A Shallow, Humorous Youth

by Hyarrowen

Summary

It's the spring of 1403. A party of French heralds is journeying from Dover to London, stopping for the night at an inn near Gadshill, where an irresponsible youth is staying too.

An extra flashback for the 1989 film. Prince Henry is sixteen years old; Montjoy is a young herald, with the title Dis-le-Vrai, who is beginning to be noticed - and not just by the Heralds' College of France!

Three of the travellers among those coming into Rochester along Watling Street early that April evening were from across the Narrow Seas, and had made their way from the shrine at Canterbury in a single day's journey. One of them was tall, thin, dark-haired, in England for the first time since the deposition of King Richard a few years before. Another was younger, black-haired, of wiry build, and inclined to banter with the ladies. These two wore the tabards of heralds; the third, a gnarled man of middle years, seemed to be a servant, for he had a pack-horse on a leading-rein, and rode a little way behind the other two.

Once through the gate in the town wall, they began to look about them for an inn. The long marketplace was emptying now; stall-holders were packing up, and the travellers picked their way through the detritus of a day's trading. Buildings lined the open space, and many of the good townsfolk of Rochester were going in through their front doors at the day's end. One door stood wide, the sounds of conviviality coming from within, and outside it was a good-natured crowd cheering on a couple of acrobats and a man with a performing dog, to the accompaniment of a young woman playing a pipe. The youngest traveller turned his head, and began to hum along with the tune; but the three of them went on their way, because what they wanted was an inn, not a tavern.

The Blue Bell, close to the Guildhall, seemed a likely choice for the night. They went in through the
arched entrance, and waited in the inn-yard. This was cobbled, with a jettied gallery running round it just above head-height. A gated passageway led past the main hall; presumably into the stable-yard, for a boy was leading a pair of horses through it.

As the bells of the cathedral rang out for Vespers, a burly manservant pushed the main gates of the inn closed. He dropped the heavy bars into place, then went through a little door close by the wicket. He was obviously a porter, and the inn was being secured for the night; that boded well for an uneventful stay.

Now the host of the inn came up. 'God give you good evening, sirs; how may I be of help to you?' The formal words were at odds with the man's appearance, solid, red-faced, and with one or two battle-scars.

'I'm Olivier de Harcourt, this is Antoine d'Evreux, and my servant Pierre. We'll need a room for the two of us, stabling for the horses, and a place for Pierre with them.'

'We're well able to help you, sir, and the place is secure, you need have no fear.'

De Harcourt had indeed had no fear on that score until that moment. Now he looked again at the solid oak gates, with their stout bars, the locked wicket, and the porter just visible inside his lodge.

'Why, what's happened?'

'Ah, some robbery up on the other side of the river, at Gadshill some miles off. A week ago now.' The host seemed rather to regret having mentioned the affair at all, since these clients had no prior knowledge of it. 'But the Bell's safe enough, you may be sure!'

'Well then; Pierre, go with the horses and make sure they're' – he had been going to say safe, but changed it to 'settled in, and we'll see you in the hall. Sir, if you would have us shown to our room?'

A boy was already taking the reins of Antoine's bay horse; de Harcourt gave over his own glossy black, and Pierre followed in the boy's wake with the other two horses.

'Margery!' called the host, and a servant girl hurried up and bobbed. 'Take these gentlemen to the corner room.' The girl, young, grey-eyed and smiling, led the way to a wooden staircase climbing up the outside of the hall, while Pierre took the horses through the arched passage to the stable-yard.

A door in the corner of the gallery led into a small, neat room, with a wide bed and a shuttered window looking out onto steep tiled roofs and a view across the back gardens of the streets of Rochester. The light was dying out of a clear sky, and a three-quarters moon was already climbing above the town. It would be a cold night.

'Will this be to your liking, sirs?'

'Yes; thank-you, Margery,' said de Harcourt civilly, and the girl left them, Antoine holding the door for her, though he had no need to do so for a servant girl. The boy was good-hearted and engaging to be sure, but it was unlikely he would rise higher than pursuivant unless he could keep his mind on his duties; a herald needed more about him than charm!

'It's better than that place in Dover!' said Antoine. The inn there had been close to the fish-market. The smell had filled de Harcourt's dreams, and it had taken them half the morning to leave it behind them.

