

THE STORY OF THE ARBALIST.

BY MAURICE THOMPSON.

HAVE you ever seen one of those old-time Southern kitchens? Think of a room twenty-four feet long and twenty feet wide, with a huge fireplace and a heavy, rudely carved mantel. Overhead are great beams of hewed pine, smoked until they look like ebony, upon which rest the broad planks of the ceiling. In one corner is a cupboard, of triangular form, in which may be seen pottery plates and dishes of curious shapes and brilliant colors. Several four-post chairs are scattered around, and the tall, black andirons spread out their crooked legs and seem to gaze at you from beneath the charred wooden crane. The walls are smoked and dingy, but the floor is clean and white. In such a kitchen I saw my first cross-bow. It was a heavy piece of finely carved oak, with a steel lathe or bow. It was hung obliquely across a raw-hide shield, or buckler, just above the mantel. Two or three arrows, called quarrels, stood beside it, and the head of an ancient spear projected from a rude stone jar just beyond. In this kitchen, two brown-haired boys heard their father tell all about cross-bows. It was a windy night and a cold rain was falling. The blackness and dreariness out-doors made the flaring pine-knot fire on the wide hearth seem doubly bright and comforting. The mother of the boys, a sweet-faced woman, was sewing near a round cherry table whose feet had claws like those of a lion. On this table stood a brass candlestick in which burned a tallow candle, and beside the candlestick lay a big Bible bound in undressed calf-skin, with the hairy side out. The father sat in front of the fire. The boys sat one on either side of him. The pine-knots flamed and sputtered, and black, fleecy-looking smoke rolled heavily up the yawning chimney.

"I will now tell you about the cross-bow," said

the father, settling himself deeper into the wide-armed chair.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" said the older boy.

"Oh, good, good!" cried the younger, clapping his hands and laughing happily.

The mother looked up from her sewing and smiled at the joyful faces of her children. The rain swashed and throbbed on the roof, the wind shook the house.

"That cross-bow was sent to me from England. It is said to be of Spanish make, and to date back to the fourteenth or fifteenth century. It may have been used in the terrible battle of Cressy, for all any one knows. The cross-bow was the most deadly of all the missile weapons before the perfecting of fire-arms. The Spaniards brought it to the greatest degree of efficiency, but the French and English also made very fine cross-bows. You see how simply it is constructed. The stock is of black oak, carved to suit the taste of the maker, whilst the lathe, or bow, is of spring steel. The stocks of some cross-bows are straight, others are crooked, somewhat after the shape of the stock of a gun. A great many of these weapons had wooden bows in the place of steel lathes; these were made of yew-wood. The arrows of the cross-bow were called quarrels, or bolts. They were shorter, thicker, and heavier than the arrows of the English long-bow. The place in the cross-bow where the string is fastened when it is pulled back, ready to shoot, is called the nut. From the nut to the fore end of the stock the wood is hollowed out, so that, when a quarrel is placed in position for firing, it does not touch the stock, except at the tip of its notch and the point where it lies on the fore end. The trigger, as you see, works on a pivot, causing the nut to free the string, whereupon the bow discharges the quarrel.

"The history of the cross-bow is very interesting. You will find that Richard the Lion-hearted was a great cross-bowman. He used to carry a very strong arbalist (the old name for cross-bow) with him wherever he went. Even on his long expedition to Palestine against the Saracens his favorite weapon (possibly it may have been that one hanging over the mantel there) was his constant companion."

"Oh, Papa!" cried the younger boy, in an excited voice, "do you really think that can be King Richard's bow?"

"I have no means of telling whose bow it may once have been," replied his father. "But I was going to tell you that Richard Cœur de Lion, at the siege of Ascalon, is said to have aimed his quarrels so skillfully that many an armed warrior on the high walls was pierced through and through."

"The steel bolts fired from the strongest cross-bows would crash through any but the very finest armor. There are breast-plates and helmets of steel, preserved among British antiquities, which have been pierced by quarrels. I have read in old books, written in French and Spanish, all about how these terrible weapons were made and used."

"Tell us more about Richard the Lion-hearted," urged the younger boy, who delighted in stories of battle.

