

The Waving of the Sword

By A. C. Benson

The things that are set down here happened in the ancient days when there was sore fighting in the land; the King, who was an unjust man, fighting to maintain his realm, and the barons fighting for the law; and the end was not far off, for the King was driven backwards to the sea, and at last could go no further; so he gathered all the troops that he might in a strong fort that lay in the midst of the downs, where the hills dipped to the plain to let the river pass through; and the barons drew slowly in upon him, through the forest in the plain. Beyond the downs lay the sea, and there in a little port was gathered the King's navy, that if the last fight went ill with him, as indeed he feared it would, he might fly for safety to another land.

Now in a house below the down, a few miles from the King's stronghold, dwelt a knight that was neither old nor young, and his name was Sir Henry Strange. He lived alone and peevishly, and he did neither good nor evil. He had no skill in fighting, but neither had he skill in peaceful arts. He had tried many things and wearied of all. He had but a small estate, which was grown less by foolish waste. He could have made it into a rich heritage, for his land was good. But he had no patience with his men, and confused them by his orders, which he would not see carried out. Sometimes he would fell timber, and then leave it to rot in the wood; or he would plough a field, and sow it not. At one time he had a fancy to be a minstrel, but he had no patience to attain to skill; he would write a ballad and leave it undone; or he would begin to carve a figure of wood, and toss it aside; sometimes he would train a dog or a horse; but he would so rage if the beast, being puzzled for all its goodwill, made mistakes, that it grew frightened of him—for nothing can be well learnt except through love and trust. He would sometimes think that he should have been a monk, and that under hard discipline he would have fared better—and indeed this was so, for he had abundant aptitude. He was alone in the world, for he had come into his estate when young; but he had had no patience to win him a wife. At first, indeed, his life had not been an unhappy one, for he was often visited by small joyful thoughts, which made him glad; and he took much pleasure, on sunshiny days, in the brave sights and sounds of the world. But such delights had grown less; and he was now a tired and restless man of forty years, who lay long abed and went not much abroad; and was for ever telling himself how happy he would be if this or that were otherwise. Far down in his heart he despised himself, and wondered how God had come to make so ill-contented a thing; but that was a chamber in his mind that he visited not often but rather took pleasure in the thought of his skill and deftness, and his fitness for the many things he might have done.

And now in the war he had come to a pass. He would not join himself to the King, because the King was an evil man, and he liked not evil; yet he loved not rebellion, and feared for his safety if the King had the upper hand; but it was still more that he had grown idle and soft-hearted, and feared the hard faring and brisk jesting of the camp. Yet even so the thought of the war lay heavy on his heart, and he wondered how men, whose lives were so short upon the goodly earth, should find it in their hearts to slay and be slain for such shadowy things as command and dominion; and he thought he would have made a song on that thought, but he did not.

And now the fighting had come very near him; and he had let some of his men go to join the King, but he went not himself, saying that he was sick, and might not go abroad.

He stood on a day, at this time, by a little wall that enclosed his garden-ground. It was in the early summer; the trees had put on their fresh green, and glistened in the still air, and the meadows were deep with grass, on the top of which seemed to float unnumbered yellow flowers. In and out the swallows passed, hunting for the flies that danced above the grass; and he stood, knowing how fair the earth was, and yet sick at heart, wondering why he could not be as a careless bird, that hunts its meat all day in the sun, and at evening sings a song of praise among the thickets.

Over the trees ran the great down with its smooth green sides, as far as the eye could see. The heat winked on its velvety bluffs, and it seemed to him, as it had often seemed before, like a great beast lying there in a dream, with a cloth of green cast over its huge limbs.

He was a tall lean man, somewhat stooping. His face had a certain beauty; his hair and beard were dark and curling; he had large eyes that looked sadly out from under heavy lids. His mouth was small, and had a very sweet smile when he was pleased; but his brow was puckered together as though he pondered; his hands were thin and delicate, and there was something almost womanly about his whole air.

