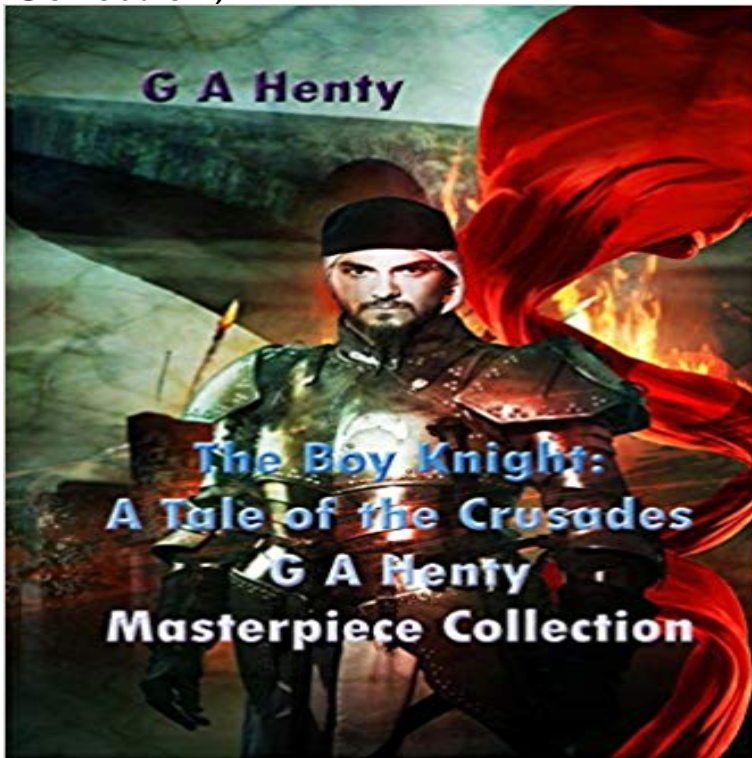


The Boy Knight: A Tale of the Crusades: (G A Henty Masterpiece Collection)



He has raided here before, and I trow has carried off no game. The landless men of the forest can hold their own against a handful of Norman knights and retainers in their own home. Ay, said Cuthbert, but this will be no common raid. This morning bands from all the holds within miles round are riding in, and at least five hundred men-at-arms are likely to do chase to-day. Is it so? said Cnut, while exclamations of surprise, but not of apprehension, broke from those standing round. If that be so, lad, you have done us good service indeed. With fair warning we can slip through the fingers of ten times five hundred men, but if they came upon us unawares, and hemmed us in, it would fare but badly with us, though we should, I doubt not, give a good account of them before their battle-axes and maces ended the strife. Have you any idea by which road they will enter the forest, or what are their intentions? I know not, Cuthbert said; all that I gathered was that the earl intended to sweep the forest, and to put an end to the breaches of the laws, not to say of the rough treatment that his foresters have met with at your hands. You had best, methinks, be off before Sir Walter and his heavily-armed men are here. The forest, large as it is, will scarce hold you both, and methinks you had best shift your quarters to Langholm Chase until the storm has passed. To Langholm be it, then, said Cnut, though I love not the place. Sir John of Wortham is a worse neighbor by far than the earl. Against the latter we bear no malice, he is a good knight and a fair lord; and could he free himself of the Norman notions that the birds of the air, and the beasts of the field, and the fishes of the water, all belong to Normans, and that we Saxons have no share in them, I should have no quarrel with him. He grinds not his neighbors, he is content with a fair tithe of the produce, and as between man and man is a fair judge without favor. The baron is a

fiend incarnate; did he not fear that he would lose by so doing, he would gladly cut the throats, or burn, or drown, or hang every Saxon within twenty miles of his hold. He is a disgrace to his order, and some day, when our band gathers a little stronger, we will burn his nest about his ears. It will be a hard nut to crack, Cuthbert said, laughing. With such arms as you have in the forest the enterprise would be something akin to scaling the skies. Ladders and axes will go far, lad, and the Norman men-at-arms have learned to dread our shafts. But enough of the baron; if we must be his neighbors for a time, so be it. You have heard, my mates, he said, turning to his comrades gathered around him, what Cuthbert tells us. Are you of my opinion, that it is better to move away till the storm is past than to fight against heavy odds, without much chance of either booty or victory? A general chorus proclaimed that the outlaws approved of the proposal for a move to Langholm Chase. The preparations were simple. Bows were taken down from the boughs on which they were hanging, quivers slung across the backs, short cloaks thrown over the shoulders. The deer was hurriedly dismembered, and the joints fastened to a pole slung on the shoulders of two of the men. The drinking-cups, some of which were of silver, looking strangely out of place among the rough horn implements and platters, were bundled together, carried a short distance and dropped among some thick bushes for safety; and then the band started for Wortham. With a cordial farewell and many thanks to Cuthbert, who declined their invitations to accompany them, the retreat to Langholm commenced. Cuthbert, not knowing in which direction the bands were likely to approach, remained for awhile motionless, intently listening. In a quarter of an hour he heard the distant note of a bugle.

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