

## CHAPTER X

For three weeks after his meeting with Bertrade de Montfort and his sojourn at the castle of John de Stutevill, Norman of Torn was busy with his wild horde in reducing and sacking the castle of John de Grey, a royalist baron who had captured and hanged two of the outlaw's fighting men; and never again after his meeting with the daughter of the chief of the barons did Norman of Torn raise a hand against the rebels or their friends.

Shortly after his return to Torn, following the successful outcome of his expedition, the watch upon the tower reported the approach of a dozen armed knights. Norman sent Red Shandy to the outer walls to learn the mission of the party, for visitors seldom came to this inaccessible and inhospitable fortress; and he well knew that no party of a dozen knights would venture with hostile intent within the clutches of his great band of villains.

The great red giant soon returned to say that it was Henry de Montfort, oldest son of the Earl of Leicester, who had come under a flag of truce and would have speech with the master of Torn.

"Admit them, Shandy," commanded Norman of Torn, "I will speak with them here."

When the party, a few moments later, was ushered into his presence it found itself facing a mailed knight with drawn visor.

Henry de Montfort advanced with haughty dignity until he faced the outlaw.

"Be ye Norman of Torn?" he asked. And, did he try to conceal the hatred and loathing which he felt, he was poorly successful.

"They call me so," replied the visored knight. "And what may bring a De Montfort after so many years to visit his old neighbor?"

"Well ye know what brings me, Norman of Torn," replied the young man. "It is useless to waste words, and we cannot resort to arms, for you have us entirely in your power. Name your price and it shall be paid, only be quick and let me hence with my sister."

"What wild words be these, Henry de Montfort? Your sister! What mean you?"

"Yes, my sister Bertrade, whom you stole upon the highroad two days since, after murdering the knights of John de Stutevill who were fetching her home from a visit upon the Baron's daughter. We know that it was you for the foreheads of the dead men bore your devil's mark."

"Shandy!" roared Norman of Torn. "WHAT MEANS THIS? Who has been upon the road, attacking women, in my absence? You were here and in charge during my visit to my Lord de Grey. As you value your hide, Shandy, the truth!"

"Since you laid me low in the hut of the good priest, I have served you well, Norman of Torn. You should know my loyalty by this time and that never have I lied to you. No man of yours has done this thing, nor is it the first time that vile scoundrels have placed your mark upon their dead that they might thus escape suspicion, themselves."

"Henry de Montfort," said Norman of Torn, turning to his visitor, "we of Torn bear no savory name, that I know full well, but no man may say that we unsheath our swords against women. Your sister is not here. I give you the word of honor of Norman of Torn. Is it not enough?"

"They say you never lie," replied De Montfort. "Would to God I knew who had done this thing, or which way to search for my sister."

Norman of Torn made no reply, his thoughts were in wild confusion, and it was with difficulty that he hid the fierce anxiety of his heart or his rage against the perpetrators of this dastardly act which tore his whole being.

In silence De Montfort turned and left, nor had his party scarce passed the drawbridge ere the castle of Torn was filled with hurrying men and the noise and uproar of a sudden call to arms.

Some thirty minutes later, five hundred iron-clad horses carried their mailed riders beneath the portcullis of the grim pile, and Norman the Devil, riding at their head, spurred rapidly in the direction of the castle of Peter of Colfax.

The great troop, winding down the rocky trail from Torn's buttressed gates, presented a picture of wild barbaric splendor.

The armor of the men was of every style and metal from the ancient banded mail of the Saxon to the richly ornamented plate armor of Milan. Gold and silver and precious stones set in plumed crest and breastplate and shield, and even in the steel spiked chamfrons of the horses' head armor showed

the rich loot which had fallen to the portion of Norman of Torn's wild raiders.

Fluttering pennons streamed from five hundred lance points, and the gray banner of Torn, with the black falcon's wing, flew above each of the five companies. The great linden wood shields of the men were covered with gray leather and, in the upper right hand corner of each, was the black falcon's wing. The surcoats of the riders were also uniform, being of dark gray villosa faced with black wolf skin, so that notwithstanding the richness of the armor and the horse trappings, there was a grim, gray warlike appearance to these wild companies that comported well with their reputation.