Presently he walked into the little lane that bordered his garden. He heard the sound of wheels coming slowly along the white chalky road; he waited to look, and saw a sad sight. In the cart was a truss of hay, and sunk upon it sate a man, his face down on his breast, deadly pale; as the cart moved, he swayed a little from side to side. The driver of the cart walked beside, sullenly and slowly; and by him walked a girl, just grown a woman, as pale as death, looking at the man that sate in the cart with a look of terror and love sometimes she would take his helpless hand, and murmur a word; but the man heeded not, and sate lost in his pain. As they passed him he could see a great bandage on the man's chest that was red with blood. He asked the waggoner what this was, and he told him that it was a young man of the country-side that had been hurt in a fight; he was but newly married, and it was thought he could not live. The cart had stopped, and the woman pulled a little cup out of a jug of water that stood in the straw, and put it to the wounded man's lips, who opened his eyes, all dark and dazed with pain, but with no look of recognition in them, and drank greedily, sinking back into his sick dream again. The girl put the cup back, and clasped her hands over her eyes, and then across her breast with a low moan, as though her heart would break. The tears came into Sir Henry's eyes; and fumbling in his pockets he took out some coins and gave them to the woman, with a kind word. "Let him be well bestowed," he said. The woman took the coins, hardly heeding him; and presently the cart started again, a shoot of pain darting across the wounded man's face as the wheels grated on the stones.

Sir Henry stood long looking after them; and it came into his heart that war was a foul and evil thing; though he half envied the poor soul that had fought his best, and was now sinking into the shadow of death.

While he thus lingered there sprang into his mind a thought that made him suddenly grow erect.

He walked swiftly along the lane with its high hedges and tall elms. The lane was at the foot of the down, but raised a little above the plain, so that he could see the rich woodland with its rolling lines, and far away the faint line of the northern hills. It was very still, and there seemed not a care in the great world; it seemed all peace and happy quiet life; yet the rumbling of the cartwheels which he still heard at a distance, now low and now loud, told him of the sorrow that lay hidden under those dreaming woods; was it all thus? And then he thought of the great armies that were so near, and of all the death they meant to deal each other. And yet God sat throned aloft watching all things, he thought, with a calm and quiet eye, waiting, waiting. But for what?

Was His heart indeed pitiful and loving, as His priests said? and did He hold in His hand, for those that passed into the forgetful gate, some secret of joyful peace that would all in a moment make amends?

He stopped beside a little stile—there, in front of him, over the tops of an orchard, the trees of which were all laden with white and rosy flowers, lay a small high-shouldered church, with a low steeple of wood. The little windows of the tower seemed to regard him as with dark sad eyes. He went by a path along the orchard edge, and entered the churchyard, full of old graves, among which grew long tumbled grass. He thought with a throb, that was almost of joy, of all those that had laid down their weary bones there in the dust, husband by wife, child by mother. They were waiting too, and how quietly! It was all over for them, the trouble and the joy alike; and for a moment the death that all dread seemed to him like a simple and natural thing, the one thing certain. There at length they slept, a quiet sleep, waiting for the dawn, if dawn there were.

He crossed the churchyard and entered the church; the coolness and the dark and the ancient holy smell was sweet after the brightness and the heat outside. Every line of the place was familiar to him from his childhood. He walked slowly up the little aisle and passed within the screen. The chancel was very dark, only lighted by two or three deep-set windows. He made a reverence and then drew near to the altar.

All the furniture of the church was most simple and old; but over the altar there was a long unusual-looking shelf; he went up to it, and stood for awhile gazing upon it. Along the shelf lay a rude and ancient sword of a simple design, in a painted scabbard of wood; and over it was a board with a legend painted on it.

The legend was in an old form of French words, long since disused in the land. But it said:

Unsheathe me and die thyself, but the battle shall be stayed.

He had known the look of the sword, and the words on the board from a child. The tale was that there had been in days long past a great battle on the hill, and that the general of one of the armies had been told, in a dream or vision, that if he should himself be slain, then should his men have the victory; but that if he lived through the battle, then should his men be worsted. Now before the armies met, while they stood and looked upon each other, the general, so said the tale, had gone out suddenly and alone, with his sword bare in his hand, and his head uncovered; and that as he advanced, one of his foes had drawn a bow and pierced him through the brain, so that he fell in his blood between the armies; and that then a kind of fury had fallen upon his men to avenge his death, and they routed the foe with a mighty slaughter. But the sword had been set in the church with this legend above it; and there it had lain many a year.