'Yes, it'll do us very well. We should get down to the hall, and see what Pierre thinks of the stabling. If there are thieves about...' It would be such a nuisance to have to hire horses if their present mounts were lost, and completely out of keeping with the dignity of a party of French heralds in a foreign
They went back down the wooden stairs to the courtyard, and entered the hall to their right. It was large and busy, with a long table running down one side of it, and a high-raftered roof that soared away into gloom. Tall windows on either side looked out onto the gathering dusk; a serving-maid was going along, swinging the shutters closed. There was a welcome fire at one side of the hall, with a large pot hanging over it. And there were thirty or forty people, pilgrims, peddlers, men of business, all eating and drinking and talking at the tops of their voices. Antoine grinned as they went in through the door, and de Harcourt found himself smiling too; this was obviously a good inn!

'Be seated, sirs, and we'll be with you as soon as we may,' said a pot-boy, as he hurried past with a tray of tankards, and the Frenchmen found themselves a gap at the table, between a large family presided over by a jolly grandmother, and a more decorous party of an elderly man, his lady, and a young woman, their daughter perhaps.

A few minutes later, Pierre came in through the doorway at the end of the hall. He cast about for them, and came to join them at the table. He had news to impart, de Harcourt could see, but first things first.

'The horses?'

'Safe enough, sir. The stable-yard is secure – good gates to it, and they're bolted and barred. Ostlers to hand, the feed's good, and I've brushed the horses down. But the boy told me more about that robbery – at least, there were two of them, so the story goes, with one band of ruffians seeing off the other. And the travellers who were waylaid started from this very inn.'

Antoine gave a low whistle – 'No wonder they're so careful here! Well, the town walls are high, and the inn's bolted and barred; we might be more secure than if there'd been no robbery.'

'You've somewhere to sleep close by the horses?' de Harcourt asked Pierre.

'Yes, sir, right over the stalls. Couldn't be better.'

'Good! We're all well settled, then. We may as well enjoy our meal. The food's on its way,' and indeed Margery was bringing it to them as they spoke. She put the bowls of pottage down before them, smiled, most particularly at Antoine, and was on her way again.

'There'll be more to enjoy than food tonight, though!' Pierre still had news to impart; he and de Harcourt had been travelling companions for years now, and had developed an easy relationship.

'Tell us, then!'

'Why, you remember the performers in the market-place? Well, they're staying here tonight, and they'll be putting on a show later on. And not just the acrobats and the dog. There are jugglers - and a dancing bear!'

'A dancing bear!' Antoine was smiling, and de Harcourt was interested too, and the grand-dame next to them, catching the French phrase, passed the news on to the children. De Harcourt, as a matter of courtesy, turned to his English; both his companions were proficient in the language. 'They'll be performing after the meal?' It looked as though this was the case, with the long table set along one wall of the hall, leaving a clear space along the other.

'As soon as the meal's over, they said. They were doing their exercises when I came away.'

The children were agog. One of them, a little maid of about five or six years, asked if they were kind
to the bear, and Pierre assured her, smiling, that they were. Two smaller boys listened with round eyes. 'And there were other animals; dogs and' - he consulted quickly with de Harcourt – 'a monkey, too!'

The boys' faces were transformed by smiles, and the grand-dame said, 'Now, there's a treat for you – if you're good, mind!' and it seemed that the children would indeed be good, for they applied themselves to their food with renewed enthusiasm.

Beyond the family party, two youths, one lanky and dark, the other stocky and fair-haired, had been listening with interest too. De Harcourt had seen their type in many a town all over Europe – trouble on two legs! - and resolved to keep an eye on them.

The grand-dame was now telling anyone who would listen that her own mother had stayed at this very inn, many years ago, 'and we're on our way to my half-brother – he's a cloth-merchant in Dover, gets all the latest fashions in from Flanders! He and I are going on to Rome – my last pilgrimage, maybe.' She looked good for several more, thought de Harcourt, surveying her hale looks and sturdy figure. 'And my son here and his family are turning back to Canterbury, to see Blessed St Thomas' tomb.' The man, very much in his mother's shadow, nodded silent confirmation.

De Harcourt had been to Rome too, and drew breath to say so, but the dame continued on without pause, 'Three times I've been to Rome, the first time with my grandmother. Everyone says it's fallen from its days of glory in the olden days, and it must have been great indeed - ' and on she went.

