

THE LOST BARON

Also by Allen French

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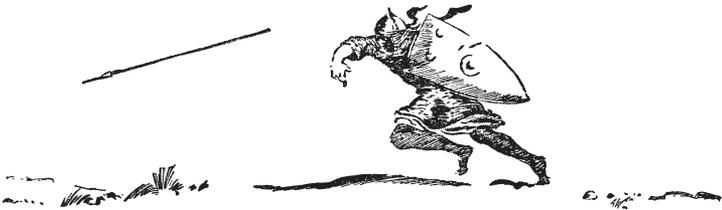
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The
LOST BARON

A story of England in the year 1200

by Allen French



Illustrated by Andrew Wyeth

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In Memory of Ellen French Spalt
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Table Of Contents

I.	<i>Martin the Page</i>	1
II.	<i>The Penny Lost, and the Baron Too</i>	17
III.	<i>The Years Pass</i>	30
IV.	<i>Topas the Warder</i>	40
V.	<i>Topas's Venture</i>	50
VI.	<i>Martin Escapes</i>	67
VII.	<i>Halbert Seizes Fish</i>	79
VIII.	<i>Dam and Cubs</i>	91
IX.	<i>Ben Asks a Favor</i>	109
X.	<i>Martin Must Judge</i>	127
XI.	<i>The Hunting of the Archers</i>	144
XII.	<i>Squire Martin</i>	160
XIII.	<i>Rosamund's Difficulties</i>	171
xiv.	<i>Where Is the Penny?</i>	185
xv.	<i>No More Food!</i>	207
xvi.	<i>The Man Is Mad!</i>	217
XVII.	<i>Secrets Revealed</i>	234
XVIII.	<i>Out of the Pit</i>	245
XIX.	<i>Alone in That Darkness</i>	262
XX.	<i>The Last of the Luck Penny</i>	272

THE LOST BARON



I

Martin the Page

VERY LONESOME, and feeling very small, Martin drew rein, and looked up at the castle. The pony readily stopped and began to graze, while the boy studied the great stone mass which, behind its encircling walls, loomed before him.

Lord Eric had very courteously said to Sir Anselm, "Pray send your son to be brought up in the castle." And as such was the custom, here was Martin on the way to enter the baron's household. He was only thirteen, and he felt, as he looked at this future home, very young indeed.

And very lonely, for his father had not been able to come with him. Sir Anselm had been kept abed by the breaking out of the wound which he had got ten years ago, in King Richard's crusade. Now, in the year 1200, Richard was dead, and John was king of England, and at times Sir Anselm was crippled again by that obstinate wound. Then his mournful pleasure was to look back on those happy days of plentiful fighting, as compared with the quiet times of this too peaceful Cornwall.

So Sir Anselm stayed at home with his anxious wife and his bandaged leg. But before Martin started, his parents gave him many a lesson how to behave himself at the castle.

"A knight is ever courteous," reminded his father. "Resent insults, but give them not."

"Remember," added his mother, "always to take off your bonnet before Lady Florence. Sit not in her presence unless she bids you. Remember that Rosamund, though younger than you, is a nobleman's daughter, and can command your services."

"But Mother," Martin appealed, "do I have to be polite to her *always*?"

"Always," replied his mother seriously. "Page, squire, or knight, you must always be courteous to girl or woman."

"If there is a book in the castle," advised Sir Anselm, "get the ladies to teach you to read. I always wished that I could; but there is not a book in all my manor. At least you can write your name. Forget it not."

"Keep yourself clean," warned his mother. "Some knights, and even ladies, think it unhealthful to bathe in winter. But I have taught you better."

"I wish," regretted Sir Anselm, "that I had a hawk fit to send to Lord Eric. But our best birds are sickly, and I am ashamed to send a mere sparrow hawk. Yet give the hawking glove which your mother embroidered. He can have no better."

"Comb your hair often," said Martin's mother. She

smoothed the bright locks which, in the manner of pages, came to his shoulder, and in Martin's own manner curled at the ends. "Remember all the care I have given it."

Little as Martin loved the task, he promised. She had ingrained in him a love of neatness.

"Swear only by the saints," warned the father. "Use not the name of God except in church. Keep the word of a knight, and never break a promise."

"Be ready to serve noble guests with your own hands at table," said the mother. "Keep your thumb from the food that you offer a lady in a dish. Eat and speak not at the same time."

