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The Housewife

RETOLD FROM THE FRENCH OF NICOLAS DE CAEN

BY JAMES BRANCH CABELL

HERE we have to do with the fifth tale of the Dizain of Queens. I abridge, at discretion, since the scantiness of our leisure is balanced by the prolixity of our author; the result is that to the Norman cleric appertains whatever the tale may have of merit, whereas what you find distasteful in it you must impute to my delinquencies in skill rather than in volition.

One August day in the year of grace 1346 (here you overtake Nicolas mid-course) Master John Copeland, secretary to the Queen, brought his mistress the unhandsome news that David Bruce had invaded her realm with forty thousand Scots to back him. He found the Queen in company with the kingdom's arbitress,—Dame Catherine de Salisbury, whom King Edward, third of that name to reign in Britain and now warring in France, very notoriously adored and obeyed. These two heard him out. Already Northumberland, Westmoreland, and Durham were the broken meats of King David.

The countess then exclaimed: "Let me pass, sir. My place is not here."

Philippa said, half hopefully, "Do you forsake Sire Edward, Catherine?"

"Madame and Queen," the countess answered, "in this world every man must scratch his own back. My lord has entrusted to me his castle of Wark, his fiefs in Northumberland. These, I hear, are being laid waste. Were there a thousand men-at-arms left in England I would say fight. As it is, our men are yonder in France and the island is defenceless. Accordingly I ride for the north to make what terms I may with the King of Scots."

Now you might have seen the Queen's eyes flame. "Undoubtedly," said she, "in her lord's absence it is the wife's part to defend his belongings. And my lord's fief is England. I bid you Godspeed,

Catherine." And when the countess was gone, Philippa turned, her round face all flushed. "She betrays him! she compounds with the Scot! Mother of Christ, let me not fail!"

"A ship must be despatched to bid Sire Edward return," said the secretary. "Otherwise all England is lost."

"Not so, John Copeland! Let Sire Edward conquer in France, if such be the Trinity's will. Always he has dreamed of that, and if I bade him return now he would be vexed."

"The disappointment of the King," John Copeland considered, "is a lesser evil than allowing all of us to be butchered."

"Not to me, John Copeland," the Queen said.

Now came many lords into the chamber, seeking Madame Philippa. "We must make peace with the Scottish rascal!—England is lost! A ship must be sent entreating succor of Sire Edward!" So they shouted.

"Messieurs," said Queen Philippa, "who commands here? Am I, then, some woman of the town?"

Ensued a sudden silence. Now the Marquis of Falmouth stepped from the throng. "Pardon, highness. But the occasion is urgent."

"The occasion is very urgent, my lord," the Queen assented. "Therefore it is my will that to-morrow one and all your men be mustered at Blackheath. We will take the field without delay against the King of Scots."

The riot began anew. "Madness!" they shouted; "lunar madness! We can do nothing until the King return with our army!"

"In his absence," the Queen said, "I command here."

"You are not Regent," the marquis said. Then he cried, "This is the Regent's affair!"

"Let the Regent be fetched," Dame

Philippa said, very quietly. Presently they brought in her son Lionel, now a boy of eight years, and Regent, in name at least, of England.

Both the Queen and the marquis held papers. "Highness," Falmouth began, "for reasons of state, which I need not here explain, this document requires your signature. It is an order that a ship be despatched in pursuit of the King. Your highness may remember the pony you admired yesterday?" The marquis smiled ingratiatingly. "Just here, your highness—a cross-mark."

"The dappled one?" said the Regent; "and all for making a little mark?" The boy jumped for the pen.

"Lionel," said the Queen, "you are Regent of England, but you are also my son. If you sign that paper, you will beyond doubt get the pony, but you will not, I think, care to ride him. You will not care to sit down at all, Lionel."

The Regent considered. "Thank you very much, my lord," he said, in the ultimate, "but I do not like ponies any more. Do I sign here, mother?"

Philippa handed the marquis a subscribed order to muster the English forces at Blackheath; then another, closing the English ports. "My lords," the Queen said, "this boy is the King's vicar. In defying him you defy the King. Yes, Lionel, you have fairly earned a pot of jam for supper."

