

## CHAPTER XV

When word of the death of Joan de Tany reached Torn, no man could tell from outward appearance the depth of the suffering which the sad intelligence wrought on the master of Torn.

All that they who followed him knew was that certain unusual orders were issued, and that that same night, the ten companies rode south toward Essex without other halt than for necessary food and water for man and beast.

When the body of Joan de Tany rode forth from her father's castle to the church at Colchester, and again as it was brought back to its final resting place in the castle's crypt, a thousand strange and silent knights, black draped, upon horses trapped in black, rode slowly behind the bier.

Silently they had come in the night preceding the funeral, and as silently, they slipped away northward into the falling shadows of the following night.

No word had passed between those of the castle and the great troop of sable-clad warriors, but all within knew that the mighty Outlaw of Torn had come to pay homage to the memory of the daughter of De Tany, and all but the grieving mother wondered at the strangeness of the act.

As the horde of Torn approached their Derby stronghold, their young leader turned the command over to Red Shandy and dismounted at the door of Father Claude's cottage.

"I am tired, Father," said the outlaw as he threw himself upon his accustomed bench. "Naught but sorrow and death follow in my footsteps. I and all my acts be accurst, and upon those I love, the blight falleth."

"Alter thy ways, my son; follow my advice ere it be too late. Seek out a new and better life in another country and carve thy future into the semblance of glory and honor."

"Would that I might, my friend," answered Norman of Torn. "But hast thou thought on the consequences which surely would follow should I thus remove both heart and head from the thing that I have built?"

"What suppose thou would result were Norman of Torn to turn his great band of cut-throats, leaderless, upon England? Hast thought on't, Father?"

"Wouldst thou draw a single breath in security if thou knew Edwild the Serf were ranging unchecked through Derby? Edwild, whose father was torn limb from limb upon the rack because he would not confess to killing a buck in the new forest, a buck which fell before the arrow of another man; Edwild, whose mother was burned for witchcraft by Holy Church.

"And Horsan the Dane, Father. How thinkest thou the safety of the roads would be for either rich or poor an I turned Horsan the Dane loose upon ye?

"And Pensilo, the Spanish Don! A great captain, but a man absolutely without bowels of compassion. When first he joined us and saw our mark upon the foreheads of our dead, wishing to out-Herod Herod, he marked the living which fell into his hands with a red hot iron, branding a great P upon each cheek and burning out the right eye completely. Wouldst like to feel, Father, that Don Piedro Castro y Pensilo ranged free through forest and hill of England?

"And Red Shandy, and the two Florys, and Peter the Hermit, and One Eye Kanty, and Gropello, and Campanee, and Cobarth, and Mandecote, and the thousand others, each with a special hatred for some particular class or individual, and all filled with the lust of blood and rapine and loot.

"No, Father, I may not go yet, for the England I have been taught to hate, I have learned to love, and I have it not in my heart to turn loose upon her fair breast the beasts of hell who know no law or order or decency other than that which I enforce."

As Norman of Torn ceased speaking, the priest sat silent for many minutes.

"Thou hast indeed a grave responsibility, my son," he said at last. "Thou canst not well go unless thou takest thy horde with thee out of England, but even that may be possible; who knows other than God?"

"For my part," laughed the outlaw, "I be willing to leave it in His hands; which seems to be the way with Christians. When one would shirk a responsibility, or explain an error, lo, one shoulders it upon the Lord."

"I fear, my son," said the priest, "that what seed of reverence I have attempted to plant within thy breast hath borne poor fruit."

"That dependeth upon the viewpoint, Father; as I take not the Lord into partnership in my successes it seemeth to me to be but of a mean and poor spirit to saddle my sorrows and perplexities upon Him. I may be wrong, for I

am ill-versed in religious matters, but my conception of God and scapegoat be not that they are synonymous."

"Religion, my son, be a bootless subject for argument between friends," replied the priest, "and further, there be that nearer my heart just now which I would ask thee. I may offend, but thou know I do not mean to. The question I would ask, is, dost wholly trust the old man whom thou call father?"

"I know of no treachery," replied the outlaw, "which he hath ever conceived against me. Why?"

