

CHAPTER XIII

When Norman of Torn regained his senses, he found himself in a small tower room in a strange castle. His head ached horribly, and he felt sick and sore; but he managed to crawl from the cot on which he lay, and by steadying his swaying body with hands pressed against the wall, he was able to reach the door. To his disappointment, he found this locked from without and, in his weakened condition, he made no attempt to force it.

He was fully dressed and in armor, as he had been when struck down, but his helmet was gone, as were also his sword and dagger.

The day was drawing to a close and, as dusk fell and the room darkened, he became more and more impatient. Repeated pounding upon the door brought no response and finally he gave up in despair. Going to the window, he saw that his room was some thirty feet above the stone-flagged courtyard, and also that it looked at an angle upon other windows in the old castle where lights were beginning to show. He saw men-at-arms moving about, and once he thought he caught a glimpse of a woman's figure, but he was not sure.

He wondered what had become of Joan de Tany and Mary de Stutevill. He hoped that they had escaped, and yet--no, Joan certainly had not, for now he distinctly remembered that his eyes had met hers for an instant just before the blow fell upon him, and he thought of the faith and confidence that he had read in that quick glance. Such a look would nerve a jackal to attack a drove of lions, thought the outlaw. What a beautiful creature she was; and she had stayed there with him during the fight. He remembered now. Mary de Stutevill had not been with her as he had caught that glimpse of her, no, she had been all alone. Ah! That was friendship indeed!

What else was it that tried to force its way above the threshold of his bruised and wavering memory? Words? Words of love? And lips pressed to his? No, it must be but a figment of his wounded brain.

What was that which clicked against his breastplate? He felt, and found a metal bauble linked to a mesh of his steel armor by a strand of silken hair. He carried the little thing to the window, and in the waning light made it out to be a golden hair ornament set with precious stones, but he could not tell if the little strand of silken hair were black or brown. Carefully he detached the little thing, and, winding the filmy tress about it, placed it within the

breast of his tunic. He was vaguely troubled by it, yet why he could scarcely have told, himself.

Again turning to the window, he watched the lighted rooms within his vision, and presently his view was rewarded by the sight of a knight coming within the scope of the narrow casement of a nearby chamber.

From his apparel, he was a man of position, and he was evidently in heated discussion with some one whom Norman of Torn could not see. The man, a great, tall black-haired and mustached nobleman, was pounding upon a table to emphasize his words, and presently he sprang up as though rushing toward the one to whom he had been speaking. He disappeared from the watcher's view for a moment and then, at the far side of the apartment, Norman of Torn saw him again just as he roughly grasped the figure of a woman who evidently was attempting to escape him. As she turned to face her tormentor, all the devil in the Devil of Torn surged in his aching head, for the face he saw was that of Joan de Tany.

With a muttered oath, the imprisoned man turned to hurl himself against the bolted door, but ere he had taken a single step, the sound of heavy feet without brought him to a stop, and the jingle of keys as one was fitted to the lock of the door sent him gliding stealthily to the wall beside the doorway, where the inswinging door would conceal him.

As the door was pushed back, a flickering torch lighted up, but dimly, the interior, so that until he had reached the center of the room, the visitor did not see that the cot was empty.

He was a man-at-arms, and at his side hung a sword. That was enough for the Devil of Torn--it was a sword he craved most; and, ere the fellow could assure his slow wits that the cot was empty, steel fingers closed upon his throat, and he went down beneath the giant form of the outlaw.

Without other sound than the scuffing of their bodies on the floor, and the clanking of their armor, they fought, the one to reach the dagger at his side, the other to close forever the windpipe of his adversary.

Presently, the man-at-arms found what he sought, and, after tugging with ever diminishing strength, he felt the blade slip from its sheath. Slowly and feebly he raised it high above the back of the man on top of him; with a last supreme effort he drove the point downward, but ere it reached its goal, there was a sharp snapping sound as of a broken bone, the dagger fell harmlessly from his dead hand, and his head rolled backward upon his broken neck.