Recruited from all ranks of society and from every civilized country of Europe, the great horde of Torn numbered in its ten companies serf and noble; Britain, Saxon, Norman, Dane, German, Italian and French, Scot, Pict and Irish.

Here birth caused no distinctions; the escaped serf, with the gall marks of his brass collar still visible about his neck, rode shoulder to shoulder with the outlawed scion of a noble house. The only requisites for admission to the troop were willingness and ability to fight, and an oath to obey the laws made by Norman of Torn.

The little army was divided into ten companies of one hundred men, each company captained by a fighter of proven worth and ability.

Our old friends Red Shandy, and John and James Flory led the first three companies, the remaining seven being under command of other seasoned veterans of a thousand fights.

One Eye Kanty, owing to his early trade, held the always important post of chief armorer, while Peter the Hermit, the last of the five cut-throats whom Norman of Torn had bested that day, six years before, in the hut of Father Claude, had become majordomo of the great castle of Torn, which post included also the vital functions of quartermaster and commissary.

The old man of Torn attended to the training of serf and squire in the art of war, for it was ever necessary to fill the gaps made in the companies, due to their constant encounters upon the highroad and their battles at the taking of some feudal castle; in which they did not always come off unscathed, though usually victorious.

Today, as they wound west across the valley, Norman of Torn rode at the head of the cavalcade, which strung out behind him in a long column. Above

his gray steel armor, a falcon's wing rose from his crest. It was the insignia which always marked him to his men in the midst of battle. Where it waved might always be found the fighting and the honors, and about it they were wont to rally.

Beside Norman of Torn rode the grim, gray, old man, silent and taciturn; nursing his deep hatred in the depths of his malign brain.

At the head of their respective companies rode the five captains: Red Shandy; John Flory; Edwild the Serf; Emilio, Count de Gropello of Italy; and Sieur Ralph de la Campnee, of France.

The hamlets and huts which they passed in the morning and early afternoon brought forth men, women and children to cheer and wave God-speed to them; but as they passed farther from the vicinity of Torn, where the black falcon wing was known more by the ferocity of its name than by the kindly deeds of the great outlaw to the lowly of his neighborhood, they saw only closed and barred doors with an occasional frightened face peering from a tiny window.

It was midnight ere they sighted the black towers of Colfax silhouetted against the starry sky. Drawing his men into the shadows of the forest a half mile from the castle, Norman of Torn rode forward with Shandy and some fifty men to a point as close as they could come without being observed. Here they dismounted and Norman of Torn crept stealthily forward alone.

Taking advantage of every cover, he approached to the very shadows of the great gate without being detected. In the castle, a light shone dimly from the windows of the great hall, but no other sign of life was apparent. To his intense surprise, Norman of Torn found the drawbridge lowered and no sign of watchmen at the gate or upon the walls.

As he had sacked this castle some two years since, he was familiar with its internal plan, and so he knew that through the scullery he could reach a small antechamber above, which let directly into the great hall.

And so it happened that, as Peter of Colfax wheeled toward the door of the little room, he stopped short in terror, for there before him stood a strange knight in armor, with lowered visor and drawn sword. The girl saw him too, and a look of hope and renewed courage overspread her face.

"Draw!" commanded a low voice in English, "unless you prefer to pray, for you are about to die."

"Who be ye, varlet?" cried the Baron. "Ho, John! Ho, Guy! To the rescue, quick!" he shrieked, and drawing his sword, he attempted to back quickly toward the main doorway of the hall; but the man in armor was upon him and forcing him to fight ere he had taken three steps.

It had been short shrift for Peter of Colfax that night had not John and Guy and another of his henchmen rushed into the room with drawn swords.

"Ware! Sir Knight," cried the girl, as she saw the three knaves rushing to the aid of their master.