"I ask because I have written to Simon de Montfort asking him to meet me and two others here upon an important matter. I have learned that he expects to be at his Leicester castle, for a few days, within the week. He is to notify me when he will come and I shall then send for thee and the old man of Torn; but it were as well, my son, that thou do not mention this matter to thy father, nor let him know when thou come hither to the meeting that De Montfort is to be present."

"As you say, Father," replied Norman of Torn. "I do not make head nor tail of thy wondrous intrigues, but that thou wish it done thus or so is sufficient. I must be off to Torn now, so I bid thee farewell."

Until the following Spring, Norman of Torn continued to occupy himself with occasional pillages against the royalists of the surrounding counties, and his patrols so covered the public highways that it became a matter of grievous import to the King's party, for no one was safe in the district who even so much as sympathized with the King's cause, and many were the dead foreheads that bore the grim mark of the Devil of Torn.

Though he had never formally espoused the cause of the barons, it now seemed a matter of little doubt but that, in any crisis, his grisly banner would be found on their side.

The long winter evenings within the castle of Torn were often spent in rough, wild carousals in the great hall where a thousand men might sit at table singing, fighting and drinking until the gray dawn stole in through the east windows, or Peter the Hermit, the fierce majordomo, tired of the din and racket, came stalking into the chamber with drawn sword and laid upon the revellers with the flat of it to enforce the authority of his commands to disperse.

Norman of Torn and the old man seldom joined in these wild orgies, but when minstrel, or troubadour, or storyteller wandered to his grim lair, the Outlaw of Torn would sit enjoying the break in the winter's dull monotony to as late an hour as another; nor could any man of his great fierce horde outdrink their chief when he cared to indulge in the pleasures of the wine cup. The only effect that liquor seemed to have upon him was to increase his desire to fight, so that he was wont to pick needless quarrels and to resort to his sword for the slightest, or for no provocation at all. So, for this reason, he drank but seldom since he always regretted the things he did under the promptings of that other self which only could assert its ego when reason was threatened with submersion.

Often on these evenings, the company was entertained by stories from the wild, roving lives of its own members. Tales of adventure, love, war and death in every known corner of the world; and the ten captains told, each, his story of how he came to be of Torn; and thus, with fighting enough by day to keep them good humored, the winter passed, and spring came with the ever wondrous miracle of awakening life, with soft zephyrs, warm rain, and sunnyskies.

Through all the winter, Father Claude had been expecting to hear from Simon de Montfort, but not until now did he receive a message which told the good priest that his letter had missed the great baron and had followed him around until he had but just received it. The message closed with these words:

"Any clew, however vague, which might lead nearer to a true knowledge of the fate of Prince Richard, we shall most gladly receive and give our best attention. Therefore, if thou wilt find it convenient, we shall visit thee, good father, on the fifth day from today."

Spizo, the Spaniard, had seen De Montfort's man leave the note with Father Claude and he had seen the priest hide it under a great bowl on his table, so that when the good father left his cottage, it was the matter of but a moment's work for Spizo to transfer the message from its hiding place to the breast of his tunic. The fellow could not read, but he to whom he took the missive could, laboriously, decipher the Latin in which it was penned.

The old man of Torn fairly trembled with suppressed rage as the full purport of this letter flashed upon him. It had been years since he had heard aught of the search for the little lost prince of England, and now that the period of his silence was drawing to a close, now that more and more often opportunities were opening up to him to wreak the last shred of his terrible

vengeance, the very thought of being thwarted at the final moment staggered his comprehension.

"On the fifth day," he repeated. "That is the day on which we were to ride south again. Well, we shall ride, and Simon de Montfort shall not talk with thee, thou fool priest."

That same spring evening in the year 1264, a messenger drew rein before the walls of Torn and, to the challenge of the watch, cried:

"A royal messenger from His Illustrious Majesty, Henry, by the grace of God, King of England, Lord of Ireland, Duke of Aquitaine, to Norman of Torn, Open, in the name of the King!"

Norman of Torn directed that the King's messenger be admitted, and the knight was quickly ushered into the great hall of the castle.

The outlaw presently entered in full armor, with visor lowered.

The bearing of the King's officer was haughty and arrogant, as became a man of birth when dealing with a low born knave.

"His Majesty has deigned to address you, sirrah," he said, withdrawing a parchment from his breast. "And, as you doubtless cannot read, I will read the King's commands to you."