Snatching the sword from the body of his dead antagonist, Norman of Torn rushed from the tower room.

As John de Fulm, Earl of Buckingham, laid his vandal hands upon Joan de Tany, she turned upon him like a tigress. Blow after blow she rained upon his head and face until, in mortification and rage, he struck her full upon the mouth with his clenched fist; but even this did not subdue her and, with ever weakening strength, she continued to strike him. And then the great royalist Earl, the chosen friend of the King, took the fair white throat between his great fingers, and the lust of blood supplanted the lust of love, for he would have killed her in his rage.

It was upon this scene that the Outlaw of Torn burst with naked sword. They were at the far end of the apartment, and his cry of anger at the sight caused the Earl to drop his prey, and turn with drawn sword to meet him.

There were no words, for there was no need of words here. The two men were upon each other, and fighting to the death, before the girl had regained her feet. It would have been short shrift for John de Fulm had not some of his men heard the fracas, and rushed to his aid.

Four of them there were, and they tumbled pell-mell into the room, fairly falling upon Norman of Torn in their anxiety to get their swords into him; but once they met that master hand, they went more slowly, and in a moment, two of them went no more at all, and the others, with the Earl, were but circling warily in search of a chance opening--an opening which never came.

Norman of Torn stood with his back against a table in an angle of the room, and behind him stood Joan de Tany.

"Move toward the left," she whispered. "I know this old pile. When you reach the table that bears the lamp, there will be a small doorway directly behind you. Strike the lamp out with your sword, as you feel my hand in your left, and then I will lead you through that doorway, which you must turn and quickly bolt after us. Do you understand?"

He nodded.

Slowly he worked his way toward the table, the men-at-arms in the meantime keeping up an infernal howling for help. The Earl was careful to keep out of reach of the point of De Conde's sword, and the men-at-arms were nothing loath to emulate their master's example.

Just as he reached his goal, a dozen more men burst into the room, and emboldened by this reinforcement, one of the men engaging De Conde came too close. As he jerked his blade from the fellow's throat, Norman of Torn felt a firm, warm hand slipped into his from behind, and his sword swung with a resounding blow against the lamp.

As darkness enveloped the chamber, Joan de Tany led him through the little door, which he immediately closed and bolted as she had instructed.

"This way," she whispered, again slipping her hand into his and, in silence, she led him through several dim chambers, and finally stopped before a blank wall in a great oak-panelled room.

Here the girl felt with swift fingers the edge of the molding. More and more rapidly she moved as the sound of hurrying footsteps resounded through the castle.

"What is wrong?" asked Norman of Torn, noticing her increasing perturbation.

"Mon Dieu!" she cried. "Can I be wrong! Surely this is the room. Oh, my friend, that I should have brought you to all this by my willfulness and vanity; and now when I might save you, my wits leave me and I forget the way."

"Do not worry about me," laughed the Devil of Torn. "Methought that it was I who was trying to save you, and may heaven forgive me else, for surely, that be my only excuse for running away from a handful of swords. I could not take chances when thou wert at stake, Joan," he added more gravely.

The sound of pursuit was now quite close, in fact the reflection from flickering torches could be seen in nearby chambers.

At last the girl, with a little cry of "stupid," seized De Conde and rushed him to the far side of the room.

"Here it is," she whispered joyously, "here it has been all the time." Running her fingers along the molding until she found a little hidden spring, she pushed it, and one of the great panels swung slowly in, revealing the yawning mouth of a black opening behind.

Quickly the girl entered, pulling De Conde after her, and as the panel swung quietly into place, the Earl of Buckingham with a dozen men entered the apartment.

"The devil take them," cried De Fulm. "Where can they have gone? Surely we were right behind them."

"It is passing strange, My Lord," replied one of the men. "Let us try the floor above, and the towers; for of a surety they have not come this way." And the party retraced its steps, leaving the apartment empty.

