

## CHAPTER XVII

When those of the royalists who had not deserted the King and fled precipitately toward the coast had regained the castle and the Priory, the city was turned over to looting and rapine. In this, Norman of Torn and his men did not participate, but camped a little apart from the town until daybreak the following morning, when they started east, toward Dover.

They marched until late the following evening, passing some twenty miles out of their way to visit a certain royalist stronghold. The troops stationed there had fled, having been appraised some few hours earlier, by fugitives, of the defeat of Henry's army at Lewes.

Norman of Torn searched the castle for the one he sought, but, finding it entirely deserted, continued his eastward march. Some few miles farther on, he overtook a party of deserting royalist soldiery, and from them he easily, by dint of threats, elicited the information he desired: the direction taken by the refugees from the deserted castle, their number, and as close a description of the party as the soldiers could give.

Again he was forced to change the direction of his march, this time heading northward into Kent. It was dark before he reached his destination, and saw before him the familiar outlines of the castle of Roger de Leybourn. This time, the outlaw threw his fierce horde completely around the embattled pile before he advanced with a score of sturdy ruffians to reconnoiter.

Making sure that the drawbridge was raised, and that he could not hope for stealthy entrance there, he crept silently to the rear of the great building and there, among the bushes, his men searched for the ladder that Norman of Torn had seen the knavish servant of My Lady Claudia unearth, that the outlaw might visit the Earl of Buckingham, unannounced.

Presently they found it, and it was the work of but a moment to raise it to the sill of the low window, so that soon the twenty stood beside their chief within the walls of Leybourn.

Noiselessly, they moved through the halls and corridors of the castle until a maid, bearing a great pasty from the kitchen, turned a sudden corner and bumped full into the Outlaw of Torn. With a shriek that might have been heard at Lewes, she dropped the dish upon the stone floor and, turning, ran, still shrieking at the top of her lungs, straight for the great dining hall.

So close behind her came the little band of outlaws that scarce had the guests arisen in consternation from the table at the shrill cries of the girl than Norman of Torn burst through the great door with twenty drawn swords at his back.

The hall was filled with knights and gentlewomen and house servants and men-at-arms. Fifty swords flashed from fifty scabbards as the men of the party saw the hostile appearance of their visitors, but before a blow could be struck, Norman of Torn, grasping his sword in his right hand, raised his left aloft in a gesture for silence.

"Hold!" he cried, and, turning directly to Roger de Leybourn, "I have no quarrel with thee, My Lord, but again I come for a guest within thy halls. Methinks thou hast as bad taste in whom thou entertains as didst thy fair lady."

"Who be ye, that thus rudely breaks in upon the peace of my castle, and makes bold to insult my guests?" demanded Roger de Leybourn.

"Who be I! If you wait, you shall see my mark upon the forehead of yon grinning baboon," replied the outlaw, pointing a mailed finger at one who had been seated close to De Leybourn.

All eyes turned in the direction that the rigid finger of the outlaw indicated, and there indeed was a fearful apparition of a man. With livid face he stood, leaning for support against the table; his craven knees wabbling beneath his fat carcass; while his lips were drawn apart against his yellow teeth in a horrid grimace of awful fear.

"If you recognize me not, Sir Roger," said Norman of Torn, drily, "it is evident that your honored guest hath a better memory."

At last the fear-struck man found his tongue, and, though his eyes never left the menacing figure of the grim, iron-clad outlaw, he addressed the master of Leybourn; shrieking in a high, awe-emasculated falsetto:

"Seize him! Kill him! Set your men upon him! Do you wish to live another moment, draw and defend yourselves for he be the Devil of Torn, and there be a great price upon his head.

"Oh, save me, save me! for he has come to kill me," he ended in a pitiful wail.

The Devil of Torn! How that name froze the hearts of the assembled guests.

The Devil of Torn! Slowly the men standing there at the board of Sir Roger de Leybourn grasped the full purport of that awful name.

Tense silence for a moment held the room in the stillness of a sepulchre, and then a woman shrieked, and fell prone across the table. She had seen the mark of the Devil of Torn upon the dead brow of her mate.

And then Roger de Leybourn spoke:

"Norman of Torn, but once before have you entered within the walls of Leybourn, and then you did, in the service of another, a great service for the house of Leybourn; and you stayed the night, an honored guest. But a moment since, you said that you had no quarrel with me. Then why be you here? Speak! Shall it be as a friend or an enemy that the master of Leybourn greets Norman of Torn; shall it be with outstretched hand or naked sword?"

