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HAL O' THE BORDER

C. B. RUTLEY

Grade 3

No. 635

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HAL O' THE BORDER

BY

C. BERNARD RUTLEY



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MUNAVIRUL ISLAM HIGH SCHOOL
Date
ERNAKULAM

HAL O' THE BORDER

CHAPTER I

A BORDER FORAY

"MASTER HAL! Master Hal!"

Henry Brand raised his head and listened. He was sharpening a sword, but as his name was repeated he laid the weapon aside, and moved towards the door of the armoury where he was working.

That was Gurth's voice, and Gurth seemed in a hurry. A frown crossed Hal's good-looking jolly face. He was only fifteen, but already he was as strong and broad-shouldered as many a man, and had learned to play his part as such. For Hal lived with his father, Robert Brand, and his mother and a score of retainers in a strong fortified tower in Northumberland not far from the Scottish border, and in that year 1400 there was almost constant war along the border, and the only way to live in any security was to be strong and well-armed.

"Master Hal!"

Again came the urgent cry, and Hal opened the door of the armoury and stepped into the passage outside.

"Here I am, Gurth," he shouted. "What is wrong?"

"Wrong, Master Hal," repeated the man who came running towards him. "There be plenty

wrong. 'Tis those rascals from beyond the border. They have been at it again, and this time methinks they have caught Fergus Reed napping, for there is a merry burning going on beyond the black wood where his tower stands."

" Fergus Reed ! "

Hal's words were an exclamation of mingled astonishment and dismay, and the next moment he had leapt past the man, and was racing towards the stairs which led to the roof of the tower. If the Reed's tower was burning, then something terrible indeed had happened, for Fergus Reed was second only to his own father as the greatest fighter on the border. And what had happened to Margaret ? Suddenly the boy was conscious of a great fear. The Brands and the Reeds had been friends for generations, and Hal and Margaret had been brought up almost as brother and sister. She was the same age as he, dark where he was fair, tall and strong, and absolutely fearless. As Hal raced up the stone steps he remembered Margaret as he had last seen her only the day before. She had been riding an unbroken horse bareback. The horse had already thrown three men, but it had not been able to throw the slim supple girl who sat with her knees pressed tightly against its heaving sides. If anything had happened to Margaret——

Hal reached the top of the steps, and scrambling through the trap-door on to the roof of the tower

ran towards the battlements. It was evening. The sun was already casting long shadows over a wild country of hill and dale, but the fading light only served to show up the leaping flames more clearly. The fire was a couple of miles away, and was partly hidden by a thick dark wood, but one glance told Hal that Gurth was right. Fergus Reed had been caught napping. There was no other tower in that direction to make such a blaze. But who had done it ? For a moment the boy stood watching the distant flames ; then he swung round on his heels, and an instant later he was racing back down the stairs as fast as he could go.

" Wilkins ! " he yelled, reaching the ground-floor of the tower where a large banqueting hall occupied almost the whole width of the building.

" Here, Master Hal," answered a grey-haired man-at-arms appearing through a narrow doorway which led to the kitchen.

" How many men did my father leave this morning when he rode forth ? " asked the boy swiftly.

" Robert Brand took twelve men with him, Master Hal, so there are eight left," replied the veteran.

" Eight. Then we will leave four to guard my mother, and you and I and three others will ride towards Reed's Tower. Hasten, Wilkins ! Choose your men and order five horses to be saddled at

once. We must be away in five minutes. Reed's Tower is burning, and I go to see what has happened to Mistress Margaret and her father."

Less than five minutes later Hal and four retainers were galloping as fast as their horses would carry them through the gathering dusk. The tower was still blazing fiercely, and as they came within sight of the burning building, and saw how the walls stood out like black cliffs against the fiery furnace within, Hal's heart grew heavy with rage and misery. Who had done this thing? No one could possibly be alive inside the tower, so what had happened to Margaret and his friends? He turned to the man riding beside him, and, catching his glance, Wilkins burst into savage speech.

"Rogues' work, Master Hal," exclaimed the old soldier fiercely, "and did you ask me to name the rogue I'd say Black Allen of the Mount."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because for the moment there is truce between us and the Scotch, therefore, as it would need a strong band to overcome Master Reed, the villain must have been Black Allen, who alone possesses the strength for such a deed. Bah!" the speaker spat contemptuously. "The Scots I can stomach. They are men and fight like men, but this Black Allen, who is neither Scot nor English, but raids both sides so long as he can gather fat pickings, is a fox who should be killed. So have a care, Master



'Hal and four retainers were galloping through the gathering dusk'—*Page* 6

Hal. A fox he is with a fox's cunning, and like as not he has prepared an ambush, guessing that some might ride this way from Brand's Tower."

"Then we will give him more than he bargains for," cried Hal fiercely, tugging his sword from its sheath. "Indeed I wish the villain had stayed to meet us, but I fear he and his rascals have already gone back to their hole. Can you see anyone, Wilkins? The place has a deserted look."

The ruined tower was now close at hand, and with every yard they galloped forward Hal's heart grew heavier. There was not a human being in sight. What had happened to Margaret and her father and the men and women who had lived within the tower? Hal had heard tales of Black Allen. Whence he had come or who he was no one knew, except that he was neither Scot nor English. The man was an outlaw, and the story was still told how some years before he and a band of ruffians had surprised a strong castle, climbing the almost unscalable cliff upon which it stood in the dead of night, and had put its garrison to the sword. Since then Black Allen and his men had lived in that castle unchallenged. Moreover, time had brought strength to the robber band, for every ruffian from miles around flocked to Black Allen's following, so that now he was feared and hated by men on both sides of the border. If Black Allen had done this thing, then——

Hal felt Wilkins tugging at his sleeve, and, turning, saw the veteran pointing to a dark figure lying on the ground. It was the figure of a man, and he lay head towards the tower with a long arrow in his back.

"Surprised," growled the old soldier as Hal drew rein beside the still figure. "Shot from behind while running towards the tower. And see the black feathers on the arrow? Allen of the Mount ever feathers his shafts thus. 'Tis as I thought, Master Hal. The villain and his rascals surprised Fergus Reed and his men, and yonder is the result. 'Tis no good we are doing here, young master. Black Allen leaves nothing behind, and we had better be getting back to guard the Dame Dorothy, your mother, in case Black Allen should visit Brand's Tower."

But Hal was loth to go. Margaret, what had happened to Margaret? Surely she had not been killed or fallen into the hands of her father's enemies? By this time it was almost dark, but twice Hal rode round the tower shouting Margaret's name. Still there came no reply. It seemed useless searching further in the dark. They had better go home as Wilkins advised. By now his father should have returned, and perhaps between them—— From inside the tower came a sudden burst of flame which for a moment drove back the surrounding darkness, and in the same instant Hal caught sight

of a dark figure lying in the shadow of a bush some distance away. It was a woman, a girl. Hal sprang from his horse with a cry, and a second later the boy was kneeling by Margaret's side.

The girl was lying on her face, and for one terrible moment Hal thought that she had been killed. Then he realized that she was only stunned, indeed, as he turned her over on her back, she opened her eyes, and an instant later she sat up with a cry of distress.

"Don't be afraid, Margaret," soothed the boy. "I'm Hal. You're with friends. Are you all right?"

"I think so, Hal," replied the girl wearily. "I was running towards the tower when I fell and struck my head on a stone." Suddenly she clutched hold of the boy's arms, and he saw that she was gazing wildly towards the blazing building. "Hal, what's happened? I heard shouting and the clash of swords, and then——"

"I don't know what has happened, Margaret," replied the boy unhappily. "Wilkins says that Black Allen has been this way, and if he's right——"

"Black Allen," the girl interrupted. "Yes, I remember now. He is right, Hal. It was Black Allen. I heard men shouting 'Allen of the Mount' as they fought." She paused a second, then went on. "So Black Allen has been here, and my father is dead or a prisoner." She rose to her feet, and stood swaying slightly and holding on to the boy.

"Take me to your home, Hal," she said presently. "I can't think very well now, but if my father is a prisoner in Black Allen's hands we must——" Her grip tightened on the boy's arms. "Hal, if he's a prisoner we must rescue him. We must——"

"Of course we'll rescue him," Hal assured her stoutly. "Now come, Margaret, you shall mount behind me and we'll ride home. By this time my father will have returned, and he will know what to do."

CHAPTER II

BAD NEWS

It was quite dark by the time the rescue party arrived back at Brand's Tower, and to Hal's astonishment he learned that his father had not yet returned. So he handed Margaret over to his mother and her women, to be cared for, and then ascended to the top of the tower.

