

CHAPTER VII

It was a beautiful spring day in May, 1262, that Norman of Torn rode alone down the narrow trail that led to the pretty cottage with which he had replaced the hut of his old friend, Father Claude.

As was his custom, he rode with lowered visor, and nowhere upon his person or upon the trappings of his horse were sign or insignia of rank or house. More powerful and richer than many nobles of the court, he was without rank or other title than that of outlaw and he seemed to assume what in reality he held in little esteem.

He wore armor because his old guardian had urged him to do so, and not because he craved the protection it afforded. And, for the same cause, he rode always with lowered visor, though he could never prevail upon the old man to explain the reason which necessitated this precaution.

"It is enough that I tell you, my son," the old fellow was wont to say, "that for your own good as well as mine, you must not show your face to your enemies until I so direct. The time will come and soon now, I hope, when you shall uncover your countenance to all England."

The young man gave the matter but little thought, usually passing it off as the foolish whim of an old dotard; but he humored it nevertheless.

Behind him, as he rode down the steep declivity that day, loomed a very different Torn from that which he had approached sixteen years before, when, as a little boy he had ridden through the darkening shadows of the night, perched upon a great horse behind the little old woman, whose metamorphosis to the little grim, gray, old man of Torn their advent to the castle had marked.

Today the great, frowning pile loomed larger and more imposing than ever in the most resplendent days of its past grandeur. The original keep was there with its huge, buttressed Saxon towers whose mighty fifteen foot walls were pierced with stairways and vaulted chambers, lighted by embrasures which, mere slits in the outer periphery of the walls, spread to larger dimensions within, some even attaining the area of small triangular chambers.

The moat, widened and deepened, completely encircled three sides of the castle, running between the inner and outer walls, which were set at intervals with small projecting towers so pierced that a flanking fire from

long bows, cross bows and javelins might be directed against a scaling party.

The fourth side of the walled enclosure overhung a high precipice, which natural protection rendered towers unnecessary upon this side.

The main gateway of the castle looked toward the west and from it ran the tortuous and rocky trail, down through the mountains toward the valley below. The aspect from the great gate was one of quiet and rugged beauty. A short stretch of barren downs in the foreground only sparsely studded with an occasional gnarled oak gave an unobstructed view of broad and lovely meadowland through which wound a sparkling tributary of the Trent.

Two more gateways let into the great fortress, one piercing the north wall and one the east. All three gates were strongly fortified with towered and buttressed barbicans which must be taken before the main gates could be reached. Each barbican was portcullised, while the inner gates were similarly safeguarded in addition to the drawbridges which, spanning the moat when lowered, could be drawn up at the approach of an enemy, effectually stopping his advance.

The new towers and buildings added to the ancient keep under the direction of Norman of Torn and the grim, old man whom he called father, were of the Norman type of architecture, the windows were larger, the carving more elaborate, the rooms lighter and more spacious.

Within the great enclosure thrived a fair sized town, for, with his ten hundred fighting-men, the Outlaw of Torn required many squires, lackeys, cooks, scullions, armorers, smithies, farriers, hostlers and the like to care for the wants of his little army.

Fifteen hundred war horses, beside five hundred sumpter beasts, were quartered in the great stables, while the east court was alive with cows, oxen, goats, sheep, pigs, rabbits and chickens.

Great wooden carts drawn by slow, plodding oxen were daily visitors to the grim pile, fetching provender for man and beast from the neighboring farm lands of the poor Saxon peasants, to whom Norman of Torn paid good gold for their crops.

These poor serfs, who were worse than slaves to the proud barons who owned the land they tilled, were forbidden by royal edict to sell or give a pennysworth of provisions to the Outlaw of Torn, upon pain of death, but nevertheless his great carts made their trips regularly and always returned

full laden, and though the husbandmen told sad tales to their overlords of the awful raids of the Devil of Torn in which he seized upon their stuff by force, their tongues were in their cheeks as they spoke and the Devil's gold in their pockets.

