

OUR LITTLE
NORMAN
COUSIN OF LONG AGO



JULIA DARROW COWLES

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by

EVALEEN STEIN





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CHAPTER I
AN INVITATION

It was a May morning in Normandy in the year 1066, and through all the grassy valleys the pear and apple trees were clouds of white and rosy bloom. Some of them overhung the little thatched huts of the peasant folk, which stood close together making the tiny village of Noireat; and some of the flowery trees clambered up the slopes of the steep limestone cliff that rose behind the village. Crowning this cliff was the great gray castle of Count Bertram, the lord of Noireat.

Within the walls of the castle was a large courtyard, where two boys were playing ball. Each was dressed in a tunic of dark green cloth; that is, a close-fitting garment belted at the waist and with a scant skirt reaching to just above the knee; on the boys' legs were long black hose and on their feet shoes of thick soft leather without heels and with long pointed toes; on their heads were little caps, each with a black cock's feather stuck into a buckle at one side.

Presently, "Hark, Alan!" cried one of the boys, "I thought I heard a trumpet!"

Both lads paused in their play; then as they caught clearly another shrill blast, "Come, Henri," said Alan, "let us go to the battlements and see who is coming!"

Off they scampered across the courtyard, through a narrow doorway in a strong tower near the gate of the castle and up a winding flight of stone steps that led to the top of the wall. This wall, which inclosed the castle, and to which parts of it were joined, was very thick and strong; and in a small tower over the gate-way stood a man-at-arms whose duty it was to watch all who came thither, and, if foes, to warn the lord so that he might make ready to defend himself. For in those days nobleman often made war on one another and people who lived in castles expected to keep constant watch for enemies.

But they were quite often friends as foes who rode along the steep bridle path to Noireat; for people played almost as much as they fought, and liked entertainment as well as we do to-day.

As Alan and Henri reached the top step of the winding stair, the man-at-arms, who had been gazing down at the bridle path, turned, and said with a smile, "Well, youngsters. I think we may look for one of those play fights that folks call tourneys. I'll wager yonder horse-

man are coming to invite Count Bertram, for they are heralds of his friend the Baron of Brecey. Do you see that zig-zag green band and the three red spots worked on the little flags hanging from their trumpets? That is the device of the Baron of Brecey.”

The lads looked eagerly down at the two riders who were by this time quite near the gate-way, and, sure enough, they could make out the embroidery of which the watchman spoke.

“I don’t think that device is so handsome as the red two-legged dragon on Count Bertram’s flag,” said Alan critically.

“Why does he have that dragon on his flag, and his shield, too?” asked Henri.

“Well,” answered the watchman, rubbing his forehead, “I don’t exactly know. Maybe Count Bertram, or some of his kinfolks, fought a red two-legged dragon somewhere, or maybe he just liked its looks. I don’t know either whether there is any particular meaning to those spots and things the Baron of Brecey has. But it’s a good thing for a knight to have *some* kind of device.”

“Why is it?” asked Alan.

“Why, there is a reason for it, youngster,” said the watchman, “and it’s this; when they go to fight in war or those play-battle tourneys or tournaments, or whatever

they call them, their faces and bodies are so covered up by the armor they have to wear to protect themselves, that no one can tell who they are unless they have a device somewhere about them, painted on their shields or worked on their banners. And as most of the knights know the devices of the rest, it is about as good as having one's name told to everybody. The trouble is though that they don't all stick to the same device they pick out, but a good many of them change it sometimes when they take a notion to, and that gets people mixed up about their names."

"Count Bertram always has the red two-legged dragon," said Henri.

"Yes," replied the watchman, "and he says that by and by all the knights will have to settle on regular devices and hand them down in their families, so people can always be sure who they are.—And maybe they will," he added.

But while Alan and Henri had been talking with the watchman, the heralds had reached the gate of the castle where they halted and each blew another shrill blast on his trumpet.

At this the lads, with eyes dancing, turned about and racing down the stairs and back to the courtyard joined a group of younger boys, all, like themselves, pages in the household. Indeed, everybody in the castle had come into

the courtyard by this time, from Count Bertram, the lord of Noireat and Lady Gisla, his wife, down to the cooks and scullions; for visitors were few, and if they came on peaceful errands were always warmly welcomed.