Hal was feeling uneasy. His father should have been back by that time. He had not been going far, only in search of some cattle which had strayed or been raided, and it was impossible to search in the dark. Had anything happened to him? The boy's eyes turned in the direction where Margaret's home had been. A ruddy glow was still reflected on the sky, and the sight increased Hal's disquiet. Suppose his father had met Black Allen and his men!

Robert Brand was not a man to shirk a fight, even though the odds might be twelve against four or five times that number. Or Black Allen might have ambushed him. The boy stirred uneasily. It couldn't be. Black Allen couldn't have overcome two such fighters as Fergus Reed and Robert Brand and their followers in one day, and yet, why didn't his father return ?

It was a question to which the hours brought no answer. Midnight came and still Robert Brand had not returned, and now Hal was sure that something had happened to his father. He consulted Wilkins, but the man-at-arms was against a search party being sent out.

" What use, lad ? " he asked. " We are but nine, counting you, and if your father has fallen into Black Allen's clutches then the fight was over long ago, and any force you could take out would be of no use at all. Moreover, if we divide our forces, and Black Allen and his rogues be nearby, then the tower will fall into his hands like a ripe fruit, and there will be more burning and more slaying. No, lad, you can do naught except wait for daylight. Maybe the new day will bring news, and we'll know better what to do."

Good advice, but it was hard doing nothing. Hal spent most of the night on the roof, listening and staring into the darkness, and in the tower no man slept for there was a feeling of danger in the air.

Slowly the hours passed without bringing any tidings, and the new day was already breaking when Hal at last espied a dark figure approaching the tower through the gathering light. The newcomer was on foot, and for some moments the boy watched his slow approach wondering who it could be ; then the man raised his face and Hal recognized Thorold, one of the men who had ridden forth with his father the day before.

Thorold ! Hal turned and raced down the steps three at a time. What was Thorold doing there alone and on foot ? Was he wounded ? He walked like a man at the end of his strength. Hal had reached the ground-floor, and was shouting to the man on guard to open the great iron-studded door ; then as Wilkins appeared he called to him to follow and ran out of the tower.

Where was Thorold ? Hal glanced swiftly around, and the next moment he espied a huddled heap lying on the ground a hundred yards away. Thorold ? Yes, it was he. He had collapsed almost within reach of home. So he was wounded. Hal ran forward and flung himself on his knees beside the fallen man. He was still conscious, and when Wilkins ran up they raised him between them in their arms and carried him into the tower. There they laid him on a bench before the great open fire-place, and poured some wine between his grey lips.

"Speak, Thorold," cried Hal in a fever of impatience. "My father. Where is he? What has happened to him?"

The wounded man looked at the boy with dull eyes, and presently a low whisper came from between his lips.

"Black Allen," he murmured in a voice which his listeners could barely hear, "ambushed us as we rode home. We fought hard, but they were too many. Robert Brand taken prisoner, others killed. I crawled away—to bring news."

"A prisoner, my father a prisoner!" echoed Hal aghast.

The wounded man nodded, and closed his eyes. But Hal had not yet finished, there was still one question he wished to ask.

"Wake up, Thorold," he begged. "Wake up! Do not close your eyes. Did you notice? Were there any other prisoners with Black Allen last night?"

The tired eyes opened.

"Other prisoners, Master Hal? How should I know? Yet wait. I remember. I did see some bound men, and one methought looked like Fergus Reed. But it was almost dark, and we were too busy to think of others. I saw your father overborne, and then——someone struck at me from behind, and——"

The whisper died away into silence, and after a brief moment Hal straightened himself.

" Take him away," he commanded, speaking to Wilkins. " Wake the women, and see that his wounds are dressed and that he is well cared for. I will break the news to my mother and Mistress Margaret."

The boy turned away, heavy at heart. His father and Fergus Reed both prisoners in Black Allen's hands, what worse disaster could have happened ? He came to his mother's door, and knocked upon it, and on being told to enter found his mother already dressed, and Margaret, clad in a long cloak, sitting by her side.

" You bring bad news, son ? "

Hal nodded. His mother was a small fragile little woman, and often he had wondered why a fighter like his father had married her, but he had to confess that she took the news bravely enough.

" Bad news, mother," he answered. " Thorold has just come in. He is wounded, and he brings news that Black Allen ambushed my father and his men last evening as they returned. Robert Brand they took prisoner, but what happened to the others I do not know, though seeing that Black Allen was the attacker it is not hard to guess."

" Your father—Black Allen's prisoner ! "

The exclamation came from the girl, and Hal nodded again.

" My father, Black Allen's prisoner, Margaret," he repeated. " And I bring you news, too. Fergus

Reed was also there a prisoner. Thorold recognized him before he was himself struck down, so it seems that your father is still alive." He laughed bitterly. "A pretty pass is it not? Fergus Reed and Robert Brand both captured by a rascally outlaw in the same day. What will happen next, I wonder?"

"We must rescue them, Hal!" cried the girl, springing to her feet.

"What, with nine men, and Black Allen has nigh on a hundred? Still I admit, Margaret, that something must be done." Hal looked at his mother. The elder woman had forgotten all about him, and was kneeling before a small ivory crucifix praying, and after one glance his eyes travelled back to Margaret's and he nodded. "Dress quickly," he whispered, "and come to the armoury. You and I must decide this thing, though what we are to do I do not know."

"Neither do I, Hal," replied the girl bravely, "except that the son of Robert Brand and the daughter of Fergus Reed cannot sit still and let their fathers rot in the dungeons of Black Allen's castle. Now leave me to dress, Hal. I will be with you in five minutes."

CHAPTER III

TRAPPED

Two hours later Hal rode forth from Brand's Tower alone. It was a desperate mission upon which he was embarking, for he was going to try and find out what had happened to his father and Fergus Reed, and, if the chance arose, rescue the prisoners from their captivity.

Hal turned in his saddle and waved good-bye to Margaret and Wilkins standing in the doorway. He grinned cheerfully as he did so, shouting out reassuring words and promising a speedy return, but inside he was feeling the reverse of happy. Had anyone ever embarked on a more hopeless errand? One boy against a strong band of outlaws who lived in a great castle from which they defied all enemies. It was ridiculous; yet there was no other way. There was no money with which to ransom the prisoners, while to have taken any of the eight men who remained to guard the tower would have been to leave his mother almost unprotected, and have done him little good. Of course there was Margaret. Margaret had wanted to accompany him. She had begun by begging, and ended by storming and raging, but Hal had been firm, and so it happened that he rode forth through the September morning alone on his desperate mission.

Hal had no plans. He did not even know exactly

where to find Black Allen's castle. Still no doubt he would be able to ask his way, and the rest he must leave to chance. Perhaps he might present himself at the castle gate, and ask to be allowed to join the outlaw band. That would be one way of getting into the enemy's stronghold, and once inside, surely he would find means of rescuing the prisoners.

So Hal rode on his way the prey of gloomy thoughts, but presently the great red horse he was riding began to prance and curvet. Really he could not understand how anyone could be sad on such a day. The sun was shining, little fleecy clouds flecked the sky, and the invigorating moorland air was filled with the fragrance of thyme and heather and a hundred other wonderful scents. Accordingly the great horse pranced and took short dancing steps first to one side and then to the other, until at last he almost succeeded in unseating his rider, and brought him out of his abstraction with a jerk.

"Steady, Rufus, steady," cried Hal, settling himself in the saddle again.

But Rufus did not want to be steady. He wanted to gallop on and on across that great, wonderful, moorland country, so he answered Hal with an excited whinny, and became more lively than ever. Hal grinned.

"All right, old boy," he said, "have it your own way."

He slackened the reins, and with a squeal of

delight the great horse broke into a swift gallop. Hal's smile deepened. Rufus was right, of course. What was the good of being gloomy? Gloomy thoughts wouldn't help the prisoners, so he might just as well be happy on such a day. And he would be happy! The boy raised his right hand, and set the light steel cap more securely on his head. He was clad in a jerkin of leather and breeches of the same strong material, while from his waist dangled a long sharp sword and his right hand gripped a stout spear. Hal dug the heels of his leather boots into his horse's ribs, and whooped with sheer delight as the pace quickened. It was good to be alive on such a day, even though he was engaged on a desperate errand.

Presently, however, the gallop slackened, and Hal eased his mount to a more steady pace. He must not forget his caution. Though still on the English side of the Border, Hal knew that he was riding through a country where every stranger was an enemy until he had proved himself a friend, so as he rode, the boy's eyes glanced hither and thither on the constant watch for the least sign of danger.

