

CHAPTER VIII

As Norman of Torn rode out from the castle of De Stutevill, Father Claude dismounted from his sleek donkey within the ballium of Torn. The austere stronghold, notwithstanding its repellent exterior and unsavory reputation, always extended a warm welcome to the kindly, genial priest; not alone because of the deep friendship which the master of Torn felt for the good father, but through the personal charm, and loveliness of the holy man's nature, which shone alike on saint and sinner.

It was doubtless due to his unremitting labors with the youthful Norman, during the period that the boy's character was most amenable to strong impressions, that the policy of the mighty outlaw was in many respects pure and lofty. It was this same influence, though, which won for Father Claude his only enemy in Torn; the little, grim, gray, old man whose sole aim in life seemed to have been to smother every finer instinct of chivalry and manhood in the boy, to whose training he had devoted the past nineteen years of his life.

As Father Claude climbed down from his donkey--fat people do not "dismount"--a half dozen young squires ran forward to assist him, and to lead the animal to the stables.

The good priest called each of his willing helpers by name, asking a question here, passing a merry joke there with the ease and familiarity that bespoke mutual affection and old acquaintance.

As he passed in through the great gate, the men-at-arms threw him laughing, though respectful, welcomes and within the great court, beautified with smooth lawn, beds of gorgeous plants, fountains, statues and small shrubs and bushes, he came upon the giant, Red Shandy, now the principal lieutenant of Norman of Torn.

"Good morrow, Saint Claude!" cried the burly ruffian. "Hast come to save our souls, or damn us? What manner of sacrilege have we committed now, or have we merited the blessings of Holy Church? Dost come to scold, or praise?"

"Neither, thou unregenerate villain," cried the priest, laughing. "Though methinks ye merit chiding for the grievous poor courtesy with which thou didst treat the great Bishop of Norwich the past week."

"Tut, tut, Father," replied Red Shandy. "We did but aid him to adhere more closely to the injunctions and precepts of Him whose servant and disciple he claims to be. Were it not better for an Archbishop of His Church to walk in humility and poverty among His people, than to be ever surrounded with the temptations of fine clothing, jewels and much gold, to say nothing of two sumpter beasts heavy laden with runlets of wine?"

"I warrant his temptations were less by at least as many runlets of wine as may be borne by two sumpter beasts when thou, red robber, had finished with him," exclaimed Father Claude.

"Yes, Father," laughed the great fellow, "for the sake of Holy Church, I did indeed confiscate that temptation completely, and if you must needs have proof in order to absolve me from my sins, come with me now and you shall sample the excellent discrimination which the Bishop of Norwich displays in the selection of his temptations."

"They tell me you left the great man quite destitute of finery, Red Shandy," continued Father Claude, as he locked his arm in that of the outlaw and proceeded toward the castle.

"One garment was all that Norman of Torn would permit him, and as the sun was hot overhead, he selected for the Bishop a bassinet for that single article of apparel, to protect his tonsured pate from the rays of old sol. Then, fearing that it might be stolen from him by some vandals of the road, he had One Eye Kanty rivet it at each side of the gorget so that it could not be removed by other than a smithy, and thus, strapped face to tail upon a donkey, he sent the great Bishop of Norwich rattling down the dusty road with his head, at least, protected from the idle gaze of whomsoever he might chance to meet. Forty stripes he gave to each of the Bishop's retinue for being abroad in bad company; but come, here we are where you shall have the wine as proof of my tale."

As the two sat sipping the Bishop's good Canary, the little old man of Torn entered. He spoke to Father Claude in a surly tone, asking him if he knew aught of the whereabouts of Norman of Torn.

"We have seen nothing of him since, some three days gone, he rode out in the direction of your cottage," he concluded.

"Why, yes," said the priest, "I saw him that day. He had an adventure with several knights from the castle of Peter of Colfax, from whom he rescued a damsel whom I suspect from the trappings of her palfrey to be of the house of Montfort. Together they rode north, but thy son did not say whither or for

what purpose. His only remark, as he donned his armor, while the girl waited without, was that I should now behold the falcon guarding the dove. Hast he not returned?"

"No," said the old man, "and doubtless his adventure is of a nature in line with thy puerile and effeminate teachings. Had he followed my training, without thy accurst priestly interference, he had made an iron-barred nest in Torn for many of the doves of thy damned English nobility. An' thou leave him not alone, he will soon be seeking service in the household of the King."

"Where, perchance, he might be more at home than here," said the priest quietly.

"Why say you that?" snapped the little old man, eyeing Father Claude narrowly.

"Oh," laughed the priest, "because he whose power and mien be even more kingly than the King's would rightly grace the royal palace," but he had not failed to note the perturbation his remark had caused, nor did his off-hand reply entirely deceive the old man.

At this juncture, a squire entered to say that Shandy's presence was required at the gates, and that worthy, with a sorrowing and regretful glance at the unemptied flagon, left the room.