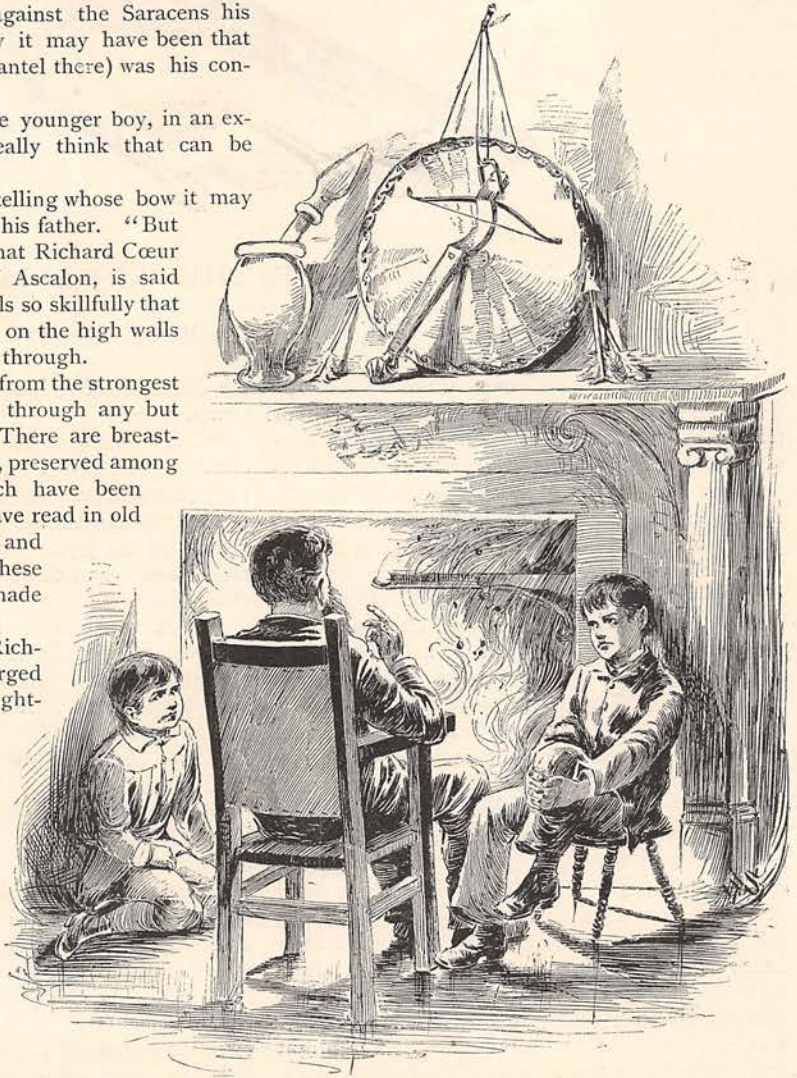
"Richard was killed by a quarrel from a French cross-bow," replied the father.

"Oh, dear!" cried the boys.

"Yes, I will tell you the story as I have gathered it from the old accounts: A plowman in the province of Compiègne unearthed a gold statuette of Minerva, a most valuable thing. This he divided, sending

one half to Richard, and keeping the other half himself. But, you know, in those days a king wanted everything. Richard's lion heart could not brook to divide a treasure with one of his vassals. So he peremptorily demanded the other half of the treasure, which being refused, he called together a small army and went to lay siege to the strong castle of Chalus, in Normandy, wherein the treasure was said to be hidden. But

it was a dear expedition for the bold king. A famous cross-bowman by the name of Bertram de Jourdan, standing on the tall turret of the castle, saw Richard riding around in the plain below and



LISTENING TO THE STORY OF THE ARBALIST.

took steady aim at him. This Bertram de Jourdan had cause to hate the king, for Richard had killed his two brothers with his own hand. So when he pressed the trigger of his powerful cross-bow he sent a hiss of revenge along with the steel-headed quarrel. Richard heard the keen twang of the bow-string and bent low over the bow of his saddle, but the arrow struck him in the shoulder and he died of the wound. So, you see, he would have

done better to leave that gold alone. However, his men stormed the castle and brought Bertram de Jourdan before him while he lay dying. Richard was too noble to mistreat a prisoner, so he gave the cross-bowman a magnificent present and ordered him to be set at liberty. But one Marcadee, an infamous brute, who was next in command to Richard, as soon as the king was dead ordered De Jourdan to be flayed alive and hung up for the vultures to eat."