But the morning passed uneventfully. Except for the birds the boy saw not a living thing, though once in the distance he espied a round tower, and rode out of his way to give it a wide berth. For in those wild days Englishmen often drew swords on

Englishmen, and with his father's freedom at stake Hal dared not take unnecessary risks.

Midday found him at the place where his father had been ambushed, and the boy drew rein, and gazed gloomily at the signs of the desperate fight. All around, the ground bore the marks of trampling feet, and leading away from the ill-omened spot was the broad trail of a large body of horsemen. Hal looked at the trail, and the boy's lips tightened in a grim line. Black Allen must have made that trail; Black Allen and his prisoners and his men, and if he could follow that trail to the end it would lead him to the Castle of the Mount where, if anywhere, he would find his father and Fergus Reed.

Hour after hour the boy rode forward through country which grew wilder with every stride. Once he stopped for a short while to eat some of the food he had brought with him in a saddle-bag, and to allow Rufus to crop the thick lush grass; then on he rode again, until presently the lengthening shadows told him that the day was coming to an end.

Hal reined in his horse and looked about him. He was in the midst of a wild country of hill and valley and thick dark woodland, and nowhere was there the slightest sign of human beings or human habitations. It looked as though he would have to spend the night in the open. Well, it would be safer than trusting himself to strangers who might be enemies in disguise.

The boy turned and rode on, until presently he came to a thicket of trees out of which ran a little burbling stream. Hal looked about him. It would be a good place to camp, he decided. The trees would give shelter, and the stream would give drink, so he dismounted, and, having unsaddled Rufus, turned him loose to feed. He knew that the horse would not stray far. Hal unbuckled his belt, and was about to lay his sword on the ground beside his spear when from the thicket behind him there came a sound. It was only a slight sound, merely the cracking of a twig, but it was filled with the warning of danger. Hal swung round to face the point whence the sound had come. Who had made it, man or animal? With one hand on the hilt of his sword Hal stood listening; then as the sound of a footfall came from behind him he turned back to front the new danger, and found himself facing three rough-looking men.

"Now don't start trouble, young master!" cried one man as Hal drew his sword, and flung the scabbard aside. "We don't mean you any hurt, but we be masterless men, and we want your sword and spear and that steel cap you be wearing and your big red horse. Masterless men we be, young master, and desperate, so don't be a fool. There be five of us here, and you can't fight five."

Five. Hal thought swiftly. There were three men facing him. Another was evidently capturing

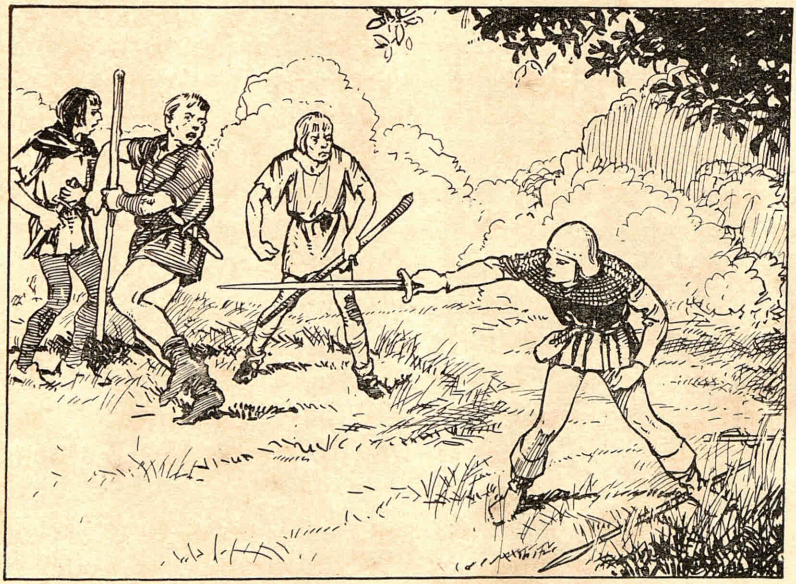
Rufus, while the fifth must be somewhere in the wood behind him. Five. No, he couldn't fight five well-armed men, but these rogues were poorly armed with knives and staves, and would find it hard to overcome him. And he must not be overcome ! To be robbed now of his horse and weapons would mean ruin to his venture. Hal stepped forward and made a swift pass at the enemy with his sword ; then, as the men leapt back, he stooped, recovered his spear from the ground, and the next moment, with a swift leap sideways, he had gained the trunk of a large tree against which he placed his back and so faced his adversaries.

" So you're going to fight, my young cockerel, are you ? " growled the man who appeared to be the leader of the robbers. " Well, have it your own way. Spread out, lads, and let him have it. Hi, Watkin ! Ah ! there you be."

Hal saw the man make a sign to someone in the thicket on his right, and involuntarily turned his head to face the new danger. But the sign had been merely a ruse to distract his attention, and the next moment, before Hal had time to realize the trap into which he had fallen, the robber had sprung in and dealt him a resounding blow on the head with his stout staff.

Hal's steel cap saved him from serious injury, but the blow left him dazed and rocking. In vain he tried to raise his sword and strike down his

aggressor. A second blow struck it from his grasp, and then, as he groped blindly for his spear, the third man sprang in with raised club. Hal saw the blow coming, but could do nothing to evade it. Crack!



'Hal made a swift pass at the enemy'—*Page* 22

The club descended on the steel cap with stunning force, and for a moment it seemed to the boy as though he were seeing all the stars in heaven; then his knees crumpled beneath his weight, the flashing lights gave place to utter darkness, and Hal slid to the ground senseless at the feet of his conquerors.

CHAPTER IV

ESCAPE

Two hours later Hal opened his eyes. For some minutes he lay wondering where he was and what had happened to him ; then, as he tried to raise his head and became conscious of throbbing pain and sickness, memory returned, and he sank back with a groan. What a fool he had been ! Outwitted by a simple trick, and knocked senseless by ill-armed rogues before he could strike a blow in self-defence ! Hal groaned again, as much from mental anguish as bodily pain. So this was the end of his fine venture. He couldn't even get through the first day without mishap. The boy tried to move, and discovered that he was bound. Bound ! That was queer. Rogues of that type did not usually take prisoners. Why had they kept him alive ? Did they know who he was, and hope to get a ransom ? Hal smiled wryly. Ill days had come to the house of Brand. First the father and now the son had fallen to an ambush. What would happen next ?

Hal's next thought was to wonder where he was. He was surrounded by complete darkness, and from the feel of things he was lying on a stone floor, while there was a chill dank atmosphere about his surroundings which reminded him of a dungeon. A dungeon ! Impossible. Masterless men like his assailants had no dungeons to which to take their

prisoners ; yet that he was in a dungeon of some sort the boy was sure. Hal tried to think of a tower or castle near the place where he had been captured, but he could remember none, and at last he gave up the attempt which only increased the throbbing in his head, and lay listening.

For some time he heard nothing, but presently the boy became aware of a distant murmur of voices. His captors ? One of the voices seemed to resemble that of the chief rogue. Hal wondered whether he should start shouting, but decided against it, and instead turned his attention to the ropes which bound him. The throbbing in his head was less, and so was the terrible feeling of sickness, and if he could only get rid of his bonds he might yet escape. But whoever had tied his arms and legs had done the work well, and after fifteen minutes of wearying effort Hal gave up the attempt. It was no good. Perhaps in the morning his captors might loosen his bonds, and a chance of escape might come. If it did so, he would take it.

Presently Hal fell asleep, and when he woke again it was to hear a soft voice murmuring his name in his ears.

" Hal, wake up," said the voice. " Wake up and don't make a noise. D'you hear me, Hal ? Wake up ! "

Hal opened his eyes. He was still lying on a stone floor in complete darkness, but now he was sure

he was not alone. Had he really heard someone speaking to him ? The voice had sounded like—— But that was impossible. What was this thing across his mouth ? It felt like a hand. A hand ! Hal moved suddenly, and as he did so the pressure upon his lips increased, and the voice he had heard in his waking moments was again whispering in his ear.

" Are you awake, Hal ? Please raise your head if you are. Thank you. Now don't make a sound, or you may wake them. I'm Margaret. Yes, I am, and I've come to rescue you. I'm going to untie the ropes round your legs and arms, and you're not to say a word while I'm doing it. Understand ? "

The hand was removed from his lips, and the first thing Hal did in spite of all commands was to speak.

" Margot," he breathed, " how ever——"

" Hush, Hal. If you make a noise you'll wake them, and then we'll never escape."

" But Margot," persisted the boy in the same breathless whisper, " how did you get here ? "

" I followed you, Hal," came the girl's murmured reply, while her fingers busied themselves with the knots which held the boy prisoner.