Then Falmouth went away without speaking. That night assembled at his lodgings, by appointment, Viscount Heringaud, Adam Frere, the Marquis of Orme, Lord Stourton, the Earls of Ufford and Gage, and Sir John Biddulph. These seven found a long table there littered with pens and parchment; to the rear of it, a lackey behind him, sat the Marquis of Falmouth, meditative over a cup of Bordeaux.

Presently Falmouth said: "My friends, in creating our womankind the Eternal Father was beyond doubt actuated by laudable and cogent reasons, so that I can merely lament my inability to fathom these reasons. I shall obey the Queen faithfully, since if I did otherwise Sire Edward would have my head off within a day of his return. In consequence I do not consider it convenient to oppose his vicar. To-morrow I shall assemble the

tatters of troops which remain to us, and to-morrow we march northward to inevitable defeat. To-night I am sending a courier into Northumberland. He is an obliging person and would convey—to cite an instance—eight letters quite as blithely as one."

Each man glanced furtively about him. England was in a panic by this and knew itself to lie before the Bruce defenceless. The all-powerful Countess of Salisbury had compounded with King David; now Falmouth, their generalissimo, compounded. What the devil! loyalty was a sonorous word, and so was patriotism, but, after all, one had estates in the north.

The seven wrote in silence. When they had ended, I must tell you that Falmouth gathered the letters into a heap, and without glancing at the superscriptions, handed them to the attendant lackey. "For the courier," he said.

The fellow left the apartment. Presently there was a clatter of hoofs without, and Falmouth rose. He was a gaunt, terrible old man, gray-bearded, and having high eyebrows that twitched and jerked.

"We have saved our precious skins," said he. "Hey, you—you Falmouths! I commend your common sense, messieurs, and request you to withdraw. Even a damned rogue such as I has need of a cleaner atmosphere when he would breathe." The seven went away without further speech.

They narrate that next day the troops marched for Durham, where the Queen took up her quarters. The Bruce had pillaged and burned his way to a place called Beaurepair, within three miles of the city. He sent word to the Queen that if her men were willing to come forth from the town he would abide and give them battle.

She replied that she accepted his offer, and that her barons would gladly risk their lives for the realm of their lord the King. The Bruce grinned and kept silence, since he had in his pocket letters from nine-tenths of them protesting they would do nothing of the sort.

There is comedy here. On one side you have a horde of half-naked savages, a shrewd master holding them in leash till the moment be auspicious; on the other, a housewife at the head of a tiny force lieutenanted by perjurers, by men



Painting by William Hurd Lawrence

"I RIDE TO THE NORTH TO MAKE WHAT TERMS I MAY"

already purchased. God knows the dreams she had of impossible victories, what time her barons trafficked in secret with the Bruce. On the Saturday before Michaelmas, when the opposing armies marshalled in the Bishop's Park, at Auckland, it is recorded that not a captain on either side believed the day to be pregnant with battle. There would be a decent counterfeit of resistance; afterward the little English army would vanish pell-mell, and the Bruce would be master of the island. The farce was prearranged, the actors therein were letter-perfect.

That morning at daybreak John Copeland came to the Queen's tent, and informed her quite frankly how matters stood. He had been drinking overnight with Adam Frere and the Earl of Gage, and after the third bottle had found them candid. "Madame and Queen, we are betrayed. The Marquis of Falmouth, our commander, is inexplicably smitten with a fever. He will not fight to-day. Not one of your lords will fight to-day." He laid bare such part of the scheme as yesterday's conviviality had made familiar. "Therefore I counsel retreat. Let the King be summoned out of France."

But Queen Philippa shook her head, as she cut up squares of toast and dipped them in milk for the Regent's breakfast. "Sire Edward would be vexed. He has always intended to conquer France. I shall visit the Marquis as soon as Lionel is fed—do you know, John Copeland, I am anxious about Lionel; he is irritable and coughed five times during the night—and I will arrange this affair."

She found the marquis in bed, groaning, the coverlet pulled up to his chin. "Pardon, highness," said Falmouth, "but I am an ill man. I cannot rise from this couch."