On the other side of her, the two youths now seemed to be engaged in discussion, but the fair-haired one caught de Harcourt's eye for a moment, and a flicker of amusement passed between them before he turned back to his friend. A man beyond the youths spoke up; 'I've relics and pardons from Rome, if any should wish to purchase them...' while on the Frenchmen's other side, the elderly man was saying to a pair of nuns next to him, 'Yes, I’m from the West Country. We're the Ashbys of Dorset' – an esquire or gentleman, then. His wife and daughter conversed decorously with the nuns, while the gentleman himself turned towards de Harcourt, and said, 'You're from abroad, sir, I take it? I don't know your arms.'

'We're new in from France, yes. I’m Dis-le-Vrai Herald, this is Papillon Pursuivant, and we're on our way to the court in London.'

'The court, sir herald?' Mistress Ashby was instantly interested. 'You'll find the King in no happy mood; he's sorely grieved over the Prince, they say!'

'The Prince - of Wales? Grieved, you say? The prince is not dead, I trust?'

'Very much alive, sir, and wild to a fault. Keeps low company, they say; in and out of taverns...' The lady was obviously happy to gossip about the subject, and her daughter too; even the nuns were smiling indulgently, though Ashby himself said, 'He should settle down, mind his father and learn his duties!'

'Oh, but he's young yet; let him have his fling!' said the good lady benevolently, and her husband said 'Harrumph,' and applied himself to his meal.

De Harcourt followed suit – the food was palatable enough, by English standards – and made a mental note to find out all he could about this prince, and though he did not catch Antoine's eye, hoped that he was doing the same. If there were strife between father and son, France needed to know about it.

Stewed fruit followed the pottage, and the hum of conversation was beginning to rise again, when
the doors at the end of the hall were flung open and the troupe pranced in to the music of a hurdy-gurdy and drum. Everyone clapped and cheered, and prepared to enjoy the show, though some carried on their talk in low voices; the two youths, for instance, had their heads together.

The acrobats began the act, followed by the jugglers. Then the monkey rode up and down the hall on the dog's back carrying a miniature lance; and at last the dancing bear came in, walking on its hands. The children gasped and laughed, while shrinking against their elders. Bruin came upright and began a solemn dance with his keeper, while all the other performers stood in a semi-circle behind, singing and clapping a rhythm. Now everyone in the hall was clapping too, and the Frenchmen were no exception; de Harcourt was smiling along with the rest.

The dancers, man and bear, took their bow, and the monkey leapt up onto the table, carrying a purse which it held out for coins. People started to chatter again, and since the hurdy-gurdy was still playing, some of them stood up to dance and while others sang along. It was a scene of good cheer, the candle-light flickering on shiny, smiling faces. Antoine joined in the dance; Pierre, after a glance at de Harcourt, did so too. De Harcourt himself, feeling that he could not compromise his dignity thus far, sat back on the bench and remarked to the grand-dame, 'This will be a night for your little ones to remember!'

'Yes, indeed, sir! I don't know when I've seen a better show! Now, Meg, would you like to give the monkey a ha'penny?' and at the little girl's silent but earnest nod, she produced a coin and gave it to her. But as Meg put it into the monkey's wrinkled palm, there was a bellow from the bear, and cries of surprise and fear from the dancers. They scattered, one or two tripping over benches or stools in their haste, the rest surging to the edges of the room.

For the bear was loose! - dragging its leash, standing tall on its hind legs, and lunging out with heavy forepaws. De Harcourt caught a glimpse of a trickle of blood down its side as it swung round. Had some idiot injured it?

A dozen men rushed to capture it, only adding to the confusion as their shouts mingled with the beast's roars. Stools went flying. There was a crash as a keg of ale went over.

He heard a wail right at his feet, and he glanced down, and saw Meg, who had been knocked to the floor, among the rushes. He scooped her up, and dashed for the wall among a crowd of others. He looked round wildly, saw her grand-mother a little way away, struggled through a press of people on either side of the fire-place, and handed her over.

'There, there,' said the dame, though she was visibly shocked herself, 'sweet-heart, sweet-heart.' She smoothed the child's hair. 'Thank-you, sir -'

The father of the family was close by, holding one of his little boys; beyond, the pardoner was shouldering his way towards them with the other.

Over the heads of the crowd, de Harcourt could see several men converging on the poor beast. It roared again, clambered up onto the table, and snarled at them. 'Don't hurt him, don't hurt him – Bruin, Bruin!' cried the keeper, but now, truly frightened, it ran down the table, knocking over jugs and cups. And candlesticks too, and one of the jugs must have held aquavit, for right in front of de Harcourt a sudden flare of flame went up, and people crashed back with horrified cries.