So Sir Henry disengaged the sword from its place very tenderly and carefully. It had been there so long that it was all covered with dust; and then, holding it in his hands, he knelt down and made a prayer in his heart that he might have strength for what he had a mind to do; and then he walked softly down the church, looking about him with a sort of secret tenderness, as though he were bidding it all farewell; his own father and mother were buried in the church; and he stopped for awhile beside their grave, and then, holding the sword by his side—for he wished it not to be seen of any—he went back to his house, and put the sword away in a great chest, that no one might know where it was laid.

Then he tarried not, but went softly out; and all that afternoon he walked about his own lands, every acre of them; for he did not think to see them again; and his mind went back to the old days; he had not thought that all could be so full of little memories. In this place he remembered

being set on a horse by his father, who held him very lovingly and safely while he led the great beast about; he remembered how proud he had been, and how he had fancied himself a mighty warrior. On this little pond, with all its reeds and waterlilies, he had sailed a boat on a summer day, his mother sitting near under a tree to see that he had no danger; and thus it was everywhere; till, as he walked in the silent afternoon, he could almost have believed that there were others that walked with him unseen, to left and right; for at every place some little memory roused itself, as the flies that rise buzzing from the leaves when you walk in an alley, until he felt like a child again, with all the years before him.

Then he came to the house again, and did the same for every room. He left one room for the last, a room where dwelt an old and simple woman that had nursed him; she was very frail and aged now, and went not much abroad, but sate and did little businesses; and it was ever a delight to her if he asked her to do some small task for him. He found her sitting, smiling for pleasure that he should come to her thus; and he kissed her, and sate beside her for awhile, and they talked a little of the childish days, for he was still ever a child to her. Then he rose to leave her, and she asked him, as was her wont, if there was anything that she could do for him, for it shamed her, she said, to sit and idle, when she had been so busy once, and when there was still so much to do. And he said, "No, dear nurse, there is nothing at this time." And he hesitated for an instant, and then said, "There is indeed one thing; I have a business to do to-night, that is hard and difficult; and I do not know what the end will be; will you say a prayer for your boy to-night, that he may be strong?" She looked at him quickly and was silent; and then she said, "Yes, dear child, but I ever do that—and I have no skill to make new prayers—but I will say my prayer over and over if that will avail." And he said, smiling at her, though the tears were in his eyes, "Yes, it will avail," and so he kissed her and went away, while she fell to her prayers.

Now the day had all this while grown stiller and hotter, till there was not a breath stirring; and now out to the eastwards there came on an angry blackness in the sky, with a pale redness beneath it, where the thunder dwelt. Sir Henry sate down, for he was weary of his walking, and in a little he fell asleep; his thoughts still ran upon the sword, for he dreamed that he had it with him in a wood that he knew not, that was dark with the shade of leaves; and he hung the sword upon a tree, and went on, to win out of the wood if he could, for it seemed very close and heavy in the forest; sometimes through the trees he saw a space of open ground, with ferns glistening in the sun; but he could not find the end of the wood; so he came back in his dream to where he had left the sword; and while he stood watching it, he saw that something dark gathered at the scabbard end, and presently fell with a little sound among the leaves. Then with a shock of terror he saw that it was blood; and he feared to take the sword back; but looking downwards he perceived that where the blood had fallen, there were red flowers growing among the leaves of a rare beauty, which seemed to be born of the blood. So he gathered a handful, and wreathed the sword with them; and then came a gladness into his mind, with which he awoke, and found it evening; he came back to himself with a kind of terror, and a fear darted into his breast; the windows were open, and there came in a scent of flowers; and he felt a great love for the beautiful earth, and for his quiet life; and he looked at the chest; and there came into his mind a strong desire to take the sword out, and lay it back in the church, and let things be as they had been; and so he sate and mused.

Presently his old serving-man came in and told him he had set his supper; so Henry went into the parlour, and made some pretence to be about to eat; sending the old man away, who babbled a little to him of the war, of the barons' army that drew nearer, and of how the King was sore bested. When he was gone Sir Henry ate a little bread and drank a sup of wine; and then he rose

up, like one who had made up his mind. He went to the chest and drew out the sword; and then he went softly out of the house, and presently walking swiftly he came out on the down.