And so, while the barons learned to hate him the more, the peasants' love for him increased. Them he never injured; their fences, their stock, their crops, their wives and daughters were safe from molestation even though the neighboring castle of their lord might be sacked from the wine cellar to the ramparts of the loftiest tower. Nor did anyone dare ride rough shod over the territory which Norman of Torn patrolled. A dozen bands of cut-throats he had driven from the Derby hills, and though the barons would much rather have had all the rest than he, the peasants worshipped him as a deliverer from the lowborn murderers who had been wont to despoil the weak and lowly and on whose account the women of the huts and cottages had never been safe.

Few of them had seen his face and fewer still had spoken with him, but they loved his name and his prowess and in secret they prayed for him to their ancient god, Wodin, and the lesser gods of the forest and the meadow and the chase, for though they were confessed Christians, still in the hearts of many beat a faint echo of the old superstitions of their ancestors; and while they prayed also to the Lord Jesus and to Mary, yet they felt it could do no harm to be on the safe side with the others, in case they did happen to exist.

A poor, degraded, downtrodden, ignorant, superstitious people, they were; accustomed for generations to the heel of first one invader and then another and in the interims, when there were any, the heels of their feudal lords and their rapacious monarchs.

No wonder then that such as these worshipped the Outlaw of Torn, for since their fierce Saxon ancestors had come, themselves as conquerors, to England, no other hand had ever been raised to shield them from oppression.

On this policy of his toward the serfs and freedmen, Norman of Torn and the grim, old man whom he called father had never agreed. The latter was for carrying his war of hate against all Englishmen, but the young man would neither listen to it, nor allow any who rode out from Torn to molest the lowly. A ragged tunic was a surer defence against this wild horde than a stout lance or an emblazoned shield.

So, as Norman of Torn rode down from his mighty castle to visit Father Claude, the sunlight playing on his clanking armor and glancing from the copper boss of his shield, the sight of a little group of woodmen kneeling uncovered by the roadside as he passed was not so remarkable after all.

Entering the priest's study, Norman of Torn removed his armor and lay back moodily upon a bench with his back against a wall and his strong, lithe legs stretched out before him.

"What ails you, my son?" asked the priest, "that you look so disconsolate on this beautiful day?"

"I do not know, Father," replied Norman of Torn, "unless it be that I am asking myself the question, 'What it is all for?' Why did my father train me ever to prey upon my fellows? I like to fight, but there is plenty of fighting which is legitimate, and what good may all my stolen wealth avail me if I may not enter the haunts of men to spend it? Should I stick my head into London town, it would doubtless stay there, held by a hempen necklace.

"What quarrel have I with the King or the gentry? They have quarrel enough with me it is true, but, nathless, I do not know why I should have hated them so before I was old enough to know how rotten they really are. So it seems to me that I am but the instrument of an old man's spite, not even knowing the grievance to the avenging of which my life has been dedicated by another.

"And at times, Father Claude, as I grow older, I doubt much that the nameless old man of Torn is my father, so little do I favor him, and never in all my life have I heard a word of fatherly endearment or felt a caress, even as a little child. What think you, Father Claude?"

"I have thought much of it, my son," answered the priest. "It has ever been a sore puzzle to me, and I have my suspicions, which I have held for years, but which even the thought of so frightens me that I shudder to speculate upon the consequences of voicing them aloud. Norman of Torn, if you are not the son of the old man you call father, may God forfend that England ever guesses your true parentage. More than this, I dare not say except that, as you value your peace of mind and your life, keep your visor down and keep out of the clutches of your enemies."

"Then you know why I should keep my visor down?"

"I can only guess, Norman of Torn, because I have seen another whom you resemble."

The conversation was interrupted by a commotion from without; the sound of horses' hoofs, the cries of men and the clash of arms. In an instant, both men were at the tiny unglazed window. Before them, on the highroad, five knights in armor were now engaged in furious battle with a party of ten or a dozen other steel-clad warriors, while crouching breathless on her palfrey, a young woman sat a little apart from the contestants.

