

CHAPTER XII

Norman of Torn did not return to the castle of Leicester "in a few days," nor for many months. For news came to him that Bertrade de Montfort had been posted off to France in charge of her mother.

From now on, the forces of Torn were employed in repeated attacks on royalist barons, encroaching ever and ever southward until even Berkshire and Surrey and Sussex felt the weight of the iron hand of the outlaw.

Nearly a year had elapsed since that day when he had held the fair form of Bertrade de Montfort in his arms, and in all that time he had heard no word from her.

He would have followed her to France but for the fact that, after he had parted from her and the intoxication of her immediate presence had left his brain clear to think rationally, he had realized the futility of his hopes, and he had seen that the pressing of his suit could mean only suffering and mortification for the woman he loved.

His better judgment told him that she, on her part, when freed from the subtle spell woven by the nearness and the newness of a first love, would doubtless be glad to forget the words she had spoken in the heat of a divine passion. He would wait, then, until fate threw them together, and should that ever chance, while she was still free, he would let her know that Roger de Conde and the Outlaw of Torn were one and the same.

If she wants me then, he thought, but she will not. No it is impossible. It is better that she marry her French prince than to live, dishonored, the wife of a common highwayman; for though she might love me at first, the bitterness and loneliness of her life would turn her love to hate.

As the outlaw was sitting one day in the little cottage of Father Claude, the priest reverted to the subject of many past conversations; the unsettled state of civil conditions in the realm, and the stand which Norman of Torn would take when open hostilities between King and baron were declared.

"It would seem that Henry," said the priest, "by his continued breaches of both the spirit and letter of the Oxford Statutes, is but urging the barons to resort to arms; and the fact that he virtually forced Prince Edward to take up arms against Humphrey de Bohun last fall, and to carry the ravages of war throughout the Welsh border provinces, convinces me that he be, by this time, well equipped to resist De Montfort and his associates."

"If that be the case," said Norman of Torn, "we shall have war and fighting in real earnest ere many months."

"And under which standard does My Lord Norman expect to fight?" asked Father Claude.

"Under the black falcon's wing," laughed he of Torn.

"Thou be indeed a close-mouthed man, my son," said the priest, smiling. "Such an attribute helpeth make a great statesman. With thy soldierly qualities in addition, my dear boy, there be a great future for thee in the paths of honest men. Dost remember our past talk?"

"Yes, father, well; and often have I thought on't. I have one more duty to perform here in England and then, it may be, that I shall act on thy suggestion, but only on one condition."

"What be that, my son?"

"That wheresoere I go, thou must go also. Thou be my best friend; in truth, my father; none other have I ever known, for the little old man of Torn, even though I be the product of his loins, which I much mistrust, be no father to me."

The priest sat looking intently at the young man for many minutes before he spoke.

Without the cottage, a swarthy figure skulked beneath one of the windows, listening to such fragments of the conversation within as came to his attentive ears. It was Spizo, the Spaniard. He crouched entirely concealed by a great lilac bush, which many times before had hid his traitorous form.

At length the priest spoke.

"Norman of Torn," he said, "so long as thou remain in England, pitting thy great host against the Plantagenet King and the nobles and barons of his realm, thou be but serving as the cats-paw of another. Thyself hast said an hundred times that thou knowst not the reason for thy hatred against them. Thou be too strong a man to so throw thy life uselessly away to satisfy the choler of another.

"There be that of which I dare not speak to thee yet and only may I guess and dream of what I think, nor do I know whether I must hope that it be false or true, but now, if ever, the time hath come for the question to be settled. Thou hast not told me in so many words, but I be an old man and

versed in reading true between the lines, and so I know that thou lovest Bertrade de Montfort. Nay, do not deny it. And now, what I would say be this. In all England there lives no more honorable man than Simon de Montfort, nor none who could more truly decide upon thy future and thy past. Thou may not understand of what I hint, but thou know that thou may trust me, Norman of Torn."

"Yea, even with my life and honor, my father," replied the outlaw.

"Then promise me, that with the old man of Torn alone, thou wilt come hither when I bidst thee and meet Simon de Montfort, and abide by his decision should my surmises concerning thee be correct. He will be the best judge of any in England, save two who must now remain nameless."

"I will come, Father, but it must be soon for on the fourth day we ride south."

"It shall be by the third day, or not at all," replied Father Claude, and Norman of Torn, rising to leave, wondered at the moving leaves of the lilac bush without the window, for there was no breeze.