"I come for this man, whom you may all see has good reason to fear me. And when I go, I take part of him with me. I be in a great hurry, so I would prefer to take my great and good friend, Peter of Colfax, without interference; but, if you wish it otherwise; we be a score strong within your walls, and nigh a thousand lie without. What say you, My Lord?"

"Your grievance against Peter of Colfax must be a mighty one, that you search him out thus within a day's ride from the army of the King who has placed a price upon your head, and from another army of men who be equally your enemies."

"I would gladly go to hell after Peter of Colfax," replied the outlaw. "What my grievance be matters not. Norman of Torn acts first and explains afterward, if he cares to explain at all. Come forth, Peter of Colfax, and for once in your life, fight like a man, that you may save your friends here from the fate that has found you at last after two years of patient waiting."

Slowly, the palsied limbs of the great coward bore him tottering to the center of the room, where gradually a little clear space had been made; the men of the party forming a circle, in the center of which stood Peter of Colfax and Norman of Torn.

"Give him a great draught of brandy," said the outlaw, "or he will sink down and choke in the froth of his own terror."

When they had forced a goblet of the fiery liquid upon him, Peter of Colfax regained his lost nerve enough so that he could raise his sword arm and defend himself and, as the fumes circulated through him, and the primal

instinct of self-preservation asserted itself, he put up a more and more creditable fight, until those who watched thought that he might indeed have a chance to vanquish the Outlaw of Torn. But they did not know that Norman of Torn was but playing with his victim, that he might make the torture long, drawn out, and wreak as terrible a punishment upon Peter of Colfax, before he killed him, as the Baron had visited upon Bertrade de Montfort because she would not yield to his base desires.

The guests were craning their necks to follow every detail of the fascinating drama that was being enacted before them.

"God, what a swordsman!" muttered one.

"Never was such swordplay seen since the day the first sword was drawn from the first scabbard!" replied Roger de Leybourn. "Is it not marvellous!"

Slowly but surely was Norman of Torn cutting Peter of Colfax to pieces; little by little, and with such fiendish care that, except for loss of blood, the man was in no way crippled; nor did the outlaw touch his victim's face with his gleaming sword. That he was saving for the fulfillment of his design.

And Peter of Colfax, cornered and fighting for his life, was no marrowless antagonist, even against the Devil of Torn. Furiously he fought; in the extremity of his fear, rushing upon his executioner with frenzied agony. Great beads of cold sweat stood upon his livid brow.

And then the gleaming point of Norman of Torn flashed, lightning-like, in his victim's face, and above the right eye of Peter of Colfax was a thin vertical cut from which the red blood had barely started to ooze ere another swift move of that master sword hand placed a fellow to parallel the first.

Five times did the razor point touch the forehead of Peter of Colfax, until the watchers saw there, upon the brow of the doomed man, the seal of death, in letters of blood--NT.

It was the end. Peter of Colfax, cut to ribbons yet fighting like the maniac he had become, was as good as dead, for the mark of the Outlaw of Torn was upon his brow. Now, shrieking and gibbering through his frothy lips, his yellow fangs bared in a mad and horrid grin, he rushed full upon Norman of Torn. There was a flash of the great sword as the outlaw swung it to the full of his mighty strength through an arc that passed above the shoulders of Peter of Colfax, and the grinning head rolled upon the floor, while the loathsome carcass, that had been a baron of England, sunk in a disheveled heap among the rushes of the great hall of the castle of Leybourn.

A little shudder passed through the wide-eyed guests. Some one broke into hysterical laughter, a woman sobbed, and then Norman of Torn, wiping his blade upon the rushes of the floor as he had done upon another occasion in that same hall, spoke quietly to the master of Leybourn.

"I would borrow yon golden platter, My Lord. It shall be returned, or a mightier one in its stead."

Leybourn nodded his assent, and Norman of Torn turned, with a few words of instructions, to one of his men.

The fellow gathered up the head of Peter of Colfax, and placed it upon the golden platter.

"I thank you, Sir Roger, for your hospitality," said Norman of Torn, with a low bow which included the spellbound guests. "Adieu." Thus followed by his men, one bearing the head of Peter of Colfax upon the platter of gold, Norman of Torn passed quietly from the hall and from the castle.