'Water, water!' There was no water close at hand. Someone snatched up an unspilled ale-jug, and threw the contents – the fair-haired youth, he saw – but the fire had too good a hold to be so easily dowsed. Then de Harcourt had a sudden vivid picture of the hearth that he'd just fought his way past, with the pot of stewed fruit keeping warm beside it. He lunged round, snatched up the pot, ran with it to the blue-hot flames, and flung the contents on top of them.
He'd thrown fast and true. The fire was gone, replaced by a great splash of fruit. He surveyed his handiwork, gasping, and someone clapped him on the shoulder. He looked round into the laughing blue eyes of the fair youth, and smiled back involuntarily. The youth seized his hand and wrung it. 'Good work, sir, you thought faster than any of us!' His lanky friend cried, 'Come on, Hal, he'll get away!' and Hal called, 'Ned, don't you dare - !' and was off after the bear with an exuberant hunting-cry.

The hubbub died down a little. Syrupy fruit began to fall from the table to the floor. The host barged through the wreckage and pumped de Harcourt's hand in his turn; 'Your food and drink tonight are on the house, sir!' he cried. 'As for those young fools...' but the young fools in question were already out of the hall, pursuing the bear with peals of laughter interspersed with crashes. Most of the troupe had followed. Antoine appeared at de Harcourt's elbow; 'Olivier, are you all right?' and at his nod, grinned at him and joined the chase.

There was a screeching high up in the rafters. It was the monkey, giving its loud opinion of the chaos below. The host groaned ostentatiously, put his hands on his hips, and craned his neck to look at it. 'One of you fetch it down, if you'd be so kind?' he requested, and one of the acrobats started to climb the wooden pillars of the hall. The monkey swore at him, leapt through a little window high up in the wall, and vanished.

The host made a resigned noise, then dismissed the matter from his mind. 'Did anyone see what happened?' he enquired of the room at large.

'No, but I imagine some idiot pricked the beast with his dagger for a jest,' said Ashby disgustedly, from further down the hall where he had his womenfolk under his wing.

'Poor creature,' put in the grand-dame, her face all creased with sympathy, 'and such a danger to everyone else!' and small Meg, holding tightly to her hand, nodded fiercely.

A cry of triumph from outside indicated that the bear had been caught. A Stentorian voice shouted, 'Now stand back, all of you young sirs, and let us get him to his quarters!' and the noise finally died away amid ironic cheers and cat-calls.

'God be praised. At last,' said the hostess, and marshalled her servants; 'Betty! Nell! Margery! Start clearing this lot up. Who's for more ale?' this last to the room at large, and there was a general shout of 'I!' And so the evening returned to sanity. Pierre went to check on the horses, and returned briefly with the news that the bear was indeed confined once more, and that his keeper had dressed his hurts and put honey on his paws to occupy him. Antoine re-appeared, flushed and smiling, and murmured in de Harcourt's ear that one of the troupe was a bright-eyed a lass as ever he'd come across, and de Harcourt, with his own recent memory of a pair of bright blue eyes, felt rather more in accord with him than he might otherwise have done.

Someone started singing a ballad, and those who knew it joined in, Antoine picking up the chorus with ease. People resumed their seats to listen, the children safe on the laps of their elders; when the song ended, Antoine began one of his own, a troubadours' lay from the south of France, and a sentimental air settled over the room. His next song was almost a lullaby. De Harcourt observed this performance with interest; the young pursuivant had more potential than he'd given him credit for, perhaps! The lullaby over, the grand-dame and Meg and the rest of their family took their leave for the evening, with great good-will towards de Harcourt; shortly thereafter, the nuns and the Ashbys followed suit, and the evening broke up far more peaceably than had first seemed likely.

The two Frenchmen went out into the stable-yard to make a last check on Pierre and their horses.
The moon now stood high over the hall's roof, and the night air was cold and fresh. The yard, a large beaten-earth rectangle between the hall, a pair of high gates, and two ranges of outbuildings, was crowded with the bulky shapes of carts and wagons. They picked their way between these, and came to the stable door.

Pierre was sitting on a stool in the loose-box with their horses, with his dagger close at hand. 'I thought that whole business might be a diversion, for people trying to steal horses, but it seems not,' he said. 'The ostlers here are pretty quick, they were all out and guarding the gate by the time I got here.'

