

CHAPTER VI

From now on, the old man devoted himself to the training of the boy in the handling of his lance and battle-axe, but each day also, a period was allotted to the sword, until, by the time the youth had turned sixteen, even the old man himself was as but a novice by comparison with the marvelous skill of his pupil.

During these days, the boy rode Sir Mortimer abroad in many directions until he knew every bypath within a radius of fifty miles of Torn. Sometimes the old man accompanied him, but more often he rode alone.

On one occasion, he chanced upon a hut at the outskirts of a small hamlet not far from Torn and, with the curiosity of boyhood, determined to enter and have speech with the inmates, for by this time the natural desire for companionship was commencing to assert itself. In all his life, he remembered only the company of the old man, who never spoke except when necessity required.

The hut was occupied by an old priest, and as the boy in armor pushed in, without the usual formality of knocking, the old man looked up with an expression of annoyance and disapproval.

"What now," he said, "have the King's men respect neither for piety nor age that they burst in upon the seclusion of a holy man without so much as a 'by your leave'?"

"I am no king's man," replied the boy quietly, "I am Norman of Torn, who has neither a king nor a god, and who says 'by your leave' to no man. But I have come in peace because I wish to talk to another than my father. Therefore you may talk to me, priest," he concluded with haughty peremptoriness.

"By the nose of John, but it must be a king has deigned to honor me with his commands," laughed the priest. "Raise your visor, My Lord, I would fain look upon the countenance from which issue the commands of royalty."

The priest was a large man with beaming, kindly eyes, and a round jovial face. There was no bite in the tones of his good-natured retort, and so, smiling, the boy raised his visor.

"By the ear of Gabriel," cried the good father, "a child in armor!"

"A child in years, mayhap," replied the boy, "but a good child to own as a friend, if one has enemies who wear swords."

"Then we shall be friends, Norman of Torn, for albeit I have few enemies, no man has too many friends, and I like your face and your manner, though there be much to wish for in your manners. Sit down and eat with me, and I will talk to your heart's content, for be there one other thing I more love than eating, it is talking."

With the priest's aid, the boy laid aside his armor, for it was heavy and uncomfortable, and together the two sat down to the meal that was already partially on the board.

Thus began a friendship which lasted during the lifetime of the good priest. Whenever he could do so, Norman of Torn visited his friend, Father Claude. It was he who taught the boy to read and write in French, English and Latin at a time when but few of the nobles could sign their own names.

French was spoken almost exclusively at court and among the higher classes of society, and all public documents were inscribed either in French or Latin, although about this time the first proclamation written in the English tongue was issued by an English king to his subjects.

Father Claude taught the boy to respect the rights of others, to espouse the cause of the poor and weak, to revere God and to believe that the principal reason for man's existence was to protect woman. All of virtue and chivalry and true manhood which his old guardian had neglected to inculcate in the boy's mind, the good priest planted there, but he could not eradicate his deep-seated hatred for the English or his belief that the real test of manhood lay in a desire to fight to the death with a sword.

An occurrence which befell during one of the boy's earlier visits to his new friend rather decided the latter that no arguments he could bring to bear could ever overcome the bald fact that to this very belief of the boy's, and his ability to back it up with acts, the good father owed a great deal, possibly his life.

As they were seated in the priest's hut one afternoon, a rough knock fell upon the door which was immediately pushed open to admit as disreputable a band of ruffians as ever polluted the sight of man. Six of them there were, clothed in dirty leather, and wearing swords and daggers at their sides.

The leader was a mighty fellow with a great shock of coarse black hair and a red, bloated face almost concealed by a huge matted black beard. Behind

him pushed another giant with red hair and a bristling mustache; while the third was marked by a terrible scar across his left cheek and forehead and from a blow which had evidently put out his left eye, for that socket was empty, and the sunken eyelid but partly covered the inflamed red of the hollow where his eye had been.

"A ha, my hearties," roared the leader, turning to his motley crew, "fine pickings here indeed. A swine of God fattened upon the sweat of such poor, honest devils as we, and a young shoat who, by his looks, must have pieces of gold in his belt.

"Say your prayers, my pigeons," he continued, with a vile oath, "for The Black Wolf leaves no evidence behind him to tie his neck with a halter later, and dead men talk the least."

"If it be The Black Wolf," whispered Father Claude to the boy, "no worse fate could befall us for he preys ever upon the clergy, and when drunk, as he now is, he murders his victims. I will throw myself before them while you hasten through the rear doorway to your horse, and make good your escape." He spoke in French, and held his hands in the attitude of prayer, so that he quite entirely misled the ruffians, who had no idea that he was communicating with the boy.