Turning to meet their assault, the knight was forced to abandon the terror-stricken Baron for an instant, and again he had made for the doorway bent only on escape; but the girl had divined his intentions, and running quickly to the entrance, she turned the great lock and threw the key with all her might to the far corner of the hall. In an instant she regretted her act, for she saw that where she might have reduced her rescuer's opponents by at least one, she had now forced the cowardly Baron to remain, and nothing fights more fiercely than a cornered rat.

The knight was holding his own splendidly with the three retainers, and for an instant Bertrade de Montfort stood spell-bound by the exhibition of swordsmanship she was witnessing.

Fighting the three alternately, in pairs and again all at the same time, the silent knight, though weighted by his heavy armor, forced them steadily back; his flashing blade seeming to weave a net of steel about them. Suddenly his sword stopped just for an instant, stopped in the heart of one of his opponents, and as the man lunged to the floor, it was flashing again close to the breasts of the two remaining men-at-arms.

Another went down less than ten seconds later, and then the girl's attention was called to the face of the horrified Baron; Peter of Colfax was moving--slowly and cautiously, he was creeping, from behind, toward the visored knight, and in his raised hand flashed a sharp dagger.

For an instant, the girl stood frozen with horror, unable to move a finger or to cry out; but only for an instant, and then, regaining control of her muscles, she stooped quickly and, grasping a heavy foot-stool, hurled it full at Peter of Colfax.

It struck him below the knees and toppled him to the floor just as the knight's sword passed through the throat of his final antagonist.

As the Baron fell, he struck heavily upon a table which supported the only lighted cresset within the chamber. In an instant, all was darkness. There was a rapid shuffling sound as of the scurrying of rats and then the quiet of the tomb settled upon the great hall.

"Are you safe and unhurt, my Lady Bertrade?" asked a grave English voice out of the darkness.

"Quite, Sir Knight," she replied, "and you?"

"Not a scratch, but where is our good friend the Baron?"

"He lay here upon the floor but a moment since, and carried a thin long dagger in his hand. Have a care, Sir Knight, he may even now be upon you."

The knight did not answer, but she heard him moving boldly about the room. Soon he had found another lamp and made a light. As its feeble rays slowly penetrated the black gloom, the girl saw the bodies of the three men-at-arms, the overturned table and lamp, and the visored knight; but Peter of Colfax was gone.

The knight perceived his absence at the same time, but he only laughed a low, grim laugh.

"He will not go far, My Lady Bertrade," he said.

"How know you my name?" she asked. "Who may you be? I do not recognize your armor, and your breastplate bears no arms."

He did not answer at once and her heart rose in her breast as it filled with the hope that her brave rescuer might be the same Roger de Conde who had saved her from the hirelings of Peter of Colfax but a few short weeks since. Surely it was the same straight and mighty figure, and there was the marvelous swordplay as well. It must be he, and yet Roger de Conde had spoken no English while this man spoke it well, though, it was true, with a slight French accent.

"My Lady Bertrade, I be Norman of Torn," said the visored knight with quiet dignity.

The girl's heart sank, and a feeling of cold fear crept through her. For years that name had been the symbol of fierce cruelty, and mad hatred against her kind. Little children were frightened into obedience by the vaguest hint that the Devil of Torn would get them, and grown men had come to whisper the name with grim, set lips.

"Norman of Torn!" she whispered. "May God have mercy on my soul!"

Beneath the visored helm, a wave of pain and sorrow surged across the countenance of the outlaw, and a little shudder, as of a chill of hopelessness, shook his giant frame.

"You need not fear, My Lady," he said sadly. "You shall be in your father's castle of Leicester ere the sun marks noon. And you will be safer under the protection of the hated Devil of Torn than with your own mighty father, or your royal uncle."

"It is said that you never lie, Norman of Torn," spoke the girl, "and I believe you, but tell me why you thus befriend a De Montfort."

"It is not for love of your father or your brothers, nor yet hatred of Peter of Colfax, nor neither for any reward whatsoever. It pleases me to do as I do, that is all. Come."