"Oh, how mean and cowardly!" exclaimed the younger boy, indignantly. "If I'd been there and had a cross-bow, I'd have shot that miserable Marcadee!"

"Yes," said the older boy, "and then his soldiers would have hacked you to pieces in a minute."

"It may be," said their father, reflectively, "that our cross-bow up there is the very one with which Bertram de Jourdan killed the lion-hearted king."

"If it is, let's burn it up!" said the younger boy. "I would n't have a cross-bow about that would do so mean a thing."

"On the 2d of August, in the year 1100," continued the father, "William II., surnamed Rufus, a famous king of England, and a son of the conqueror, was killed by a cross-bow bolt in the forest at Charningham, accidentally, it is said, by Sir Walter Tyrrel, his bow-bearer. A nephew of King Rufus had been killed in May of the same year by a like mishap. But the deeds done with the cross-bow were not all so bloody and terrible. From a very early date in the history of France companies of cross-bowmen have existed, among which those at Lisle, Roulaix, Lennoy, Comines, Le Guesnoy, and Valenciennes may be mentioned as prominent. That at Roulaix was instituted by Pierre de Roulaix in 1491, a year before America was discovered by Columbus. The members of these societies shot at targets and marks of various kinds, and their meetings were often the occasion for great pomp and splendor. Many of these companies have been suppressed by law in comparatively recent times.

"The sportsmen of Spain and France used the cross-bow as their principal hunting weapon up to the time when the flint-lock fire-arm had reached a degree of power and accuracy at short range second only to the perfected weapon of the nineteenth century. In England, as far back as the reign of William Rufus, laws were passed forbidding the use of the arbalist, excepting by persons having especial royal permit. This was because the cross-bow, particularly the kind with a windlass attachment to draw the string, was so destructive to the king's deer. You will at once see the great advantage the arbalist gave to huntsmen who

used it instead of the long-bow; for he could shoot from any tangled thicket where a long-bowman could not use his weapon at all. Then, too, it required years of patient practice before a man could shoot well enough with a long-bow to hit a deer, while any one, with but a day or two's experience, could successfully aim a cross-bow.

"The mediæval arbalister, as the cross-bowman was called, is represented in old drawings and



THE MODERN BOY WITH HIS CROSS-BOW.

engravings as a strong, heavy-limbed man, wearing a helmet and a coat of chain mail, or of quilted silk and thongs of raw-hide, and a loose, shirt-like garment over all, belted at the waist. He stands in the attitude of aiming, with his feet planted firmly on the ground, his bow-stock resting in the hollow of his left hand, whilst his right forefinger presses the trigger. He takes sight over the point of his quarrel. His attitude is very much like that of a rifleman aiming a rifle.

"I have told you that the Spaniards were probably the most skillful arbalist-makers in the world,

but I forgot to relate how I once came near becoming the owner of a genuine old Spanish weapon. I was at St. Augustine, that strange old town on the coast of Florida, and was having a man dig up a plant which grew close beside the crumbling wall that flanks the famous gate, when his hoe struck something hard, and he dragged out of the loose sand a rusty bow of iron set in a piece of rotten oak-wood."

"That was luck!" exclaimed the older boy.

"But it belonged to the man who dug it up," interposed the younger.

"Not when Papa had hired him," replied the elder.

"As I was proceeding to tell you," continued their father, "it proved to be ——"

"Oh, how came it there?" cried the younger boy, excitedly. "Tell us the story!"

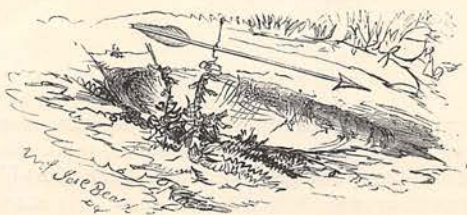
"Well, he was telling it, and you went and stopped him," said the elder.

"Now Claude," said the younger, whose name was Jesse, "you know I did n't mean it!"