'You've done well. You're sleeping close by, you said?'

'Up in the hay-loft,' said Pierre with a jerk of his chin. 'I'll be right above them.'

There was a screech from somewhere inside the inn. The monkey, still at large. There was laughter, and a flurry of footsteps. De Harcourt sighed. 'Sleep with one eye open, and I'll do the same. I'm for my bed now. I'll see you at dawn, if all goes well. If it doesn't go well, I'll see you before!'

'Good night, sirs, and God watch over us all.' Pierre went back to the horses, giving each one a pat and a soft word, and de Harcourt and Antoine left him to it.

They passed the doorway of the hall as they went back through the passage-way to the courtyard. There were several servants in there, sweeping the floor, dealing with the last of the mess. Hal and his dark-haired young friend were nowhere to be seen, but there were still a few of the troupe there, and one of the girls happened to look up and catch Antoine's eye... 'Hey, Frenchy, come and teach us that song you were singing!' she called, and Antoine tilted his head at de Harcourt for permission, who gave it with a resigned nod. Antoine went through into the hall with alacrity, and seated himself on the bench next to the girl.

De Harcourt continued through to the courtyard alone, climbed the wooden staircase in the light of the lantern hanging over it, and let himself into the corner room. Here he took a good look round, in the full expectation that they had been robbed, but the few possessions they had left there were still in place. The bear had been teased, then, simply for amusement, not as a diversion. Well, young fools were a hazard in every country, and at least there had been no human blood shed.

A scurrying along the gallery, followed by heavier footfalls, brought him alert again; that damned monkey! The creak of shutters in the next room as they were pulled stealthily back, Hal's voice; 'Got you, you little – ah!' and a rush of swift footsteps. A crash from outside. Had the boy leapt out of a window after it? De Harcourt opened the shutters of his own room and peered out. Geese honked and flapped, dogs barked. The barking spread along the back-yards of the street. There was the sound of someone crashing through bushes, and a peal of laughter. A man yelled a curse. Then the noise died down.

Exasperated, de Harcourt swung the shutters closed. Why had they not stayed at the Seven Stars further up the street? But it was too late now; and with luck, the young idiot would be caught by the Town Watch. With a sigh, he turned back to his bed, and took out his rosary beads, knelt down and began to tell them over. Faint strains of music drifted up from below; the sounds of clearing-up had diminished; even the geese were quiet, and there was no sound from Bruin at all. De Harcourt stripped down to his undergarments, not being inclined to risk disrobing further, and climbed gratefully into the bed. He put his dagger under the pillow.

The night-sounds drifted further and further away from him. Now all he could hear was the distant bark of a dog, and the creaks made by any house at odd intervals. He turned his face into the pillow,
and slept.

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He had no idea how much time had elapsed when he felt someone climbing into the bed with him. Perhaps it was Antoine, returning from the hall unexpectedly early? But the someone took him in a warm embrace, which was not Antoine's style at all! Nor was it a sensation with which de Harcourt was overly familiar. He made to grab for his dagger, but the unknown someone was snuggling close, and moreover was strong.

He drew breath to shout for help, but a youth's voice murmured, 'Soft, Ned, it's only me. I might have known you'd be tucked up in bed! I had to come in over the roof, the inn's shut up tight. You went a little far tonight, don't you think?' but there was indulgence in the voice, and de Harcourt's bedfellow cuddled closer. At least that bedfellow was wearing a shirt, which was a relief.

'Sir, you are in error!' De Harcourt made an attempt to withdraw himself, and could not. His heart thudded; every muscle was tense. His sleep-befuddled brain suddenly realised that, distracted as he had been by the commotion outside the inn, he had in fact omitted to bolt the door - even though he had not really expected Antoine to come back that night. 'Whoever your paramour is, I suggest you go in search of her!' For perhaps the name he had heard was Nell, not Ned.

'What? You're not Ned?' Consternation, and the head which had nestled on his shoulder suddenly lifted.

'No, I am not your Ned. Away to him, sir, and leave me to my rest.'

'Oh... and I was sure I'd got the right room. But it's too dark to go looking for him now, and I'm tired... what an evening it's been!' A trace of exultation in the voice, along with the suspicion of a giggle. De Harcourt began to think he knew that voice; very assured, despite some signs of intoxication; slurring, and beery breath, though it was sweet enough. There were other scents too; cold night air, clean sweat, green vegetation, a touch of midden, and... violets?