Spizo, the Spaniard, reached Torn several minutes before the outlaw chief and had already poured his tale into the ears of the little, grim, gray, old man.

As the priest's words were detailed to him the old man of Torn paled in anger.

"The fool priest will upset the whole work to which I have devoted near twenty years," he muttered, "if I find not the means to quiet his half-wit tongue. Between priest and petticoat, it be all but ruined now. Well then, so much the sooner must I act, and I know not but that now be as good a time as any. If we come near enough to the King's men on this trip south, the gibbet shall have its own, and a Plantagenet dog shall taste the fruits of his own tyranny," then glancing up and realizing that Spizo, the Spaniard, had been a listener, the old man, scowling, cried:

"What said I, sirrah? What didst hear?"

"Naught, My Lord; thou didst but mutter incoherently," replied the Spaniard.

The old man eyed him closely.

"An did I more, Spizo, thou heardst naught but muttering, remember."

"Yes, My Lord."

An hour later, the old man of Torn dismounted before the cottage of Father Claude and entered.

"I am honored," said the priest, rising.

"Priest," cried the old man, coming immediately to the point, "Norman of Torn tells me that thou wish him and me and Leicester to meet here. I know not what thy purpose may be, but for the boy's sake, carry not out thy design as yet. I may not tell thee my reasons, but it be best that this meeting take place after we return from the south."

The old man had never spoken so fairly to Father Claude before, and so the latter was quite deceived and promised to let the matter rest until later.

A few days after, in the summer of 1263, Norman of Torn rode at the head of his army of outlaws through the county of Essex, down toward London town. One thousand fighting men there were, with squires and other servants, and five hundred sumpter beasts to transport their tents and other impedimenta, and bring back the loot.

But a small force of ailing men-at-arms, and servants had been left to guard the castle of Torn under the able direction of Peter the Hermit.

At the column's head rode Norman of Torn and the little grim, gray, old man; and behind them, nine companies of knights, followed by the catapult detachment; then came the sumpter beasts. Horsan the Dane, with his company, formed the rear guard. Three hundred yards in advance of the column rode ten men to guard against surprise and ambuscades.

The pennons, and the banners and the bugles; and the loud rattling of sword, and lance and armor and iron-shod hoof carried to the eye and ear ample assurance that this great cavalcade of iron men was bent upon no peaceful mission.

All his captains rode today with Norman of Torn. Beside those whom we have met, there was Don Pedro Castro y Pensilo of Spain; Baron of Cobarth of Germany, and Sir John Mandecote of England. Like their leader, each of these fierce warriors carried a great price upon his head, and the story of the life of any one would fill a large volume with romance, war, intrigue, treachery, bravery and death.

Toward noon one day, in the midst of a beautiful valley of Essex, they came upon a party of ten knights escorting two young women. The meeting was at

a turn in the road, so that the two parties were upon each other before the ten knights had an opportunity to escape with their fair wards.

"What the devil be this," cried one of the knights, as the main body of the outlaw horde came into view, "the King's army or one of his foreign legions?"

"It be Norman of Torn and his fighting men," replied the outlaw.

The faces of the knights blanched, for they were ten against a thousand, and there were two women with them.

"Who be ye?" said the outlaw.

"I am Richard de Tany of Essex," said the oldest knight, he who had first spoken, "and these be my daughter and her friend, Mary de Stutevill. We are upon our way from London to my castle. What would you of us? Name your price, if it can be paid with honor, it shall be paid; only let us go our way in peace. We cannot hope to resist the Devil of Torn, for we be but ten lances. If ye must have blood, at least let the women go unharmed."

"My Lady Mary is an old friend," said the outlaw. "I called at her father's home but little more than a year since. We are neighbors, and the lady can tell you that women are safer at the hands of Norman of Torn than they might be in the King's palace."

"Right he is," spoke up Lady Mary, "Norman of Torn accorded my mother, my sister, and myself the utmost respect; though I cannot say as much for his treatment of my father," she added, half smiling.

"I have no quarrel with you, Richard de Tany," said Norman of Torn. "Ride on."

The next day, a young man hailed the watch upon the walls of the castle of Richard de Tany, telling him to bear word to Joan de Tany that Roger de Conde, a friend of her guest Lady Mary de Stutevill, was without.

In a few moments, the great drawbridge sank slowly into place and Norman of Torn trotted into the courtyard.

He was escorted to an apartment where Mary de Stutevill and Joan de Tany were waiting to receive him. Mary de Stutevill greeted him as an old friend, and the daughter of de Tany was no less cordial in welcoming her friend's friend to the hospitality of her father's castle.