Presently, one of the knights detached himself from the melee and rode to her side with some word of command, at the same time grasping roughly at her bridle rein. The girl raised her riding whip and struck repeatedly but futilely against the iron headgear of her assailant while he swung his horse up the road, and, dragging her palfrey after him, galloped rapidly out of sight.

Norman of Torn sprang to the door, and, reckless of his unarmored condition, leaped to Sir Mortimer's back and spurred swiftly in the direction taken by the girl and her abductor.

The great black was fleet, and, unencumbered by the usual heavy armor of his rider, soon brought the fugitives to view. Scarce a mile had been covered ere the knight, turning to look for pursuers, saw the face of Norman of Torn not ten paces behind him.

With a look of mingled surprise, chagrin and incredulity the knight reined in his horse, exclaiming as he did so, "Mon Dieu, Edward!"

"Draw and defend yourself," cried Norman of Torn.

"But, Your Highness," stammered the knight.

"Draw, or I stick you as I have stuck an hundred other English pigs," cried Norman of Torn.

The charging steed was almost upon him and the knight looked to see the rider draw rein, but, like a black bolt, the mighty Sir Mortimer struck the other horse full upon the shoulder, and man and steed rolled in the dust of the roadway.

The knight arose, unhurt, and Norman of Torn dismounted to give fair battle upon even terms. Though handicapped by the weight of his armor, the knight also had the advantage of its protection, so that the two fought furiously for several minutes without either gaining an advantage.

The girl sat motionless and wide-eyed at the side of the road watching every move of the two contestants. She made no effort to escape, but seemed

riveted to the spot by the very fierceness of the battle she was beholding, as well, possibly, as by the fascination of the handsome giant who had espoused her cause. As she looked upon her champion, she saw a lithe, muscular, brown-haired youth whose clear eyes and perfect figure, unconcealed by either bassinet or hauberk, reflected the clean, athletic life of the trained fighting man.

Upon his face hovered a faint, cold smile of haughty pride as the sword arm, displaying its mighty strength and skill in every move, played with the sweating, puffing, steel-clad enemy who hacked and hewed so futilely before him. For all the din of clashing blades and rattling armor, neither of the contestants had inflicted much damage, for the knight could neither force nor insinuate his point beyond the perfect guard of his unarmored foe, who, for his part, found difficulty in penetrating the other's armor.

Finally, by dint of his mighty strength, Norman of Torn drove his blade through the meshes of his adversary's mail, and the fellow, with a cry of anguish, sank limply to the ground.

"Quick, Sir Knight!" cried the girl. "Mount and flee; yonder come his fellows."

And surely, as Norman of Torn turned in the direction from which he had just come, there, racing toward him at full tilt, rode three steel-armored men on their mighty horses.

"Ride, madam," cried Norman of Torn, "for fly I shall not, nor may I, alone, unarmored, and on foot hope more than to momentarily delay these three fellows, but in that time you should easily make your escape. Their heavy-burdened animals could never o'ertake your fleet palfrey."

As he spoke, he took note for the first time of the young woman. That she was a lady of quality was evidenced not alone by the richness of her riding apparel and the trappings of her palfrey, but as well in her noble and haughty demeanor and the proud expression of her beautiful face.

Although at this time nearly twenty years had passed over the head of Norman of Torn, he was without knowledge or experience in the ways of women, nor had he ever spoken with a female of quality or position. No woman graced the castle of Torn nor had the boy, within his memory, ever known a mother.

His attitude therefore was much the same toward women as it was toward men, except that he had sworn always to protect them. Possibly, in a way, he looked up to womankind, if it could be said that Norman of Torn looked

up to anything: God, man or devil--it being more his way to look down upon all creatures whom he took the trouble to notice at all.

As his glance rested upon this woman, whom fate had destined to alter the entire course of his life, Norman of Torn saw that she was beautiful, and that she was of that class against whom he had preyed for years with his band of outlaw cut-throats. Then he turned once more to face her enemies with the strange inconsistency which had ever marked his methods.