But his bedfellow was saying, 'You've got a comfortable shoulder. I think I'll stop here, if it's all the same to you.' And the head, with its thick thatch of hair – yes, it was undoubtedly Hal - nestled once again into de Harcourt's shoulder, and the arms slid more closely round him. There was a sigh of contentment.

He realised that the only way to get his bed to himself was to fight for it, and he was not sure he would succeed at that. 'Stay then, if you insist!' he said, with some asperity.

'Spoken like a true gentleman, sir,' the words murmured sleepily against his collar-bone. 'And if you're not Ned – and you're lanky enough, but now you come to mention it, the voice isn't right – I think you're probably Dis-le-Vrai, the herald in the hall tonight, yes?'

'What if I am?' Did the youth intend to do away with him, thinking him friendless in this land? De Harcourt tensed again.

'Only that I liked you a lot,' was the surprising answer, delivered in a muzzy voice. 'Tall and dark, just my type - and you think fast in a crisis.' This was news to de Harcourt, who hadn't thought at all in those crowded few minutes in the hall. Even more surprisingly, Hal continued, 'You don't want to...?' And here his hips moved a little, suggestively.

'No, I do not!' De Harcourt tried for outrage, and almost managed it. 'I don't sport with boys, sir.' Nor with youths who were too tipsy to know what they were doing.
'I'm not a boy – I'm a man!' Indignation, now.

'Men don't loose dancing bears on a hall full of people. It was you and your Ned who did that, wasn't it? So you, sir, are a boy.'

'Hmpf. They all say things like that.'

'Then they are right, whoever they are,' said de Harcourt, resignedly.

'My father, and all his aged counsellors. He doesn't understand me, you know. Doesn't care about me.' Hal had reached the maudlin stage, obviously.

'I don't doubt they only want what's best for you.'

'Grey-beards all of them. They want to think the worst of me. They don't understand why I go off to the tavern with Ned and Jack and the rest of them. Even Jack doesn't understand. "Hal," he says, "we'll have fine times when you come into your own." They all want me to be one thing or another. They don't see me at all.'

Taverns. A father who didn't understand. A sudden wild suspicion of who this might be crossed de Harcourt's mind; suspicion of who this might be snuggled up in his bed, wanting dalliance, wanting understanding, the fair-haired youth, the madcap, the leader. And if he hadn't been tipsy, and giggly, and most of all, too young by a year or three, de Harcourt might even have been tempted.

If Hal really was the prince, he could not send him out to wander the dark inn. Who knew what further scrapes he might get into? So instead he awkwardly patted the rounded shoulder lying close under his chin. 'I've never known a father and son who understood each other,' he said comfortingly. 'If you can understand yourself, you're doing better than most.' Saying this made him feel like an aged counsellor himself. 'Go to sleep, Hal. You'll feel terrible in the morning. And you'll deserve it.'

'I know, I know,' was the mumbled response. 'Let me know if you change your mind, hmm? I liked you a lot. And maybe you like me, too.'

'Maybe I do. But as I said: not with boys.'

An interjection which sounded like 'Spoilsport.'

De Harcourt ignored this. 'And now, perhaps, you'll let me go to sleep?'

But there was no reply; Hal's breathing had become slow and regular. One foot was hooked around de Harcourt's ankle, and a muscled arm lay heavy across his chest. Short of using violence, Hal could not now be shifted.

He was a herald, a man of peace, and was not about to use violence. And it was, undeniably, pleasant to have such a bedfellow, prince or no. De Harcourt considered the matter, as Hal's body became more relaxed and his breathing deeper. Hal obviously wanted to be where he was, even though his companion was not who he'd thought, even though his offer of dalliance had been refused. And de Harcourt found that he wanted him to be there, just for this one night, though he would not take advantage of Hal's offer. Surely there could be nothing so terribly wrong in letting that warm body, that heavy head (with its unruly hair even now tickling his nose) stay where they were?

And since that arm was lying so possessively across him, he saw no harm in turning towards Hal just a little, to settle them both more comfortably. Then, at last, he gave himself up to sleep.
To begin with, Hal was occasionally restless, like a hound chasing rabbits in his sleep. His limbs twitched, and he muttered under his breath, 'Ned? Is that you?'

'No, it's Dis-le-Vrai, the herald,' he replied, as in honour bound, and felt a little sad as he said it, sure that Hal would come to his senses and depart forthwith. But Hal simply grunted, 'Good,' and wound more tightly around him, and relapsed into sleep.