" Followed me ! "

" Yes. Did you really think I would stay safely at home while you went forth alone to rescue our fathers ? I waited till Wilkins was out of the way ; then I saddled a horse, and I've been behind you

all day. I saw those men attack you, and I followed you here, and now you're not to say another word till we're out of the tower and away."

"A tower?"

"Yes, Disobedient. You're in a ruined tower. Must have been burnt years ago in some border foray. There are only the ground-floor and the dungeons left. There, that's the last knot undone. I expect you're stiff, but you'll soon be all right. Now listen, Hal, and then not another word till we are outside. When you can walk properly, I'm going to lead you up some stone steps to the ground-floor above. The men are asleep up there, but they're sleeping heavily, and we shan't wake them if we're quiet. Your weapons and steel cap are on a stone settle near the door, and Rufus is in the ruined stables at the back of the tower. If we're careful those men won't discover your escape till the morning, and then we'll be far away."

"I understand, Margot," whispered Hal, and then lapsed into silence while he rubbed the life back into his numbed limbs. It was a painful process, for his captors had bound him tightly, but at last the use came back to his arms and legs, and he was able to stand firmly on his feet.

"All right, Hal?"

"Yes."

A hand came out of the darkness and led him across the dungeon.

"Here we are," the girl whispered. "Steps. Take care you don't stumble and make a noise. There's a door at the top. I'll go first and open it. Come along now, and do be careful!"

Hal heard the faint rustle of Margaret's feet as she mounted the unseen stairs, and then he also was climbing up through the darkness. It was eerie work, for at first he could see nothing; then there came a tiny creak from above, and Hal became aware of an open door and the glow of a dying fire coming through the doorway. A second later he was standing by Margaret's side.

For some moments the companions stood listening. From the round stone chamber beyond the door came the sound of lusty snoring, and at a pressure from Margaret's hand the boy followed her through the doorway into the room. The embers of a wood fire still glowed in the wide open hearth, and on the floor before the fire lay Hal's five captors sleeping soundly. The boy glanced at them, but a tug upon his sleeve made him turn away and follow Margaret across the room towards a narrow doorway which alone allowed entrance into the chamber. There were his spear and sword and steel cap. Hal picked up the latter thankfully, and set it on his head. He buckled on his sword, and was in the act of picking up his spear when from the room behind came a slight sound. What was that? The boy paused as though turned to stone; then, as a low

cry came from Margaret, he swung round and saw that one of the men who had captured him was sitting up, and gazing at him with astonished owlish eyes.

Gone now was all chance of a swift and easy escape. For a second the man and boy stared at each other in mute defiance, the next the silence was rudely broken by a violent yell which awoke the remaining rogues as one man and brought them leaping to their feet. Hal plucked his sword from its sheath, and pushed Margaret through the doorway.

"Run," he whispered urgently. "Get Rufus out of the stable and saddle him. I'll hold the door while you're doing it. Go, Margaret," as the girl hesitated. "It's our only chance. Call me when you're ready, and I'll come. Hurry!"

"All right."

The girl slipped away into the darkness, and the boy turned to face his foes. The ruffians had possessed themselves of their rude weapons, but now they stood hesitating to attack. The doorway was in a corner of the room, so placed that but one man could attack Hal at a time, and no one seemed anxious to be the first to face that long gleaming sword.

"So you've escaped, my young cockerel," said the chief rogue, leaning on his staff, and regarding Hal out of hard eyes. "Pity I didn't let Watkin finish you out there by the wood as he wanted to

do. Didn't know you had a friend. Well, I don't think you're worth the letting of good blood, so as far as I am concerned you may go."

The speaker turned away as though he had no further interest in Hal ; the next moment he swung round with lightning swiftness, and flung his great knife straight at the boy. But Hal had already been tricked once, and had been watching the man's every movement, now, as he glimpsed the thrown up arm and the dull gleam of the knife, he ducked swiftly, with the result that the keen blade flew over his head and crashed to the ground behind him.

A howl of rage greeted his success, and almost before the boy could straighten himself again the ruffian had sprung in and was striking at him with his club. Hal turned the first blow aside and the second. He saw a third sweeping towards him and stepped out of its way so that the club struck nothing but thin air ; then as the ruffian stumbled forward, carried by the impetus of his own blow, Hal drove in with his sword, and ran the knave through the fleshy part of his left arm.

With a curse and a scream of pain the ruffian sprang back, and the next moment another of the rogues was engaging the boy. This man was more cautious. He was armed with a long pointed stake, and for a couple of minutes it was a ding-dong battle of thrust and parry, parry and thrust until Hal's arms began to ache. How much longer would

Margaret be ? he wondered. He saw the point of the stake leaping towards him, and essayed a hasty parry, but his brief abstraction had given his adversary the opening he needed, and the sharp point struck Hal full on the chest. Still the point failed to penetrate the boy's stout leather jerkin, and angered by the blow Hal struck downward so that his sword slid along the stake and wounded his opponent on the wrist.

Now it was the ruffian's turn to give ground, and suddenly, forgetting his caution, Hal leapt after him. Thrust, parry, thrust. Hal's point found the man's shoulder, but before he could withdraw his sword he found himself assailed from right and left by two more rogues. Too late then the boy realized the mistake he had made. In his excitement he had left the safety of the door where but one man could attack him at a time, and now he was assailed on two sides at once. Crack ! Hal half parried a blow at his head so that the club glanced off his steel cap, and the next moment his other adversary caught him on the left shoulder, numbing his arm and driving him to his knees.

With a shout of triumph the ruffian raised his club to strike again, but before he could repeat the blow Hal had lunged forward and driven his sword through his adversary's thigh. A scream greeted this success, and the man dropped his weapon and fell to the ground. In the same moment Hal flung

himself backward so that the blow aimed at him by the man on his right missed him altogether. And now Hal was back in the comparative safety of the doorway, and his enemies were standing watching him with vicious eyes. Three of them were wounded, but their wounds seemed only to have increased their fury. The boy watched them anxiously. Surely Margaret should have saddled Rufus by this time? What was that? "Hal! Hal!" There she was. The boy gripped his spear, and suddenly, taking a lesson from his adversaries' teaching, he flung it straight at his nearest enemy; the next moment he was out of the tower and running through the darkness as fast as his feet would carry him.

"Margaret!" he shouted.

"Here I am, Hal, right in front."

The boy ran on, and an instant later he caught sight of two horses, with one rider up, as deeper shadows in the darkness.

"All right, Margot," he gasped.

Hal gripped hold of the bridle and swung himself up into the vacant saddle. From Rufus came a whinny of welcome. The robbers were streaming out of the tower and rushing towards them, but already Margaret and Hal were digging their heels into their horses' flanks, and before their enemies could reach them the horses had broken into a canter, and were carrying their riders swiftly away into the sheltering darkness.

CHAPTER V

VOICES IN THE MIST

For half an hour the fugitives rode without stopping, leaving it to their horses to find a way through the darkness ; then Hal drew rein.

" We're safe enough now," he said. " Those knaves have no horses, and will never be able to follow us. Margot," he went on, " I don't know how to thank you. I should never have escaped by myself."

" Don't talk about it, Hal," replied the girl. " We're comrades in this venture, and one comrade should always help the other. What are we going to do now ? "

Hal hesitated.

" I suppose by rights I ought to take you back to Brand's Tower," he answered slowly.

" Take me back to the tower ! " repeated Margaret in astonishment. " Now listen to me, Henry Brand. I am not going back to the tower, or if I do you'll have to bind me hand and foot and carry me back like a dead deer across your saddle. And I don't think you'll do that."

Hal grinned, and shook his head.

" No, I shan't do that, Margot. I was only thinking that a girl——"

" Would be in the way, and out of place, and all that," Margaret finished for him. " I quite agree,

Hal, she would. But I've ceased to be a girl for this venture. You didn't notice me back in the ruined tower, there was no time, but if you had I doubt if you would have recognized me. Before I left your home I cut my hair. Then I found a leather jerkin and breeches of yours which you have outgrown but which fit me very well. I took a steel cap and a light sword from the armoury, and here I am, your younger brother. And, Hal, if you dare to treat me as a girl till this venture is over, I'll fight you, and you know dad taught me to use a sword."

"I know, Margot," answered Hal with a grin. "All right, we're comrades from now on, and very glad I am to have you. Now I think we'd better find a wood or some place where we can sleep, for we'll lose all idea of direction if we go on riding through the dark."

Accordingly the companions rode on another mile or two, and then they came upon a small coppice beside a little stream which ran along the bottom of a valley. From the little they could see in the darkness, it was just the place they wanted, so Margaret and Hal dismounted, and having unsaddled their horses, tethered them with long lengths of rope to two trees so that they could graze their fill of the thick grass. Then the boy and girl took their saddles and cloaks and saddle-bags, and made themselves comfortable on the ground in the shelter of a large tree.