"You know," said their father, "that when that celebrated captain, the blood-thirsty Menendez, was fighting everybody, white or Indian, that he could find in Florida, his cross-bowmen used to prowl all through the woods where St. Augustine now stands, and they no doubt had many a deadly trial of skill with the cunning Indian archers.



WHAT HE AIMED AT,



AND WHAT HE HIT. [SEE PAGE 866.]

This, of course, might be one of Menendez's arbalists, or even one of De Soto's. To be sure, it was a mere fragment, which the teeth of time had left for me; but would n't the merest rotten splinter and rusty remnant of those knightly days be worth a good deal?"

"I should think so," said Claude.

"Tell us about fighting the Indians and the wild game and all," said Jesse.

"Oh, for that matter," said the father, "those Spanish soldiers were great murderers. Once when De Soto and his men were pursuing some flying savages, a warrior suddenly turned his face toward the Spaniards and halted. He was armed with a long-bow and arrows, and was just across a narrow river from his foes. He made signs that he challenged any one of the Spanish cross-bowmen to fight a duel with him. The challenge was accepted by one Juan de Salinas, a most expert arbalister, who stepped forward and faced the Indian. The comrades of Salinas offered to cover him with their shields, but the brave soldier scorned to take advantage of a naked savage. So he refused the cover, and placing a quarrel on the nut of his drawn bow made ready to shoot. The Indian also was ready by this time, and both discharged their arrows at the same moment. But Salinas was cooler under such stress of danger than the Indian was, and so took truer aim. His quarrel pierced the savage warrior's heart, and he fell dead. The bows of the savages were puny things when matched against the steel arbalists of the trained Spanish soldiers. The Indian's slender reed arrow passed through the nape of Juan de Salinas' neck, but without seriously hurting him. A quilted shirt of doubled silk was sufficient protection against most of the Indian missiles, and a man in steel armor was proof against all."

"But did the man let you have the old cross-bow he dug up?" asked Claude, as his father stopped speaking.

"I picked it up," said his father, "and found it to be a rotten barrel-stave with an arc of old rusted hoop fastened to it."

"Oh, pshaw!" cried Jesse. "You were badly sold, were n't you?"

"But to go back to hunting with the cross-bow," said his father. "I have seen a picture of Queen Elizabeth of England, representing her in the act of shooting at a deer with an arbalist."

"Oh, Papa! May be our cross-bow was the one she used!" said Claude, breathlessly.

"Why, Claude," exclaimed Jesse, in a tone of voice that indicated surprise, "you know very well that a woman never could have handled *that* bow!"

"But Queen Elizabeth had a strong man for her bow-bearer," said his father, "and all she had to do was to take aim and pull the trigger after the bow-bearer had made the arbalist all ready for shooting. Nevertheless, I think she would not have chosen so heavy a weapon. Its recoil might have hurt her."

"The manner of hunting deer in those days was to stand in a spot whence you could see in all directions through the forest, while a number of expert woodsmen drove the game near to you as you held your arbalist ready to shoot. If you shot at a running deer you would have to aim far ahead of it in order to hit it.

"Hare or rabbit shooting was great sport for the cross-bowmen. For this purpose lighter arbalists were used. The hunter kept carefully trained dogs, somewhat like our pointers and setters, whose business it was to find the game. Twenty-five yards was about the usual distance for shooting at rabbits. They were rarely shot while running.

"A cross-bow for throwing pebbles, called a stone-bow, was used in small bird shooting. This weapon was also called a rodd. At short distances it shot with great force and precision. The rodd differed very little from the ordinary arbalist. Its string was armed with a sort of loop or pouch at the middle for holding the pebble or small stone. Some men became very expert in the use of the stone-bow. There are old pictures which seem to convey the idea that birds were shot on the wing; but I doubt if that could be done with so clumsy an instrument as the rodd."

"Papa, I think my rubber gun must be somewhat like a rodd," said Jesse. "You know it has an attachment for shooting bullets."

"Yes," replied his father; "it is the same principle. But your rubber gun shoots by the elasticity of its string, while the rodd was a real cross-bow, or arbalist, many of them having powerful lathes of steel.

