The Little Duke

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THE GOOD AND THE BEAUTIFUL LIBRARY

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CHAPTER I

N A BRIGHT AUTUMN DAY, as long ago as the year 943, there was a great bustle in the Castle of Bayeux in Normandy.

The hall was large and low, the roof arched, and supported on thick short columns, almost like the crypt of a Cathedral; the walls were thick, and the windows, which had no glass, were very small, set in such a depth of wall that there was a wide deep window seat upon which the rain might beat without reaching the interior of the room. And even if it had come in, there was nothing for it to hurt, for the walls were of rough stone and the floor of tiles. There was a fire at each end of this great dark apartment, but there were no chimneys over the ample hearths, and the smoke curled about in thick white folds in the vaulted roof, adding to the wreaths of soot, which made the hall look still darker.

The fire at the lower end was by far the largest and hottest. Great black cauldrons hung over it, and servants, both men and women, with red faces, bare and grimed arms, and long iron hooks, or pots and pans, were busied around it. At the other end, which was raised about three steps above the floor of the hall, other servants were engaged. Two young maidens were strewing fresh rushes on the floor; some men were setting up a long table of rough boards, supported on trestles, and then arranging upon it silver cups, drinking horns, and wooden trenchers.

Benches were placed to receive most of the guests, but in the middle, at the place of honor, was a high chair with very thick

crossing legs and the arms curiously carved with lions' faces and claws; a clumsy wooden footstool was set in front, and the silver drinking cup on the table was of far more beautiful workmanship than the others, richly chased with vine leaves and grapes and figures of little boys with goats' legs. If that cup could have told its story, it would have been a strange one, for it had been made long since, in the old Roman times, and been carried off from Italy by some Northman pirate.

From one of these scenes of activity to the other, there moved a stately old lady: her long, thick, light hair, hardly touched with grey, was bound around her head, under a tall white cap, with a band passing under her chin: she wore a long sweeping dark robe, with wide-hanging sleeves, and thick gold earrings and necklace, which had possibly come from the same quarter as the cup. She directed the servants, inspected both the cookery and arrangements of the table, held council with an old steward, now and then looked rather anxiously from the window, as if expecting someone, and began to say something about fears that these loitering youths would not bring home the venison in time for Duke William's supper.

Presently, she looked up rejoiced, for a few notes of a bugle horn were sounded; there was a clattering of feet, and in a few moments there bounded into the hall a boy of about eight years old, his cheeks and large blue eyes bright with air and exercise, and his long light-brown hair streaming behind him as he ran forward flourishing a bow in his hand and crying out, "I hit him, I hit him! Dame Astrida, do you hear? 'Tis a stag of ten branches, and I hit him in the neck."

"You! my Lord Richard! you killed him?"

"Oh, no, I only struck him. It was Osmond's shaft that took him in the eye, and—Look, Fru Astrida, he came thus through the wood, and I stood here, it might be, under the great elm with my bow thus"—And Richard was beginning to act over again the whole scene of the deer hunt, but Fru, that is to say, Lady Astrida,

was too busy to listen and broke in with, "Have they brought home the haunch?"

"Yes, Walter is bringing it. I had a long arrow—"

A stout forester was at this instant seen bringing in the venison, and Dame Astrida hastened to meet it and gave directions, little Richard following her all the way and talking as eagerly as if she were attending to him, showing how he shot, how Osmond shot, how the deer bounded, and how it fell, and then counting the branches of its antlers, always ending with, "This is something to tell my father. Do you think he will come soon?"

In the meantime, two men entered the hall, one about fifty, the other, one or two-and-twenty, both in hunting dresses of plain leather, crossed by broad embroidered belts, supporting a knife and a bugle horn. The elder was broad shouldered, sun burnt, ruddy, and rather stern looking; the younger, who was also the taller, was slightly made, and very active, with a bright keen grey eye and merry smile. These were Dame Astrida's son, Sir Eric de Centeville, and her grandson, Osmond; and to their care Duke William of Normandy had committed his only child, Richard, to be fostered, or brought up.[1]

It was always the custom among the Northmen that young princes should thus be put under the care of some trusty vassal instead of being brought up at home, and one reason why the Centevilles had been chosen by Duke William was that both Sir Eric and his mother spoke only the old Norwegian tongue, which he wished young Richard to understand well, whereas, in other parts of the Duchy, the Normans had forgotten their own tongue and had taken up what was then called the *Languéd'ouì*, a language between German and Latin, which was the beginning of French.

On this day Duke William himself was expected at Bayeux, to pay a visit to his son before setting out on a journey to settle the disputes between the Counts of Flanders and Montreuil, and this was the reason of Fru Astrida's great preparations. No sooner had she seen the haunch placed upon a spit, which a little boy was

to turn before the fire, than she turned to dress something else, namely, the young Prince Richard himself, whom she led off to one of the upper rooms, and there he had full time to talk, while she, great lady though she was, herself combed smooth his long flowing curls and fastened his short scarlet cloth tunic, which just reached to his knee, leaving his neck, arms, and legs bare. He begged hard to be allowed to wear a short, beautifully ornamented dagger at his belt, but this Fru Astrida would not allow.

