CHAPTER XI

The door clanged, shutting out all but a little light, and I was left alone on my back. By the tricks I had long since learned in the jacket, I managed to writhe myself across the floor an inch at a time until the edge of the sole of my right shoe touched the door. There was an immense cheer in this. I was not utterly alone. If the need arose, I could at least rap knuckle talk to Morrell.

But Warden Atherton must have left strict injunctions on the guards, for, though I managed to call Morrell and tell him I intended trying the experiment, he was prevented by the guards from replying. Me they could only curse, for, in so far as I was in the jacket for a ten days' bout, I was beyond all threat of punishment.

I remember remarking at the time my serenity of mind. The customary pain of the jacket was in my body, but my mind was so passive that I was no more aware of the pain than was I aware of the floor beneath me or the walls around me. Never was a man in better mental and spiritual condition for such an experiment. Of course, this was largely due to my extreme weakness. But there was more to it. I had long schooled myself to be oblivious to pain. I had neither doubts nor fears. All the content of my mind seemed to be an absolute faith in the over-lordship of the mind. This passivity was almost dream-like, and yet, in its way, it was positive almost to a pitch of exaltation.

I began my concentration of will. Even then my body was numbing and prickling through the loss of circulation. I directed my will to the little toe of my right foot, and I willed that toe to cease to be alive in my consciousness. I willed that toe to die--to die so far as I, its lord, and a different thing entirely from it, was concerned. There was the hard struggle. Morrell had warned me that it would be so. But there was no flicker of doubt to disturb my faith. I knew that that toe would die, and I knew when it was dead. Joint by joint it had died under the compulsion of my will.

The rest was easy, but slow, I will admit. Joint by joint, toe by toe, all the toes of both my feet ceased to be. And joint by joint, the process went on. Came the time when my flesh below the ankles had ceased. Came the time when all below my knees had ceased.

Such was the pitch of my perfect exaltation, that I knew not the slightest prod of rejoicing at my success. I knew nothing save that I was making my body die. All that was I was devoted to that sole task. I performed the work as thoroughly as any mason laying bricks, and I regarded the work as just about as commonplace as would a brick-mason regard his work.

At the end of an hour my body was dead to the hips, and from the hips up, joint by joint, I continued to will the ascending death.

It was when I reached the level of my heart that the first blurring and dizzying of my consciousness' occurred. For fear that I should lose consciousness, I willed to hold the death I had gained, and shifted my concentration to my fingers. My brain cleared again, and the death of my arms to the shoulders was most rapidly accomplished.

At this stage my body was all dead, so far as I was concerned, save my head and a little patch of my chest. No longer did the pound and smash of my compressed heart echo in my brain. My heart was beating steadily but feebly. The joy of it, had I dared joy at such a moment, would have been the cessation of sensations.

At this point my experience differs from Morrell's. Still willing automatically, I began to grow dreamy, as one does in that borderland between sleeping and waking. Also, it seemed as if a prodigious enlargement of my brain was taking place within the skull itself that did not enlarge. There were occasional glintings and flashings of light as if even I, the overlord, had ceased for a moment and the next moment was again myself, still the tenant of the fleshly tenement that I was making to die.

Most perplexing was the seeming enlargement of brain. Without having passed through the wall of skull, nevertheless it seemed to me that the periphery of my brain was already outside my skull and still expanding. Along with this was one of the most remarkable sensations or experiences that I have ever encountered. Time and space, in so far as they were the

stuff of my consciousness, underwent an enormous extension. Thus, without opening my eyes to verify, I knew that the walls of my narrow cell had receded until it was like a vast audience-chamber. And while I contemplated the matter, I knew that they continued to recede. The whim struck me for a moment that if a similar expansion were taking place with the whole prison, then the outer walls of San Quentin must be far out in the Pacific Ocean on one side and on the other side must be encroaching on the Nevada desert. A companion whim was that since matter could permeate matter, then the walls of my cell might well permeate the prison walls, pass through the prison walls, and thus put my cell outside the prison and put me at liberty. Of course, this was pure fantastic whim, and I knew it at the time for what it was.

The extension of time was equally remarkable. Only at long intervals did my heart beat. Again a whim came to me, and I counted the seconds, slow and sure, between my heart-beats. At first, as I clearly noted, over a hundred seconds intervened between beats. But as I continued to count the intervals extended so that I was made weary of counting.

And while this illusion of the extension of time and space persisted and grew, I found myself dreamily considering a new and profound problem. Morrell had told me that he had won freedom from his body by killing his body--or by eliminating his body from his consciousness, which, of course, was in effect the same thing. Now, my body was so near to being entirely dead that I knew in all absoluteness that by a quick concentration of will on the yet-alive patch of my torso it, too, would

cease to be. But--and here was the problem, and Morrell had not warned me: should I also will my head to be dead? If I did so, no matter what befell the spirit of Darrell Standing, would not the body of Darrell Standing be for ever dead?