Norman of Torn could scarce repress a smile at this clever ruse of the old priest, and, assuming a similar attitude, he replied in French:

"The good Father Claude does not know Norman of Torn if he thinks he runs out the back door like an old woman because a sword looks in at the front door."

Then rising he addressed the ruffians.

"I do not know what manner of grievance you hold against my good friend here, nor neither do I care. It is sufficient that he is the friend of Norman of Torn, and that Norman of Torn be here in person to acknowledge the debt of friendship. Have at you, sir knights of the great filth and the mighty stink!" and with drawn sword he vaulted over the table and fell upon the surprised leader.

In the little room, but two could engage him at once, but so fiercely did his blade swing and so surely did he thrust that, in a bare moment, The Black Wolf lay dead upon the floor and the red giant, Shandy, was badly, though not fatally wounded. The four remaining ruffians backed quickly from the hut, and a more cautious fighter would have let them go their way in peace,

for in the open, four against one are odds no man may pit himself against with impunity. But Norman of Torn saw red when he fought and the red lured him ever on into the thickest of the fray. Only once before had he fought to the death, but that once had taught him the love of it, and ever after until his death, it marked his manner of fighting; so that men who loathed and hated and feared him were as one with those who loved him in acknowledging that never before had God joined in the human frame absolute supremacy with the sword and such utter fearlessness.

So it was, now, that instead of being satisfied with his victory, he rushed out after the four knaves. Once in the open, they turned upon him, but he sprang into their midst with his seething blade, and it was as though they faced four men rather than one, so quickly did he parry a thrust here and return a cut there. In a moment one was disarmed, another down, and the remaining two fleeing for their lives toward the high road with Norman of Torn close at their heels.

Young, agile and perfect in health, he outclassed them in running as well as in swordsmanship, and ere they had made fifty paces, both had thrown away their swords and were on their knees pleading for their lives.

"Come back to the good priest's hut, and we shall see what he may say," replied Norman of Torn.

On the way back, they found the man who had been disarmed bending over his wounded comrade. They were brothers, named Flory, and one would not desert the other. It was evident that the wounded man was in no danger, so Norman of Torn ordered the others to assist him into the hut, where they found Red Shandy sitting propped against the wall while the good father poured the contents of a flagon down his eager throat.

The villain's eyes fairly popped from his head when he saw his four comrades coming, unarmed and prisoners, back to the little room.

"The Black Wolf dead, Red Shandy and John Flory wounded, James Flory, One Eye Kanty and Peter the Hermit prisoners!" he ejaculated.

"Man or devil! By the Pope's hind leg, who and what be ye?" he said, turning to Norman of Torn.

"I be your master and ye be my men," said Norman of Torn. "Me ye shall serve in fairer work than ye have selected for yourselves, but with fighting a-plenty and good reward."

The sight of this gang of ruffians banded together to prey upon the clergy had given rise to an idea in the boy's mind, which had been revolving in a nebulous way within the innermost recesses of his subconsciousness since his vanquishing of the three knights had brought him, so easily, such riches in the form of horses, arms, armor and gold. As was always his wont in his after life, to think was to act.

"With The Black Wolf dead, and may the devil pull out his eyes with red hot tongs, we might look farther and fare worse, mates, in search of a chief," spoke Red Shandy, eyeing his fellows, "for verily any man, be he but a stripling, who can vanquish six such as we, be fit to command us."

"But what be the duties?" said he whom they called Peter the Hermit.

"To follow Norman of Torn where he may lead, to protect the poor and the weak, to lay down your lives in defence of woman, and to prey upon rich Englishmen and harass the King of England."

The last two clauses of these articles of faith appealed to the ruffians so strongly that they would have subscribed to anything, even daily mass, and a bath, had that been necessary to admit them to the service of Norman of Torn.

"Aye, aye!" they cried. "We be your men, indeed."

"Wait," said Norman of Torn, "there is more. You are to obey my every command on pain of instant death, and one-half of all your gains are to be mine. On my side, I will clothe and feed you, furnish you with mounts and armor and weapons and a roof to sleep under, and fight for and with you with a sword arm which you know to be no mean protector. Are you satisfied?"

"That we are," and "Long live Norman of Torn," and "Here's to the chief of the Torns" signified the ready assent of the burly cut-throats.

"Then swear it as ye kiss the hilt of my sword and this token," pursued Norman of Torn catching up a crucifix from the priest's table.

With these formalities was born the Clan Torn, which grew in a few years to number a thousand men, and which defied a king's army and helped to make Simon de Montfort virtual ruler of England.