"Are all your old friends and neighbors come after you to Essex," cried Joan de Tany, laughingly, addressing Mary. "Today it is Roger de Conde,

yesterday it was the Outlaw of Torn. Methinks Derby will soon be depopulated unless you return quickly to your home."

"I rather think it be for news of another that we owe this visit from Roger de Conde," said Mary, smiling. "For I have heard tales, and I see a great ring upon the gentleman's hand--a ring which I have seen before."

Norman of Torn made no attempt to deny the reason for his visit, but asked bluntly if she heard aught of Bertrade de Montfort.

"Thrice within the year have I received missives from her," replied Mary. "In the first two she spoke only of Roger de Conde, wondering why he did not come to France after her; but in the last she mentions not his name, but speaks of her approaching marriage with Prince Philip."

Both girls were watching the countenance of Roger de Conde narrowly, but no sign of the sorrow which filled his heart showed itself upon his face.

"I guess it be better so," he said quietly. "The daughter of a De Montfort could scarcely be happy with a nameless adventurer," he added, a little bitterly.

"You wrong her, my friend," said Mary de Stutevill. "She loved you and, unless I know not the friend of my childhood as well as I know myself, she loves you yet; but Bertrade de Montfort is a proud woman and what can you expect when she hears no word from you for a year? Thought you that she would seek you out and implore you to rescue her from the alliance her father has made for her?"

"You do not understand," he answered, "and I may not tell you; but I ask that you believe me when I say that it was for her own peace of mind, for her own happiness, that I did not follow her to France. But, let us talk of other things. The sorrow is mine and I would not force it upon others. I cared only to know that she is well, and, I hope, happy. It will never be given to me to make her or any other woman so. I would that I had never come into her life, but I did not know what I was doing; and the spell of her beauty and goodness was strong upon me, so that I was weak and could not resist what I had never known before in all my life--love."

"You could not well be blamed," said Joan de Tany, generously. "Bertrade de Montfort is all and even more than you have said; it be a benediction simply to have known her."

As she spoke, Norman of Torn looked upon her critically for the first time, and he saw that Joan de Tany was beautiful, and that when she spoke, her face lighted with a hundred little changing expressions of intelligence and character that cast a spell of fascination about her. Yes, Joan de Tany was good to look upon, and Norman of Torn carried a wounded heart in his breast that longed for surcease from its sufferings--for a healing balm upon its hurts and bruises.

And so it came to pass that, for many days, the Outlaw of Torn was a daily visitor at the castle of Richard de Tany, and the acquaintance between the man and the two girls ripened into a deep friendship, and with one of them, it threatened even more.

Norman of Torn, in his ignorance of the ways of women, saw only friendship in the little acts of Joan de Tany. His life had been a hard and lonely one. The only ray of brilliant and warming sunshine that had entered it had been his love for Bertrade de Montfort and hers for him.

His every thought was loyal to the woman whom he knew was not for him, but he longed for the companionship of his own kind and so welcomed the friendship of such as Joan de Tany and her fair guest. He did not dream that either looked upon him with any warmer sentiment than the sweet friendliness which was as new to him as love--how could he mark the line between or foresee the terrible price of his ignorance!

Mary de Stutevill saw and she thought the man but fickle and shallow in matters of the heart--many there were, she knew, who were thus. She might have warned him had she known the truth, but instead, she let things drift except for a single word of warning to Joan de Tany.

"Be careful of thy heart, Joan," she said, "lest it be getting away from thee into the keeping of one who seems to love no less quickly than he forgets."

The daughter of De Tany flushed.

"I am quite capable of safeguarding my own heart, Mary de Stutevill," she replied warmly. "If thou covet this man thyself, why, but say so. Do not think though that, because thy heart glows in his presence, mine is equally susceptible."

It was Mary's turn now to show offense, and a sharp retort was on her tongue when suddenly she realized the folly of such a useless quarrel. Instead she put her arms about Joan and kissed her.

"I do not love him," she said, "and I be glad that you do not, for I know that Bertrade does, and that but a short year since, he swore undying love for her. Let us forget that we have spoken on the subject."

It was at this time that the King's soldiers were harassing the lands of the rebel barons, and taking a heavy toll in revenge for their stinging defeat at Rochester earlier in the year, so that it was scarcely safe for small parties to venture upon the roadways lest they fall into the hands of the mercenaries of Henry III.