He led her in silence to the courtyard and across the lowered drawbridge, to where they soon discovered a group of horsemen, and in answer to a low challenge from Shandy, Norman of Torn replied that it was he.

"Take a dozen men, Shandy, and search yon hellhole. Bring out to me, alive, Peter of Colfax, and My Lady's cloak and a palfrey--and Shandy, when all is done as I say, you may apply the torch! But no looting, Shandy."

Shandy looked in surprise upon his leader, for the torch had never been a weapon of Norman of Torn, while loot, if not always the prime object of his many raids, was at least a very important consideration.

The outlaw noticed the surprised hesitation of his faithful subaltern and signing him to listen, said:

"Red Shandy, Norman of Torn has fought and sacked and pillaged for the love of it, and for a principle which was at best but a vague generality. Tonight we ride to redress a wrong done to My Lady Bertrade de Montfort, and that, Shandy, is a different matter. The torch, Shandy, from tower to scullery, but in the service of My Lady, no looting."

"Yes, My Lord," answered Shandy, and departed with his little detachment.

In a half hour he returned with a dozen prisoners, but no Peter of Colfax.

"He has flown, My Lord," the big fellow reported, and indeed it was true. Peter of Colfax had passed through the vaults beneath his castle and, by a long subterranean passage, had reached the quarters of some priests

without the lines of Norman of Torn. By this time, he was several miles on his way to the coast and France; for he had recognized the swordsmanship of the outlaw, and did not care to remain in England and face the wrath of both Norman of Torn and Simon de Montfort.

"He will return," was the outlaw's only comment, when he had been fully convinced that the Baron had escaped.

They watched until the castle had burst into flames in a dozen places, the prisoners huddled together in terror and apprehension, fully expecting a summary and horrible death.

When Norman of Torn had assured himself that no human power could now save the doomed pile, he ordered that the march be taken up, and the warriors filed down the roadway behind their leader and Bertrade de Montfort, leaving their erstwhile prisoners sorely puzzled but unharmed and free.

As they looked back, they saw the heavens red with the great flames that sprang high above the lofty towers. Immense volumes of dense smoke rolled southward across the sky line. Occasionally it would clear away from the burning castle for an instant to show the black walls pierced by their hundreds of embrasures, each lit up by the red of the raging fire within. It was a gorgeous, impressive spectacle, but one so common in those fierce, wild days, that none thought it worthy of more than a passing backward glance.

Varied emotions filled the breasts of the several riders who wended their slow way down the mud-slippery road. Norman of Torn was both elated and sad. Elated that he had been in time to save this girl who awakened such strange emotions in his breast; sad that he was a loathesome thing in her eyes. But that it was pure happiness just to be near her, sufficed him for the time; of the morrow, what use to think! The little, grim, gray, old man of Torn nursed the spleen he did not dare vent openly, and cursed the chance that had sent Henry de Montfort to Torn to search for his sister; while the followers of the outlaw swore quietly over the vagary which had brought them on this long ride without either fighting or loot.

Bertrade de Montfort was but filled with wonder that she should owe her life and honor to this fierce, wild cut-throat who had sworn especial hatred against her family, because of its relationship to the house of Plantagenet. She could not fathom it, and yet, he seemed fair spoken for so rough a man;



she wondered what manner of countenance might lie beneath that barred visor.

Once the outlaw took his cloak from its fastenings at his saddle's cantel and threw it about the shoulders of the girl, for the night air was chilly, and again he dismounted and led her palfrey around a bad place in the road, lest the beast might slip and fall.

She thanked him in her courtly manner for these services, but beyond that, no word passed between them, and they came, in silence, about midday within sight of the castle of Simon de Montfort.

The watch upon the tower was thrown into confusion by the approach of so large a party of armed men, so that, by the time they were in hailing distance, the walls of the great structure were crowded with fighting men.

Shandy rode ahead with a flag of truce, and when he was beneath the castle walls Simon de Montfort called forth:

"Who be ye and what your mission? Peace or war?"

"It is Norman of Torn, come in peace, and in the service of a De Montfort," replied Shandy. "He would enter with one companion, my Lord Earl."

