

CHAPTER XIV

Some hours later, fifty men followed Norman of Torn on foot through the ravine below the castle where John de Fulm, Earl of Buckingham, had his headquarters; while nearly a thousand more lurked in the woods before the grim pile.

Under cover of the tangled shrubbery, they crawled unseen to the little door through which Joan de Tany had led him the night before. Following the corridors and vaults beneath the castle, they came to the stone stairway, and mounted to the passage which led to the false panel that had given the two fugitives egress.

Slipping the spring lock, Norman of Torn entered the apartment followed closely by his henchmen. On they went, through apartment after apartment, but no sign of the Earl or his servitors rewarded their search, and it was soon apparent that the castle was deserted.

As they came forth into the courtyard, they descried an old man basking in the sun, upon a bench. The sight of them nearly caused the old fellow to die of fright, for to see fifty armed men issue from the untenanted halls was well reckoned to blanch even a braver cheek.

When Norman of Torn questioned him, he learned that De Fulm had ridden out early in the day bound for Dover, where Prince Edward then was. The outlaw knew it would be futile to pursue him, but yet, so fierce was his anger against this man, that he ordered his band to mount, and spurring to their head, he marched through Middlesex, and crossing the Thames above London, entered Surrey late the same afternoon.

As they were going into camp that night in Kent, midway between London and Rochester, word came to Norman of Torn that the Earl of Buckingham, having sent his escort on to Dover, had stopped to visit the wife of a royalist baron, whose husband was with Prince Edward's forces.

The fellow who gave this information was a servant in my lady's household who held a grudge against his mistress for some wrong she had done him. When, therefore, he found that these grim men were searching for De Fulm, he saw a way to be revenged upon his mistress.

"How many swords be there at the castle?" asked Norman of Torn.

"Scarce a dozen, barring the Earl of Buckingham," replied the knave; "and, furthermore, there be a way to enter, which I may show you, My Lord, so that you may, unseen, reach the apartment where My Lady and the Earl be supping."

"Bring ten men, beside yourself, Shandy," commanded Norman of Torn. "We shall pay a little visit upon our amorous friend, My Lord, the Earl of Buckingham."

Half an hour's ride brought them within sight of the castle. Dismounting, and leaving their horses with one of the men, Norman of Torn advanced on foot with Shandy and the eight others, close in the wake of the traitorous servant.

The fellow led them to the rear of the castle, where, among the brush, he had hidden a rude ladder, which, when tilted, spanned the moat and rested its farther end upon a window ledge some ten feet above the ground.

"Keep the fellow here till last, Shandy," said the outlaw, "till all be in, an' if there be any signs of treachery, stick him through the gizzard--death thus be slower and more painful."

So saying, Norman of Torn crept boldly across the improvised bridge, and disappeared within the window beyond. One by one the band of cut-throats passed through the little window, until all stood within the castle beside their chief; Shandy coming last with the servant.

"Lead me quietly, knave, to the room where My Lord sups," said Norman of Torn. "You, Shandy, place your men where they can prevent my being interrupted."

Following a moment or two after Shandy came another figure stealthily across the ladder and, as Norman of Torn and his followers left the little room, this figure pushed quietly through the window and followed the great outlaw down the unlighted corridor.

A moment later, My Lady of Leybourn looked up from her plate upon the grim figure of an armored knight standing in the doorway of the great dining hall.

"My Lord Earl!" she cried. "Look! Behind you."

And as the Earl of Buckingham glanced behind him, he overturned the bench upon which he sat in his effort to gain his feet; for My Lord Earl of Buckingham had a guilty conscience.

The grim figure raised a restraining hand, as the Earl drew his sword.

"A moment, My Lord," said a low voice in perfect French.

"Who are you?" cried the lady.

"I be an old friend of My Lord, here; but let me tell you a little story.

"In a grim old castle in Essex, only last night, a great lord of England held by force the beautiful daughter of a noble house and, when she spurned his advances, he struck her with his clenched fist upon her fair face, and with his brute hands choked her. And in that castle also was a despised and hunted outlaw, with a price upon his head, for whose neck the hempen noose has been yawning these many years. And it was this vile person who came in time to save the young woman from the noble flower of knighthood that would have ruined her young life.

"The outlaw wished to kill the knight, but many men-at-arms came to the noble's rescue, and so the outlaw was forced to fly with the girl lest he be overcome by numbers, and the girl thus fall again into the hands of her tormentor.

"But this crude outlaw was not satisfied with merely rescuing the girl, he must needs mete out justice to her noble abductor and collect in full the toll of blood which alone can atone for the insult and violence done her.

"My Lady, the young girl was Joan de Tany; the noble was My Lord the Earl of Buckingham; and the outlaw stands before you to fulfill the duty he has sworn to do. En garde, My Lord!"