Almost immediately commenced that series of outlaw acts upon neighboring barons, and chance members of the gentry who happened to be caught in the open by the outlaws, that filled the coffers of Norman of Torn with many

pieces of gold and silver, and placed a price upon his head ere he had scarce turned eighteen.

That he had no fear of or desire to avoid responsibility for his acts, he grimly evidenced by marking with a dagger's point upon the foreheads of those who fell before his own sword the initials NT.

As his following and wealth increased, he rebuilt and enlarged the grim Castle of Torn, and again dammed the little stream which had furnished the moat with water in bygone days.

Through all the length and breadth of the country that witnessed his activities, his very name was worshipped by poor and lowly and oppressed. The money he took from the King's tax gatherers, he returned to the miserable peasants of the district, and once when Henry III sent a little expedition against him, he surrounded and captured the entire force, and, stripping them, gave their clothing to the poor, and escorted them, naked, back to the very gates of London.

By the time he was twenty, Norman the Devil, as the King himself had dubbed him, was known by reputation throughout all England, though no man had seen his face and lived other than his friends and followers. He had become a power to reckon with in the fast culminating quarrel between King Henry and his foreign favorites on one side, and the Saxon and Norman barons on the other.

Neither side knew which way his power might be turned, for Norman of Torn had preyed almost equally upon royalist and insurgent. Personally, he had decided to join neither party, but to take advantage of the turmoil of the times to prey without partiality upon both.

As Norman of Torn approached his grim castle home with his five filthy, ragged cut-throats on the day of his first meeting with them, the old man of Torn stood watching the little party from one of the small towers of the barbican.

Halting beneath this outer gate, the youth winded the horn which hung at his side in mimicry of the custom of the times.

"What ho, without there!" challenged the old man entering grimly into the spirit of the play.

"'Tis Sir Norman of Torn," spoke up Red Shandy, "with his great host of noble knights and men-at-arms and squires and lackeys and sumpter beasts. Open in the name of the good right arm of Sir Norman of Torn."

"What means this, my son?" said the old man as Norman of Torn dismounted within the ballium.

The youth narrated the events of the morning, concluding with, "These, then, be my men, father; and together we shall fare forth upon the highways and into the byways of England, to collect from the rich English pigs that living which you have ever taught me was owing us."

"'Tis well, my son, and even as I myself would have it; together we shall ride out, and where we ride, a trail of blood shall mark our way.

"From now, henceforth, the name and fame of Norman of Torn shall grow in the land, until even the King shall tremble when he hears it, and shall hate and loathe ye as I have even taught ye to hate and loathe him.

"All England shall curse ye and the blood of Saxon and Norman shall never dry upon your blade."

As the old man walked away toward the great gate of the castle after this outbreak, Shandy, turning to Norman of Torn, with a wide grin, said:

"By the Pope's hind leg, but thy amiable father loveth the English. There should be great riding after such as he."

"Ye ride after ME, varlet," cried Norman of Torn, "an' lest ye should forget again so soon who be thy master, take that, as a reminder," and he struck the red giant full upon the mouth with his clenched fist--so that the fellow tumbled heavily to the earth.

He was on his feet in an instant, spitting blood, and in a towering rage. As he rushed, bull-like, toward Norman of Torn, the latter made no move to draw; he but stood with folded arms, eyeing Shandy with cold, level gaze; his head held high, haughty face marked by an arrogant sneer of contempt.

The great ruffian paused, then stopped, slowly a sheepish smile overspread his countenance and, going upon one knee, he took the hand of Norman of Torn and kissed it, as some great and loyal noble knight might have kissed his king's hand in proof of his love and fealty. There was a certain rude, though chivalrous grandeur in the act; and it marked not only the beginning of a lifelong devotion and loyalty on the part of Shandy toward his young master, but was prophetic of the attitude which Norman of Torn was to

inspire in all the men who served him during the long years that saw thousands pass the barbicans of Torn to crave a position beneath his grim banner.

As Shandy rose, one by one, John Flory, James, his brother, One Eye Kanty, and Peter the Hermit knelt before their young lord and kissed his hand. From the Great Court beyond, a little, grim, gray, old man had watched this scene, a slight smile upon his old, malicious face.

"'Tis to transcend even my dearest dreams," he muttered. "'S death, but he be more a king than Henry himself. God speed the day of his coronation, when, before the very eyes of the Plantagenet hound, a black cap shall be placed upon his head for a crown; beneath his feet the platform of a wooden gibbet for a throne."