Behind the panel, the girl stood shrinking close to De Conde, her hand still in his.

"Where now?" he asked. "Or do we stay hidden here like frightened chicks until the war is over and the Baron returns to let us out of this musty hole?"

"Wait," she answered, "until I quiet my nerves a little. I am all unstrung." He felt her body tremble as it pressed against his.

With the spirit of protection strong within him, what wonder that his arm fell about her shoulder as though to say, fear not, for I be brave and powerful; naught can harm you while I am here.

Presently she reached her hands up to his face, made brave to do it by the sheltering darkness.

"Roger," she whispered, her tongue halting over the familiar name. "I thought that they had killed you, and all for me, for my foolish stubbornness. Canst forgive me?"

"Forgive?" he asked, smiling to himself. "Forgive being given an opportunity to fight? There be nothing to forgive, Joan, unless it be that I should ask forgiveness for protecting thee so poorly."

"Do not say that," she commanded. "Never was such bravery or such swordsmanship in all the world before; never such a man."

He did not answer. His mind was a chaos of conflicting thoughts. The feel of her hands as they had lingered momentarily, and with a vague caress upon his cheek, and the pressure of her body as she leaned against him sent the hot blood coursing through his veins. He was puzzled, for he had not dreamed that friendship was so sweet. That she did not shrink from his encircling arms should have told him much, but Norman of Torn was slow to realize that a woman might look upon him with love. Nor had he a thought of any other sentiment toward her than that of friend and protector.

And then there came to him as in a vision another fair and beautiful face--Bertrade de Montfort's--and Norman of Torn was still more puzzled; for at

heart he was clean, and love of loyalty was strong within him. Love of women was a new thing to him, and, robbed as he had been all his starved life of the affection and kindly fellowship, of either men or women, it is little to be wondered at that he was easily impressionable and responsive to the feeling his strong personality had awakened in two of England's fairest daughters.

But with the vision of that other face, there came to him a faint realization that mayhap it was a stronger power than either friendship or fear which caused that lithe, warm body to cling so tightly to him. That the responsibility for the critical stage their young acquaintance had so quickly reached was not his had never for a moment entered his head. To him, the fault was all his; and perhaps it was this quality of chivalry that was the finest of the many noble characteristics of his sterling character. So his next words were typical of the man; and did Joan de Tany love him, or did she not, she learned that night to respect and trust him as she respected and trusted few men of her acquaintance.

"My Lady," said Norman of Torn, "we have been through much, and we are as little children in a dark attic, and so if I have presumed upon our acquaintance," and he lowered his arm from about her shoulder, "I ask you to forgive it for I scarce know what to do, from weakness and from the pain of the blow upon my head."

Joan de Tany drew slowly away from him, and without reply, took his hand and led him forward through a dark, cold corridor.

"We must go carefully now," she said at last, "for there be stairs near."

He held her hand pressed very tightly in his, tighter perhaps than conditions required, but she let it lie there as she led him forward, very slowly down a flight of rough stone steps.

Norman of Torn wondered if she were angry with him and then, being new at love, he blundered.

"Joan de Tany," he said.

"Yes, Roger de Conde; what would you?"

"You be silent, and I fear that you be angry with me. Tell me that you forgive what I have done, an it offended you. I have so few friends," he added sadly, "that I cannot afford to lose such as you."

"You will never lose the friendship of Joan de Tany," she answered. "You have won her respect and--and--" But she could not say it and so she trailed off lamely--"and undying gratitude."

But Norman of Torn knew the word that she would have spoken had he dared to let her. He did not, for there was always the vision of Bertrade de Montfort before him; and now another vision arose that would effectually have sealed his lips had not the other--he saw the Outlaw of Torn dangling by his neck from a wooden gibbet.

Before, he had only feared that Joan de Tany loved him, now he knew it, and while he marvelled that so wondrous a creature could feel love for him, again he blamed himself, and felt sorrow for them both; for he did not return her love nor could he imagine a love strong enough to survive the knowledge that it was possessed by the Devil of Torn.