Not even were the wives and daughters of the barons exempt from the attacks of the royalists; and it was no uncommon occurrence to find them suffering imprisonment, and something worse, at the hands of the King's supporters.

And in the midst of these alarms, it entered the willful head of Joan de Tany that she wished to ride to London town and visit the shops of the merchants.

While London itself was solidly for the barons and against the King's party, the road between the castle of Richard de Tany and the city of London was beset with many dangers.

"Why," cried the girl's mother in exasperation, "between robbers and royalists and the Outlaw of Torn, you would not be safe if you had an army to escort you."

"But then, as I have no army," retorted the laughing girl, "if you reason by your own logic, I shall be indeed quite safe."

And when Roger de Conde attempted to dissuade her, she taunted him with being afraid of meeting with the Devil of Torn, and told him that he might remain at home and lock himself safely in her mother's pantry.

And so, as Joan de Tany was a spoiled child, they set out upon the road to London; the two girls with a dozen servants and knights; and Roger de Conde was of the party.

At the same time a grim, gray, old man dispatched a messenger from the outlaw's camp; a swarthy fellow, disguised as a priest, whose orders were to proceed to London, and when he saw the party of Joan de Tany, with Roger de Conde, enter the city, he was to deliver the letter he bore to the captain of the gate.

The letter contained this brief message:

"The tall knight in gray with closed helm is Norman of Torn," and was unsigned.

All went well and Joan was laughing merrily at the fears of those who had attempted to dissuade her when, at a cross road, they discovered two parties of armed men approaching from opposite directions. The leader of the nearer party spurred forward to intercept the little band, and, reining in before them, cried brusquely,

"Who be ye?"

"A party on a peaceful mission to the shops of London," replied Norman of Torn.

"I asked not your mission," cried the fellow. "I asked, who be ye? Answer, and be quick about it."

"I be Roger de Conde, gentleman of France, and these be my sisters and servants," lied the outlaw, "and were it not that the ladies be with me, your answer would be couched in steel, as you deserve for your boorish insolence."

"There be plenty of room and time for that even now, you dog of a French coward," cried the officer, couching his lance as he spoke.

Joan de Tany was sitting her horse where she could see the face of Roger de Conde, and it filled her heart with pride and courage as she saw and understood the little smile of satisfaction that touched his lips as he heard the man's challenge and lowered the point of his own spear.

Wheeling their horses toward one another, the two combatants, who were some ninety feet apart, charged at full tilt. As they came together the impact was so great that both horses were nearly overturned and the two powerful war lances were splintered into a hundred fragments as each struck the exact center of his opponent's shield. Then, wheeling their horses and throwing away the butts of their now useless lances, De Conde and the officer advanced with drawn swords.

The fellow made a most vicious return assault upon De Conde, attempting to ride him down in one mad rush, but his thrust passed harmlessly from the tip of the outlaw's sword, and as the officer wheeled back to renew the battle, they settled down to fierce combat, their horses wheeling and turning shoulder to shoulder.

The two girls sat rigid in their saddles watching the encounter, the eyes of Joan de Tany alight with the fire of battle as she followed every move of the wondrous swordplay of Roger de Conde.

He had not even taken the precaution to lower his visor, and the grim and haughty smile that played upon his lips spoke louder than many words the utter contempt in which he held the sword of his adversary. And as Joan de Tany watched, she saw the smile suddenly freeze to a cold, hard line, and the eyes of the man narrow to mere slits, and her woman's intuition read the death warrant of the King's officer ere the sword of the outlaw buried itself in his heart.

The other members of the two bodies of royalist soldiers had sat spellbound as they watched the battle, but now, as their leader's corpse rolled from the saddle, they spurred furiously in upon De Conde and his little party.

The Baron's men put up a noble fight, but the odds were heavy and even with the mighty arm of Norman of Torn upon their side the outcome was apparent from the first.

Five swords were flashing about the outlaw, but his blade was equal to the thrust and one after another of his assailants crumpled up in their saddles as his leaping point found their vitals.

Nearly all of the Baron's men were down, when one, an old servitor, spurred to the side of Joan de Tany and Mary de Stutevill.

"Come, my ladies," he cried, "quick and you may escape. They be so busy with the battle that they will never notice."

"Take the Lady Mary, John," cried Joan, "I brought Roger de Conde to this pass against the advice of all and I remain with him to the end."

"But, My Lady--" cried John.

