

CHAPTER XI

Several days after Norman of Torn's visit to the castle of Leicester, a young knight appeared before the Earl's gates demanding admittance to have speech with Simon de Montfort. The Earl received him, and as the young man entered his presence, Simon de Montfort, sprang to his feet in astonishment.

"My Lord Prince," he cried. "What do ye here, and alone?"

The young man smiled.

"I be no prince, My Lord," he said, "though some have said that I favor the King's son. I be Roger de Conde, whom it may have pleased your gracious daughter to mention. I have come to pay homage to Bertrade de Montfort."

"Ah," said De Montfort, rising to greet the young knight cordially, "an you be that Roger de Conde who rescued my daughter from the fellows of Peter of Colfax, the arms of the De Montforts are open to you.

"Bertrade has had your name upon her tongue many times since her return. She will be glad indeed to receive you, as is her father. She has told us of your valiant espousal of her cause, and the thanks of her brothers and mother await you, Roger de Conde.

"She also told us of your strange likeness to Prince Edward, but until I saw you, I could not believe two men could be born of different mothers and yet be so identical. Come, we will seek out my daughter and her mother."

De Montfort led the young man to a small chamber where they were greeted by Princess Eleanor, his wife, and by Bertrade de Montfort. The girl was frankly glad to see him once more and laughingly chide him because he had allowed another to usurp his prerogative and rescue her from Peter of Colfax.

"And to think," she cried, "that it should have been Norman of Torn who fulfilled your duties for you. But he did not capture Sir Peter's head, my friend; that is still at large to be brought to me upon a golden dish."

"I have not forgotten, Lady Bertrade," said Roger de Conde. "Peter of Colfax will return."

The girl glanced at him quickly.

"The very words of the Outlaw of Torn," she said. "How many men be ye, Roger de Conde? With raised visor, you could pass in the King's court for the King's son; and in manner, and form, and swordsmanship, and your visor lowered, you might easily be hanged for Norman of Torn."

"And which would it please ye most that I be?" he laughed.

"Neither," she answered, "I be satisfied with my friend, Roger de Conde."

"So ye like not the Devil of Torn?" he asked.

"He has done me a great service, and I be under monstrous obligations to him, but he be, nathless, the Outlaw of Torn and I the daughter of an earl and a king's sister."

"A most unbridgeable gulf indeed," commented Roger de Conde, drily. "Not even gratitude could lead a king's niece to receive Norman of Torn on a footing of equality."

"He has my friendship, always," said the girl, "but I doubt me if Norman of Torn be the man to impose upon it."

"One can never tell," said Roger de Conde, "what manner of fool a man may be. When a man's head be filled with a pretty face, what room be there for reason?"

"Soon thou wilt be a courtier, if thou keep long at this turning of pretty compliments," said the girl coldly; "and I like not courtiers, nor their empty, hypocritical chatter."

The man laughed.

"If I turned a compliment, I did not know it," he said. "What I think, I say. It may not be a courtly speech or it may. I know nothing of courts and care less, but be it man or maid to whom I speak, I say what is in my mind or I say nothing. I did not, in so many words, say that you are beautiful, but I think it nevertheless, and ye cannot be angry with my poor eyes if they deceive me into believing that no fairer woman breathes the air of England. Nor can you chide my sinful brain that it gladly believes what mine eyes tell it. No, you may not be angry so long as I do not tell you all this."

Bertrade de Montfort did not know how to answer so ridiculous a sophistry; and, truth to tell, she was more than pleased to hear from the lips of Roger de Conde what bored her on the tongues of other men.

De Conde was the guest of the Earl of Leicester for several days, and before his visit was terminated, the young man had so won his way into the good graces of the family that they were loath to see him leave.

Although denied the society of such as these throughout his entire life, yet it seemed that he fell as naturally into the ways of their kind as though he had always been among them. His starved soul, groping through the darkness of the empty past, yearned toward the feasting and the light of friendship, and urged him to turn his back upon the old life, and remain ever with these people, for Simon de Montfort had offered the young man a position of trust and honor in his retinue.

"Why refused you the offer of my father?" said Bertrade to him as he was come to bid her farewell. "Simon de Montfort is as great a man in England as the King himself, and your future were assured did you attach your self to his person. But what am I saying! Did Roger de Conde not wish to be elsewhere, he had accepted and, as he did not accept, it is proof positive that he does not wish to bide among the De Montforts."

"I would give my soul to the devil," said Norman of Torn, "would it buy me the right to remain ever at the feet of Bertrade Montfort."

He raised her hand to his lips in farewell as he started to speak, but something--was it an almost imperceptible pressure of her little fingers, a quickening of her breath or a swaying of her body toward him?--caused him to pause and raise his eyes to hers.

For an instant they stood thus, the eyes of the man sinking deep into the eyes of the maid, and then hers closed and with a little sigh that was half gasp, she swayed toward him, and the Devil of Torn folded the King's niece in his mighty arms and his lips placed the seal of a great love upon those that were upturned to him.

The touch of those pure lips brought the man to himself.