"I'm hungry," announced Margaret. "I brought some food, Hal, so with what you have in your saddle-bag we ought to have enough to last us two or three days. After that we must trust to luck."

The girl opened her saddle-bag and produced a hunk of rough bread and some meat. Then, with a small sharp dagger, she cut off two portions of each, and having handed one share to Hal began to munch the food contentedly. In between bites they discussed their plans, but it was difficult to make plans for such a desperate enterprise, and as soon as they had eaten and quenched their thirst at the stream, they rolled themselves in their cloaks and were soon fast asleep.

Margaret was the first to wake, and she opened her eyes to a grey blank world. The branches of the tree above her were quite invisible, and though she could hear the horses moving she could not see them. The girl uttered an exclamation of dismay. The mist was the thickest she had ever seen, and leaning over, she caught hold of Hal by one shoulder and shook him awake.

"What's the matter?" asked the boy, sitting up.

"A mist's the matter," answered Margaret testily. "What shall we do, Hal? It's worse than darkness. We'll never find our way anywhere in this."

The boy looked about him.

"Perhaps it will clear when the sun gets up," he suggested, though none too hopefully. "Let's have breakfast, and then see how it is."

So the companions ate some food and drank again from the stream, but when they had finished, the mist was as thick as ever, and it was hopeless to think of going on.

"We must wait till it clears," said Hal at last. "If we set out in this we shall simply ride round in circles, or else the horses will take us home again and that would never do."

Accordingly they waited as patiently as they could for the mist to lift. But that morning the mist seemed to cling to the earth more strongly than usual, and it was nearly midday before they detected a thinning of the white curtain about them.

"Come on," said Hal, rising to his feet. "Let's get on. I'm chilled to the bone, and I'm sure you must be, Margot."

The horses were quickly saddled, and for a time the mist did lift partially, and they were able to pick out objects about them, but within an hour it descended again shutting the travellers in with blank grey walls.

"We're lost," announced Hal gloomily. "There's nothing for it, Margot. We'll have to camp again till it clears."

"We have to find a place first," answered the girl. "Let's ride on a little farther, Hal. If we could only find a cave or some shelter it wouldn't be so bad."

So the boy and girl rode forward again. Truth

to tell they were both feeling very miserable. Their errand was desperate enough without Nature joining their enemies against them, and they rode on through the mist in silence until, all of a sudden, a slight break in the grey fog showed them the tall walls of a border tower a short distance away. Only for a moment was the tower visible ; then the mist closed round it again, and the companions were once more lost in the blank grey world.

" Did you see it, Hal ? " whispered the girl.

" Yes, and the quicker we get away from it the better," answered the boy. " I know, Margot, it's shelter, but for all we know we may be over the border, and if so, the best we should get would be a dungeon, and I'd rather be out here. Let us go. We have our fathers to think about, and we daren't take any risks."

The girl had to admit the truth of his reasoning, so they rode miserably forward again. But now the world, which had been so empty all the morning, seemed to have become suddenly full of danger, for they had ridden less than a mile from the tower when out of the mist close at hand there came the sound of voices, and the tramp of a large body of mounted men.

Hal and Margot drew rein, and sat with straining ears and eyes, listening and peering into the mist. Men ! Who were they ? The next moment the answer reached them out of the fog.

"The tower may be near or it may be miles away, Master Allen," said a man's surly voice. "How can I tell! The saints couldn't find anything in this mist."

"Then you'd better not be a saint, Angus," answered another voice. "I have a special account to settle with Red Murdoch, also I know that he has a coffer full of gold, and this mist will enable us to take him by surprise. So use your wits, my friend, or you may find a lodging in the dungeons of the Mount with my other captives."

The voice ceased and gradually the muffled sound of hoofs died in the distance. Hal and Margaret clutched each other in the gloom.

"Did you hear?" whispered the boy. "Black Allen. It must be. The same name, and then his castle is called the Castle of the Mount."

"Yes, Hal, and he's going to attack that tower we passed. Oh! the poor people. Hal, we must go back and warn them, or they'll be taken by surprise and killed."

For a moment only, Hal hesitated.

"All right," he answered. "Scot or English, if we carry them warning they can't help but treat us well, and in any case Black Allen is the enemy of both nations. Come along, Margot. Those men are lost for the moment, but if the mist should clear again they'll see the tower at once. Follow me, I think I can find my way."

As it happened, however, it was Rufus who took them back to the tower, and they reached it just as the mist suddenly began to clear rapidly, disclosing the country round. Hal sprang from his horse. The great door of the tower was open, but as the boy ran forward a huge red-headed man appeared in the doorway, and eyed him sharply.

"Hey, who are you, my young friend?" he cried. "You seem in a hurry to visit Red Murdoch."

"Red Murdoch!" gasped Hal. "Are you Red Murdoch?"

"That's me," answered the giant.

"Then shut your gate and call your men," cried Hal, "for Black Allen of the Mount and his rogues are on their way here. Look, there they are on that hillside less than a mile away."

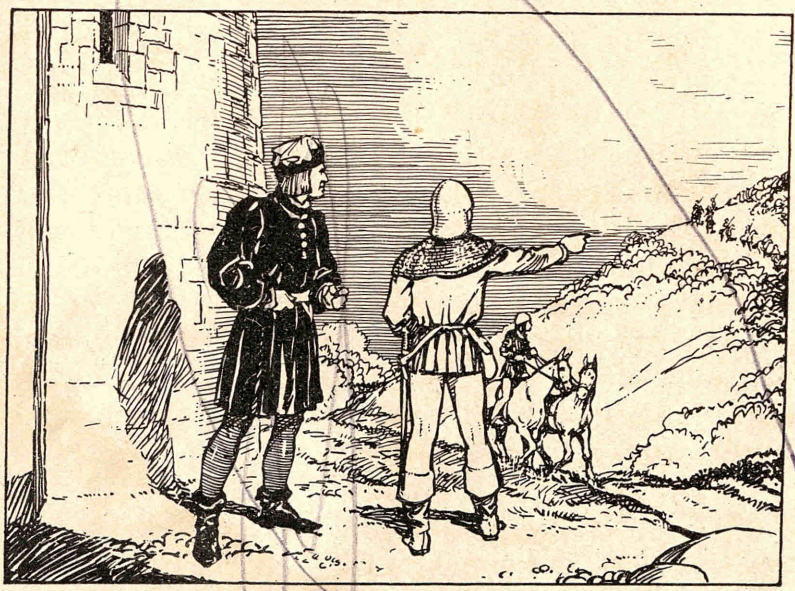
"Black Allen!"

The red-headed giant took one glance at the distant troop; then he sprang into swift action.

"Come inside," he shouted, "both of you, horses and all. Red Murdoch never shut his gate on a friend. Hurry! That's right." He began to yell various names, and men came running into the hall which formed the ground-floor of the tower. "Bar the gate," he yelled. "Quickly, you varlets, Black Allen is coming. David, where are you, you rogue? Ah! there you are. Take ten men and man the loopholes. Use your crossbows. Shoot the rogues

as they ride up, and a golden crown to the man who puts a bolt through Black Allen."

Hal and Margot stood on one side and watched the swift preparations. Red Murdoch and his men



'"Look, there they are on that hillside"'—*Page* 39

were evidently not unused to such forays, and in a surprisingly short time the stout door had been bolted and barred, and men were running up to the higher floors where cunningly devised loopholes covered the gateway and the approaches to the tower. Hal looped Rufus's bridle over an iron hook, then he did the same for Margot's horse, after

which he took the girl's hand and dragged her towards the steps which led to the top of the tower.

"Come along, Margot," he cried. "Let's get out on the roof and see what's happening."

CHAPTER VI

THE ATTACK ON THE TOWER

A stirring and rather frightening scene met the companions' gaze. Black Allen had at least sixty men with him. They were all mounted, and well-armed, while the leader himself was clad in full mail and rode a great coal-black horse. For the moment, the attacking force was drawn up outside the range of the garrison's crossbows, but now the leader himself rode forward, and, holding his shield so as to protect his face, hailed the defenders.

"Hey there, Red Murdoch!" he shouted. "I am Black Allen of the Mount, and I and my merry men have come to visit you, you red-headed knave."

"Knave yourself," came back the reply in a bull-like bellow. "I want no truck with outlaws, Allen of the Mount, so get you gone, you and your black-hearted rogues, and come not troubling honest folk."

