

## CHAPTER XVIII

Both horses and men were fairly exhausted from the gruelling strain of many days of marching and fighting, so Norman of Torn went into camp that night; nor did he again take up his march until the second morning, three days after the battle of Lewes.

He bent his direction toward the north and Leicester's castle, where he had reason to believe he would find a certain young woman, and though it galled his sore heart to think upon the humiliation that lay waiting his coming, he could not do less than that which he felt his honor demanded.

Beside him on the march rode the fierce red giant, Shandy, and the wiry, gray little man of Torn, whom the outlaw called father.

In no way, save the gray hair and the parchment-surfaced skin, had the old fellow changed in all these years. Without bodily vices, and clinging ever to the open air and the exercise of the foil, he was still young in muscle and endurance.

For five years, he had not crossed foils with Norman of Torn, but he constantly practiced with the best swordsmen of the wild horde, so that it had become a subject often discussed among the men as to which of the two, father or son, was the greater swordsman.

Always taciturn, the old fellow rode in his usual silence. Long since had Norman of Torn usurped by the force of his strong character and masterful ways, the position of authority in the castle of Torn. The old man simply rode and fought with the others when it pleased him; and he had come on this trip because he felt that there was that impending for which he had waited over twenty years.

Cold and hard, he looked with no love upon the man he still called "my son." If he held any sentiment toward Norman of Torn, it was one of pride which began and ended in the almost fiendish skill of his pupil's mighty sword arm.

The little army had been marching for some hours when the advance guard halted a party bound south upon a crossroad. There were some twenty or thirty men, mostly servants, and a half dozen richly garbed knights.

As Norman of Torn drew rein beside them, he saw that the leader of the party was a very handsome man of about his own age, and evidently a person of distinction; a profitable prize, thought the outlaw.

"Who are you," said the gentleman, in French, "that stops a prince of France upon the highroad as though he were an escaped criminal? Are you of the King's forces, or De Montfort's?"

"Be this Prince Philip of France?" asked Norman of Torn.

"Yes, but who be you?"

"And be you riding to meet my Lady Bertrade de Montfort?" continued the outlaw, ignoring the Prince's question.

"Yes, an it be any of your affair," replied Philip curtly.

"It be," said the Devil of Torn, "for I be a friend of My Lady Bertrade, and as the way be beset with dangers from disorganized bands of roving soldiery, it is unsafe for Monsieur le Prince to venture on with so small an escort. Therefore will the friend of Lady Bertrade de Montfort ride with Monsieur le Prince to his destination that Monsieur may arrive there safely."

"It is kind of you, Sir Knight, a kindness that I will not forget. But, again, who is it that shows this solicitude for Philip of France?"

"Norman of Torn, they call me," replied the outlaw.

"Indeed!" cried Philip. "The great and bloody outlaw?" Upon his handsome face there was no look of fear or repugnance.

Norman of Torn laughed.

"Monsieur le Prince thinks, mayhap, that he will make a bad name for himself," he said, "if he rides in such company?"

"My Lady Bertrade and her mother think you be less devil than saint," said the Prince. "They have told me of how you saved the daughter of De Montfort, and, ever since, I have been of a great desire to meet you, and to thank you. It had been my intention to ride to Torn for that purpose so soon as we reached Leicester, but the Earl changed all our plans by his victory and only yesterday, on his orders, the Princess Eleanor, his wife, with the Lady Bertrade, rode to Battel, where Simon de Montfort and the King are to be today. The Queen also is there with her retinue, so it be expected that, to show the good feeling and renewed friendship existing between De Montfort and his King, there will be gay scenes in the old fortress. But," he added,

after a pause, "dare the Outlaw of Torn ride within reach of the King who has placed a price upon his head?"

"The price has been there since I was eighteen," answered Norman of Torn, "and yet my head be where it has always been. Can you blame me if I look with levity upon the King's price? It be not heavy enough to weigh me down; nor never has it held me from going where I listed in all England. I am freer than the King, My Lord, for the King be a prisoner today."

Together they rode toward Battel, and as they talked, Norman of Torn grew to like this brave and handsome gentleman. In his heart was no rancor because of the coming marriage of the man to the woman he loved.

If Bertrade de Montfort loved this handsome French prince, then Norman of Torn was his friend; for his love was a great love, above jealousy. It not only held her happiness above his own, but the happiness and welfare of the man she loved, as well.

It was dusk when they reached Battel and as Norman of Torn bid the prince adieu, for the horde was to make camp just without the city, he said:

"May I ask My Lord to carry a message to Lady Bertrade? It is in reference to a promise I made her two years since and which I now, for the first time, be able to fulfill."

"Certainly, my friend," replied Philip. The outlaw, dismounting, called upon one of his squires for parchment, and, by the light of a torch, wrote a message to Bertrade de Montfort.