De Harcourt, flattered, followed him down into oblivion.

This repose was interrupted a while later by someone opening the door; not silently, as Hal must have done, but confidently enough to awaken de Harcourt fully. He looked up, his head full of sleep, to see a dim figure coming through, holding a candle, and Antoine's voice said, 'It's only me, Olivier, don't worry – oh, I'm sorry!' It seemed that he had become aware that de Harcourt was not alone in his bed. Hal had quickly hunched down further under the covers, and de Harcourt realised that only the fair hair would be visible in the candle-light, and that might just as well be a girl's as a youth's.

'Don't worry, Olivier, I won't disturb you!' There was a grin in Antoine's voice now. 'I'll leave you to it; sweet dreams, now!' And the door swung shut again.

'Oh, that's my reputation gone for good. I thank you, Hal,' muttered de Harcourt; but Hal was shaking with silent giggles. De Harcourt sighed. 'Go back to sleep, scamp.'

A long time after that, a door slammed shut somewhere below. A cockerel crowed. There was a stir of movement in the circle of his arm. (Now how had that happened? But there it was; his hand was on Hal's waist, the two of them snuggled together like puppies in a basket.)

'Oh...' Hal grumbled into his shoulder, and the rounded limbs scrabbled a little to gain purchase. 'What's o'clock?'

'I have no idea.' De Harcourt peered at the shutters, where dawn-light was showing through the crack between them. 'It's morning, though.'

'Mm.' Hal flopped over onto his back. 'You let me stay here all night. That was good of you.'

'I had little choice in the matter,' de Harcourt pointed out.

'No, you were kind. I was right to like you. You haven't changed your mind about..?' and a hopeful note entered his voice; he turned his head on the pillow, looking sidelong at de Harcourt.

'I told you last night. Not with boys.'

'Ah, well. I note you don't say Not with men.'

De Harcourt was taken aback. No, he hadn't said that, and for good reason. Hal had been quicker on the uptake than he's suspected.

A soft grunt of amusement at his side. 'We'll see, then. In a year or two, when I'm a man,' said with heavy emphasis, 'who knows?'

'If you stop loosing dancing bears, and climbing into strangers' beds at midnight, and I know not
what else, who knows indeed? Off you go, Hal. I want my sleep out.’

He closed his eyes to signify that the conversation was at an end. The warm weight left his side, and there were the sounds of someone dressing, mostly by feel, it seemed, for there were soft thumps and mutterings, and once Hal asked himself, ‘How did that get there?’

Then a hand touched de Harcourt's shoulder. He opened his eyes to see, in the stronger light now creeping through the shutters, the fair-haired youth of the night before smiling impishly at him.

'Until next time, then, God be with you!' he said, and leaning still further over, he planted a kiss on de Harcourt's lips, who, feeling that he was due this at least, curved an arm up around his neck and responded in kind.

'Ah, that's nice. So you really do like me, then.'

'Yes, I like you, scamp. Be off with you, now!' Hal smiled, straightened up, and paused on the threshold. 'And a word of advice, if I may make so bold? Be sure to bolt the door in future!'

'Go!' De Harcourt waved Hal away in exasperation, and the door swung closed behind him.

De Harcourt threw back the covers, got out of bed, and slid the bolt home. Then he opened the shutters, and stood for a while before them, letting the sharp dawn air cool his heated blood.

The kiss still tingled on his lips. Hal was a scapegrace, no doubt about it, but a particularly engaging one. De Harcourt was divided between hoping that he was indeed the prince, so he might be sure of seeing him again; or that he was not, so if they did meet some time in the future they might perhaps spend another night together. In either case, this last night would be a sweet memory for a long time to come.

-x-

He went down to the stable-yard as soon as he had dressed. Two men and a couple of boys were loading carts there, grumbling about everything under the sun; the great wooden gates stood wide open. De Harcourt glanced over his shoulder, tracing in his mind's eye the route that Hal must have taken last night; over the stable-yard wall, up onto the roof and down the other side, and along the gallery to fetch up at his door.

Nimble-footed as a mountain goat; or maybe Dionysus had watched over his footsteps the whole way.

He found Pierre emptying a measure of grain into the manger. 'Good morning! Did you have a quiet night?'

'Yes, there was no trouble in the end. And Antoine's in with the troupe; he's already looked in,' and Pierre gestured vaguely in the direction of the range of buildings on the other side of the yard; but he had a sly smirk on his face. Antoine had obviously passed on the news of de Harcourt's night-time companion. 'Did you sleep well yourself, sir?'