"The long-bowmen of England cordially hated the arbalisters, especially when it came to shooting game in the green woods. The good yeomen who had spent years of unremitting practice to become proficient with the famous Norman long-bow, could not bear to see lazy fellows, who had never given a

month to practice, coming into the best hunting-grounds armed with those murderous steel cross-bows. A great deal of quarreling and bloodshed was the result. So, as I have said, the Government



OLD-TIME CROSS-BOWMAN WITH HIS ARBALIST.

of England passed stringent laws against the arbalist, and the weapon became somewhat dishonored. But in France and Spain it held the supremacy over all the weapons of the chase. Even to this day in Spain a hunter is called *ballastero*, which means cross-bowman or arbalister.

"De Espinar, a Spanish writer of the seventeenth century, in a curious and most delightful book on hunting and field sports, gives minute details of the grand royal hunting matches in the time of Philip IV. of Spain; but I think the arbalist fell into comparative disuse at about the end of the first half of the seventeenth century.

"The strongest and most deadly arbalists were

those constructed with moninet pulleys and movable handles or cranks, which gave a man power to spring a bow of enormous strength. These were clumsy instruments and rather uncouth in appearance."

"But, Papa," exclaimed Jesse, "why don't you sometimes take the old cross-bow and go hunting? I should think it would be just splendid fun!"

His father gazed into the fire and smiled rather grimly, as if some curious recollection had been suddenly called up.

"I did try that once," he presently said.

"Oh, tell us about it!" cried both boys, drawing their chairs closer to him and leaning forward in their eagerness.

"It was soon after I got the arbalist," continued their father, "when the idea of trying its shooting qualities came into my mind. I think I must have allowed the poetry of the thought to get the better of me, for I never once stopped to consider the chances of any disastrous result to the experiment. For some time the hares had been gnawing at my young apple-trees. This afforded me a good excuse, if any was needed, for shooting the little pests. So one morning I took down the old cross-bow and its quarrels and went forth, as I imagine the poachers of the fourteenth century used to do in Merrie Englede, to have an hour or two of sport. It chanced that the first live thing I saw was a gold-shafted woodpecker. It was on an old stump, and I thought I would try a shot at it. But I found it no easy task to pull the string back to the nut. I tell you that steel bow was strong. The string came near cutting my hands, I had to pull so hard. At last I got the weapon sprung and a quarrel in the groove, ready for firing; but when I looked for my bird it was gone and I could not find it any more. So I kept the bow set and my thumb on the nut to prevent any accidental discharge, as I pursued my search for game. Hares were plenty in this region then, and it was not long before I discovered one lying in its form. A form

is the shallow bed a hare sleeps in during the daytime. I was not more than forty feet distant from it as it lay in its peculiar crouching attitude, amid the thin weeds and briers. I raised the arbalist, and took careful aim at the little animal. When I thought all was right, I pressed the trigger with the forefinger of my right hand. Clang! whack! you ought to have heard that racket. The recoil was astonishing, and painful as well. The stock had jumped against my chin and hurt it; but I did not take my eyes off the hare. You never saw anything so badly scared. The quarrel had hit the ground just a little short of the game and was sticking there. The hare had turned its head and was gazing wildly at the quarrel, but the next second it leaped from its form and scudded away, soon disappearing in a thicket of sassafras and persimmon bushes. Upon another occasion I tried the same feat again, with a somewhat different but equally unsatisfactory result. Though my aim this time was truer, the second hare was too quick for me. Simultaneously with the 'clang' of the bow it disappeared in the thicket, my arrow burying itself harmlessly in the hollow it had just quitted. This was the last of my cross-bow shooting, however. The recoil of my second shot had snapped one limb of the steel lathe of the arbalist short off."

"Oh, Papa, that would spoil it!" said Jesse.

"So it did. I got a skillful workman to rivet the lathe, but of course it is spoiled for all shooting purposes, and must hang over the mantel as a mere relic of the past. Sometimes I half imagine it broke in sheer resentment at having a nineteenth-century man presume to disturb the long rest it had enjoyed since Richard Cœur de Lion, or Bertram de Jourdan, or Sir Walter Tyrrel, or Queen Elizabeth, or Ponce de Leon had last fired it."

"I am sorry it is broken," said Claude, ruefully.

Soon after this the boys kissed their mother good-night, and went to bed to dream of mediæval days and mighty feats with the arbalist.