Tomorrow he might be assaulting the ramparts of her father's castle, but today he was joyously offering to sacrifice his life for her--had she been the daughter of a charcoal burner he would have done no less. It was enough that she was a woman and in need of protection.

The three knights were now fairly upon him, and with fine disregard for fair play, charged with couched spears the unarmored man on foot. But as the leading knight came close enough to behold his face, he cried out in surprise and consternation:

"Mon Dieu, le Prince!" He wheeled his charging horse to one side. His fellows, hearing his cry, followed his example, and the three of them dashed on down the high road in as evident anxiety to escape as they had been keen to attack.

"One would think they had met the devil," muttered Norman of Torn, looking after them in unfeigned astonishment.

"What means it, lady?" he asked turning to the damsel, who had made no move to escape.

"It means that your face is well known in your father's realm, my Lord Prince," she replied. "And the King's men have no desire to antagonize you, even though they may understand as little as I why you should espouse the cause of a daughter of Simon de Montfort."

"Am I then taken for Prince Edward of England?" he asked.

"An' who else should you be taken for, my Lord?"

"I am not the Prince," said Norman of Torn. "It is said that Edward is in France."

"Right you are, sir," exclaimed the girl. "I had not thought on that; but you be enough of his likeness that you might well deceive the Queen herself. And you be of a bravery fit for a king's son. Who are you then, Sir Knight, who

has bared your steel and faced death for Bertrade, daughter of Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester?"

"Be you De Montfort's daughter, niece of King Henry?" queried Norman of Torn, his eyes narrowing to mere slits and face hardening.

"That I be," replied the girl, "an' from your face I take it you have little love for a De Montfort," she added, smiling.

"An' whither may you be bound, Lady Bertrade de Montfort? Be you niece or daughter of the devil, yet still you be a woman, and I do not war against women. Wheresoever you would go will I accompany you to safety."

"I was but now bound, under escort of five of my father's knights, to visit Mary, daughter of John de Stutevill of Derby."

"I know the castle well," answered Norman of Torn, and the shadow of a grim smile played about his lips, for scarce sixty days had elapsed since he had reduced the stronghold, and levied tribute on the great baron. "Come, you have not far to travel now, and if we make haste you shall sup with your friend before dark."

So saying, he mounted his horse and was turning to retrace their steps down the road when he noticed the body of the dead knight lying where it had fallen.

"Ride on," he called to Bertrade de Montfort, "I will join you in an instant."

Again dismounting, he returned to the side of his late adversary, and lifting the dead knight's visor, drew upon the forehead with the point of his dagger the letters NT.

The girl turned to see what detained him, but his back was toward her and he knelt beside his fallen foeman, and she did not see his act. Brave daughter of a brave sire though she was, had she seen what he did, her heart would have quailed within her and she would have fled in terror from the clutches of this scourge of England, whose mark she had seen on the dead foreheads of a dozen of her father's knights and kinsmen.

Their way to Stutevill lay past the cottage of Father Claude, and here Norman of Torn stopped to don his armor. Now he rode once more with lowered visor, and in silence, a little to the rear of Bertrade de Montfort that he might watch her face, which, of a sudden, had excited his interest.

Never before, within the scope of his memory, had he been so close to a young and beautiful woman for so long a period of time, although he had often seen women in the castles that had fallen before his vicious and terrible attacks. While stories were abroad of his vile treatment of women captives, there was no truth in them. They were merely spread by his enemies to incite the people against him. Never had Norman of Torn laid violent hand upon a woman, and his cut-throat band were under oath to respect and protect the sex, on penalty of death.

As he watched the semi-profile of the lovely face before him, something stirred in his heart which had been struggling for expression for years. It was not love, nor was it allied to love, but a deep longing for companionship of such as she, and such as she represented. Norman of Torn could not have translated this feeling into words for he did not know, but it was the far faint cry of blood for blood and with it, mayhap, was mixed not alone the longing of the lion among jackals for other lions, but for his lioness.

They rode for many miles in silence when suddenly she turned, saying:

"You take your time, Sir Knight, in answering my query. Who be ye?"