"I do not question the gravity of your disorder," the Queen retorted, "since it is well known that the same illness brought about the death of Iscariot. Nevertheless, I bid you get up and lead our troops against the Scot."

Now the hand of the marquis veiled his countenance. But "I am an ill man," he muttered, doggedly. "I cannot rise from this couch."

There was a silence.

"My lord," the Queen presently began, "without is an army prepared—ay, and

able—to defend our England. The one requirement of this army is a leader. Afford them that, my lord—ah, I know that our peers are sold to the Bruce, yet our yeomen at least are honest. Give them, then, a leader, and they cannot but conquer, since God also is honest and incorruptible. Pardieu! a woman might lead these men, and lead them to victory!"

Falmouth answered: "I am an ill man. I cannot rise from this couch."

You saw that Philippa was not beautiful. You perceived that to the contrary she was superb, saw the soul of the woman aglow, gilding the mediocrities of color and curve as a conflagration does a hovel.

"There is no man left in England," said the Queen, "since Sire Edward went into France. Praise God, I am his wife." And she was gone without flurry.

Through the tent-flap Falmouth beheld all which followed. The English force was marshalled in four divisions, each commanded by a bishop and a baron. You could see the men fidgeting, puzzled by the delay; as a wind goes about a cornfield, vague rumors were going about those wavering spears. Toward them rode Philippa, upon a white palfrey, alone and quite tranquil. Her eight lieutenants were now gathered about her in voluble protestation, and she heard them out. Afterward she spoke, without any particular violence, as one might order a strange cur from his room. Then the Queen rode on, as though these eight muttering persons had ceased to be of interest, and reined up before her standard-bearer, and took the standard in her hand. She began again to speak, and immediately the army was in an uproar; the barons were clustering behind her, in stealthy groups of two or three whisperers each; all were in the greatest amazement and knew not what to do; but the army was shouting the Queen's name.

"Now is England shamed," said Falmouth, "since a woman alone dares to encounter the Scot. She will lead them into battle,—and by God! there is no braver person under heaven than yonder Dutch Frau! Friend David, I perceive that your venture is lost, for those men would within the moment follow her to storm hell if she desired it."

He meditated and more lately shrugged. "And so would I," said Falmouth.

A little afterward a gaunt and haggard old man, bareheaded and very hastily dressed, reined his horse by the Queen's side. "Madame and Queen," said Falmouth, "I rejoice that my recent illness is departed. I shall, by God's grace, on this day drive the Bruce from England."

Philippa was not given to verbiage. Doubtless she had her emotions now, but none were visible upon the honest face; yet one hand had fallen into the big-veined hand of Falmouth. "I welcome back the gallant gentleman of yesterday. I was about to lead your army, my friend, since there was no one else to do it, but I was hideously afraid. At bottom every woman is a coward."

"You were afraid to do it," said the marquis, "but you were going to do it, because there was no one else to do it! Ho! madame, had I an army of such cowards I would drive the Scot not past the Border but to the Orkneys."

The Queen then said, "But you are unarmed."

"Highness," he replied, "it is surely apparent that I, who have played the traitor to two monarchs within the same day, cannot with either decency or comfort survive that day." He turned upon the lords and bishops twittering about his horse's tail. "You merchandise, get back to your stations, and if there was ever an honest woman in any of your families, the which I doubt, contrive to get yourselves killed this day, as I mean to do, in the cause of the honestest and bravest woman our time has known." Presently the English forces marched toward Neville's Cross.

Philippa returned to her pavilion and inquired for John Copeland. He had ridden off, she was informed, armed, in company with five of her immediate retainers. She considered this strange, but made no comment.

You picture her, perhaps, as spending the morning in prayer, in beatings upon her breast, and in lamentations. Philippa did nothing of the sort. As you have heard, she considered her cause to be so clamantly just that to expatiate to the Holy Father upon its merits were an impertinence; it was not conceivable that He would fail her; and in any event, she had in hand a deal of sewing that required immediate attention. Accordingly she set-

tled down to her needlework, while the Regent of England leaned his head against her knee, and his mother told him that agelong tale of Lord Huon, who in a wood near Babylon encountered the King of Faëry, and subsequently stripped the atrocious Emir of both beard and daughter. All this the industrious woman narrated in a low and pleasant voice, while the wide-eyed Regent attended and at the proper intervals gulped his cough-mixture.