"Forget not the backstroke with your sword that I taught you," reminded Sir Anselm. "Remember the thrust with the point that saved my life from the Saracen."

"Say your prayers at matins, nones, and vespers," said the pious mother.

The father sighed. "We will not confuse you with too much advice. If you remember not your training of yourself, we can help you no more. Look upon the baron as your father now."

Then Martin knelt before his father and his mother, and asked their blessings as a dutiful son should, and mounted his pony, and rode away. The burden of all those warnings was on him now as he looked at the castle which was to be his home. He felt the need of his father's company, to give him confidence. He wished that he had come with hawk on wrist as a

present to the baron, and particularly that he owned a real steed, instead of this shambling pony, hung round with his belongings.

He longed, too, for some armor that would show that he was a knight's son, such as an iron cap, and a jerkin heavily quilted, instead of a bonnet with a feather, and this buff jacket which, even though it was almost tough enough to turn the point of a knife, looked fuzzy and countrified.

Wisely, he had not taken his father's spare sword. It was too heavy for him to wield, and so long that it would have dragged on the ground when he walked. He wore only his own light short-sword, or hanger, and the dagger, double-edged and sharp-pointed, with which he did everything from skinning game to cutting up his meat at table. His bow hung at his side; and in front of him was the beautiful pheasant which his arrow had brought down but yesterday. He meant it as a present to the Lady Florence; but he wondered if he should not also be bringing some gift to Rosamund.

To complete his dress Martin wore long hose that fitted closely to his legs from hip to toe, and low shoes that ended in a point. But the best thing that he bore about him, and was quite unconscious of, was his air of honest straightforwardness, which showed in his steady eyes, his firm lips, and even in the carriage of his back and shoulders. Courage, too, he showed, for suppressing his desire to turn back toward

home, Martin gathered up his reins, and urged the pony onward toward the castle.

A little nearer, however, he drew rein again beside a boy who rose from a stone to greet him. This lad, younger than himself, wore no hat on his shaggy locks, and had but a hooded garment on his body, with loose breeches to the knee. He greeted Martin shyly and eagerly, showing not only the natural deference of a peasant to one of the lordly class, but also a hero-worship which a stupid boy could not have felt.

“Ben,” said Martin, “this is a strange place to meet you.”

On his way Martin had just passed a little hamlet of closely crowded huts, but Ben lived not there. The castle stood on the very edge of a cliff, and below it, at a little distance, where a break in the frowning shore line made a tiny harbor, was a village of fishermen. Ben was a fisherman’s son, and he and his kind despised the people of the hamlet as much as they despised him.

Ben displayed a little basket. “I hoped to sell these.” He lifted leaves, and showed prawns below them. “But none of the gentlefolk have come out as yet, and the rest do not buy.”

Martin held out his hand for the basket. “I will buy.”

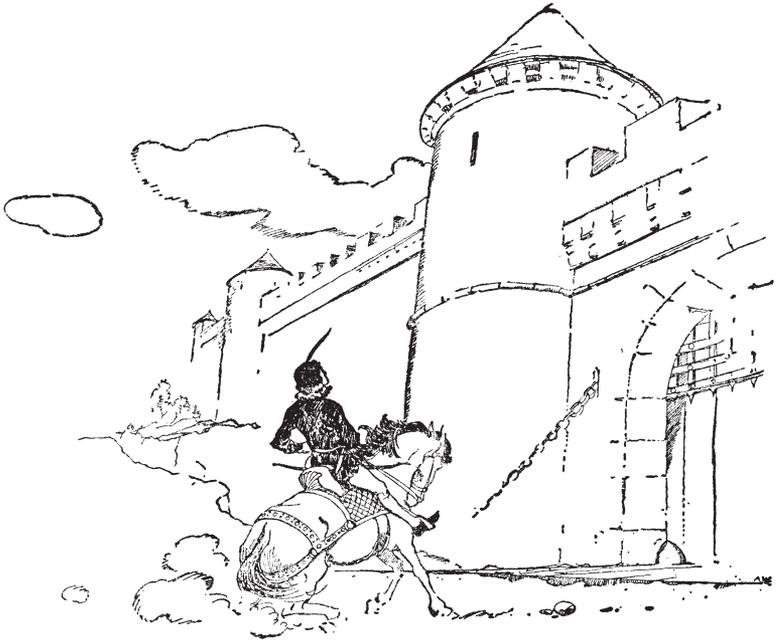
But the fisherboy withheld it. “You would buy only out of kindness. You do not need them.”