Half an hour later, a servant in the castle of Battel handed the missive to the daughter of Leicester as she sat alone in her apartment. Opening it, she read:

To Lady Bertrade de Montfort, from her friend, Norman of Torn.

Two years have passed since you took the hand of the Outlaw of Torn in friendship, and now he comes to sue for another favor.

It is that he may have speech with you, alone, in the castle of Battel this night.

Though the name Norman of Torn be fraught with terror to others, I know that you do not fear him, for you must know the loyalty and friendship which he bears you.

My camp lies without the city's gates, and your messenger will have safe conduct whatever reply he bears to,

Norman of Torn.

Fear? Fear Norman of Torn? The girl smiled as she thought of that moment of terrible terror two years ago when she learned, in the castle of Peter of Colfax, that she was alone with, and in the power of, the Devil of Torn. And then she recalled his little acts of thoughtful chivalry, nay, almost tenderness, on the long night ride to Leicester.

What a strange contradiction of a man! She wondered if he would come with lowered visor, for she was still curious to see the face that lay behind the cold, steel mask. She would ask him this night to let her see his face, or would that be cruel? For, did they not say that it was from the very ugliness of it that he kept his helm closed to hide the repulsive sight from the eyes of men!

As her thoughts wandered back to her brief meeting with him two years before, she wrote and dispatched her reply to Norman of Torn.

In the great hall that night as the King's party sat at supper, Philip of France, addressing Henry, said:

"And who thinkest thou, My Lord King, rode by my side to Battel today, that I might not be set upon by knaves upon the highway?"

"Some of our good friends from Kent?" asked the King.

"Nay, it was a man upon whose head Your Majesty has placed a price, Norman of Torn; and if all of your English highwaymen be as courteous and pleasant gentlemen as he, I shall ride always alone and unarmed through your realm that I may add to my list of pleasant acquaintances."

"The Devil of Torn?" asked Henry, incredulously. "Some one be hoaxing you."

"Nay, Your Majesty, I think not," replied Philip, "for he was indeed a grim and mighty man, and at his back rode as ferocious and awe-inspiring a pack as ever I beheld outside a prison; fully a thousand strong they rode. They be camped not far without the city now."

"My Lord," said Henry, turning to Simon de Montfort, "be it not time that England were rid of this devil's spawn and his hellish brood? Though I presume," he added, a sarcastic sneer upon his lip, "that it may prove

embarrassing for My Lord Earl of Leicester to turn upon his companion in arms."

"I owe him nothing," returned the Earl haughtily, "by his own word."

"You owe him victory at Lewes," snapped the King. "It were indeed a sad commentary upon the sincerity of our loyalty-professing lieges who turned their arms against our royal person, 'to save him from the treachery of his false advisers,' that they called upon a cutthroat outlaw with a price upon his head to aid them in their 'righteous cause'."

"My Lord King," cried De Montfort, flushing with anger, "I called not upon this fellow, nor did I know he was within two hundred miles of Lewes until I saw him ride into the midst of the conflict that day. Neither did I know, until I heard his battle cry, whether he would fall upon baron or royalist."

"If that be the truth, Leicester," said the King, with a note of skepticism which he made studiously apparent, "hang the dog. He be just without the city even now."

"You be King of England, My Lord Henry. If you say that he shall be hanged, hanged he shall be," replied De Montfort.

"A dozen courts have already passed sentence upon him, it only remains to catch him, Leicester," said the King.

"A party shall sally forth at dawn to do the work," replied De Montfort.

"And not," thought Philip of France, "if I know it, shall the brave Outlaw of Torn be hanged tomorrow."

In his camp without the city of Battel, Norman of Torn paced back and forth waiting an answer to his message.

Sentries patrolled the entire circumference of the bivouac, for the outlaw knew full well that he had put his head within the lion's jaw when he had ridden thus boldly to the seat of English power. He had no faith in the gratitude of De Montfort, and he knew full well what the King would urge when he learned that the man who had sent his soldiers naked back to London, who had forced his messenger to eat the King's message, and who had turned his victory to defeat at Lewes, was within reach of the army of De Montfort.

Norman of Torn loved to fight, but he was no fool, and so he did not relish pitting his thousand upon an open plain against twenty thousand within a walled fortress.

No, he would see Bertrade de Montfort that night and before dawn his rough band would be far on the road toward Torn. The risk was great to enter the castle, filled as it was with his mighty enemies. But if he died there, it would be in a good cause, thought he and, anyway, he had set himself to do this duty which he dreaded so, and do it he would were all the armies of the world camped within Battel.

Directly he heard a low challenge from one of his sentries, who presently appeared escorting a lackey.