'Yes, I thank you,' said with as much dignity as he could muster at that early hour. Last night now began to seem like a fleeting dream; but he had a sudden vivid memory of Hal nudging against him, and shivered with remembered desire. Why had he not taken up that offer? A few minutes of mutual pleasure, freely offered, freely taken - and a guilty conscience thereafter. He didn't sport with boys; still less if they were tipsy.

'We'll be on our way, then, as soon as we've had breakfast. Come along to the hall as soon as you've
finished here,' and he went back out to the stable-yard. The road outside was already busy with traffic; farm-carts, peddlers, pilgrims, and housewives with baskets over their arms. And in the stable-yard itself was Bruin, restored to good humour, with his handler, and they were trying out a few paces of their routine. Antoine was among the little knot of people looking on.

'Sleep well?' he asked, with a knowing look.

'Well enough,' said de Harcourt with resignation. 'And yourself? Did you manage to keep warm?' and the last word was rather pointed.

'Oh, I was very snug.' There was a tone of complicity in Antoine's voice, and was that a wink? 'Julietta and the rest of the troupe found a place for me.' He waved across the yard, to where a slim girl – Julietta, presumably - waved cheerfully back.

One of the other players had the monkey on his shoulder, leashed once more; de Harcourt looked an enquiry at Antoine, who said, 'Someone put her in through the stable door in the early hours. We don't know who it was – they didn't stop to be thanked - and we had a fine time catching her. That was before I looked in on you...'

De Harcourt had a very good idea who it was. 'Well then, we all survived the night, which is good news. And now I’m for breakfast; are you with me?'

-x-

They went back into the hall, where there was no trace of last night's excitement to be seen. The long table now ran down the centre of the room. The hostess was overseeing the maids, who were serving out buttered eggs and toast to the company, and there was a pot by the fire as there had been last night.

The three Frenchmen took their places at the table. The talk around them was of the events of last night, and the possible hazards of the road ahead, bearing in mind that those going up to London would be passing close by the scene of last week's robbery at Gadshill. The Ashby family were travelling their way, and de Harcourt made an arrangement to ride in company with them; better safe than sorry, after all.

So half an hour later, they all assembled in a chattering group in the courtyard, and Pierre and the boy brought the horses through the passage-way by the hall. De Harcourt glanced up one last time at the gallery; he could see the door to the corner room standing open, with a broom beside it; obviously a maid was already cleaning it. He smiled a little at his memories, and turned back to take the reins of his horse from Pierre. He was just giving the black's girth a final check, when when a voice behind him gave him pause.

'I hope you're not taking the Gadshill road, Dis-le-Vrai.'

He turned, and there among the press of people was Hal, real as daylight, real as morning. He looked fresh as a daisy. Not a sign of last night's excess of drink, and there was the familiar imp of mischief in his eyes.

'I'll be safe enough and in good company, sir, as I have been all the time in Rochester,' he said repressively, though there was an undercurrent of amusement in his voice.

Hal's attention was already being claimed by Ned, who really was looking the worse for wear, saying something about Court Wood – had he heard that right? - and Hal turned away. But he spared the time to glance back over his shoulder, with a lop-sided smile for de Harcourt, who was, much
against his will, utterly charmed once more. But he responded with the best stern look he could muster; Hal nodded once, and was gone.

De Harcourt mounted up, looked about him for his companions, and left the inn-yard in the wake of Ashby and his family. They rode out through the town gate, and began to make their way across the Medway bridge, with seagulls wheeling above them and fishing-boats going down to the estuary below. Low wooded hills rose ahead on the western bank of the river. De Harcourt's face was now impassive, but his mind was doing its best to grapple with the quicksilver phenomenon that was Hal.

Gadshill. Had Hal been involved in the robbery that everyone was talking about – or the subsequent robbing of the robbers? De Harcourt would not put either of those things past him. And how drunk had he actually been last night? Not very, to judge by his sunny and untroubled aspect this morning. Which might mean that his sudden arrival in de Harcourt's bed last night had been no mistake at all.

Whoever he was, young Hal would be one to watch out for, that was for sure, de Harcourt concluded. If he ever grew up - if no-one knocked him over the head in a fit of sheer exasperation, which was a distinct possibility - he'd be nothing less than a force of nature as a man.

FIN

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