Presently they reached the bottom of the stairway, and Joan de Tany led him, gropingly, across what seemed, from their echoing footsteps, a large chamber. The air was chill and dank, smelling of mold, and no ray of light penetrated this subterranean vault, and no sound broke the stillness.

"This be the castle's crypt," whispered Joan; "and they do say that strange happenings occur here in the still watches of the night, and that when the castle sleeps, the castle's dead rise from their coffins and shake their dry bones.

"Sh! What was that?" as a rustling noise broke upon their ears close upon their right; and then there came a distinct moan, and Joan de Tany fled to the refuge of Norman of Torn's arms.

"There is nothing to fear, Joan," reassured Norman of Torn. "Dead men wield not swords, nor do they move, or moan. The wind, I think, and rats are our only companions here."

"I am afraid," she whispered. "If you can make a light, I am sure you will find an old lamp here in the crypt, and then will it be less fearsome. As a child I visited this castle often, and in search of adventure, we passed through these corridors an hundred times, but always by day and with lights."

Norman of Torn did as she bid, and finding the lamp, lighted it. The chamber was quite empty save for the coffins in their niches, and some effigies in marble set at intervals about the walls.

"Not such a fearsome place after all," he said, laughing lightly.

"No place would seem fearsome now," she answered simply, "were there a light to show me that the brave face of Roger de Conde were by my side."

"Hush, child," replied the outlaw. "You know not what you say. When you know me better, you will be sorry for your words, for Roger de Conde is not what you think him. So say no more of praise until we be out of this hole, and you safe in your father's halls."

The fright of the noises in the dark chamber had but served to again bring the girl's face close to his so that he felt her hot, sweet breath upon his cheek, and thus another link was forged to bind him to her.

With the aid of the lamp, they made more rapid progress, and in a few moments, reached a low door at the end of the arched passageway.

"This is the doorway which opens upon the ravine below the castle. We have passed beneath the walls and the moat. What may we do now, Roger, without horses?"

"Let us get out of this place, and as far away as possible under the cover of darkness, and I doubt not I may find a way to bring you to your father's castle," replied Norman of Torn.

Putting out the light, lest it should attract the notice of the watch upon the castle walls, Norman of Torn pushed open the little door and stepped forth into the fresh night air.

The ravine was so overgrown with tangled vines and wildwood that, had there ever been a pathway, it was now completely obliterated; and it was with difficulty that the man forced his way through the entangling creepers and tendrils. The girl stumbled after him and twice fell before they had taken a score of steps.

"I fear I am not strong enough," she said finally. "The way is much more difficult than I had thought."

So Norman of Torn lifted her in his strong arms, and stumbled on through the darkness and the shrubbery down the center of the ravine. It required the better part of an hour to traverse the little distance to the roadway; and all the time her head nestled upon his shoulder and her hair brushed his cheek. Once when she lifted her head to speak to him, he bent toward her, and in the darkness, by chance, his lips brushed hers. He felt her little form tremble in his arms, and a faint sigh breathed from her lips.

They were upon the highroad now, but he did not put her down. A mist was before his eyes, and he could have crushed her to him and smothered those warm lips with his own. Slowly, his face inclined toward hers, closer and closer his iron muscles pressed her to him, and then, clear cut and distinct before his eyes, he saw the corpse of the Outlaw of Torn swinging by the neck from the arm of a wooden gibbet, and beside it knelt a woman gowned in rich cloth of gold and many jewels. Her face was averted and her arms were outstretched toward the dangling form that swung and twisted from the grim, gaunt arm. Her figure was racked with choking sobs of horror-stricken grief. Presently she staggered to her feet and turned away, burying her face in her hands; but he saw her features for an instant then--the woman who openly and alone mourned the dead Outlaw of Torn was Bertrade de Montfort.