"Honest folk, did you say, Murdoch?" laughed the rider. "Ha, ha! Well, we will not quibble over words. But hearken, varlet. There is a coffer in your tower which I covet, a coffer full of gold. Now

I am in need of gold, so if you will send a man out with that coffer and I find its contents to my liking, I and my merry lads will ride away and leave you in peace, but if that coffer is not forthcoming, then, by St. Andrew ! I will come and take it."

The answer to this bold threat was a sudden sharp twang, and an instant later a crossbow bolt, shot from the tower, stuck quivering in Black Allen's shield. From the body of outlaws came a shout of rage, but their leader was unharmed, and the next moment, with a derisive gesture, Black Allen had swung his horse round, and ridden back to his followers.

" Now we're for it," cried Hal, as Black Allen began to deploy his forces.

" But, Hal, how will they try to get in ? " asked Margaret nervously. " The rogues took us by surprise before dad could shut the gate, but Red Murdoch and his men are ready for them."

" I expect Black Allen will post men to shoot at the loopholes, and under cover of that attack, others will try to break down the gate with a battering ram. Yes, look, I'm right. Some of the rogues are dismounting and going towards that big log over there. Margot, I'm going to get a crossbow and some bolts. I can't stand up here doing nothing. If those ruffians get inside the tower they won't spare a soul. Keep under cover and don't let them see you."

Hal was gone in a flash, but inside five minutes

he had returned bearing a crossbow and a bag full of iron bolts.

"What are they doing?" he asked, crouching down beside Margaret, and peering through an embrasure in the battlements which crowned the walls of the tower.

"They've lifted the log," replied the girl, "and more than half the outlaws are already posted to cover the loopholes. Look out, Hal, they're going to shoot."

A sudden loud twang followed the girl's warning, and an instant later a score of iron bolts struck the tower. The majority of them hit the walls without doing any damage, but one at least found its way through a loophole, for from somewhere below came a sudden sharp cry of pain.

"Someone's hit," remarked Hal grimly.

He fitted a bolt to his bow, and aimed at an outlaw who was crouching behind a bush. Twang! Hal's aim was rather low, nevertheless the bolt struck the man in the left leg and bowled him over with a cry of pain; the next moment the rest of the defenders had joined in, and were shooting hard and fast at the enemy.

But numbers were on the attackers' side, and no matter how hard and fast the defenders shot, the attackers shot harder and faster. Three more men of Black Allen's band were struck, but twice again Hal and Margaret heard cries from inside the tower

telling of hits scored by the enemy. So matters continued for some minutes ; then, all at once, the men who were standing beside the log gripped hold of it, lifted it, and started running with it towards the gate of the tower.

Twang ! Twang ! Hal got in two shots both of which missed ; then a swarm of bolts drove him down to seek shelter with Margaret behind the battlements. What was happening ? They could see nothing though they could hear Red Murdoch bellowing orders to his men, and a few seconds later there came a resounding thud from below, followed by the sound of cracking timbers.

" They've reached the gate and are battering it in ! " cried Hal.

The boy sprang to his feet and loosed a bolt at the attackers, but before he could shoot again a bolt from an enemy's crossbow glanced off his steel cap, and Margaret had dragged him back into safety.

Crash ! Crash !

Again the battering-ram thudded against the gate, and again, while inside and outside the tower everyone seemed to be shouting at once. Crash ! What was Murdoch doing ? Why weren't the men wielding the battering-ram shot down ? Had the defenders been driven back from the loopholes ? Hal lifted his head to see what was happening, but the next instant a bolt whizzed through the air so

close that the breath of its passing fanned the boy's cheek, and he was glad to duck into shelter again.

" It's no good, Hal," cried Margaret, clutching at the boy and holding him down. " You can't do anything, and you'll be shot if you show yourself."

Crash ! Again the battering-ram thudded against the door of the tower, while the loud twang of the crossbows never ceased. Crash ! Inside the tower a man screamed, telling of a bolt gone home. Crash ! Crash ! With every thud of the ram the sound of cracking timbers became louder, until suddenly there came a louder crash than usual, followed almost instantly by a loud cheer, and the clash of steel on steel.

" They're in ! " cried Hal, springing to his feet, and seizing his crossbow and bag of bolts. " Stop here, Margaret. I must go and help Red Murdoch."

He turned towards the stairs, while from outside the tower came the sound of Black Allen's voice shouting orders, followed by a roar of voices and the thud of charging feet. Hal reached the top of the stairs and began to race down them, but almost at once he realized that Margaret was following close behind.

" Go back, Margaret ! " he commanded, stopping and facing the girl.

" I won't go back," answered the girl rebelliously. " Do you think I want to be caught alone if Black Allen and his ruffians get in ? Go on, Hal. You

say you want to help Red Murdoch. Well then, hurry, for by the sound of things Red Murdoch and his men are in sore straits."

It did, indeed, seem as though the enemy were carrying things before them. From the bottom of the tower came a confused din of clashing steel and screams and angry yells, above which the shouts of Black Allen and his followers rose clearly, dominating the voices of Red Murdoch and his men. Hal listened a second ; then, realizing that it was a waste of time arguing with Margaret, he continued his hasty descent.

The tower was four stories high, and at the top of the lowest flight of steps Hal halted to look about him. From where he was standing almost the whole of the hall was visible with the shattered door at one end, and a glance showed the boy the desperate nature of the plight in which the defenders were placed. At least a score of Black Allen's outlaws had already entered the hall, and these, led by Black Allen himself, were slowly forcing back a thin line of desperately struggling men headed by Red Murdoch wielding a huge axe.

The din was terrific. Above the clash of steel and the cries of the wounded rose the shouts of the contending factions, while every time Red Murdoch's axe fell the giant roared forth his war-cry, " Strike, Murdoch, strike ! " in a voice which echoed backwards and forwards between the surrounding walls.

But numbers were on the side of the attackers. Red Murdoch was already wounded in the thigh, and all the valour of the defenders could not stop the steady flow of fresh enemies into the hall. Men fell, struck down by sword and axe, but, whereas the attackers could find fresh men to fill the gaps, the defenders grew fewer every minute, until there came a time when Red Murdoch and his men were outnumbered three or four to one, and the shouts of the outlaws drowned all other sounds.

"Hey, Murdoch," gibed Black Allen, striking down a man who opposed him, "what about that coffer now? Are you not sorry you refused the offer I made you? You might have saved that great carcass of yours for a few more months if——"

He broke off with a scream of pain, for suddenly, with a vicious smack, a heavy bolt shot from Hal's crossbow had struck him in the right shoulder, and piercing the stout mail had buried itself in the flesh beneath. In vain Black Allen tried to raise his sword. The weapon slipped from his nerveless grip, and the next moment an axe, wielded by one of the defenders, had descended full upon the outlaw's helm and had felled him to the ground.

Now it was the turn of the attackers to give ground. "Black Allen's down! Black Allen's down!" rose the cry, and instantly some of the outlaws began to scramble through the ruined doorway, while others gathered round their fallen

leader, and picking him up fought their way to safety. Twang! Twang! Two more bolts from Hal's bow crashed into the retreating men, and Red Murdoch and his surviving followers, seeing victory so miraculously within their grasp, flung themselves upon the outlaws with fierce shouts of exultation. "Strike, Murdoch, strike!" Red Murdoch's axe rose and fell, rose and fell. Now there were but six of the enemy left within the hall, and a few seconds later these also were fleeing for their lives. Standing on the top of the steps leading down into the hall, Hal and Margaret listened. For some seconds they heard a medley of shouts and yells, then came the sound of horses galloping furiously past the tower, the noise of their hoofs receding farther and farther into the distance until presently it died away altogether.

Three hours later Hal and Margaret were sitting on a settle facing Red Murdoch as he sprawled at ease in a great chair. The litter of the fight had been cleared away, the wounded attended to, and the gate temporarily repaired, and now the owner of the tower sat with a great flagon of mead by his side facing the young adventurers. He had thanked Hal for what he had done, calling him a brave fighter, he had listened to his story, and the story of the quest he and Margaret were embarked upon, but when Hal asked him to help them rescue their fathers from Black Allen's clutches he shook his great head.

"I owe you much, young Englishman," he answered, "but, boy, yours is a mad quest, and what you ask of me is impossible. Ha, ha!" he put back his head and laughed. "What would that rogue Black Allen say if he knew that a boy and a girl dressed as a boy had set out to rob him of his prisoners? Methinks it would be worth hearing."

"Perhaps he is not in a position to say anything," remarked Margaret darkly. "Hal's bolt hit hard, and that blow upon his helm was a shrewd one."