The encounter was short, for Norman of Torn had come to kill, and he had been looking through a haze of blood for hours--in fact every time he had thought of those brutal fingers upon the fair throat of Joan de Tany and of the cruel blow that had fallen upon her face.

He showed no mercy, but backed the Earl relentlessly into a corner of the room, and when he had him there where he could escape in no direction, he drove his blade so deep through his putrid heart that the point buried itself an inch in the oak panel beyond.

Claudia Leybourn sat frozen with horror at the sight she was witnessing, and, as Norman of Torn wrenched his blade from the dead body before him and wiped it on the rushes of the floor, she gazed in awful fascination while he drew his dagger and made a mark upon the forehead of the dead nobleman.

"Outlaw or Devil," said a stern voice behind them, "Roger Leybourn owes you his friendship for saving the honor of his home."

Both turned to discover a mail-clad figure standing in the doorway where Norman of Torn had first appeared.

"Roger!" shrieked Claudia Leybourn, and swooned.

"Who be you?" continued the master of Leybourn addressing the outlaw.

For answer Norman of Torn pointed to the forehead of the dead Earl of Buckingham, and there Roger Leybourn saw, in letters of blood, NT.

The Baron advanced with outstretched hand.

"I owe you much. You have saved my poor, silly wife from this beast, and Joan de Tany is my cousin, so I am doubly beholden to you, Norman of Torn."

The outlaw pretended that he did not see the hand.

"You owe me nothing, Sir Roger, that may not be paid by a good supper. I have eaten but once in forty-eight hours."

The outlaw now called to Shandy and his men, telling them to remain on watch, but to interfere with no one within the castle.

He then sat at the table with Roger Leybourn and his lady, who had recovered from her swoon, and behind them on the rushes of the floor lay the body of De Fulm in a little pool of blood.

Leybourn told them that he had heard that De Fulm was at his home, and had hastened back; having been in hiding about the castle for half an hour before the arrival of Norman of Torn, awaiting an opportunity to enter unobserved by the servants. It was he who had followed across the ladder after Shandy.

The outlaw spent the night at the castle of Roger Leybourn; for the first time within his memory a welcomed guest under his true name at the house of a gentleman.

The following morning, he bade his host goodbye, and returning to his camp started on his homeward march toward Torn.

Near midday, as they were approaching the Thames near the environs of London, they saw a great concourse of people hooting and jeering at a small party of gentlemen and gentlewomen.

Some of the crowd were armed, and from very force of numbers were waxing brave to lay violent hands upon the party. Mud and rocks and rotten vegetables were being hurled at the little cavalcade, many of them barely missing the women of the party.

Norman of Torn waited to ask no questions, but spurring into the thick of it laid right and left of him with the flat of his sword, and his men, catching the contagion of it, swarmed after him until the whole pack of attacking ruffians were driven into the Thames.

And then, without a backward glance at the party he had rescued, he continued on his march toward the north.

The little party sat upon their horses looking in wonder after the retreating figures of their deliverers. Then one of the ladies turned to a knight at her side with a word of command and an imperious gesture toward the fast disappearing company. He, thus addressed, put spurs to his horse, and rode at a rapid gallop after the outlaw's troop. In a few moments he had overtaken them and reined up beside Norman of Torn.

"Hold, Sir Knight," cried the gentleman, "the Queen would thank you in person for your brave defence of her."

Ever keen to see the humor of a situation, Norman of Torn wheeled his horse and rode back with the Queen's messenger.

As he faced Her Majesty, the Outlaw of Torn bent low over his pommel.

"You be a strange knight that thinks so lightly on saving a queen's life that you ride on without turning your head, as though you had but driven a pack of curs from annoying a stray cat," said the Queen.

"I drew in the service of a woman, Your Majesty, not in the service of a queen."

"What now! Wouldst even belittle the act which we all witnessed? The King, my husband, shall reward thee, Sir Knight, if you but tell me your name."

"If I told my name, methinks the King would be more apt to hang me," laughed the outlaw. "I be Norman of Torn."

The entire party looked with startled astonishment upon him, for none of them had ever seen this bold raider whom all the nobility and gentry of England feared and hated.

"For lesser acts than that which thou hast just performed, the King has pardoned men before," replied Her Majesty. "But raise your visor, I would look upon the face of so notorious a criminal who can yet be a gentleman and a loyal protector of his queen."

"They who have looked upon my face, other than my friends," replied Norman of Torn quietly, "have never lived to tell what they saw beneath this visor, and as for you, Madame, I have learned within the year to fear it might mean unhappiness to you to see the visor of the Devil of Torn lifted from his face." Without another word he wheeled and galloped back to his little army.

"The puppy, the insolent puppy," cried Eleanor of England, in a rage.

And so the Outlaw of Torn and his mother met and parted after a period of twenty years.