Meantime Master Herve, the gate-keeper, opened the heavy door at the end of an arched passage under the watch-tower and let down the narrow drawbridge that was held up by ropes to the castle wall. Outside the wall was the moat, a ditch filled with water deep enough to drown any one who tried to ride through it; and the drawbridge was so called because it could be drawn up and folded against the wall until the gate-keeper knew whether it was friend or foe who wished to enter.

As now the two horsemen rode into the courtyard of Noireat, a pair of little pages hurried out and held their bridles while Alan and Henri helped them dismount. One of the heralds then blew a third blast on his trumpet as the other, taking his place on the high curb of a well near by and raising his voice, called out "My master, the Baron of Brecey, sends greeting to the Count of Noireat and his household, and proclaims a tourney to be held four weeks from to-day in the meadow adjoining his castle, and he invites all Norman knights who so desire to contest for the prizes, which will be a pair of gilded

spurs for the first champion and a silver hunting-horn for him adjudged second winner!”

When he had finished, everybody clapped their hands; and “Oh Henri,” whispered Alan, “do you suppose Count Bertram will take us along?”

“I’m sure I hope so!” answered Henri.

“What is a tourney?” asked one of the little pages, in a low voice, as he clung tightly to the bridle of the herald’s horse.

“Why,” said Henri, with a superior air, for he had been to one, “it is a kind of game where knights ride on horseback and fight for fun. Their lances aren’t sharp, and they don’t try to kill each other, but only to see which is the best fighter, and he gets a prize. The most beautiful lady there gives it to him. And there are always lots of ladies go, for somebody has to look on, you know, and most all the men are doing the fighting.”

“Oh,” said the little page, with round eyes, “I wish I could go!”

“You probably can’t, though,” said Henri. “You are too little.”

At this tears sprang to the eyes of the little page, who was only seven years old and very homesick for the castle of Briouze, which was his real home and from which he had lately been brought to Noireat. “Oh,” he sobbed, “I

wish I was home! Father would let me go! I don't see why everybody has to live in somebody else's house, anyway! I don't know why I had to come here!" and he began to cry in good earnest.

"There," said Henri, taking the bridle from his shaking little hand, "don't cry! You must be here, because your father is a vassal of Count Bertram. So is my father and Alan's and all the other pages'. That's why we're here, too. And I'm twelve and have been here five years. You'll like it when you get used to it: —isn't everybody good to you?"

"Y-e-s," sobbed the little page, "but I want my mother!" Here his tears broke out afresh. "Why—why can't I go home?" he quavered.

"Because," said Henri severely, "you're here to be trained. You will be a page for seven years and learn to mind, and run errands, and ride a pony, and ever so many things, and then you will be a squire for seven years more, and learn how to go hunting on horseback, and to fight, and lots more things, and then, if you have behaved right, when you are twenty-one you will be made a knight!" and Henri's eyes sparkled as he added, "And just think how grand that will be! You will have your own war-horse and armor and spurs and lance and banner and can ride out and go where you please and

fight and have all kinds of adventures!” For in those days this was a gentleman’s idea of life; it seldom entered their heads to do any real work in the world.

But the poor little seven-year-old was not to be comforted, and crept off to a corner of the courtyard still sobbing, “I want my mother! I want to go home! I don’t see why people are other people’s vassals! I don’t want to be a page! Boo-hoo-hoo!”

And it did seem strange that most of the gently born children of that time had to be brought up in “somebody else’s house,” as the little page complained. To understand how it came about you must know, to begin with, that the ruler of Normandy was called the duke; that the people were divided into three classes; first, the nobles who lived in castles, and, next to the duke, were of highest rank; second, the people who lived in towns and worked at trades and kept shops and inns for travelers; and the third, or lowest class, who were poor peasants little better than slaves, and who lived in little huts in the country where they had to farm the land for the nobles. Most of the land was owned by these nobles and they, too, were of different degrees of rank, some having stronger castles than others and more fighting men under them. As a great deal of fighting was always going on, it followed that each weaker noble wanted the help and protection

of some one more powerful than he was. In order to get his he must become a vassal; that is, he must promise to be loyal to his overlord, to fight for him in return, and in time of war to furnish him men and supplies. In this way it had come about that everybody in Normandy was the vassal of some one else, and it became the custom for children to be sent to their father's overlord that they might be brought up in his home and trained to be loyal to him. The lord and lady of every castle became foster parents to the boys and girls sent to them and did their best to be kind to them and to teach them all they could.