"A messenger from Lady Bertrade de Montfort," said the soldier.

"Bring him hither," commanded the outlaw.

The lackey approached and handed Norman of Torn a dainty parchment sealed with scented wax wafers.

"Did My Lady say you were to wait for an answer?" asked the outlaw.

"I am to wait, My Lord," replied the awestruck fellow, to whom the service had been much the same had his mistress ordered him to Hell to bear a message to the Devil.

Norman of Torn turned to a flickering torch and, breaking the seals, read the message from the woman he loved. It was short and simple.

To Norman of Torn, from his friend always, Bertrade de Montfort.

Come with Giles. He has my instructions to lead thee secretly to where I be.

Bertrade de Montfort.

Norman of Torn turned to where one of his captains squatted upon the ground beside an object covered with a cloth.

"Come, Flory," he said, and then, turning to the waiting Giles, "lead on."

They fell in single file: first the lackey, Giles, then Norman of Torn and last the fellow whom he had addressed as Flory bearing the object covered with a cloth. But it was not Flory who brought up the rear. Flory lay dead in the shadow of a great oak within the camp; a thin wound below his left shoulder blade marked the spot where a keen dagger had found its way to his heart,

and in his place walked the little grim, gray, old man, bearing the object covered with a cloth. But none might know the difference, for the little man wore the armor of Flory, and his visor was drawn.

And so they came to a small gate which let into the castle wall where the shadow of a great tower made the blackness of a black night doubly black. Through many dim corridors, the lackey led them, and up winding stairways until presently he stopped before a low door.

"Here," he said, "My Lord," and turning left them.

Norman of Torn touched the panel with the mailed knuckles of his right hand, and a low voice from within whispered, "Enter."

Silently, he strode into the apartment, a small antechamber off a large hall. At one end was an open hearth upon which logs were burning brightly, while a single lamp aided in diffusing a soft glow about the austere chamber. In the center of the room was a table, and at the sides several benches.

Before the fire stood Bertrade de Montfort, and she was alone.

"Place your burden upon this table, Flory," said Norman of Torn. And when it had been done: "You may go. Return to camp."

He did not address Bertrade de Montfort until the door had closed behind the little grim, gray man who wore the armor of the dead Flory and then Norman of Torn advanced to the table and stood with his left hand ungauntleted, resting upon the table's edge.

"My Lady Bertrade," he said at last, "I have come to fulfill a promise."

He spoke in French, and she started slightly at his voice. Before, Norman of Torn had always spoken in English. Where had she heard that voice! There were tones in it that haunted her.

"What promise did Norman of Torn e'er make to Bertrade de Montfort?" she asked. "I do not understand you, my friend."

"Look," he said. And as she approached the table he withdrew the cloth which covered the object that the man had placed there.

The girl started back with a little cry of terror, for there upon a golden platter was a man's head; horrid with the grin of death baring yellow fangs.

"Dost recognize the thing?" asked the outlaw. And then she did; but still she could not comprehend. At last, slowly, there came back to her the idle,

jesting promise of Roger de Conde to fetch the head of her enemy to the feet of his princess, upon a golden dish.

But what had the Outlaw of Torn to do with that! It was all a sore puzzle to her, and then she saw the bared left hand of the grim, visored figure of the Devil of Torn, where it rested upon the table beside the grisly head of Peter of Colfax; and upon the third finger was the great ring she had tossed to Roger de Conde on that day, two years before.

What strange freak was her brain playing her! It could not be, no it was impossible; then her glance fell again upon the head grinning there upon the platter of gold, and upon the forehead of it she saw, in letters of dried blood, that awful symbol of sudden death--NT!

Slowly her eyes returned to the ring upon the outlaw's hand, and then up to his visored helm. A step she took toward him, one hand upon her breast, the other stretched pointing toward his face, and she swayed slightly as might one who has just arisen from a great illness.

"Your visor," she whispered, "raise your visor." And then, as though to herself: "It cannot be; it cannot be."

Norman of Torn, though it tore the heart from him, did as she bid, and there before her she saw the brave strong face of Roger de Conde.

"Mon Dieu!" she cried, "Tell me it is but a cruel joke."

"It be the cruel truth, My Lady Bertrade," said Norman of Torn sadly. And, then, as she turned away from him, burying her face in her raised arms, he came to her side, and, laying his hand upon her shoulder, said sadly:

"And now you see, My Lady, why I did not follow you to France. My heart went there with you, but I knew that naught but sorrow and humiliation could come to one whom the Devil of Torn loved, if that love was returned; and so I waited until you might forget the words you had spoken to Roger de Conde before I came to fulfill the promise that you should know him in his true colors.