Two days later, Norman of Torn directed Red Shandy to lead the forces of Torn from their Essex camp back to Derby. The numerous raiding parties which had been constantly upon the road during the days they had spent in this rich district had loaded the extra sumpter beasts with rich and valuable booty and the men, for the time satiated with fighting and loot, turned their faces toward Torn with evident satisfaction.

The outlaw was speaking to his captains in council; at his side the old man of Torn.

"Ride by easy stages, Shandy, and I will overtake you by tomorrow morning. I but ride for a moment to the castle of De Tany on an errand, and, as I shall stop there but a few moments, I shall surely join you tomorrow."

"Do not forget, My Lord," said Edwild the Serf, a great yellow-haired Saxon giant, "that there be a party of the King's troops camped close by the road which branches to Tany."

"I shall give them plenty of room," replied Norman of Torn. "My neck itcheth not to be stretched," and he laughed and mounted.

Five minutes after he had cantered down the road from camp, Spizo the Spaniard, sneaking his horse unseen into the surrounding forest, mounted and spurred rapidly after him. The camp, in the throes of packing refractory, half broken sumpter animals, and saddling their own wild mounts, did not

notice his departure. Only the little grim, gray, old man knew that he had gone, or why, or whither.

That afternoon, as Roger de Conde was admitted to the castle of Richard de Tany and escorted to a little room where he awaited the coming of the Lady Joan, a swarthy messenger handed a letter to the captain of the King's soldiers camped a few miles south of Tany.

The officer tore open the seal as the messenger turned and spurred back in the direction from which he had come.

And this was what he read:

Norman of Torn is now at the castle of Tany, without escort.

Instantly the call "to arms" and "mount" sounded through the camp and, in five minutes, a hundred mercenaries galloped rapidly toward the castle of Richard de Tany, in the visions of their captain a great reward and honor and preferment for the capture of the mighty outlaw who was now almost within his clutches.

Three roads meet at Tany; one from the south along which the King's soldiers were now riding; one from the west which had guided Norman of Torn from his camp to the castle; and a third which ran northwest through Cambridge and Huntingdon toward Derby.

All unconscious of the rapidly approaching foes, Norman of Torn waited composedly in the anteroom for Joan de Tany.

Presently she entered, clothed in the clinging house garment of the period; a beautiful vision, made more beautiful by the suppressed excitement which caused the blood to surge beneath the velvet of her cheek, and her breasts to rise and fall above her fast beating heart.

She let him take her fingers in his and raise them to his lips, and then they stood looking into each other's eyes in silence for a long moment.

"I do not know how to tell you what I have come to tell," he said sadly. "I have not meant to deceive you to your harm, but the temptation to be with you and those whom you typify must be my excuse. I--" He paused. It was easy to tell her that he was the Outlaw of Torn, but if she loved him, as he feared, how was he to tell her that he loved only Bertrade de Montfort?

"You need tell me nothing," interrupted Joan de Tany. "I have guessed what you would tell me, Norman of Torn. The spell of moonlight and adventure is

no longer upon us'--those are your own words, and still I am glad to call you friend."

The little emphasis she put upon the last word bespoke the finality of her decision that the Outlaw of Torn could be no more than friend to her.

"It is best," he replied, relieved that, as he thought, she felt no love for him now that she knew him for what he really was. "Nothing good could come to such as you, Joan, if the Devil of Torn could claim more of you than friendship; and so I think that for your peace of mind and for my own, we will let it be as though you had never known me. I thank you that you have not been angry with me. Remember me only to think that in the hills of Derby, a sword is at your service, without reward and without price. Should you ever need it, Joan, tell me that you will send for me--wilt promise me that, Joan?"

"I promise, Norman of Torn."

"Farewell," he said, and as he again kissed her hand he bent his knee to the ground in reverence. Then he rose to go, pressing a little packet into her palm. Their eyes met, and the man saw, in that brief instant, deep in the azure depths of the girl's that which tumbled the structure of his new-found complacency about his ears.

As he rode out into the bright sunlight upon the road which led northwest toward Derby, Norman of Torn bowed his head in sorrow, for he realized two things. One was that the girl he had left still loved him, and that some day, mayhap tomorrow, she would suffer because she had sent him away; and the other was that he did not love her, that his heart was locked in the fair breast of Bertrade de Montfort.

He felt himself a beast that he had allowed his loneliness and the aching sorrow of his starved, empty heart to lead him into this girl's life. That he had been new to women and newer still to love did not permit him to excuse himself, and a hundred times he cursed his folly and stupidity, and what he thought was fickleness.

But the unhappy affair had taught him one thing for certain: to know without question what love was, and that the memory of Bertrade de Montfort's lips would always be more to him than all the allurements possessed by the balance of the women of the world, no matter how charming, or how beautiful.