Count Bertram and Lady Gisla took a real interest in the group of squires and pages at Noireat and were much beloved in return. And now, as the little page still sobbed in his corner, Lady Gisla noticed him and a pitying look came into her eyes. "Poor little man!" she murmured to herself. Then turning to two little girls who, hand in hand, had been standing near by watching things, "Blanchette," she said, "go over to little Josef and bring him to me!"

"Yes, mother!" answered the little girl, as she ran off to do Lady Gisla's bidding.

Blanchette was the only child of Count Bertram and Lady Gisla; and though her companion, Marie, was the daughter of one of the Count's vassals, and been sent to

Noireat to be trained, Blanchette herself had stayed in her own home because Count Bertram's overlord lived in a castle near the sea where the winters were so sharp and cold that Lady Gisla feared for the health of the little girl who had been delicate since babyhood. Moreover, it was not thought so important to send girls away from home as the boys who must be trained to fight loyally, if need be, for their overlord.

In a moment Blanchette led little Josef, still sobbing, to Lady Gisla, who taking him in her arms hugged and kissed him just as his own mother might have done. "There, there!" she whispered softly to him as she dried his eyes. "Never mind! You must learn to be a little man, and we are all going to help you!" And then she kissed him again and comforted him, till presently the little page was smiling through his tears and ran along quite happily when Blanchette and Marie too him off between them to romp with one of the big brown dogs, who were barking in the general excitement caused by the coming of the heralds.

CHAPTER II
THE CASTLE OF NOIREAT

Meantime the cooks and scullions had all hurried back to their work, and as dinner was nearly ready Count Bertram invited the heralds into the castle; to be sure it was only eleven o'clock, but that was the usual hour for the midday meal.

The Count and Lady Gisla both looked very handsome as they led the way up a flight of steps to the door of the great square tower of stone, called the keep, which was the main part of the castle. Count Bertram was dressed in a tunic of dark crimson and over his black hose narrow strips of green cloth were criss-crossed up to his knees where they were tied in knots with fringed ends; his pointed leather shoes were dark crimson and so was his cap and the short mantle fastened over one shoulder with a silver clasp. Lady Gisla wore a gown of violet-colored cloth with close bodice and flaring sleeves, and her long skirt was caught up in front by a silken girdle from which hung a number of silver keys; on her head was a pointed cap, and a square of lace fastened to its peak

partly covered her hair which fell over her shoulders in loose flowing locks.

Within the keep was one huge room called the hall. Heavy stone pillars upheld the floor of an upper story, and high up in the thick walls were long, narrow windows; there was no glass in these for glass was scarce and imperfect then; but sometimes in winter, when it was very cold, the windows were filled in with pieces of waxed linen instead. At either end of the room was a great fireplace; one was for warmth in winter time, while at the other the castle cooking went on the year around, for there was no other kitchen. And as there were no chimneys either, the smoke from the blazing logs, over which the cooks were busy with dinner, curled up into the hall and found its way out through the windows as best it could, which, of course, wasn't very well.

On the castle walls were no pictures, but here and there hung large pieces of cloth so skillfully embroidered that they looked almost like pictures, and here and there were fastened the antlers of a stag or a bow and sheaf of arrows. Rushes were strewn over the stone floor which was raised a little at one side of the room and called the dais. Here serving-men were placing long boards over some wooden trestles, this making a table for the lord and lady. Others were arranging a similar but much

longer one down the length of the hall. There were no cloths on either of these tables, for nobody had any; and as for forks, folks expected their fingers to answer. Count Bertram and Lady Gisla had some silver dishes and glass cups; but on the long table for the household between each two persons was set an oblong wooden dish called a trencher, and this must do for a plate for both; their cups were pewter or else part of a cow's horn hollowed out and set in metal.

When all had taken their places on the benches that served for seats the long table was quite filled, for there were many people in the household. Besides the serving-folk, and the pages and squires and other attendants of gentle birth, often some wandering knight or minstrel or pilgrim or herald added to the company. Sever of the pages and squires, however, did not sit down with the others but stood on the dais ready to wait upon Count Bertram and Lady Gisla, for one of the first things taught to them was obedience and service.

