn came to take the bow and show whether he was fit to be a soldier. His hand trembled for a moment, he was so anxious to prove that he was a good marksman and fit to go to France with the next contingent that was sent out. It had been his pastime hitherto, and life

CONTINGENT: *group of troops*

would be one long holiday, he thought, if he could only succeed in satisfying Martin that he was fit to join the earl's regular archers; so he bent all his strength and skill to the purpose, and after a minute's delay shot his arrow and sent it straight at the bull's-eye.

A shout went up from the men who were watching him, and Roger's face flushed with pride and pleasure as he looked round on the sun-burned faces of the heroes of Cressy who had thus cheered him. With that cheer went all thought of returning to his home and his little brother. He drew the bow again, and this time, though he missed the actual center of the target, it was so nearly struck that another ringing cheer greeted him, and his success was an assured fact. When the archers dispersed for a meal, Martin went into the castle and begged to be allowed to see the earl, for the acquisition of such a clever marksman was too good to be kept to himself.

ACQUISITION: *gaining*

Another thing, he wanted his master to take the lad into his immediate service, and thus afford him the protection and shelter of the castle in case his father should find out where he was and come to claim him. Roger had told him that his father was a wool-stapler in the town, and there was little doubt that at one time he had been a villein, but had purchased his freedom from the earl or the earl's father. But if this lad came and took service of his own accord under the earl's banner, no one could dispute it. Just now, too, it would specially gratify the earl to do this, for while he had been away at the wars, the townsmen had taxed themselves to send a money present to the king for the expenses of the war, and in return the king had granted the town a charter by which its inhabitants were allowed to hold a market in the principal street without paying toll to the earl, and were also allowed to give their daughters to any man who wanted to marry

WOOL-STAPLER: *wool-merchant*

VILLEIN: *a farmer who owed service to a lord*

TOLL: *a fee*

them without asking leave of their lord, or paying him any bounty upon the occasion.

These curtailments of his power had made the earl very angry when he heard of them, so that he was not likely to yield any point about Roger if once he had taken service under him; so Martin was the more anxious that it should be done with all speed for fear the lad should change his mind and want to go back to his friends.

When the proud, haughty earl heard Martin's errand he smiled grimly. "Thou art a clever knave," he said; "I will see the lad, and if he pleases me I will send him under thy escort to my cousin's castle in Lincoln, for it will not do to rouse the ire of these upstart townsmen, albeit they were my father's thralls; for the king is bent on favoring these miserable traders, to the undoing of England's greatness. So keep the lad close until I send for him."

LEAVE: *permission*

CURTAILMENTS: *reductions*

IRE: *anger*

THRALLS: *slaves*

Before sunset the order came for Roger to appear before the earl. Martin went with him, and waited in the great hall among the pages and dogs, who were lying about enjoying the bones that had been thrown to them by the guests at table; while Roger went up the stone stairs to the lady's bower, where the earl was being nursed by his wife and her maidens.

Roger had been filled with wonder and awe at the sight of these stairs, for it was the first time he had seen the wonderful contrivance; but the lady's bower, with its arras-hung walls and the floor strewed with fresh rushes and rosemary, was a picture of luxury such as Roger had not dreamed of previously. The earl was pleased with the look of the well-grown lad, and after asking him a few questions about the archery, said he understood from Martin the captain that he wanted to take service under him, and go to the wars by-and-by.

BOWER: *private ladies' apartment in a medieval hall*

NURSED: *cared for*

CONTRIVANCE: *invention*

ARRAS-HUNG: *tapestry-hung*

“Yes,” answered Roger, wondering how it was that no questions had been asked about his father, and where he lived. The earl did not ask his age, but seemed well content to take Martin’s account of it, and said in a tone that required no answer:

“You are sixteen—over young for a soldier, it may be, but England is in dire need just now, and those caitiff townsmen will not turn out to fight her battles. Send Martin to me, and hold thyself in readiness to start on a journey tomorrow at daylight.”

Roger did not dare to ask his new master where he was going; but when he got down to the great hall he delivered his message, and then added: “We are to go on a journey tomorrow. Where are we going?”

“You will hear time enough to get ready,” answered Martin; and he left the boy and went up to his master.

When he came back he said: “We are to sleep here at the castle tonight, so as to be ready for our journey in the morning.”

Roger found that his quarters at the castle did not differ very much from those at home, only, instead of having a heap of clean straw in a little shed to himself, he had to lie down on the rushes with the men and dogs, and the smell was far from sweet or pleasant.

But he did not regret what he had done; he assured himself of this again and again; only if he could just see his mother and little Tom, to bid them good-bye, he would like to do it. He would tell Martin this in the morning, and ask him to let him run home before they started, and tell them he was going to be a soldier and fight for merrie England. With this thought he went to sleep, in spite of the dogs scratching and growling over their bones; for there was no curfew that a dog would obey, and so they kept up their growling and snarling long after their masters had gone to sleep.