"I am Nor--" and then he stopped. Always before he had answered that question with haughty pride. Why should he hesitate, he thought. Was it because he feared the loathing that name would inspire in the breast of this daughter of the aristocracy he despised? Did Norman of Torn fear to face the look of seem and repugnance that was sure to be mirrored in that lovely face?

"I am from Normandy," he went on quietly. "A gentleman of France."

"But your name?" she said peremptorily. "Are you ashamed of your name?"

"You may call me Roger," he answered. "Roger de Conde."

"Raise your visor, Roger de Conde," she commanded. "I do not take pleasure in riding with a suit of armor; I would see that there is a man within."

Norman of Torn smiled as he did her bidding, and when he smiled thus, as he rarely did, he was good to look upon.

"It is the first command I have obeyed since I turned sixteen, Bertrade de Montfort," he said.

The girl was about nineteen, full of the vigor and gaiety of youth and health; and so the two rode on their journey talking and laughing as they might have been friends of long standing.

She told him of the reason for the attack upon her earlier in the day, attributing it to an attempt on the part of a certain baron, Peter of Colfax, to abduct her, his suit for her hand having been peremptorily and roughly denied by her father.

Simon de Montfort was no man to mince words, and it is doubtless that the old reprobate who sued for his daughter's hand heard some unsavory truths from the man who had twice scandalized England's nobility by his rude and discourteous, though true and candid, speeches to the King.

"This Peter of Colfax shall be looked to," growled Norman of Torn. "And, as you have refused his heart and hand, his head shall be yours for the asking. You have but to command, Bertrade de Montfort."

"Very well," she laughed, thinking it but the idle boasting so much indulged in in those days. "You may bring me his head upon a golden dish, Roger de Conde."

"And what reward does the knight earn who brings to the feet of his princess the head of her enemy?" he asked lightly.

"What boon would the knight ask?"

"That whatsoever a bad report you hear of your knight, of whatsoever calumnies may be heaped upon him, you shall yet ever be his friend, and believe in his honor and his loyalty."

The girl laughed gaily as she answered, though something seemed to tell her that this was more than play.

"It shall be as you say, Sir Knight," she replied. "And the boon once granted shall be always kept."

Quick to reach decisions and as quick to act, Norman of Torn decided that he liked this girl and that he wished her friendship more than any other thing he knew of. And wishing it, he determined to win it by any means that accorded with his standard of honor; an honor which in many respects was higher than that of the nobles of his time.

They reached the castle of De Stutevill late in the afternoon, and there, Norman of Torn was graciously welcomed and urged to accept the Baron's hospitality overnight.

The grim humor of the situation was too much for the outlaw, and, when added to his new desire to be in the company of Bertrade de Montfort, he made no effort to resist, but hastened to accept the warm welcome.

At the long table upon which the evening meal was spread sat the entire household of the Baron, and here and there among the men were evidences of painful wounds but barely healed, while the host himself still wore his sword arm in a sling.

"We have been through grievous times," said Sir John, noticing that his guest was glancing at the various evidences of conflict. "That fiend, Norman the Devil, with his filthy pack of cut-throats, besieged us for ten days, and then took the castle by storm and sacked it. Life is no longer safe in England with the King spending his time and money with foreign favorites and buying alien soldiery to fight against his own barons, instead of insuring the peace and protection which is the right of every Englishman at home.

"But," he continued, "this outlaw devil will come to the end of a short halter when once our civil strife is settled, for the barons themselves have decided upon an expedition against him, if the King will not subdue him."

"An' he may send the barons naked home as he did the King's soldiers," laughed Bertrade de Montfort. "I should like to see this fellow; what may he look like--from the appearance of yourself, Sir John, and many of your men-at-arms, there should be no few here but have met him."

"Not once did he raise his visor while he was among us," replied the Baron, "but there are those who claim they had a brief glimpse of him and that he is of horrid countenance, wearing a great yellow beard and having one eye gone, and a mighty red scar from his forehead to his chin."

"A fearful apparition," murmured Norman of Torn. "No wonder he keeps his helm closed."