Of the pages, Alan and Henri, who were inseparable friends, were favorites of the Count, while of the squires he preferred to be served by a youth names Hugh, who had been at Noireat a number of years and was now almost ready for knighthood. These three now busied themselves to attend their master, while others of their

number served Lady Gisla and the little girls who sat beside her.

Henri had already been to the well in the courtyard and filled a sliver pitcher and now he brought also a silver basin, and after Count Bertram was seated at the table he poured the water over his hands into the basin and then presented him a small linen towel on which to dry them.

Meantime, Alan had gone to the kitchen end of the great hall. Here the cooks were busy at the big smoky fireplace dishing up food cooked in the copper kettles and saucepans which they pulled to the hearth from the glowing coals. On a long spit in front of the fire were pieces of roasted meat, and on either side tired little dogs were lying hungrily sniffing the food they dared not touch till their own turn came.

Each dog had a little chain fastened around his body, one end of the chain being hooked to the spit, and for almost an hour they had been obliged to walk back and forth, thus turning the spit and keeping the meat from burning. For that was the way dogs had to help cook in those days.

“How are you, Bowser? How are you, Towser?” (perhaps those were not their real names, but never mind) said Alan, as he gently poked with his foot, first one and

then the other of the dogs as he waited for the cook to place some meat on the silver platter he had brought.

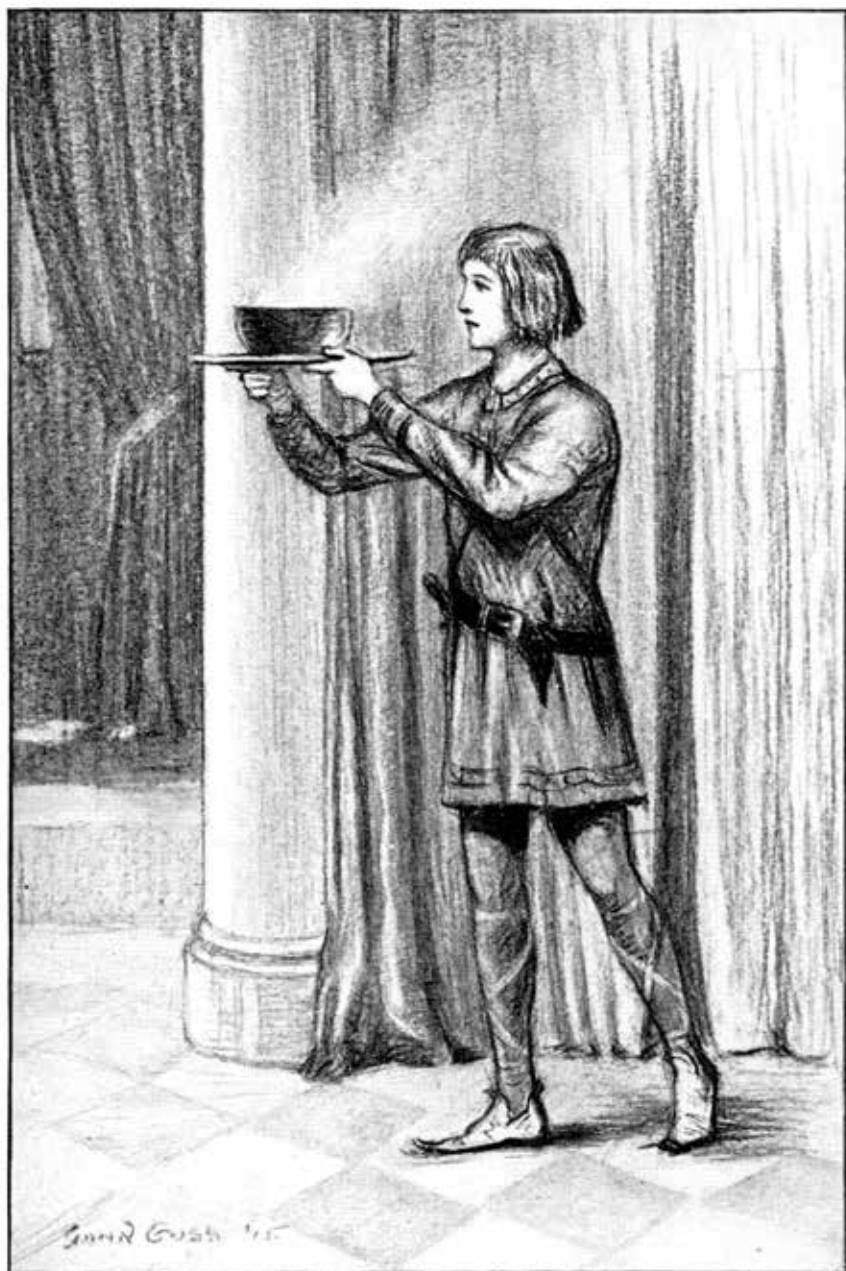
Henri, too, now came to the kitchen fireplace, and "There is a dish of pigeons for you to bring," said Alan as he went off with his platter.