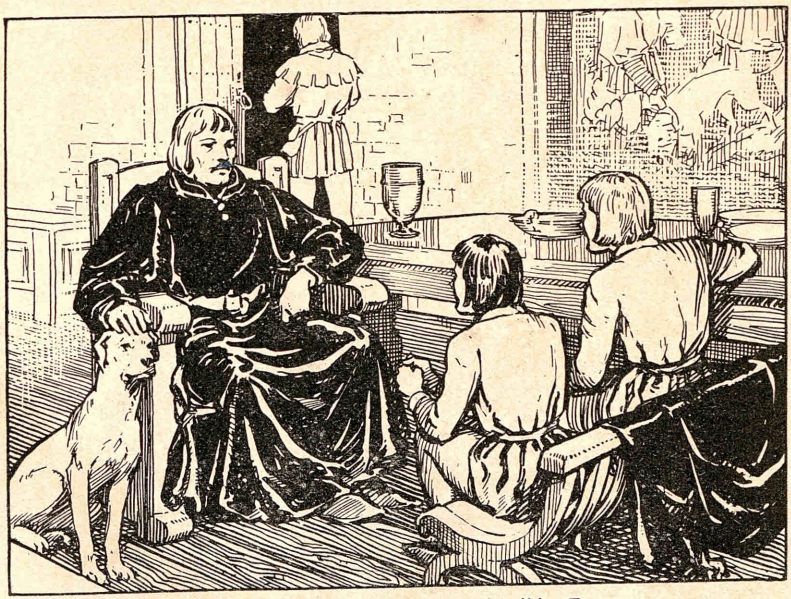
"Ha! so you think that? No, wench, Black Allen is very much alive you may be sure, and as angry as a wounded bear. The wound your lad gave him was but a shoulder wound which numbed his arm, and that helm of his will have saved his head. Nay, Black Allen still lives, ill-luck, and a week from to-day he'll be as strong as ever."

"Then you will not help us?" asked Hal.

"Help you, lad? How can I? Black Allen still has eighty men or more, perched in a castle on the top of a rock where we might get at him if we could fly, but not on our feet. Against this strength I have but ten sound men. 'Tis mad, boy, mad! Go home, both of you, and send a messenger to Black Allen offering to ransom your fathers. No doubt that is what he is waiting for you to do, for the rogue seems fond of gold, and because of what you have done this day I will help you with twenty golden crowns."

But Hal shook his head.

"'Tis useless," he answered. "Black Allen would demand a hundred crowns each, and we could not muster a quarter of that amount. So if you will not help us we must go on alone."



"'What you ask of me is impossible'"—*Page* 49

The big man shook his head sadly.

"Well, well, have it your own way. Maybe you'll succeed where I and my ten men would fail. Aye, strange things happen sometimes. Black Allen would see me, but he may not see you. And that reminds me. There is a holy hermit who lives in a cave about three miles away. His name is Father

Andrew, and he is a very holy man though there was a time when he was not so holy. 'Tis said, indeed, that once he belonged to Black Allen's band, but that becoming tired of his master's wickedness he rebuked him one day. Thereupon Black Allen blinded him, and turned him out of the castle, and now he is Father Andrew who lives alone trying to do penance for his past sins."

"But how can he help us, Murdoch ?" asked Hal.

"I don't know, lad, but the Father is a learned man, and there have been times when from things he has said I have thought that he knows more about the castle where Black Allen lives than he will say. I have asked him, wondering what the secret may be, but he will tell me nothing, calling me a man of war. But maybe he will regard you differently. Yours is a bold quest, and it would seem a good one, so perchance the worthy Father may be willing to help."

"It seems a poor chance," remarked Margaret doubtfully.

"Aye, lass, it is that, but it's the best I can do short of taking my ten men and riding up to the gate of Black Allen's castle and asking him to shoot us down. And that I will not do. So bide here the night, my young venturers, and to-morrow I will set you on your way to Father Andrew, and you shall ask his advice."

CHAPTER VII

BLACK ALLEN MEETS HIS MATCH

"This is the place."

The words were Hal's, and as he spoke he pushed aside a thick bush, disclosing a narrow opening in the base of an almost sheer wall of rock which rose for three hundred feet above his head.

It was the night following that which he and Margaret had spent in Red Murdoch's tower, and much had happened in the intervening hours. True to his promise, Murdoch had shown them the way to Father Andrew's cell, and the holy man had listened patiently to their story. But for a long time he had refused to help them. To do so, he had protested, would be to hand them into the power of their enemies, and not until Hal and Margaret had threatened that, did all else fail, they would seek service in Black Allen's castle, and try to reach the captives that way, did the holy man relent.

"You are headstrong, my children," Father Andrew had said. "Nevertheless, it is in a worthy cause, and, now that I think on it, maybe I was allowed to discover the secret I know in order that you might save your fathers from the clutches of the evil man whom once I served."

Then Father Andrew went on to tell them how one night, when he had been on duty in the castle, he had discovered the entrance to a secret passage

which led from the castle to the bottom of the cliff on which it stood. He related how he had followed the passage to the end, and how, from that day to this, he had told no one, so that until now he alone knew of the secret way into the Castle of the Mount.

" And what will you do now, my children ? " the hermit asked when he had finished.

" I don't know, Father," Hal had replied, " but indeed it is something to know that we can get into the castle when we will."

After that Hal had asked the hermit many questions. How were they to find the beginning of the passage ? Would it be easy to reach the dungeons ? Where were the keys of the cells kept ? Where was the castle armoury ? Did Black Allen keep many prisoners ? And last, but by no means least, was there a good watch kept in the castle ?

To all these questions the holy hermit had replied as best he could, after which Hal and Margaret had thanked him, and ridden on their way. Now, close upon midnight, they stood at the foot of the rock upon the summit of which was perched the Castle of the Mount.

" I wish you'd let me go alone, Margaret," said Hal, pausing at the mouth of the low dark opening.

" No," came back the answer.

The boy turned, and without another word entered the narrow passage. He and Margaret had left their horses tethered to two trees, and now they

pushed forward as quickly as the darkness would allow, feeling the way with their hands. Soon they came to a flight of steps and began to mount upwards. A hundred steps the boy counted, and still they stretched away up into the darkness. Hal left off counting, and began to go over the plans they had made. According to Father Andrew, except for a man upon the gate, no watch was kept in the castle, and they would most likely find the outlaws fast asleep. Then recent reports which had somehow reached the hermit had stated that there were about thirty prisoners in the tower, men captured in recent raids. That also had been good news. Yes, Hal assured himself, their plan was a good one if only the outlaws were asleep, and they could take them by surprise. Surprise was everything. If they could surprise Black Allen and his men asleep, then the Castle of the Mount might be in other possession before the morning.

The top of the steps was reached at last, and the rescuers found themselves confronted by a blank wall of stone. But they had expected that, and presently, feeling about in the darkness, Hal's hands found a broad copper bar upon which he pushed. Instantly he felt the wall in front of him swing away, and a few seconds later he and Margaret were standing in a small round chamber on the ground-floor of the castle. The chamber had two doors. One led into the great hall from which came

the sound of numbers of men asleep, while the other opened into a narrow stone passage. Hal touched Margaret's arm.

"Wait," he whispered.

The girl nodded, and her companion slipped away down the passage. They had planned exactly what they were going to do, and if Father Andrew's instructions had been correct, Hal was on his way to the guardroom where hung the keys of the dungeons. It was hard waiting alone there in the darkness, but Margaret came of a plucky breed, and sooner than she had expected Hal was back again by her side.

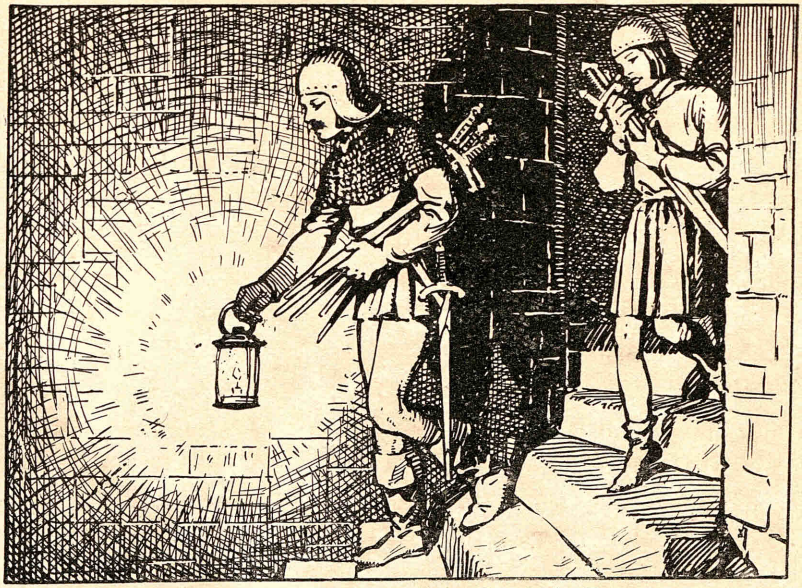
"Got them?" she whispered.