"But nothing, sirrah!" she interrupted sharply. "Do as you are bid. Follow my Lady Mary, and see that she comes to my father's castle in safety," and raising her riding whip, she struck Mary's palfrey across the rump so that the animal nearly unseated his fair rider as he leaped frantically to one side and started madly up the road down which they had come.

"After her, John," commanded Joan peremptorily, "and see that you turn not back until she be safe within the castle walls; then you may bring aid."

The old fellow had been wont to obey the imperious little Lady Joan from her earliest childhood, and the habit was so strong upon him that he wheeled his horse and galloped after the flying palfrey of the Lady Mary de Stutevill.

As Joan de Tany turned again to the encounter before her, she saw fully twenty men surrounding Roger de Conde, and while he was taking heavy toll of those before him, he could not cope with the men who attacked him from behind; and even as she looked, she saw a battle axe fall full upon his helm, and his sword drop from his nerveless fingers as his lifeless body rolled from the back of Sir Mortimer to the battle-tramped clay of the highroad.

She slid quickly from her palfrey and ran fearlessly toward his prostrate form, reckless of the tangled mass of snorting, trampling, steel-clad horses, and surging fighting-men that surrounded him. And well it was for Norman of Torn that this brave girl was there that day, for even as she reached his side, the sword point of one of the soldiers was at his throat for the coup de grace.

With a cry, Joan de Tany threw herself across the outlaw's body, shielding him as best she could from the threatening sword.

Cursing loudly, the soldier grasped her roughly by the arm to drag her from his prey, but at this juncture, a richly armored knight galloped up and drew rein beside the party.

The newcomer was a man of about forty-five or fifty; tall, handsome, black-mustached and with the haughty arrogance of pride most often seen upon the faces of those who have been raised by unmerited favor to positions of power and affluence.

He was John de Fulm, Earl of Buckingham, a foreigner by birth and for years one of the King's favorites; the bitterest enemy of De Montfort and the barons.

"What now?" he cried. "What goes on here?"

The soldiers fell back, and one of them replied:

"A party of the King's enemies attacked us, My Lord Earl, but we routed them, taking these two prisoners."

"Who be ye?" he said, turning toward Joan who was kneeling beside De Conde, and as she raised her head, "My God! The daughter of De Tany! a noble prize indeed my men. And who be the knight?"

"Look for yourself, My Lord Earl," replied the girl removing the helm, which she had been unlacing from the fallen man.

"Edward?" he ejaculated. "But no, it cannot be, I did but yesterday leave Edward in Dover."

"I know not who he be," said Joan de Tany, "except that he be the most marvelous fighter and the bravest man it has ever been given me to see. He called himself Roger de Conde, but I know nothing of him other than that he looks like a prince, and fights like a devil. I think he has no quarrel with either side, My Lord, and so, as you certainly do not make war on women, you will let us go our way in peace as we were when your soldiers wantonly set upon us."

"A De Tany, madam, were a great and valuable capture in these troublous times," replied the Earl, "and that alone were enough to necessitate my keeping you; but a beautiful De Tany is yet a different matter and so I will grant you at least one favor. I will not take you to the King, but a prisoner you shall be in mine own castle for I am alone, and need the cheering company of a fair and loving lady."

The girl's head went high as she looked the Earl full in the eye.

"Think you, John de Fulm, Earl of Buckingham, that you be talking to some comely scullery maid? Do you forget that my house is honored in England, even though it does not share the King's favors with his foreign favorites, and you owe respect to a daughter of a De Tany?"

"All be fair in war, my beauty," replied the Earl. "Egad," he continued, "methinks all would be fair in hell were they like unto you. It has been some years since I have seen you and I did not know the old fox Richard de Tany kept such a package as this hid in his grimy old castle."

"Then you refuse to release us?" said Joan de Tany.

"Let us not put it thus harshly," countered the Earl. "Rather let us say that it be so late in the day, and the way so beset with dangers that the Earl of Buckingham could not bring himself to expose the beautiful daughter of his old friend to the perils of the road, and so--"

"Let us have an end to such foolishness," cried the girl. "I might have expected naught better from a turncoat foreign knave such as thee, who once joined in the councils of De Montfort, and then betrayed his friends to curry favor with the King."

The Earl paled with rage, and pressed forward as though to strike the girl, but thinking better of it, he turned to one of the soldiers, saying:

"Bring the prisoner with you. If the man lives bring him also. I would learn more of this fellow who masquerades in the countenance of a crown prince."

And turning, he spurred on towards the neighboring castle of a rebel baron which had been captured by the royalists, and was now used as headquarters by De Fulm.