"I can read," replied Norman of Torn, "whatever the King can write. Unless it be," he added, "that the King writes no better than he rules."

The messenger scowled angrily, crying:

"It ill becomes such a low fellow to speak thus disrespectfully of our gracious King. If he were less generous, he would have sent you a halter rather than this message which I bear."

"A bridle for thy tongue, my friend," replied Norman of Torn, "were in better taste than a halter for my neck. But come, let us see what the King writes to his friend, the Outlaw of Torn."

Taking the parchment from the messenger, Norman of Torn read:

Henry, by Grace of God, King of England, Lord of Ireland, Duke of Aquitaine; to Norman of Torn:

Since it has been called to our notice that you be harassing and plundering the persons and property of our faithful lieges!!!!

We therefore, by virtue of the authority vested in us by Almighty God, do command that you cease these nefarious practices!!!!

And further, through the gracious intercession of Her Majesty, Queen Eleanor, we do offer you full pardon for all your past crimes!!!!

Provided, you repair at once to the town of Lewes, with all the fighting men, your followers, prepared to protect the security of our person, and wage war upon those enemies of England, Simon de Montfort, Gilbert de Clare and their accomplices, who even now are collected to threaten and menace our person and kingdom!!!!

Or, otherwise, shall you suffer death, by hanging, for your long unpunished crimes. Witnessed myself, at Lewes, on May the third, in the forty-eighth year of our reign.

HENRY, REX.

"The closing paragraph be unfortunately worded," said Norman of Torn, "for because of it shall the King's messenger eat the King's message, and thus take back in his belly the answer of Norman of Torn." And crumpling the parchment in his hand, he advanced toward the royal emissary.

The knight whipped out his sword, but the Devil of Torn was even quicker, so that it seemed that the King's messenger had deliberately hurled his weapon across the room, so quickly did the outlaw disarm him.

And then Norman of Torn took the man by the neck with one powerful hand and, despite his struggles, and the beating of his mailed fists, bent him back upon the table, and there, forcing his teeth apart with the point of his sword, Norman of Torn rammed the King's message down the knight's throat; wax, parchment and all.

It was a crestfallen gentleman who rode forth from the castle of Torn a half hour later and spurred rapidly--in his head a more civil tongue.

When, two days later, he appeared before the King at Winchelsea and reported the outcome of his mission, Henry raged and stormed, swearing by all the saints in the calendar that Norman of Torn should hang for his effrontery before the snow flew again.

News of the fighting between the barons and the King's forces at Rochester, Battel and elsewhere reached the ears of Norman of Torn a few days after the coming of the King's message, but at the same time came other news which hastened his departure toward the south. This latter word was that

Bertrade de Montfort and her mother, accompanied by Prince Philip, had landed at Dover, and that upon the same boat had come Peter of Colfax back to England--the latter, doubtless reassured by the strong conviction, which held in the minds of all royalists at that time, of the certainty of victory for the royal arms in the impending conflict with the rebel barons.

Norman of Torn had determined that he would see Bertrade de Montfort once again, and clear his conscience by a frank avowal of his identity. He knew what the result must be. His experience with Joan de Tany had taught him that. But the fine sense of chivalry which ever dominated all his acts where the happiness or honor of women were concerned urged him to give himself over as a sacrifice upon the altar of a woman's pride, that it might be she who spurned and rejected; for, as it must appear now, it had been he whose love had grown cold. It was a bitter thing to contemplate, for not alone would the mighty pride of the man be lacerated, but a great love.

Two days before the start of the march, Spizo, the Spaniard, reported to the old man of Torn that he had overheard Father Claude ask Norman of Torn to come with his father to the priest's cottage the morning of the march to meet Simon de Montfort upon an important matter, but what the nature of the thing was the priest did not reveal to the outlaw.

This report seemed to please the little, grim, gray old man more than aught he had heard in several days; for it made it apparent that the priest had not as yet divulged the tenor of his conjecture to the Outlaw of Torn.

On the evening of the day preceding that set for the march south, a little, wiry figure, grim and gray, entered the cottage of Father Claude. No man knows what words passed between the good priest and his visitor nor the details of what befell within the four walls of the little cottage that night; but some half hour only elapsed before the little, grim, gray man emerged from the darkened interior and hastened upward upon the rocky trail into the hills, a cold smile of satisfaction on his lips.

