

CHAPTER IX

The visit of Bertrade de Montfort with her friend Mary de Stutevill was drawing to a close. Three weeks had passed since Roger de Conde had ridden out from the portals of Stutevill and many times the handsome young knight's name had been on the lips of his fair hostess and her fairer friend.

Today the two girls roamed slowly through the gardens of the great court, their arms about each other's waists, pouring the last confidences into each other's ears, for tomorrow Bertrade had elected to return to Leicester.

"Methinks thou be very rash indeed, my Bertrade," said Mary. "Wert my father here he would, I am sure, not permit thee to leave with only the small escort which we be able to give."

"Fear not, Mary," replied Bertrade. "Five of thy father's knights be ample protection for so short a journey. By evening it will have been accomplished; and, as the only one I fear in these parts received such a sound set back from Roger de Conde recently, I do not think he will venture again to molest me."

"But what about the Devil of Torn, Bertrade?" urged Mary. "Only yestereve, you wot, one of Lord de Grey's men-at-arms came limping to us with the news of the awful carnage the foul fiend had wrought on his master's household. He be abroad, Bertrade, and I canst think of naught more horrible than to fall into his hands."

"Why, Mary, thou didst but recently say thy very self that Norman of Torn was most courteous to thee when he sacked this, thy father's castle. How be it thou so soon has changed thy mind?"

"Yes, Bertrade, he was indeed respectful then, but who knows what horrid freak his mind may take, and they do say that he be cruel beyond compare. Again, forget not that thou be Leicester's daughter and Henry's niece; against both of whom the Outlaw of Torn openly swears his hatred and his vengeance. Oh, Bertrade, wait but for a day or so, I be sure my father must return ere then, and fifty knights shall accompany thee instead of five."

"What be fifty knights against Norman of Torn, Mary? Thy reasoning is on a parity with thy fears, both have flown wide of the mark.

"If I am to meet with this wild ruffian, it were better that five knights were sacrificed than fifty, for either number would be but a mouthful to that

horrid horde of unhung murderers. No, Mary, I shall start tomorrow and your good knights shall return the following day with the best of word from me."

"If thou wilt, thou wilt," cried Mary petulantly. "Indeed it were plain that thou be a De Montfort; that race whose historic bravery be second only to their historic stubbornness."

Bertrade de Montfort laughed, and kissed her friend upon the cheek.

"Mayhap I shall find the brave Roger de Conde again upon the highroad to protect me. Then indeed shall I send back your five knights, for of a truth, his blade is more powerful than that of any ten men I ere saw fight before."

"Methinks," said Mary, still peeved at her friend's determination to leave on the morrow, "that should you meet the doughty Sir Roger all unarmed, that still would you send back my father's knights."

Bertrade flushed, and then bit her lip as she felt the warm blood mount to her cheek.

"Thou be a fool, Mary," she said.

Mary broke into a joyful, teasing laugh; hugely enjoying the discomfiture of the admission the tell-tale flush proclaimed.

"Ah, I did but guess how thy heart and thy mind tended, Bertrade; but now I seest that I divined all too truly. He be indeed good to look upon, but what knowest thou of him?"

"Hush, Mary!" commanded Bertrade. "Thou know not what thou sayest. I would not wipe my feet upon him, I care naught whatever for him, and then-it has been three weeks since he rode out from Stutevill and no word hath he sent."

"Oh, ho," cried the little plague, "so there lies the wind? My Lady would not wipe her feet upon him, but she be sore vexed that he has sent her no word. Mon Dieu, but thou hast strange notions, Bertrade."

"I will not talk with you, Mary," cried Bertrade, stamping her sandaled foot, and with a toss of her pretty head she turned abruptly toward the castle.

In a small chamber in the castle of Colfax two men sat at opposite sides of a little table. The one, Peter of Colfax, was short and very stout. His red, bloated face, bleary eyes and bulbous nose bespoke the manner of his life; while his thick lips, the lower hanging large and flabby over his receding

chin, indicated the base passions to which his life had been given. His companion was a little, grim, gray man but his suit of armor and closed helm gave no hint to his host of whom his guest might be. It was the little armored man who was speaking.

"Is it not enough that I offer to aid you, Sir Peter," he said, "that you must have my reasons? Let it go that my hate of Leicester be the passion which moves me. Thou failed in thy attempt to capture the maiden; give me ten knights and I will bring her to you."

"How knowest thou she rides out tomorrow for her father's castle?" asked Peter of Colfax.

"That again be no concern of thine, my friend, but I do know it, and, if thou wouldst have her, be quick, for we should ride out tonight that we may take our positions by the highway in ample time tomorrow."