When he set it before Count Bertram, "Where is the carving knife?" asked Hugh, who was standing by ready to carve the meat, which was one of the duties of a squire.

"Oh, dear!" cried Alan, flushing, "I never can remember that knife!" And off he hurried to the kitchen so fast that he nearly ran into Henri and his pigeons. When the knife was brought, Hugh, holding the meat firmly with a wooden skewer, carefully carved it, the two boys watching intently as he did it.

"That's right," said Count Bertram, "see how he does it, lads! Hugh will soon be a knight and go away, and then, by and by, I will expect my new squires, Alan and Henri, to do my carving,"

When the meat was served the boys brought dishes of beans, cabbage, turnips and other vegetables, but no potatoes, for the very good reason that none grew in Normandy as yet. Along with these they brought also the cake and custard and sweet things, which people then ate any time they pleased during the meal instead of keeping them for dessert as we would.



BROUGHT DISHES OF BEANS, CABBAGE,
TURNIPS AND OTHER VEGETABLES.

When Count Bertram had risen from his seat, the two pages went to the long table in the center of the hall where they found places side by side with a wooden trencher between them.

When everybody had finished eating, very likely a number of bones had been flung under the table; and it is quite possible, too, that some of the brown dogs had crept up from the kitchen hearth or the courtyard, and lying on the rumpled-up rushes munched and gnawed to their hearts' content. For people in those days were not such particular housekeepers as we are.

CHAPTER III

ROLF THE GANGER

After dinner the two heralds took their leave. Alan and Henri followed them to the gate, and when it was shut they loitered awhile in the small rood under the watch-tower where Master Herve, the gate-keeper, lived. He was an old man, and the boys liked to hear the stories he was always ready to tell.

“Well, lads,” he said, as they seated themselves on a bench by the door, “ ‘tis lucky for you that you will get to see one more tourney before our noble ruler, Duke William, sets sail for Britain, for ‘tis likely times will be dull enough with all the good knights following him across the sea!”

“Master Herve,” said Henri, “why is Duke William going to fight in Britain?”

“Why, child,” answered Master Herve, “the blood of Rolf the Ganger runs in his veins, and every true North-man loves a good ship and a good fight!—especially if there is a good prize at the end of it!”

“Tell us about Rolf the Ganger!” put in Alan; for

though the boys had heard the story often before, they always liked to listen to tales of their Northmen forefathers.

Master Herve smiled approvingly, and began: "Rolf, you know, was the great-great-great-grandfather of our Duke William, and was born nearly two hundred years ago on an isle off the coast of Norway. When he grew up he was so big and tall that he scorned to ride any of the little horses they have in Norway, and because he always walked instead people called him Rolf the Ganger, which means Rolf the Walker."

"And afterwhile he was outlawed!" said Henri.

"Yes," said Master Herve, "he was a wild blade, and for some deed he did he was made an outlaw by the King of Norway. But that didn't daunt Rolf the Ganger! He just got together a band of men and some dragon ships, for the men of Norway have always been famous rovers and more at home on sea than on land."

"I wish I could see a dragon ship!" exclaimed Alan longingly. "Do you think there will be some at Dives when Duke William sails for Britain next fall? You know when Count Bertram goes to join him we are to go, too, as far as Dives."

"Well," answered Herve, "the ships now are a good deal the same, only larger, and not so gay and fine look-