"Yes. No one there. Think themselves perfectly safe on top of this rock I suppose. Come along. Not a sound."

Their next visit was to the armoury where they loaded themselves with half a dozen swords each, and then, as silently as ghosts, they crept down a narrow flight of steps which led to the dungeons. Hal had found a lantern in the guardroom, and by its light they stole along damp gloomy passages, opening the strong wooden doors as they came to them one by one. The first two cells were empty, but in the third a man was lying on a heap of dirty straw, and at the sound of the opening door he sat up and blinked at them with dazzled eyes.

"Who are you?" he asked, staring at Hal and Margaret in amazement.

"Friends," replied Hal. He went on to speak in quick urgent sentences, and presently the pris-



'They crept down a narrow flight of stairs'—*Page* 55

oner uttered a short laugh, and, taking a sword which Hal handed him, followed them out of the cell.

So from cell to cell went Hal and Margaret, while up in the castle above, Black Allen and his followers slept, all unconscious of the fate which was being prepared for them. Some of the cells were

empty, but most of them contained a prisoner, and to all Hal said the same words, and handed a sword so long as the supply of weapons lasted. Soon there were over twenty men treading softly behind the boy and girl, and in the last two cells of all they found Fergus Reed and Robert Brand, and joyful indeed were the greetings between the son and daughter and their fathers.

"But how did you come here, son?" asked Robert Brand, gripping Hal by his shoulders. "Methinks this smacks of magic."

"'Tis not magic, father, but a secret passage," answered Hal. "Now we must hasten. Listen. Twelve of these men are armed, and there are weapons for the others in the armoury to which we will lead them. For the rest Black Allen and his ruffians are fast asleep, thinking themselves safe from all attack, and if we make no sound we shall take them by surprise, and there will be an end of this outlaw band."

"Truly you are a great leader, Hal," exclaimed Fergus Reed. "Lead on, boy. I'll feel a different man once I have a sword in my hand."

So Hal led the way to the armoury where, by the flickering light of the lantern, the tattered crew armed themselves, and set steel caps upon their heads. Then, when all were ready, they issued forth, and fell upon the sleeping ruffians in the great hall.

Now in that castle of ill-fame a terrible fight began. At first the rescued prisoners carried all before them. The only light came from a few smoking torches, and in this murky gloom the outlaws who had survived the first desperate onslaught were rapidly giving way to panic, when suddenly a tall figure carrying a long sword and with a bandaged head burst into their midst.

It was Black Allen, and at sight of their leader the outlaws rallied and returned to the fight. And now it was the turn of the rescued prisoners to give ground. In and out flashed the long swords, the air was filled with screams and the clash of steel, and then all at once silence fell, and Margaret, looking on, saw that Robert Brand and Black Allen had met in the centre of the hall.

"At last, my enemy," cried Hal's father, and struck at the outlaw chief.

But Black Allen parried the blow, and thereupon in that dimly-lit hall began a desperate combat. The two fighters were well-matched, and by mutual consent the outlaws and their adversaries drew back to watch their leaders. Hal stood looking on with an anxious heart. To the watching boy, Black Allen's sword seemed like a tongue of flame, so swiftly did it weave in and out; yet presently Hal noticed that ever as the outlaw struck there was his father's sword to turn the blow aside. So for some minutes the fight raged without advantage to either

man ; then suddenly Robert Brand flung up his blade and smote downward with all his strength. It was a mighty blow. It swept Black Allen's sword aside like a blade of grass, and descending on the ruffian's head stretched him lifeless on the floor. At the sight, a great shout went up from the rescued prisoners, and they turned to resume the fight.

But the outlaws had had enough. The fall of their leader had sapped all their courage, and throwing down their weapons they begged for mercy. This was given them, though they had shown little mercy to others in the past, and when they had all been driven forth from the castle, Robert Brand gave orders that fire should be set to the building. Thus it happened that the Castle of the Mount, which for so long had terrorized the country on both sides of the border, was destroyed, and as Hal and Margaret and the rescued men rode homeward they often turned to look back at a great pillar of smoke which rose upward towards the sky.

"A gallant venture, son," cried Hal's father, clapping the boy on his back. "There will be many a lighter heart on the border when the news gets round that Black Allen and his band are no more."

"Aye, a gallant venture, Robert," echoed Margaret's father. "Methinks we owe more than our freedom to young Hal, for of a surety we could never have raised the ransom Black Allen was demanding."

Hal shook his head.

" You're forgetting Margaret," he said. " She rescued me when I fell into a trap set by five masterless rogues, and but for her we'd none of us be free at this moment, and Black Allen would still be master of the Mount."

The girl laughed happily. It was joyous riding home through the early morning with her father sound and well, even though they were returning to a home destroyed.

" It seems that neither of us could have done without the other," she said, " so we will share the credit, Hal."

BATTLE OF OTTERBOURNE

An Old Border Ballad

It fell about the Lammas tide,
When the muir-men win their hay,
The doughty earl of Douglas rode
Into England, to catch a prey.

And he has burn'd the dales of Tyne,
And part of Bambrough shire:
And three good towers on Roxburgh fells,
He left them all on fire.

His men they came to Otterbourne,
Upon the bent sae brown;
They lighted high on Otterbourne,
And threw their pallions down.

But up then spake a little page,
Before the peep of dawn—
" O waken ye, waken ye, my good lord,
For Percy's hard at hand."

He belted on his good braid sword,
And to the field he ran;
But he forgot the helmet good,
That should have kept his brain.

When Percy wi' the Douglas met,
I wat he was fu' fain!
They swakked their swords, till sair they swat,
And the blood ran down like rain.

But Percy with his good braid sword,
That could so sharply wound,
Has wounded Douglas on the brow,
Till he fell to the ground.

Then he called on his little foot-page,
And said—" Run speedilie,
And fetch my ain dear sister's son,
Sir Hugh Montgomery."

" My nephew good," the Douglas said,
" What recks the death of ane ?
Last night I dream'd a dreary dream,
And I ken the day's thy ain.

" My wound is deep; I fain would sleep;
Take thou the vanguard of the three,
And hide me by the bracken brush,
That grows on yonder lilye lee.

" O bury me by the bracken bush,
Beneath the blooming briar;
Let never living mortal ken,
That ere a kindly Scot lies here."

He lifted up that noble lord,
Wi' the saut tear in his e'e;
He hid him in the bracken bush,
That his merrie men might not see.

The moon was clear, the day drew near,
The spears in flinders flew,
But mony a gallant Englishman
Ere day the Scotsmen slew.

The Percy and Montgomery met,
That either of other were fain;
They swapped swords, and they twa swat,
And aye the blude ran down between.

"Yield thee, O yield thee, Percy!" he said,
"Or else I vow I'll lay thee low!"
"Whom to shall I yield," said Earl Percy,
"Now that I see it must be so?"

"Thou shalt not yield to lord nor loun,
Nor yet shalt thou yield to me;
But yield thee to the bracken bush,
That grows upon yon lilye lee!"

"I will not yield to a bracken bush,
Nor yet will I yield to a briar;
But I would yield to Earl Douglas,
Or Sir Hugh the Montgomery, if he were here."

As soon as he knew it was Montgomery,
He stuck his sword's point in the grounde;
And the Montgomery was a courteous knight,
And quickly took him by the hande.

This deed was done at Otterbourne,
About the breaking of the day;
Earl Douglas was buried at the bracken bush,
And the Percy led captive away.

QUESTIONS

Chapter I

1. Who was Black Allen of the Mount ?
2. Describe Hal and Margaret.

Chapter II

1. Give the news that Thorold brought.
2. What did Hal and Margaret resolve to do ?

Chapter III

1. Give a short account of Hal's meeting with the five rogues.
2. What was the result of the fight ?

Chapter IV

1. Who rescued Hal, and how ?
2. Describe Hal's fight in the stone chamber.

Chapter V

1. What did the children overhear as they waited for the mist to clear ?
2. Tell about their visit to Red Murdoch.

Chapter VI

1. Give in your own words a short account of the attack on the tower.
2. "Yours is a mad quest." Who said this ? To whom ? What was the quest ?

Chapter VII

1. Tell how Black Allen met his match.
2. Can you suggest another good title for this story ?

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