You must know that about noon Master John Copeland came into the tent. "We have conquered," he said. "Ho! Madame Philippa, there was never a victory more complete. The Scottish army is not beaten but demolished."

"I rejoice," the Queen said, looking up from her sewing, "that we have conquered, though in nature I expected nothing else. Oh, horrible!" She sprang to her feet with a cry of anguish: and here in little you have the entire woman; the victory of her armament was to her a thing of course, since her cause was just, whereas the loss of two front teeth by John Copeland was a genuine calamity.

He drew her toward the tent-flap, which he opened. Without was a mounted knight, in full panoply, his arms bound behind him, surrounded by the Queen's five retainers. "In the rout I took him," said John Copeland; "though, as my mouth witnesses, I did not find David Bruce a tractable prisoner."

"Is that, then, the King of Scots?" Philippa demanded, as she mixed salt and water for a mouth-wash; and presently: "Sire Edward should be pleased, I think. Will he not love me a little now, John Copeland?"

John Copeland lifted either plump hand toward his lips. "He could not choose," John Copeland said,— "madame, he could no more choose but love you than I could choose."

Philippa sighed. Afterward she bade John Copeland rinse his gums and then take his prisoner to Falmouth. He told her the marquis was dead, slain by the Knight of Liddesdale. "That is a pity," the Queen said; and more lately: "There is left alive in England but one man to whom I dare entrust the keeping of the King of Scots. My barons are sold to him; if I retain David by me, one or



Painting by William Hurd Lawrence

WITHOUT WAS A MOUNTED KNIGHT, HIS ARMS BOUND BEHIND HIM

another lord will engineer his escape within the week, and Sire Edward will be vexed. Yet listen, John—" She unfolded her plan.

"I have long known," he said, when she had done, "that in all the world there was no lady more lovable. Twenty years I have loved you, my Queen, and yet it is but to-day I perceive that in all the world there is no lady more wise than you."

Philippa touched his cheek, maternally. "Foolish boy! You tell me the King of Scots has an arrow-wound in his nose? I think a bread-poultice would be best." . . . So then he left the tent and presently rode away with his company.

Philippa saw that the Regent had his dinner, and afterward mounted her white palfrey and set out for the battle-field. There the Earl of Ufford, as second in command, received her with great courtesy. God had shown to her Majesty's servants most singular favor: despite the calculations of reasonable men—to which, she might remember, he had that morning taken the liberty to assent—some fifteen thousand Scots were slain. True, her gallant general was no longer extant, though this was scarcely astounding when one considered the fact that he had voluntarily entered the *mêlée* quite unarmed. A touch of age, perhaps; Falmouth was always an eccentric man; and in any event, as epilogue, he congratulated the Queen that—by blind luck, he was forced to concede—her worthy secretary had made a prisoner of the Scottish King. Doubtless, Master Copeland was an estimable scribe, and yet— Ah, yes, he quite followed her Majesty—beyond doubt, the wardage of a king was an honor not lightly to be conferred. Oh yes, he understood; her Majesty desired that the office should be given some person of rank. And pardie! her Majesty was in the right. Eh? said the Earl of Ufford.

Intently gazing into the man's shallow eyes, Philippa assented. Master Copeland had acted unwarrantably in riding off with his captive. Let him be sought at once. She dictated a letter to Ufford's secretary, which informed John Copeland that he had done what was not agreeable in purloining her prisoner without leave. Let him sans delay deliver the King to her good friend the Earl of Ufford.

To Ufford this was satisfactory, since he intended that once in his possession David Bruce should escape forthwith. The letter, I repeat, suited him in its tiniest syllable, and the single difficulty was to convey it to John Copeland, for as to his whereabouts neither Ufford nor any one else had the least notion.

This was immaterial, however, for they narrate that next day a letter signed with John Copeland's name was found pinned to the front of Ufford's tent. I cite a passage therefrom: "I will not give up my royal prisoner to a woman or a child, but only to my own lord, Sire Edward, for to him I have sworn allegiance, and not to any woman. Yet you may tell the Queen she may depend on my taking excellent care of King David. I have poulticed his nose, as she directed."