"You will have enough to do with steel and dagger before your life is at an end," said she, "without seeking to begin over soon."

"To be sure I shall," answered Richard. "I will be called Richard of the Sharp Axe, or the Bold Spirit, I promise you, Fru Astrida. We are as brave in these days as the Sigurds and Ragnars you sing of! I only wish there were serpents and dragons to slay here in Normandy."

"Never fear but you will find even too many of them," said Dame Astrida. "There be dragons of wrong here and everywhere, quite as venomous as any in my Sagas."

"I fear them not," said Richard, but half understanding her, "if you would only let me have the dagger! But, hark! hark!" he darted to the window. "They come, they come! There is the banner of Normandy."

Away ran the happy child and never rested till he stood at the bottom of the long, steep, stone stair, leading to the embattled porch. Thither came the Baron de Centeville and his son to receive their Prince. Richard looked up at Osmond, saying, "Let me hold his stirrup," and then sprang up and shouted for joy, as under the arched gateway there came a tall black horse, bearing the stately form of the Duke of Normandy. His purple robe was fastened around him by a rich belt, sustaining the mighty weapon from which he was called "William of the Long Sword;" his legs and feet were cased in linked steel chain-work, his gilded spurs were on his heels, and his short brown hair was covered by his ducal cap of purple, turned up with fur and a feather fastened

in by a jewelled clasp. His brow was grave and thoughtful, and there was something both of dignity and sorrow in his face at the first moment of looking at it, recalling the recollection that he had early lost his young wife, the Duchess Emma, and that he was beset by many cares and toils; but the next glance generally conveyed encouragement, so full of mildness were his eyes and so kind the expression of his lips.

And now, how bright a smile beamed upon the little Richard, who, for the first time, paid him the duty of a pupil in chivalry by holding the stirrup while he sprung from his horse. Next, Richard knelt to receive his blessing, which was always the custom when children met their parents. The Duke laid his hand on his head, saying, "God of His mercy bless thee, my son," and lifting him in his arms, held him to his breast and let him cling to his neck and kiss him again and again before setting him down, while Sir Eric came forward, bent his knee, kissed the hand of his Prince, and welcomed him to his Castle.

It would take too long to tell all the friendly and courteous words that were spoken, the greeting of the Duke and the noble old Lady Astrida, and the reception of the Barons who had come in the train of their Lord. Richard was bidden to greet them, but, though he held out his hand as desired, he shrank a little to his father's side, gazing at them in dread and shyness.

There was Count Bernard, of Harcourt, called the "Dane,"[2] with his shaggy red hair and beard, to which a touch of grey had given a strange unnatural tint, his eyes looking fierce and wild under his thick eyebrows, one of them misshapen in consequence of a sword cut, which had left a broad red and purple scar across both cheek and forehead. There, too, came tall Baron Rainulf, of Ferrières, cased in a linked steel hauberk that rang as he walked, and the men-at-arms, with helmets and shields, looking as if Sir Eric's armour that hung in the hall had come to life and were walking about.

They sat down to Fru Astrida's banquet, the old Lady at the Duke's right hand and the Count of Harcourt on his left;

Osmond carved for the Duke, and Richard handed his cup and trencher. All through the meal, the Duke and his Lords talked earnestly of the expedition on which they were bound to meet Count Arnulf of Flanders on a little islet in the river Somme, there to come to some agreement by which Arnulf might make restitution to Count Herluin of Montreuil for certain wrongs which he had done him.

Some said that this would be the fittest time for requiring Arnulf to yield up some towns on his borders to which Normandy had long laid claim, but the Duke shook his head, saying that he must seek no selfish advantage when called to judge between others.

Richard was rather tired of their grave talk and thought the supper very long; but at last it was over, the Grace was said, the boards which had served for tables were removed, and as it was still light, some of the guests went to see how their steeds had been bestowed, others to look at Sir Eric's horses and hounds, and others collected together in groups.

The Duke had time to attend to his little boy, and Richard sat upon his knee and talked, told about all his pleasures, how his arrow had hit the deer to-day, how Sir Eric let him ride out to the chase on his little pony, how Osmond would take him to bathe in the cool bright river, and how he had watched the raven's nest in the top of the old tower.

Duke William listened and smiled and seemed as well pleased to hear as the boy was to tell. "And, Richard," said he at last, "have you naught to tell me of Father Lucas and his great book? What, not a word? Look up, Richard, and tell me how it goes with the learning."[3]

"Oh, father!" said Richard in a low voice, playing with the clasp of his father's belt and looking down, "I don't like those crabbed letters on the old yellow parchment."

"But you try to learn them, I hope!" said the Duke.

"Yes, father, I do, but they are very hard, and the words are