The castle of Torn was filled with the rush and rattle of preparation early the following morning, for by eight o'clock the column was to march. The courtyard was filled with hurrying squires and lackeys. War horses were being groomed and caparisoned; sumpter beasts, snubbed to great posts, were being laden with the tents, bedding, and belongings of the men; while those already packed were wandering loose among the other animals and men. There was squealing, biting, kicking, and cursing as animals fouled one another with their loads, or brushed against some tethered war horse.

Squires were running hither and thither, or aiding their masters to don armor, lacing helm to hauberk, tying the points of ailette, coude, and rondel; buckling cuisse and jambe to thigh and leg. The open forges of armorer and smithy smoked and hissed, and the din of hammer on anvil rose above the thousand lesser noises of the castle courts, the shouting of commands, the rattle of steel, the ringing of iron hoof on stone flags, as these artificers hastened, sweating and cursing, through the eleventh hour repairs to armor, lance and sword, or to reset a shoe upon a refractory, plunging beast.

Finally the captains came, armored cap-a-pie, and with them some semblance of order and quiet out of chaos and bedlam. First the sumpter beasts, all loaded now, were driven, with a strong escort, to the downs below the castle and there held to await the column. Then, one by one, the companies were formed and marched out beneath fluttering pennon and waving banner to the martial strains of bugle and trumpet.

Last of all came the catapults, those great engines of destruction which hurled two hundred pound boulders with mighty force against the walls of beleaguered castles.

And after all had passed through the great gates, Norman of Torn and the little old man walked side by side from the castle building and mounted their chargers held by two squires in the center of the courtyard.

Below, on the downs, the column was forming in marching order, and as the two rode out to join it, the little old man turned to Norman of Torn, saying,

"I had almost forgot a message I have for you, my son. Father Claude sent word last evening that he had been called suddenly south, and that some appointment you had with him must therefore be deferred until later. He said that you would understand." The old man eyed his companion narrowly through the eye slit in his helm.

"'Tis passing strange," said Norman of Torn but that was his only comment. And so they joined the column which moved slowly down toward the valley and as they passed the cottage of Father Claude, Norman of Torn saw that the door was closed and that there was no sign of life about the place. A wave of melancholy passed over him, for the deserted aspect of the little flower-hedged cote seemed dismally prophetic of a near future without the beaming, jovial face of his friend and adviser.

Scarcely had the horde of Torn passed out of sight down the east edge of the valley ere a party of richly dressed knights, coming from the south by

another road along the west bank of the river, crossed over and drew rein before the cottage of Father Claude.

As their hails were unanswered, one of the party dismounted to enter the building.

"Have a care, My Lord," cried his companion. "This be over-close to the Castle Torn and there may easily be more treachery than truth in the message which called thee thither."

"Fear not," replied Simon de Montfort, "the Devil of Torn hath no quarrel with me." Striding up the little path, he knocked loudly on the door. Receiving no reply, he pushed it open and stepped into the dim light of the interior. There he found his host, the good father Claude, stretched upon his back on the floor, the breast of his priestly robes dark with dried and clotted blood.

Turning again to the door, De Montfort summoned a couple of his companions.

"The secret of the little lost prince of England be a dangerous burden for a man to carry," he said. "But this convinces me more than any words the priest might have uttered that the abductor be still in England, and possibly Prince Richard also."

A search of the cottage revealed the fact that it had been ransacked thoroughly by the assassin. The contents of drawer and box littered every room, though that the object was not rich plunder was evidenced by many pieces of jewelry and money which remained untouched.

"The true object lies here," said De Montfort, pointing to the open hearth upon which lay the charred remains of many papers and documents. "All written evidence has been destroyed, but hold what lieth here beneath the table?" and, stooping, the Earl of Leicester picked up a sheet of parchment on which a letter had been commenced. It was addressed to him, and he read it aloud:

Lest some unforeseen chance should prevent the accomplishment of our meeting, My Lord Earl, I send thee this by one who knoweth not either its contents or the suspicions which I will narrate herein.

He who bareth this letter, I truly believe to be the lost Prince Richard. Question him closely, My Lord, and I know that thou wilt be as positive as I.