Here was a nonplus, not perhaps without its comical side. Two great realms had met in battle, and the king of one of them had vanished like a soap-bubble. Philippa was in a rage,—you could see that both by her demeanor and by the indignant letters she dictated; true, they could not be delivered, since they were all addressed to John Copeland. Meanwhile, Scotland was in despair, whereas the English barons now within that realm were in a frenzy, because, however willing you may be, you cannot well betray a kingdom to an unlocateable enemy. The circumstances were unique and they remained unchanged for three feverish weeks.

We will now return to affairs in France, where on the day of the Nativity, as night gathered about Calais, John Copeland came unheralded to the quarters of King Edward, then besieging that city. Master Copeland entreated audience, and got it readily enough, since there was no man alive whom Edward more cordially desired to lay his fingers upon.

Within he found the King, a stupendous person, blond and incredibly big. With him were a smirking Italian, that Almerigo di Pavia who afterward betrayed him, and a lean soldier whom Master Copeland recognized as John Chandos. These three were drawing up an account of the recent victory at Créci, to be forwarded to all mayors and sheriffs in England, with a cogent postscript as to the King's incidental and immediate need of money.

Now King Edward sat leaning far back in his chair, a hand on either hip, and his eyes narrowing as he regarded Master Copeland. Had the Brabanter flinched, the King would probably have hanged him within the next ten minutes; finding his gaze unwavering, the King was pleased. Here was a novelty; most people blinked quite genuinely under the scrutiny of those fierce big eyes, which were blue and cold and of an astounding lustre, gemlike as the March sea.

The King rose with a jerk and took John Copeland's hand. "Ha!" he grunted, "I welcome the squire who by his valor has captured the King of Scots. And now, my man, what have you done with Davie?"

John Copeland answered: "Highness, you may find him at your convenience safely locked in Bamborough Castle. Meanwhile, I entreat you, sire, do not take it amiss if I did not surrender King David to the orders of my lady Queen, for I hold my lands of you, and not of her, and my oath is to you, and not to her, unless indeed by choice."

"John," the King sternly replied, "the loyal service you have done us is considerable, whereas your excuse for kidnapping Davie is a farce. Hey, Almerigo, do you and Chandos avoid the chamber! I have something in private with this fellow." When they had gone, the King sat down and composedly said, "Now tell me the truth, John Copeland."

"Sire," he began, "it is necessary you first understand I bear a letter from Madame Philippa—"

"Then read it," said the King. "Heart of God! have I an eternity to waste on you Brabanters!"

John Copeland read aloud, while the King trifled with a pen, half negligent, and in part attendant. Read, John Copeland:

"MY DEAR LORD,—I recommend me to your lordship with soul and body and all my poor might, and with all this I thank you, as my dear lord, dearest and best beloved of all earthly lords I protest to me, and thank you, my dear lord, with all this as I say before. Your comfortable letter came to me on St. Gregory's day, and I was never so glad as when I heard by your letter that ye were strong enough

in Ponthieu by the grace of God for to keep you from your enemies. Among them I estimate Madame Catherine of Salisbury, who would have betrayed you to the Scot. And, dear lord, if it be pleasing to your high lordship that as soon as ye may that I might hear of your gracious speed, which may God Almighty continue and increase, I shall be glad, and also if ye do each night chafe your feet with a rag of woollen stuff. And, my dear lord, if it like you for to know of my fare, John Copeland will acquaint you concerning the Bruce his capture, and the syrup he brings for our son Lord Edward's cough, and the great malice-workers in these shires which would have so despitefully wrought to you, and of the manner of taking it after each meal. I am lately informed that Madame Catherine is now at Stirling with Robert Stewart and has lost all her good looks. God is invariably gracious to His servants. Farewell, my dear lord, and may the Holy Trinity keep you from your adversaries and ever send me comfortable tidings of you. Written at York, in the Castle, on St. Gregory's day last past, by your own poor

PHILIPPA.

"To my true lord."

"H'm!" said the King; "and now give me the entire story."