Slowly his arms relaxed, and gently and reverently he lowered Joan de Tany to the ground. In that instant Norman of Torn had learned the difference between friendship and love, and love and passion.

The moon was shining brightly upon them, and the girl turned, wide-eyed and wondering, toward him. She had felt the wild call of love and she could not understand his seeming coldness now, for she had seen no vision beyond a life of happiness within those strong arms.

"Joan," he said, "I would but now have wronged thee. Forgive me. Forget what has passed between us until I can come to you in my rightful colors, when the spell of the moonlight and adventure be no longer upon us, and then,"--he paused--"and then I shall tell you who I be and you shall say if you still care to call me friend--no more than that shall I ask."

He had not the heart to tell her that he loved only Bertrade de Montfort, but it had been a thousand times better had he done so.

She was about to reply when a dozen armed men sprang from the surrounding shadows, calling upon them to surrender. The moonlight falling upon the leader revealed a great giant of a fellow with an enormous, bristling mustache--it was Shandy.

Norman of Torn lowered his raised sword.

"It is I, Shandy," he said. "Keep a still tongue in thy head until I speak with thee apart. Wait here, My Lady Joan; these be friends."

Drawing Shandy to one side, he learned that the faithful fellow had become alarmed at his chief's continued absence, and had set out with a small party

to search for him. They had come upon the riderless Sir Mortimer grazing by the roadside, and a short distance beyond, had discovered evidences of the conflict at the cross-roads. There they had found Norman of Torn's helmet, confirming their worst fears. A peasant in a nearby hut had told them of the encounter, and had set them upon the road taken by the Earl and his prisoners.

"And here we be, My Lord," concluded the great fellow.

"How many are you?" asked the outlaw.

"Fifty, all told, with those who lie farther back in the bushes."

"Give us horses, and let two of the men ride behind us," said the chief. "And, Shandy, let not the lady know that she rides this night with the Outlaw of Torn."

"Yes, My Lord."

They were soon mounted, and clattering down the road, back toward the castle of Richard de Tany.

Joan de Tany looked in silent wonder upon this grim force that sprang out of the shadows of the night to do the bidding of Roger de Conde, a gentleman of France.

There was something familiar in the great bulk of Red Shandy; where had she seen that mighty frame before? And now she looked closely at the figure of Roger de Conde. Yes, somewhere else had she seen these two men together; but where and when?

And then the strangeness of another incident came to her mind. Roger de Conde spoke no English, and yet she had plainly heard English words upon this man's lips as he addressed the red giant.

Norman of Torn had recovered his helmet from one of his men who had picked it up at the crossroads, and now he rode in silence with lowered visor, as was his custom.

There was something sinister now in his appearance, and as the moonlight touched the hard, cruel faces of the grim and silent men who rode behind him, a little shudder crept over the frame of Joan de Tany.

Shortly before daylight they reached the castle of Richard de Tany, and a great shout went up from the watch as Norman of Torn cried:

"Open! Open for My Lady Joan."

Together they rode into the courtyard, where all was bustle and excitement. A dozen voices asked a dozen questions only to cry out still others without waiting for replies.

Richard de Tany with his family and Mary de Stutevill were still fully clothed, having not lain down during the whole night. They fairly fell upon Joan and Roger de Conde in their joyous welcome and relief.

"Come, come," said the Baron, "let us go within. You must be fair famished for good food and drink."

"I will ride, My Lord," replied Norman of Torn. "I have a little matter of business with my friend, the Earl of Buckingham. Business which I fear will not wait."

Joan de Tany looked on in silence. Nor did she urge him to remain, as he raised her hand to his lips in farewell. So Norman of Torn rode out of the courtyard; and as his men fell in behind him under the first rays of the drawing day, the daughter of De Tany watched them through the gate, and a great light broke upon her, for what she saw was the same as she had seen a few days since when she had turned in her saddle to watch the retreating forms of the cut-throats of Torn as they rode on after halting her father's party.