Still Peter of Colfax hesitated, he feared this might be a ruse of Leicester's to catch him in some trap. He did not know his guest--the fellow might want the girl for himself and be taking this method of obtaining the necessary assistance to capture her.

"Come," said the little, armored man irritably. "I cannot bide here forever. Make up thy mind; it be nothing to me other than my revenge, and if thou wilt not do it, I shall hire the necessary ruffians and then not even thou shalt see Bertrade de Montfort more."

This last threat decided the Baron.

"It is agreed," he said. "The men shall ride out with you in half an hour. Wait below in the courtyard."

When the little man had left the apartment, Peter of Colfax summoned his squire whom he had send to him at once one of his faithful henchmen.

"Guy," said Peter of Colfax, as the man entered, "ye made a rare fizzle of a piece of business some weeks ago. Ye wot of which I speak?"

"Yes, My Lord."

"It chanced that on the morrow ye may have opportunity to retrieve thy blunder. Ride out with ten men where the stranger who waits in the courtyard below shall lead ye, and come not back without that which ye lost to a handful of men before. You understand?"

"Yes, My Lord!"

"And, Guy, I half mistrust this fellow who hath offered to assist us. At the first sign of treachery, fall upon him with all thy men and slay him. Tell the others that these be my orders."

"Yes, My Lord. When do we ride?"

"At once. You may go."

The morning that Bertrade de Montfort had chosen to return to her father's castle dawned gray and threatening. In vain did Mary de Stutevill plead with her friend to give up the idea of setting out upon such a dismal day and without sufficient escort, but Bertrade de Montfort was firm.

"Already have I overstayed my time three days, and it is not lightly that even I, his daughter, fail in obedience to Simon de Montfort. I

shall have enough to account for as it be. Do not urge me to add even one more day to my excuses. And again, perchance, my mother and my father may be sore distressed by my continued absence. No, Mary, I must ride today." And so she did, with the five knights that could be spared from the castle's defence.

Scarcely half an hour had elapsed before a cold drizzle set in, so that they were indeed a sorry company that splashed along the muddy road, wrapped in mantle and surcoat. As they proceeded, the rain and wind increased in volume, until it was being driven into their faces in such blinding gusts that they must needs keep their eyes closed and trust to the instincts of their mounts.

Less than half the journey had been accomplished. They were winding across a little hollow toward a low ridge covered with dense forest, into the somber shadows of which the road wound. There was a glint of armor among the drenched foliage, but the rain-buffeted eyes of the riders saw it not. On they came, their patient horses plodding slowly through the sticky road and hurtling storm.

Now they were half way up the ridge's side. There was a movement in the dark shadows of the grim wood, and then, without cry or warning, a band of steel-clad horsemen broke forth with couched spears. Charging at full run down upon them, they overthrew three of the girl's escort before a blow could be struck in her defense. Her two remaining guardians wheeled to meet the return attack, and nobly did they acquit themselves, for it took the entire eleven who were pitted against them to overcome and slay the two.

In the melee, none had noticed the girl, but presently one of her assailants, a little, grim, gray man, discovered that she had put spurs to her palfrey and escaped. Calling to his companions he set out at a rapid pace in pursuit.

Reckless of the slippery road and the blinding rain, Bertrade de Montfort urged her mount into a wild run, for she had recognized the arms of Peter of Colfax on the shields of several of the attacking party.

Nobly, the beautiful Arab bent to her call for speed. The great beasts of her pursuers, bred in Normandy and Flanders, might have been tethered in their stalls for all the chance they had of overtaking the flying white steed that fairly split the gray rain as lightning flies through the clouds.

But for the fiendish cunning of the little grim, gray man's foresight, Bertrade de Montfort would have made good her escape that day. As it was, however, her fleet mount had carried her but two hundred yards ere, in the midst of the dark wood, she ran full upon a rope stretched across the roadway between two trees.

As the horse fell, with a terrible lunge, tripped by the stout rope, Bertrade de Montfort was thrown far before him, where she lay, a little, limp bedraggled figure, in the mud of the road.

There they found her. The little, grim, gray man did not even dismount, so indifferent was he to her fate; dead or in the hands of Peter of Colfax, it was all the same to him. In either event, his purpose would be accomplished, and Bertrade de Montfort would no longer lure Norman of Torn from the path he had laid out for him.

That such an eventuality threatened, he knew from one Spizo the Spaniard, the single traitor in the service of Norman of Torn, whose mean aid the little grim, gray man had purchased since many months to spy upon the comings and goings of the great outlaw.