"Dares Norman of Torn enter the castle of Simon de Montfort--thinks he that I keep a robbers' roost!" cried the fierce old warrior.

"Norman of Torn dares ride where he will in all England," boasted the red giant. "Will you see him in peace, My Lord?"

"Let him enter," said De Montfort, "but no knavery, now, we are a thousand men here, well armed and ready fighters."

Shandy returned to his master with the reply, and together, Norman of Torn and Bertrade de Montfort clattered across the drawbridge beneath the portcullis of the castle of the Earl of Leicester, brother-in-law of Henry III of England.

The girl was still wrapped in the great cloak of her protector, for it had been raining, so that she rode beneath the eyes of her father's men without being recognized. In the courtyard, they were met by Simon de Montfort, and his sons Henry and Simon.

The girl threw herself impetuously from her mount, and, flinging aside the outlaw's cloak, rushed toward her astounded parent.

"What means this," cried De Montfort, "has the rascal offered you harm or indignity?"

"You craven liar," cried Henry de Montfort, "but yesterday you swore upon your honor that you did not hold my sister, and I, like a fool, believed." And with his words, the young man flung himself upon Norman of Torn with drawn sword.

Quicker than the eye could see, the sword of the visored knight flew from its scabbard, and, with a single lightning-like move, sent the blade of young De Montfort hurtling cross the courtyard; and then, before either could take another step, Bertrade de Montfort had sprung between them and placing a hand upon the breastplate of the outlaw, stretched forth the other with palm out-turned toward her kinsmen as though to protect Norman of Torn from further assault.

"Be he outlaw or devil," she cried, "he is a brave and courteous knight, and he deserves from the hands of the De Montforts the best hospitality they can give, and not cold steel and insults." Then she explained briefly to her astonished father and brothers what had befallen during the past few days.

Henry de Montfort, with the fine chivalry that marked him, was the first to step forward with outstretched hand to thank Norman of Torn, and to ask his pardon for his rude words and hostile act.

The outlaw but held up his open palm, as he said,

"Let the De Montforts think well ere they take the hand of Norman of Torn. I give not my hand except in friendship, and not for a passing moment; but for life. I appreciate your present feelings of gratitude, but let them not blind you to the fact that I am still Norman the Devil, and that you have seen my mark upon the brows of your dead. I would gladly have your friendship, but I wish it for the man, Norman of Torn, with all his faults, as well as what virtues you may think him to possess."

"You are right, sir," said the Earl, "you have our gratitude and our thanks for the service you have rendered the house of Montfort, and ever during our lives you may command our favors. I admire your bravery and your candor, but while you continue the Outlaw of Torn, you may not break bread at the table of De Montfort as a friend would have the right to do."

"Your speech is that of a wise and careful man," said Norman of Torn quietly. "I go, but remember that from this day, I have no quarrel with the House of Simon de Montfort, and that should you need my arms, they are at

your service, a thousand strong. Goodbye." But as he turned to go, Bertrade de Montfort confronted him with outstretched hand.

"You must take my hand in friendship," she said, "for, to my dying day, I must ever bless the name of Norman of Torn because of the horror from which he has rescued me."

He took the little fingers in his mailed hand, and bending upon one knee raised them to his lips.

"To no other--woman, man, king, God, or devil--has Norman of Torn bent the knee. If ever you need him, My Lady Bertrade, remember that his services are yours for the asking."

And turning, he mounted and rode in silence from the courtyard of the castle of Leicester. Without a backward glance, and with his five hundred men at his back, Norman of Torn disappeared beyond a turning in the roadway.

"A strange man," said Simon de Montfort, "both good and bad, but from today, I shall ever believe more good than bad. Would that he were other than he be, for his arm would wield a heavy sword against the enemies of England, and he could be persuaded to our cause."

"Who knows," said Henry de Montfort, "but that an offer of friendship might have won him to a better life. It seemed that in his speech was a note of wistfulness. I wish, father, that we had taken his hand."