"But such a swordsman," spoke up a son of De Stutevill. "Never in all the world was there such swordplay as I saw that day in the courtyard."

"I, too, have seen some wonderful swordplay," said Bertrade de Montfort, "and that today. O he!" she cried, laughing gleefully, "verily do I believe I have captured the wild Norman of Torn, for this very knight, who styles

himself Roger de Conde, fights as I ne'er saw man fight before, and he rode with his visor down until I chide him for it."

Norman of Torn led in the laugh which followed, and of all the company he most enjoyed the joke.

"An' speaking of the Devil," said the Baron, "how think you he will side should the King eventually force war upon the barons? With his thousand hell-hounds, the fate of England might well be in the palm of his bloody hand."

"He loves neither King nor baron," spoke Mary de Stutevill, "and I rather lean to the thought that he will serve neither, but rather plunder the castles of both rebel and royalist whilst their masters be absent at war."

"It be more to his liking to come while the master be home to welcome him," said De Stutevill, ruthfully. "But yet I am always in fear for the safety of my wife and daughters when I be away from Derby for any time. May the good God soon deliver England from this Devil of Torn."

"I think you may have no need of fear on that score," spoke Mary, "for Norman of Torn offered no violence to any woman within the wall of Stutevill, and when one of his men laid a heavy hand upon me, it was the great outlaw himself who struck the fellow such a blow with his mailed hand as to crack the ruffian's helm, saying at the time, 'Know you, fellow, Norman of Torn does not war upon women?'"

Presently the conversation turned to other subjects and Norman of Torn heard no more of himself during that evening.

His stay at the castle of Stutevill was drawn out to three days, and then, on the third day, as he sat with Bertrade de Montfort in an embrasure of the south tower of the old castle, he spoke once more of the necessity for leaving and once more she urged him to remain.

"To be with you, Bertrade of Montfort," he said boldly, "I would forego any other pleasure, and endure any privation, or face any danger, but there are others who look to me for guidance and my duty calls me away from you. You shall see me again, and at the castle of your father, Simon de Montfort, in Leicester. Provided," he added, "that you will welcome me there."

"I shall always welcome you, wherever I may be, Roger de Conde," replied the girl.

"Remember that promise," he said smiling. "Some day you may be glad to repudiate it."

"Never," she insisted, and a light that shone in her eyes as she said it would have meant much to a man better versed in the ways of women than was Norman of Torn.

"I hope not," he said gravely. "I cannot tell you, being but poorly trained in courtly ways, what I should like to tell you, that you might know how much your friendship means to me. Goodbye, Bertrade de Montfort," and he bent to one knee, as he raised her fingers to his lips.

As he passed over the drawbridge and down toward the highroad a few minutes later on his way back to Torn, he turned for one last look at the castle and there, in an embrasure in the south tower, stood a young woman who raised her hand to wave, and then, as though by sudden impulse, threw a kiss after the departing knight, only to disappear from the embrasure with the act.

As Norman of Torn rode back to his grim castle in the hills of Derby, he had much food for thought upon the way. Never till now had he realized what might lie in another manner of life, and he felt a twinge of bitterness toward the hard, old man whom he called father, and whose teachings from the boy's earliest childhood had guided him in the ways that had cut him off completely from the society of other men, except the wild horde of outlaws, ruffians and adventurers that rode beneath the grisly banner of the young chief of Torn.

Only in an ill-defined, nebulous way did he feel that it was the girl who had come into his life that caused him for the first time to feel shame for his past deeds. He did not know the meaning of love, and so he could not know that he loved Bertrade de Montfort.

And another thought which now filled his mind was the fact of his strange likeness to the Crown Prince of England. This, together with the words of Father Claude, puzzled him sorely. What might it mean? Was it a heinous offence to own an accidental likeness to a king's son?

But now that he felt he had solved the reason that he rode always with closed helm, he was for the first time anxious himself to hide his face from the sight of men. Not from fear, for he knew not fear, but from some inward impulse which he did not attempt to fathom.