John Copeland obeyed. I must tell you that early in the narrative Edward arose and, with a sob, strode toward a window. "Catherine!" he said. He remained motionless what time Master Copeland went on without any manifest emotion. When he had ended, King Edward said, "And where is Madame de Salisbury now?"

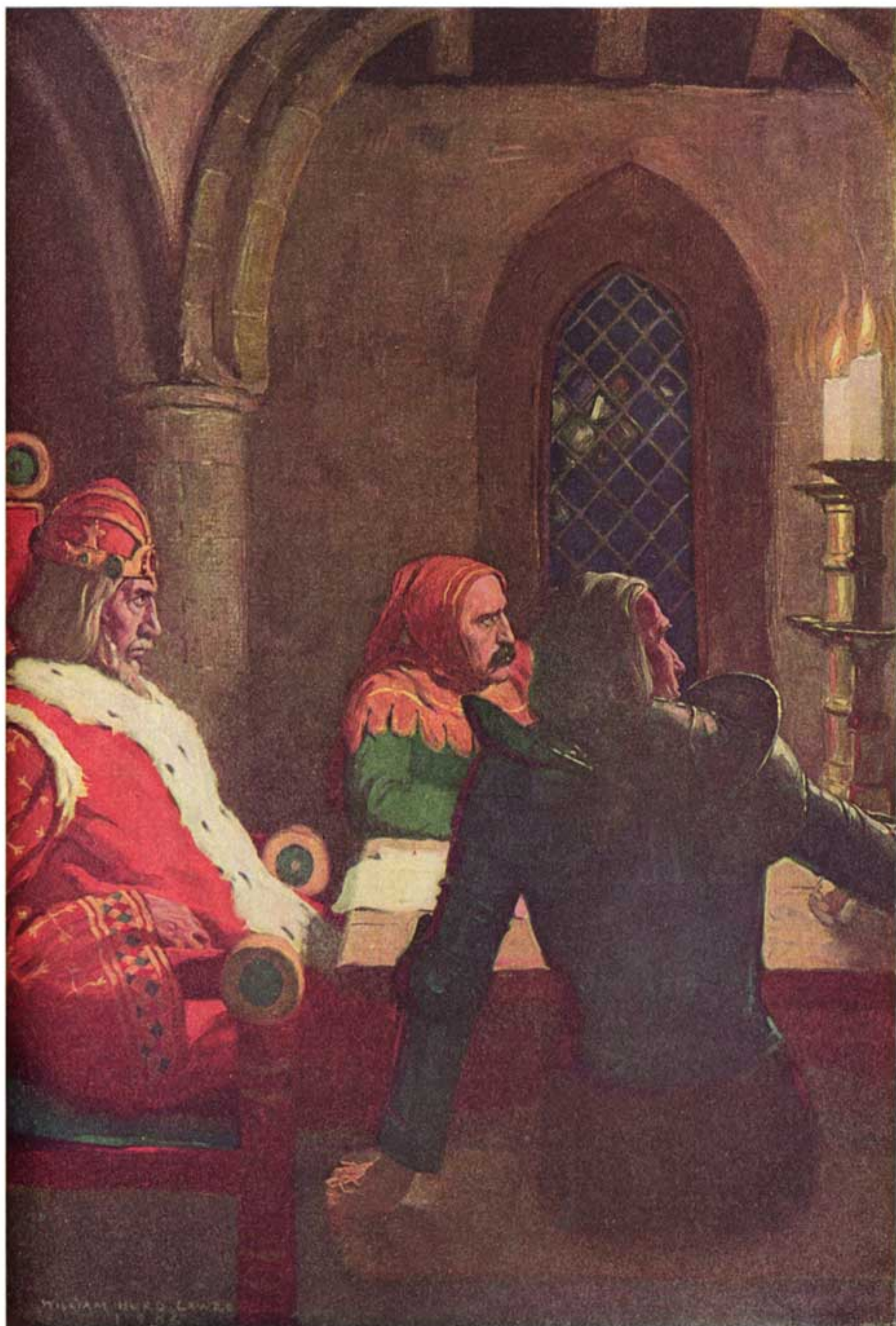
At this the Brabanter went mad. As a leopard springs he leapt upon the King, and grasping him by either shoulder, shook him as one punishing a child.