It was now nearly dusk; the sky lay clear and still, fading into a sort of delicate green, but all the west was shrouded in a dim blackness, the cloud being spread out, like a great dark bird winging its way slowly up the sky. Then far down in the west there leapt, as it were, interlacing streams of fire out of the cloud, and then followed a low rolling of thunder.

But all the while he mounted the down, up a little track that gleamed white in the grass; and now he could see the huge plain, with a few lights twinkling out of farms; far down to the west there was a little redness of light, and he thought that this was doubtless where the army of the barons lay; but he seemed to himself to have neither wonder nor fear left in his mind; he only went like one that had a task to perform; and soon he came to the top.

Here all was bare, save for some bushes of furze that grew blackly in the gloom; he stepped through them, and he came at last to where a great mound stood, that was held to be the highest place in all the down, a mound that marked the place of a battle, or that was perhaps the burying-place of some old tribe—for it was called the Barrow of the Seven Kings.

He came quickly to the mound, and went to the top; and then he laid the sword upon the turf by him, and kneeled down; once again came a great outpouring of fire from heaven in the west, and a peal of thunder followed hard upon it; and indeed the storm was near at hand; he could see the great wings of the cloud moving now, and a few large drops splashed in the grass about him, and one fell upon his brow.

And now a great fear fell upon Henry of he knew not what. He seemed to himself to be in the presence of some vast and fearful thing, that was passing swiftly by; and yet seemed, for all its haste, to have espied him, and to have been, as it were, stayed by him; there came into his mind a recollection of how he had once, on a summer's day, joined the mowers in one of the fields, and had mowed a few swathes with them for the pleasure of seeing the rich seeded grass fall before the gleaming scythe. At one of his strokes, he remembered, he had uncovered a little field-mouse, that sate in the naked field, its high covert having been swept bare from above it, and watched him with bright eyes of fear, while he debated whether he should crush it; he had done so, he remembered, carelessly, with his foot, and now he wished that he had spared it, for it was even so that he himself felt.

So to strengthen himself in his purpose, he made a prayer aloud, though it was a thing that in his idle life he had much foregone; and he said:

“Lord God, if Thou indeed hearest and seest me, make me strong to do what I have a mind to do; I have lived foolishly and for myself, and I have little to give. I have despised life, and it is as an empty husk to me. I have put love away from me, and my heart is dry; I have had friends and I have wearied of them. I have profited nothing; I have wasted my strength in foolish dreams of pleasure, and I have not found it. I am as a weed that cumpers the fair earth.”

Then he stayed for a moment, for he was afraid; for it seemed to him as though somewhat stood near to listen. Then he said again:—

“But, Lord, I do indeed love my fellow-men a little; and I would have the waste of life stayed. It is a pitiful thing that I have to offer, but it is all that I have left—an empty life, which yet I love. I will not promise, Lord, to yield my life to the service of men, for I love my ease too well, and I should not keep my word—so I offer my life freely into Thy hand, and let it avail that which it may avail.”

Then the blackness seemed to gather all about him, and he felt with his hand in the turf and found the sword; then he drew the scabbard off, and flung it down beside him, and he raised the sword in his hands.

Then it seemed as though the heavens opened above him, but he saw not the fire, nor heard the shouting of the thunder that followed; he fell on his face in the turf without a sound and moved no more.

Now it happened that about the time that he unsheathed the sword, it came into the heart of the King to send a herald to the barons; for he saw the host spread out below him on the plain, and he feared to meet them; and the barons, too, were weary of fighting; and the King bound himself by a great oath to uphold the law of the realm, and so the land had peace.

The next day came a troop of men-at-arms along the hill; and they wondered exceedingly to see a man lie on the mound with a sword in his hand unsheathed, and partly molten. He lay stiff and cold, but they could not tell how he came by his death, and they knew not what he had done for the land; his hand was so tightly clenched upon the sword, that they took it not out, but they buried him there upon the hill-top, very near the sky, and passed on; and no man knew what had become of him. But God, who made him and had need of him, knoweth.