“Ah, but I do!” returned Martin. “I have no present for Lady Rosamund. These are just what I need.”

Willingly, therefore, Ben gave over the basket, and received the farthing which Martin found in the bottom of his purse. The smallest coin of all, the farthing delighted Ben, who stood twinkling with joy. He was short and broad, dark-skinned and raven-haired, with snapping black eyes, all in sharpest contrast with Martin’s longer limbs, fair hair, and blue eyes. But Martin’s Norman blood was strongly mixed with Saxon, while Ben was descended from the Phœnician people who came to England before the Romans, and who, here among Cornish fisherfolk, still preserved the signs of their race.

Then Ben skipped happily away, while Martin went forward with regret. He had given away a quarter of all the money he possessed, and he had cumbered himself with a basket of prawns—quite ridiculous. To make his first appearance at the castle with a pheasant in one hand and a basket in the other would make him seem a bumpkin indeed. But he went on.

Around the castle itself stood an encircling wall perhaps three times as high as Martin as he sat on his pony. It was strongly made, with turrets at intervals standing higher still, and a gate defended by a pair of sturdy towers. Outside was a drawbridge over a dry ditch. As the feet of the pony struck upon the bridge, two guards appeared inside, looking curiously at the newcomer. But apparently expecting him, they



greeted him and let him pass into the outer court, or bailey.

This was a circular space of more than an acre, within which, facing him on the farther side, stood the castle itself. The walls at his back curved round, and running for a short distance on the very edge of a cliff, met the great square keep. This likewise stood up above a precipice which, Martin knew, dropped into the sea. Its front, however, thrust toward him walls higher than those of the bailey, with turrets at the corners, and two heavy squat towers strongly defending the gate.

But this morning the gate stood open, and a groom

allowed Martin to approach. He took the pony by the bridle. "Leave the horse with me, Master Martin," he said. "The baron is in the court."

Grateful because the man had called the pony a horse, Martin dismounted and walked through the gate. Behind him, in the bailey, were the stables and storehouses, and various little dwellings snuggled under the walls where lived the servants and fighting men. Before him was the court, on three sides closed in by the walls and their turrets, and on the fourth by the huge keep, built by the Normans a century ago, but founded by the Romans, hundreds of years earlier still. Everyone knew that, and could show where the lower tiers of Roman masonry were joined by the smaller stones of the Normans.

This keep, the heart of the castle, was the home of the baron and his family and of some of his upper servants. It contained the great hall, where most of the dwellers in the castle met for meals. Within the enormous thickness of the walls were stairs, passages, chambers large and small. From the flat roof one could view the country, and the sea, for miles. This donjon, castle, stronghold, fortress, was a defense for its people and for the folk of the hamlet, village, and farms, who in case of war would flock to it for safety. In the past it had been, so tradition said, the home of terror and cruelty. But that had ceased with the coming of the good-natured Lord Eric.

Martin saw across the court, before the door of the keep, the baron himself, his lady, and a stranger

whom the boy did not recognize. Little Rosamund was there too, and seeing Martin, ran to meet him, her face eager, her fair hair floating. A friendly child, she tucked her hand under one of his encumbered arms, and led him to her father. "Here is Martin," she said.

The baron was a tall nobleman, wearing his hunting suit of soft, embroidered leather, his short-sword, and carrying his javelin. This short spear was Eric's favorite weapon; he was said never to be without it. It stood by his chair at meals; it leaned against his bedstead at night. He could throw it an incredible distance; and at short range, men said, he could make it pierce a shield and pin the arm of the holder. With it he had pierced a wild boar from side to side. Martin looked upon him with great respect, and kneeling on one knee, delivered his father's messages. He knelt again, next, before the Lady Florence, and carefully repeated his mother's good wishes. At her feet he laid the pheasant; then rising and bowing to Rosamund, he gave her the basket of prawns. Finally, drawing from his pouch the hawking glove, he gave it to the baron.

Eric, Florence, and Rosamund listened closely to Martin's careful speeches, and let him finish them without interruption, each in turn giving him thanks. The baron glanced at his lady, and met her approving smile. This boy was well-trained in manners. Then the baron turned to the stranger.

"Basil," said he, "this is my new page. Martin,