"Now by the splendor of God—!" King Edward began, very terrible in his wrath. He saw that John Copeland held a dagger to his breast, and shrugged. "Well, my man, you perceive I am defenceless. Therefore make an end, you dog."

"First you will hear me out," John Copeland said.

"It would appear," the King retorted, "that I have little choice."

At this time John Copeland began:



Painting by William Hurd Lawrence

JOHN COPELAND FOUND THE KING WITH DI PAVIA AND CHANDOS

"Sire, you are the greatest monarch our race has known. England is yours, France is yours, conquered Scotland lies prostrate at your feet. To-day there is no man in all the world who possesses a tithe of your glory; yet twenty years ago Madame Philippa first beheld you and loved you, an outcast, an exiled, empty-pocketed prince. Twenty years ago the love of Madame Philippa, great Count William's daughter, got for you the armament wherewith England was regained. Twenty years ago, but for Madame Philippa you had died naked in some ditch."

"Go on," the King said, presently.

"And afterward you took a fancy to reign in France. You learned then that we Brabanters are a frugal people: Madame Philippa was wealthy when she married you, and twenty years had but quadrupled her fortune. She gave you every penny of it that you might fit out this expedition; now her very crown is in pawn at Ghent. In fine, the love of Madame Philippa gave you France as lightly as one might bestow a toy upon a child who whined for it."

The King fiercely said, "Go on."

"Eh, sire, I intend to. You left England undefended that you might posture a little in the eyes of Europe. And meanwhile a woman preserves England, a woman gives you all Scotland as a gift, and in return demands nothing—God ha' mercy on us!—save that you nightly chafe your feet with a bit of woollen. You hear of it—and ask, 'Where is Madame de Salisbury?' Here beyond doubt is the cock of A'sop's fable," snarled John Copeland, "who unearthed a gem and grumbled that his diamond was not a grain of corn."

"You will be hanged ere dawn," the King replied, and yet by this one hand had screened his face. "Meanwhile spit out your venom."

"I say to you, then," John Copeland continued, "that to-day you are the master of Europe. That but for this woman whom for twenty years you have neglected you would to-day be mouldering in some pauper's grave. Eh, without question, you most magnanimously loved that shrew of Salisbury! because you fancied the color of her eyes, Sire Edward, and admired the angle between her nose and

her forehead. I say to you,"—now the man's rage was monstrous,—"I say to you go home to your wife, the source of all your glory! sit at her feet! and let her teach you what love is!" He flung away the dagger. "There you have the truth. Now summon your attendants and have me hanged."

The King gave no movement. "You have been bold," he said at last.

"You have been far bolder, sire. For twenty years you have dared to flout that love which is God made manifest as His one heritage to His children."

King Edward sat in meditation for a long while. He rose, and flung back his big head as a lion might. "John, the loyal service you have done us and our esteem for your valor are so great that they may well serve you as an excuse. May shame fall on those who bear you any ill-will! You will now return home, and take your prisoner, the King of Scotland, and deliver him to my wife, to do with as she may elect. You will convey to her my entreaty—not my orders, John—that she come to me here at Calais. As remuneration for this evening's insolence, I assign lands as near your house as you can choose them to the value of £500 a year for you and for your heirs."

You must know that John Copeland fell upon his knees before King Edward. "Sire—" he stammered.

But the King raised him. "Nay," he said, "you are the better man. Were there any equity in Fate, John Copeland, she would have loved you, not me. As it is, I shall strive to prove not altogether unworthy of my fortune. Go, then, John Copeland—go, my squire, and bring me back my Queen."

Presently he heard John Copeland singing without. And through that instant was youth returned to Edward Plantagenet, and all the scents and shadows and faint sounds of Valenciennes on that ancient night when a tall girl came to him, running, stumbling in her haste to bring him kingship. Now at last he understood the heart of Philippa.

"Let me live!" the King prayed; "O Eternal Father, let me live a little while that I may make atonement!" And meantime John Copeland sang without and the Brabanter's heart was big with joy.