"Ah, Bertrade, my Bertrade," he cried, "what is this thing that I have done! Forgive me, and let the greatness and the purity of my love for you plead in extenuation of my act."

She looked up into his face in surprise, and then placing her strong white hands upon his shoulders, she whispered:

"See, Roger, I am not angry. It is not wrong that we love; tell me it is not, Roger."

"You must not say that you love me, Bertrade. I am a coward, a craven poltroon; but, God, how I love you."

"But," said the girl, "I do love--"

"Stop," he cried, "not yet, not yet. Do not say it till I come again. You know nothing of me, you do not know even who I be; but when next I come, I promise that ye shall know as much of me as I myself know, and then, Bertrade, my Bertrade, if you can then say, 'I love you' no power on earth, or in heaven above, or hell below shall keep you from being mine!"

"I will wait, Roger, for I believe in you and trust you. I do not understand, but I know that you must have some good reason, though it all seems very strange to me. If I, a De Montfort, am willing to acknowledge my love for any man, there can be no reason why I should not do so, unless," and she started at the sudden thought, wide-eyed and paling, "unless there be another woman, a--a--wife?"

"There is no other woman, Bertrade," said Norman of Torn. "I have no wife; nor within the limits of my memory have my lips ever before touched the lips of another, for I do not remember my mother."

She sighed a happy little sigh of relief, and laughing lightly, said:

"It is some old woman's bugaboo that you are haling out of a dark corner of your imagination to frighten yourself with. I do not fear, since I know that you must be all good. There be no line of vice or deception upon your face and you are very brave. So brave and noble a man, Roger, has a heart of pure gold."

"Don't," he said, bitterly. "I cannot endure it. Wait until I come again and then, oh my flower of all England, if you have it in your heart to speak as you are speaking now, the sun of my happiness will be at zenith. Then, but not before, shall I speak to the Earl, thy father. Farewell, Bertrade, in a few days I return."

"If you would speak to the Earl on such a subject, you insolent young puppy, you may save your breath," thundered an angry voice, and Simon de Montfort strode, scowling, into the room.

The girl paled, but not from fear of her father, for the fighting blood of the De Montforts was as strong in her as in her sire. She faced him with as brave and resolute a face as did the young man, who turned slowly, fixing De Montfort with level gaze.

"I heard enough of your words as I was passing through the corridor," continued the latter, "to readily guess what had gone before. So it is for this that you have wormed your sneaking way into my home? And thought you that Simon de Montfort would throw his daughter at the head of the first passing rogue? Who be ye, but a nameless rascal? For aught we know, some low born lackey. Get ye hence, and be only thankful that I do not aid you with the toe of my boot where it would do the most good."

"Stop!" cried the girl. "Stop, father, hast forgot that but for Roger de Conde ye might have seen your daughter a corpse ere now, or, worse, herself befouled and dishonored?"

"I do not forget," replied the Earl, "and it is because I remember that my sword remains in its scabbard. The fellow has been amply repaid by the friendship of De Montfort, but now this act of perfidy has wiped clean the score. An' you would go in peace, sirrah, go quickly, ere I lose my temper."

"There has been some misunderstanding on your part, My Lord," spoke Norman of Torn, quietly and without apparent anger or excitement. "Your daughter has not told me that she loves me, nor did I contemplate asking you for her hand. When next I come, first shall I see her and if she will have me, My Lord, I shall come to you to tell you that I shall wed her. Norm-- Roger de Conde asks permission of no man to do what he would do."

Simon de Montfort was fairly bursting with rage but he managed to control himself to say,

"My daughter weds whom I select, and even now I have practically closed negotiations for her betrothal to Prince Philip, nephew of King Louis of France. And as for you, sir, I would as lief see her the wife of the Outlaw of Torn. He, at least, has wealth and power, and a name that be known outside his own armor. But enough of this; get you gone, nor let me see your face again within the walls of Leicester's castle."

"You are right, My Lord, it were foolish and idle for us to be quarreling with words," said the outlaw. "Farewell, My Lady. I shall return as I promised, and your word shall be law." And with a profound bow to De Montfort, Norman of Torn left the apartment, and in a few minutes was riding through the courtyard of the castle toward the main portals.

As he passed beneath a window in the castle wall, a voice called to him from above, and drawing in his horse, he looked up into the eyes of Bertrade de Montfort.

"Take this, Roger de Conde," she whispered, dropping a tiny parcel to him, "and wear it ever, for my sake. We may never meet again, for the Earl my father, is a mighty man, not easily turned from his decisions; therefore I shall say to you, Roger de Conde, what you forbid my saying. I love you, and be ye prince or scullion, you may have me, if you can find the means to take me."

"Wait, my lady, until I return, then shall you decide, and if ye be of the same mind as today, never fear but that I shall take ye. Again, farewell." And with a brave smile that hid a sad heart, Norman of Torn passed out of the castle yard.

When he undid the parcel which Bertrade had tossed to him, he found that it contained a beautifully wrought ring set with a single opal.

The Outlaw of Torn raised the little circlet to his lips, and then slipped it upon the third finger of his left hand.