The men of Peter of Colfax gathered up the lifeless form of Bertrade de Montfort and placed it across the saddle before one of their number.

"Come," said the man called Guy, "if there be life left in her, we must hasten to Sir Peter before it be extinct."

"I leave ye here," said the little old man. "My part of the business is done."

And so he sat watching them until they had disappeared in the forest toward the castle of Colfax.

Then he rode back to the scene of the encounter where lay the five knights of Sir John de Stutevill. Three were already dead, the other two, sorely but not mortally wounded, lay groaning by the roadside.

The little grim, gray man dismounted as he came abreast of them and, with his long sword, silently finished the two wounded men. Then, drawing his dagger, he made a mark upon the dead foreheads of each of the five, and mounting, rode rapidly toward Torn.

"And if one fact be not enough," he muttered, "that mark upon the dead will quite effectually stop further intercourse between the houses of Torn and Leicester."

Henry de Montfort, son of Simon, rode fast and furious at the head of a dozen of his father's knights on the road to Stutevill.

Bertrade de Montfort was so long overdue that the Earl and Princess Eleanor, his wife, filled with grave apprehensions, had posted their oldest son off to the castle of John de Stutevill to fetch her home.

With the wind and rain at their backs, the little party rode rapidly along the muddy road, until late in the afternoon they came upon a white palfrey standing huddled beneath a great oak, his arched back toward the driving storm.

"By God," cried De Montfort, "'tis my sister's own Abdul. There be something wrong here indeed." But a rapid search of the vicinity, and loud calls brought no further evidence of the girl's whereabouts, so they pressed on toward Stutevill.

Some two miles beyond the spot where the white palfrey had been found, they came upon the dead bodies of the five knights who had accompanied Bertrade from Stutevill.

Dismounting, Henry de Montfort examined the bodies of the fallen men. The arms upon shield and helm confirmed his first fear that these had been Bertrade's escort from Stutevill.

As he bent over them to see if he recognized any of the knights, there stared up into his face from the foreheads of the dead men the dreaded sign, NT, scratched there with a dagger's point.

"The curse of God be on him!" cried De Montfort. "It be the work of the Devil of Torn, my gentlemen," he said to his followers. "Come, we need no further

guide to our destination." And, remounting, the little party spurred back toward Torn.

When Bertrade de Montfort regained her senses, she was in bed in a strange room, and above her bent an old woman; a repulsive, toothless old woman, whose smile was but a fangless snarl.

"Ho, ho!" she croaked. "The bride waketh. I told My Lord that it would take more than a tumble in the mud to kill a De Montfort. Come, come, now, arise and clothe thyself, for the handsome bridegroom canst scarce restrain his eager desire to fold thee in his arms. Below in the great hall he paces to and fro, the red blood mantling his beauteous countenance."

"Who be ye?" cried Bertrade de Montfort, her mind still dazed from the effects of her fall. "Where am I?" and then, "O, Mon Dieu!" as she remembered the events of the afternoon; and the arms of Colfax upon the shields of the attacking party. In an instant she realized the horror of her predicament; its utter hopelessness.

Beast though he was, Peter of Colfax stood high in the favor of the King; and the fact that she was his niece would scarce aid her cause with Henry, for it was more than counter-balanced by the fact that she was the daughter of Simon de Montfort, whom he feared and hated.

In the corridor without, she heard the heavy tramp of approaching feet, and presently a man's voice at the door.

"Within there, Coll! Hast the damsel awakened from her swoon?"

"Yes, Sir Peter," replied the old woman, "I was but just urging her to arise and clothe herself, saying that you awaited her below."

"Haste then, My Lady Bertrade," called the man, "no harm will be done thee if thou showest the good sense I give thee credit for. I will await thee in the great hall, or, if thou prefer, wilt come to thee here."

The girl paled, more in loathing and contempt than in fear, but the tones of her answer were calm and level.

"I will see thee below, Sir Peter, anon," and rising, she hastened to dress, while the receding footsteps of the Baron diminished down the stairway which led from the tower room in which she was imprisoned.

The old woman attempted to draw her into conversation, but the girl would not talk. Her whole mind was devoted to weighing each possible means of escape.

A half hour later, she entered the great hall of the castle of Peter of Colfax. The room was empty. Little change had been wrought in the apartment since the days of Ethelwolf. As the girl's glance ranged the hall in search of her jailer it rested upon the narrow, unglazed windows beyond which lay freedom. Would she ever again breathe God's pure air outside these stifling walls? These grimy hateful walls! Black as the inky rafters and wainscot except for occasional splotches a few shades less begrimed, where repairs had been made. As her eyes fell upon the trophies of war and chase which hung there her lips curled in scorn, for she knew that they were acquisitions by inheritance rather than by the personal prowess of the present master of Colfax.