For a few moments, the two men sat in meditative silence, which was presently broken by the old man of Torn.

"Priest," he said, "thy ways with my son are, as you know, not to my liking. It were needless that he should have wasted so much precious time from swordplay to learn the useless art of letters. Of what benefit may a knowledge of Latin be to one whose doom looms large before him. It may be years and again it may be but months, but as sure as there be a devil in hell, Norman of Torn will swing from a king's gibbet. And thou knowst it, and he too, as well as I. The things which thou hast taught him be above his station, and the hopes and ambitions they inspire will but make his end the bitterer for him. Of late I have noted that he rides upon the highway with less enthusiasm than was his wont, but he has gone too far ever to go back now; nor is there where to go back to. What has he ever been other than outcast and outlaw? What hopes could you have engendered in his breast greater than to be hated and feared among his blood enemies?"

"I knowst not thy reasons, old man," replied the priest, "for devoting thy life to the ruining of his, and what I guess at be such as I dare not voice; but let

us understand each other once and for all. For all thou dost and hast done to blight and curse the nobleness of his nature, I have done and shall continue to do all in my power to controvert. As thou hast been his bad angel, so shall I try to be his good angel, and when all is said and done and Norman of Torn swings from the King's gibbet, as I only too well fear he must, there will be more to mourn his loss than there be to curse him.

"His friends are from the ranks of the lowly, but so too were the friends and followers of our Dear Lord Jesus; so that shall be more greatly to his honor than had he preyed upon the already unfortunate.

"Women have never been his prey; that also will be spoken of to his honor when he is gone, and that he has been cruel to men will be forgotten in the greater glory of his mercy to the weak.

"Whatever be thy object: whether revenge or the natural bent of a cruel and degraded mind, I know not; but if any be curst because of the Outlaw of Torn, it will be thou--I had almost said, unnatural father; but I do not believe a single drop of thy debased blood flows in the veins of him thou callest son."

The grim old man of Torn had sat motionless throughout this indictment, his face, somewhat pale, was drawn into lines of malevolent hatred and rage, but he permitted Father Claude to finish without interruption.

"Thou hast made thyself and thy opinions quite clear," he said bitterly, "but I be glad to know just how thou standeth. In the past there has been peace between us, though no love; now let us both understand that it be war and hate. My life work is cut out for me. Others, like thyself, have stood in my path, yet today I am here, but where are they? Dost understand me, priest?" And the old man leaned far across the table so that his eyes, burning with an insane fire of venom, blazed but a few inches from those of the priest.

Father Claude returned the look with calm level gaze.

"I understand," he said, and, rising, left the castle.

Shortly after he had reached his cottage, a loud knock sounded at the door, which immediately swung open without waiting the formality of permission. Father Claude looked up to see the tall figure of Norman of Torn, and his face lighted with a pleased smile of welcome.

"Greetings, my son," said the priest.

"And to thee, Father," replied the outlaw, "And what may be the news of Torn. I have been absent for several days. Is all well at the castle?"

"All be well at the castle," replied Father Claude, "if by that you mean have none been captured or hanged for their murders. Ah, my boy, why wilt thou not give up this wicked life of thine? It has never been my way to scold or chide thee, yet always hath my heart ached for each crime laid at the door of Norman of Torn."

"Come, come, Father," replied the outlaw, "what dost I that I have not good example for from the barons, and the King, and Holy Church. Murder, theft, rapine! Passeth a day over England which sees not one or all perpetrated in the name of some of these?"

"Be it wicked for Norman of Torn to prey upon the wolf, yet righteous for the wolf to tear the sheep? Methinks not. Only do I collect from those who have more than they need, from my natural enemies; while they prey upon those who havenaught.

"Yet," and his manner suddenly changed, "I do not love it, Father. That thou know. I would that there might be some way out of it, but there is none.

"If I told you why I wished it, you would be surprised indeed, nor can I myself understand; but, of a verity, my greatest wish to be out of this life is due to the fact that I crave the association of those very enemies I have been taught to hate. But it is too late, Father, there can be but one end and that the lower end of a hempen rope."

"No, my son, there is another way, an honorable way," replied the good Father. "In some foreign clime there be opportunities abundant for such as thee. France offers a magnificent future to such a soldier as Norman of Torn. In the court of Louis, you would take your place among the highest of the land. You be rich and brave and handsome. Nay do not raise your hand. You be all these and more, for you have learning far beyond the majority of nobles, and you have a good heart and a true chivalry of character. With such wondrous gifts, naught could bar your way to the highest pinnacles of power and glory, while here you have no future beyond the halter. Canst thou hesitate, Norman of Torn?"

The young man stood silent for a moment, then he drew his hand across his eyes as though to brush away a vision.

"There be a reason, Father, why I must remain in England for a time at least, though the picture you put is indeed wondrous alluring."

And the reason was Bertrade de Montfort.