"It is because I love you, Bertrade, that I have come this night. God knows that it be no pleasant thing to see the loathing in your very attitude, and to read the hate and revulsion that surges through your heart, or to guess the hard, cold thoughts which fill your mind against me because I allowed you to speak the words you once spoke, and to the Devil of Torn.



"I make no excuse for my weakness. I ask no forgiveness for what I know you never can forgive. That, when you think of me, it will always be with loathing and contempt is the best that I can hope.

"I only know that I love you, Bertrade; I only know that I love you, and with a love that surpasseth even my own understanding.

"Here is the ring that you gave in token of friendship. Take it. The hand that wore it has done no wrong by the light that has been given it as guide.

"The blood that has pulsed through the finger that it circled came from a heart that beat for Bertrade de Montfort; a heart that shall continue to beat for her alone until a merciful providence sees fit to gather in a wasted and useless life.

"Farewell, Bertrade." Kneeling he raised the hem of her garment to his lips.

A thousand conflicting emotions surged through the heart of this proud daughter of the new conqueror of England. The anger of an outraged confidence, gratitude for the chivalry which twice had saved her honor, hatred for the murderer of a hundred friends and kinsmen, respect and honor for the marvellous courage of the man, loathing and contempt for the base born, the memory of that exalted moment when those handsome lips had clung to hers, pride in the fearlessness of a champion who dared come alone among twenty thousand enemies for the sake of a promise made her; but stronger than all the rest, two stood out before her mind's eye like living things--the degradation of his low birth, and the memory of the great love she had cherished all these long and dreary months.

And these two fought out their battle in the girl's breast. In those few brief moments of bewilderment and indecision, it seemed to Bertrade de Montfort that ten years passed above her head, and when she reached her final resolution she was no longer a young girl but a grown woman who, with the weight of a mature deliberation, had chosen the path which she would travel to the end--to the final goal, however sweet or however bitter.

Slowly she turned toward him who knelt with bowed head at her feet, and, taking the hand that held the ring outstretched toward her, raised him to his feet. In silence she replaced the golden band upon his finger, and then she lifted her eyes to his.

"Keep the ring, Norman of Torn," she said. "The friendship of Bertrade de Montfort is not lightly given nor lightly taken away," she hesitated, "nor is her love."

"What do you mean?" he whispered. For in her eyes was that wondrous light he had seen there on that other day in the far castle of Leicester.

"I mean," she answered, "that, Roger de Conde or Norman of Torn, gentleman or highwayman, it be all the same to Bertrade de Montfort--it be thee I love; thee!"

Had she reviled him, spat upon him, he would not have been surprised, for he had expected the worst; but that she should love him! Oh God, had his overwrought nerves turned his poor head? Was he dreaming this thing, only to awaken to the cold and awful truth!

But these warm arms about his neck, the sweet perfume of the breath that fanned his cheek; these were no dream!

"Think thee what thou art saying, Bertrade?" he cried. "Dost forget that I be a low-born knave, knowing not my own mother and questioning even the identity of my father? Could a De Montfort face the world with such a man for husband?"

"I know what I say, perfectly," she answered. "Were thou born out of wedlock, the son of a hostler and a scullery maid, still would I love thee, and honor thee, and cleave to thee. Where thou be, Norman of Torn, there shall be happiness for me. Thy friends shall be my friends; thy joys shall be my joys; thy sorrows, my sorrows; and thy enemies, even mine own father, shall be my enemies.

"Why it is, my Norman, I know not. Only do I know that I didst often question my own self if in truth I did really love Roger de Conde, but thee-- oh Norman, why is it that there be no shred of doubt now, that this heart, this soul, this body be all and always for the Outlaw of Torn?"

"I do not know," he said simply and gravely. "So wonderful a thing be beyond my poor brain; but I think my heart knows, for in very joy, it is sending the hot blood racing and surging through my being till I were like to be consumed for the very heat of my happiness."

"Sh!" she whispered, suddenly, "methinks I hear footsteps. They must not find thee here, Norman of Torn, for the King has only this night wrung a promise from my father to take thee in the morning and hang thee. What shall we do, Norman? Where shall we meet again?"

"We shall not be separated, Bertrade; only so long as it may take thee to gather a few trinkets, and fetch thy riding cloak. Thou ridest north tonight

with Norman of Torn, and by the third day, Father Claude shall make us one."

"I am glad thee wish it," she replied. "I feared that, for some reason, thee might not think it best for me to go with thee now. Wait here, I will be gone but a moment. If the footsteps I hear approach this door," and she indicated the door by which he had entered the little room, "thou canst step through this other doorway into the adjoining apartment, and conceal thyself there until the danger passes."

Norman of Torn made a wry face, for he had no stomach for hiding himself away from danger.

"For my sake," she pleaded. So he promised to do as she bid, and she ran swiftly from the room to fetch her belongings.