A single cresset lighted the chamber, while the flickering light from a small wood fire upon one of the two great hearths seemed rather to accentuate the dim shadows of the place.

Bertrade crossed the room and leaned against a massive oak table, blackened by age and hard usage to the color of the beams above, dented and nicked by the pounding of huge drinking horns and heavy swords when wild and lusty brawlers had been moved to applause by the lay of some wandering minstrel, or the sterner call of their mighty chieftains for the oath of fealty.

Her wandering eyes took in the dozen benches and the few rude, heavy chairs which completed the rough furnishings of this rough room, and she shuddered. One little foot tapped sullenly upon the disordered floor which was littered with a miscellany of rushes interspread with such bones and scraps of food as the dogs had rejected or overlooked.

But to none of these surroundings did Bertrade de Montfort give but passing heed; she looked for the man she sought that she might quickly have the encounter over and learn what fate the future held in store for her.

Her quick glance had shown her that the room was quite empty, and that in addition to the main doorway at the lower end of the apartment, where she had entered, there was but one other door leading from the hall. This was at one side, and as it stood ajar she could see that it led into a small room, apparently a bedchamber.

As she stood facing the main doorway, a panel opened quietly behind her and directly back of where the thrones had stood in past times. From the black mouth of the aperture stepped Peter of Colfax. Silently, he closed the panel after him, and with soundless steps, advanced toward the girl. At the edge of the raised dais he halted, rattling his sword to attract her attention.

If his aim had been to unnerve her by the suddenness and mystery of his appearance, he failed signally, for she did not even turn her head as she said:

"What explanation hast thou to make, Sir Peter, for this base treachery against thy neighbor's daughter and thy sovereign's niece?"

"When fond hearts be thwarted by a cruel parent," replied the pot-bellied old beast in a soft and fawning tone, "love must still find its way; and so thy gallant swain hath dared the wrath of thy great father and majestic uncle, and lays his heart at thy feet, O beauteous Bertrade, knowing full well that thine hath been hungering after it since we didst first avow our love to thy hard-hearted sire. See, I kneel to thee, my dove!" And with cracking joints the fat baron plumped down upon his marrow bones.

Bertrade turned and as she saw him her haughty countenance relaxed into a sneeringsmile.

"Thou art a fool, Sir Peter," she said, "and, at that, the worst species of fool--an ancient fool. It is useless to pursue thy cause, for I will have none of thee. Let me hence, if thou be a gentleman, and no word of what hath transpired shall ever pass my lips. But let me go, 'tis all I ask, and it is useless to detain me for I cannot give what you would have. I do not love you, nor ever can I."

Her first words had caused the red of humiliation to mottle his already ruby visage to a semblance of purple, and now, as he attempted to rise with dignity, he was still further covered with confusion by the fact that his huge stomach made it necessary for him to go upon all fours before he could rise, so that he got up much after the manner of a cow, raising his stern high in air in a most ludicrous fashion. As he gained his feet he saw the girl turn her head from him to hide the laughter on her face.

"Return to thy chamber," he thundered. "I will give thee until tomorrow to decide whether thou wilt accept Peter of Colfax as thy husband, or take another position in his household which will bar thee for all time from the society of thykind."

The girl turned toward him, the laugh still playing on her lips.

"I will be wife to no buffoon; to no clumsy old clown; to no debauched, degraded parody of a man. And as for thy other rash threat, thou hast not the guts to put thy wishes into deeds, thou craven coward, for well ye know that Simon de Montfort would cut out thy foul heart with his own hand if he ever suspected thou wert guilty of speaking of such to me, his daughter." And Bertrade de Montfort swept from the great hall, and mounted to her tower chamber in the ancient Saxon stronghold of Colfax.

The old woman kept watch over her during the night and until late the following afternoon, when Peter of Colfax summoned his prisoner before him once more. So terribly had the old hag played upon the girl's fears that she felt fully certain that the Baron was quite equal to his dire threat, and so she had again been casting about for some means of escape or delay.

The room in which she was imprisoned was in the west tower of the castle, fully a hundred feet above the moat, which the single embrasure overlooked. There was, therefore, no avenue of escape in this direction. The solitary door was furnished with huge oaken bars, and itself composed of mighty planks of the same wood, cross barred with iron.