Another thing, a painful thing he had learned from it, too, that the attitude of Joan de Tany, daughter of an old and noble house, was but the attitude which the Outlaw of Torn must expect from any good woman of her class; what he must expect from Bertrade de Montfort when she learned that Roger de Conde was Norman of Torn.

The outlaw had scarce passed out of sight upon the road to Derby ere the girl, who still stood in an embrasure of the south tower, gazing with strangely drawn, sad face up the road which had swallowed him, saw a body of soldiers galloping rapidly toward Tany from the south.

The King's banner waved above their heads, and intuitively, Joan de Tany knew for whom they sought at her father's castle. Quickly she hastened to the outer barbican that it might be she who answered their hail rather than one of the men-at-arms on watch there.

She had scarcely reached the ramparts of the outer gate ere the King's men drew rein before the castle.

In reply to their hail, Joan de Tany asked their mission.

"We seek the outlaw, Norman of Torn, who hides now within this castle," replied the officer.

"There be no outlaw here," replied the girl, "but, if you wish, you may enter with half a dozen men and search the castle."

This the officer did and, when he had assured himself that Norman of Torn was not within, an hour had passed, and Joan de Tany felt certain that the Outlaw of Torn was too far ahead to be caught by the King's men; so she said:

"There was one here just before you came who called himself though by another name than Norman of Torn. Possibly it is he ye seek."

"Which way rode he?" cried the officer.

"Straight toward the west by the middle road," lied Joan de Tany. And, as the officer hurried from the castle and, with his men at his back, galloped furiously away toward the west, the girl sank down upon a bench, pressing her little hands to her throbbing temples.

Then she opened the packet which Norman of Torn had handed her, and within found two others. In one of these was a beautiful jeweled locket, and on the outside were the initials JT, and on the inside the initials NT; in the

other was a golden hair ornament set with precious stones, and about it was wound a strand of her own silken tresses.

She looked long at the little trinkets and then, pressing them against her lips, she threw herself face down upon an oaken bench, her lithe young form racked with sobs.

She was indeed but a little girl chained by the inexorable bonds of caste to a false ideal. Birth and station spelled honor to her, and honor, to the daughter of an English noble, was a mightier force even than love.

That Norman of Torn was an outlaw she might have forgiven, but that he was, according to report, a low fellow of no birth placed an impassable barrier between them.

For hours the girl lay sobbing upon the bench, whilst within her raged the mighty battle of the heart against the head.

Thus her mother found her, and kneeling beside her, and with her arms about the girl's neck, tried to soothe her and to learn the cause of her sorrow. Finally it came, poured from the flood gates of a sorrowing heart; that wave of bitter misery and hopelessness which not even a mother's love could check.

"Joan, my dear daughter," cried Lady de Tany, "I sorrow with thee that thy love has been cast upon so bleak and impossible a shore. But it be better that thou hast learnt the truth ere it were too late; for, take my word upon it, Joan, the bitter humiliation such an alliance must needs have brought upon thee and thy father's house would soon have cooled thy love; nor could his have survived the sneers and affronts even the menials would have put upon him."

"Oh, mother, but I love him so," moaned the girl. "I did not know how much until he had gone, and the King's officer had come to search for him, and then the thought that all the power of a great throne and the mightiest houses of an entire kingdom were turned in hatred against him raised the hot blood of anger within me and the knowledge of my love surged through all my being. Mother, thou canst not know the honor, and the bravery, and the chivalry of the man as I do. Not since Arthur of Silures kept his round table hath ridden forth upon English soil so true a knight as Norman of Torn.

"Couldst thou but have seen him fight, my mother, and witnessed the honor of his treatment of thy daughter, and heard the tone of dignified respect in

which he spoke of women thou wouldst have loved him, too, and felt that outlaw though he be, he is still more a gentleman than nine-tenths the nobles of England."

"But his birth, my daughter!" argued the Lady de Tany. "Some even say that the gall marks of his brass collar still showeth upon his neck, and others that he knoweth not himself the name of his own father, nor had he any mother."

Ah, but this was the mighty argument! Naught could the girl say to justify so heinous a crime as low birth. What a man did in those rough cruel days might be forgotten and forgiven but the sins of his mother or his grandfather in not being of noble blood, no matter howsoever wickedly attained, he might never overcome or live down.

Torn by conflicting emotions, the poor girl dragged herself to her own apartment and there upon a restless, sleepless couch, beset by wild, impossible hopes, and vain, torturing regrets, she fought out the long, bitter night; until toward morning she solved the problem of her misery in the only way that seemed possible to her poor, tired, bleeding, little heart. When the rising sun shone through the narrow window, it found Joan de Tany at peace with all about her; the carved golden hilt of the toy that had hung at her girdle protruded from her breast, and a thin line of crimson ran across the snowy skin to a little pool upon the sheet beneath her.

And so the cruel hand of a mighty revenge had reached out to crush another innocent victim.