If she could but get the old woman out, thought Bertrade, she could barricade herself within and thus delay, at least, her impending fate in the hope that succor might come from some source. But her most subtle wiles proved ineffectual in ridding her, even for a moment, of her harpy jailer; and now that the final summons had come, she was beside herself for a lack of means to thwart her captor.

Her dagger had been taken from her, but one hung from the girdle of the old woman and this Bertrade determined to have.

Feigning trouble with the buckle of her own girdle, she called upon the old woman to aid her, and as the hag bent her head close to the girl's body to see what was wrong with the girdle clasp, Bertrade reached quickly to her side and snatched the weapon from its sheath. Quickly she sprang back from the old woman who, with a cry of anger and alarm, rushed upon her.

"Back!" cried the girl. "Stand back, old hag, or thou shalt feel the length of thine own blade."

The woman hesitated and then fell to cursing and blaspheming in a most horrible manner, at the same time calling for help.

Bertrade backed to the door, commanding the old woman to remain where she was, on pain of death, and quickly dropped the mighty bars into place. Scarcely had the last great bolt been slipped than Peter of Colfax, with a dozen servants and men-at-arms, were pounding loudly upon the outside.

"What's wrong within, Coll," cried the Baron.

"The wench has wrested my dagger from me and is murdering me," shrieked the old woman.

"An' that I will truly do, Peter of Colfax," spoke Bertrade, "if you do not immediately send for my friends to conduct me from thy castle, for I will not step my foot from this room until I know that mine own people stand without."

Peter of Colfax pled and threatened, commanded and coaxed, but all in vain. So passed the afternoon, and as darkness settled upon the castle the Baron desisted from his attempts, intending to starve his prisoner out.

Within the little room, Bertrade de Montfort sat upon a bench guarding her prisoner, from whom she did not dare move her eyes for a single second. All that long night she sat thus, and when morning dawned, it found her position unchanged, her tired eyes still fixed upon the hag.

Early in the morning, Peter of Colfax resumed his endeavors to persuade her to come out; he even admitted defeat and promised her safe conduct to her father's castle, but Bertrade de Montfort was not one to be fooled by his lying tongue.

"Then will I starve you out," he cried at length.

"Gladly will I starve in preference to falling into thy foul hands," replied the girl. "But thy old servant here will starve first, for she be very old and not so strong as I. Therefore, how will it profit you to kill two and still be robbed of thy prey?"

Peter of Colfax entertained no doubt but that his fair prisoner would carry out her threat and so he set his men to work with cold chisels, axes and saws upon the huge door.

For hours, they labored upon that mighty work of defence, and it was late at night ere they made a little opening large enough to admit a hand and arm, but the first one intruded within the room to raise the bars was drawn quickly back with a howl of pain from its owner. Thus the keen dagger in the

girl's hand put an end to all hopes of entering without completely demolishing the door.

To this work, the men without then set themselves diligently while Peter of Colfax renewed his entreaties, through the small opening they had made. Bertrade replied but once.

"Seest thou this poniard?" she asked. "When that door falls, this point enters my heart. There is nothing beyond that door, with thou, poltroon, to which death in this little chamber would not be preferable."

As she spoke, she turned toward the man she was addressing, for the first time during all those weary, hideous hours removing her glance from the old hag. It was enough. Silently, but with the quickness of a tigress the old woman was upon her back, one claw-like paw grasping the wrist which held the dagger.

"Quick, My Lord!" she shrieked, "the bolts, quick."

Instantly Peter of Colfax ran his arm through the tiny opening in the door and a second later four of his men rushed to the aid of the old woman.

Easily they wrested the dagger from Bertrade's fingers, and at the Baron's bidding, they dragged her to the great hall below.

As his retainers left the room at his command, Peter of Colfax strode back and forth upon the rushes which strewed the floor. Finally he stopped before the girl standing rigid in the center of the room.

"Hast come to thy senses yet, Bertrade de Montfort?" he asked angrily. "I have offered you your choice; to be the honored wife of Peter of Colfax, or, by force, his mistress. The good priest waits without, what be your answer now?"

"The same as it has been these past two days," she replied with haughty scorn. "The same that it shall always be. I will be neither wife nor mistress to a coward; a hideous, abhorrent pig of a man. I would die, it seems, if I felt the touch of your hand upon me. You do not dare to touch me, you craven. I, the daughter of an earl, the niece of a king, wed to the warty toad, Peter of Colfax!"

"Hold, chit!" cried the Baron, livid with rage. "You have gone too far. Enough of this; and you love me not now, I shall learn you to love ere the sun rises." And with a vile oath he grasped the girl roughly by the arm, and dragged her toward the little doorway at the side of the room.