I chanced the chest and the slow-beating heart. The quick compulsion of my will was rewarded. I no longer had chest nor heart. I was only a mind, a soul, a consciousness--call it what you will--incorporate in a nebulous brain that, while it still centred inside my skull, was expanded, and was continuing to expand, beyond my skull.

And then, with flashings of light, I was off and away. At a bound I had vaulted prison roof and California sky, and was among the stars. I say "stars" advisedly. I walked among the stars. I was a child. I was clad in frail, fleece-like, delicate-coloured robes that shimmered in the cool starlight. These robes, of course, were based upon my boyhood observance of circus actors and my boyhood conception of the garb of young angels.

Nevertheless, thus clad, I trod interstellar space, exalted by the knowledge that I was bound on vast adventure, where, at the end, I would find all the cosmic formulae and have made clear to me the ultimate secret of the universe. In my hand I carried a long glass wand. It was borne in upon me that with the tip of this wand I must touch each star in passing. And I knew, in all absoluteness, that did I but miss one star I should be precipitated into some unplummeted abyss of unthinkable and eternal punishment and guilt.

Long I pursued my starry quest. When I say "long," you must bear in mind the enormous extension of time that had occurred in my brain. For centuries I trod space, with the tip of my wand and with unerring eye and hand tapping each star I passed. Ever the way grew brighter. Ever the ineffable goal of infinite wisdom grew nearer. And yet I made no mistake. This was no other self of mine. This was no experience that had once been mine. I was aware all the time that it was I, Darrell Standing, who walked among the stars and tapped them with a wand of glass. In short, I knew that here was nothing real, nothing that had ever been nor could ever be. I knew that it was nothing else than a ridiculous orgy of the imagination, such as men enjoy in drug dreams, in delirium, or in mere ordinary slumber.

And then, as all went merry and well with me on my celestial quest, the tip of my wand missed a star, and on the instant I knew I had been guilty of a great crime. And on the instant a knock, vast and compulsive, inexorable and mandatory as the stamp of the iron hoof of doom, smote me and reverberated across the universe. The whole sidereal system coruscated, reeled and fell in flame.

I was torn by an exquisite and disruptive agony. And on the instant I was Darrell Standing, the life-convict, lying in his strait-jacket in solitary. And I knew the immediate cause of that summons. It was a rap of the knuckle by Ed Morrell, in Cell Five, beginning the spelling of some message.

And now, to give some comprehension of the extension of time and space that I was experiencing. Many days afterwards I asked Morrell what he had tried to convey to me. It was a simple message, namely: "Standing, are you there?" He had tapped it rapidly, while the guard was at the far end of the corridor into which the solitary cells opened. As I say, he had tapped the message very rapidly. And now behold! Between the first tap and the second I was off and away among the stars, clad in fleecy garments, touching each star as I passed in my pursuit of the formulae that would explain the last mystery of life. And, as before, I pursued the quest for centuries. Then came the summons, the stamp of the hoof of doom, the exquisite disruptive agony, and again I was back in my cell in San Quentin. It was the second tap of Ed Morrell's knuckle. The interval between it and the first tap could have been no more than a fifth of a second. And yet, so unthinkably enormous was the extension of time to me, that in the course of that fifth of a second I had been away star-roving for long ages.

Now I know, my reader, that the foregoing seems all a farrago. I agree with you. It is farrago. It was experience, however. It was just as real to me as is the snake beheld by a man in delirium tremens.

Possibly, by the most liberal estimate, it may have taken Ed Morrell two minutes to tap his question. Yet, to me, aeons elapsed between the first tap of his knuckle and the last. No longer could I tread my starry path with that ineffable pristine joy, for my way was beset with dread of the

inevitable summons that would rip and tear me as it jerked me back to my strait-jacket hell. Thus my aeons of star-wandering were aeons of dread.

And all the time I knew it was Ed Morrell's knuckle that thus cruelly held me earth-bound. I tried to speak to him, to ask him to cease. But so thoroughly had I eliminated my body from my consciousness that I was unable to resurrect it. My body lay dead in the jacket, though I still inhabited the skull. In vain I strove to will my foot to tap my message to Morrell. I reasoned I had a foot. And yet, so thoroughly had I carried out the experiment, I had no foot.

Next--and I know now that it was because Morrell had spelled his message quite out--I pursued my way among the stars and was not called back. After that, and in the course of it, I was aware, drowsily, that I was falling asleep, and that it was delicious sleep. From time to time, drowsily, I stirred--please, my reader, don't miss that verb--I STIRRED. I moved my legs, my arms. I was aware of clean, soft bed linen against my skin. I was aware of bodily well-being. Oh, it was delicious! As thirsting men on the desert dream of splashing fountains and flowing wells, so dreamed I of easement from the constriction of the jacket, of cleanliness in the place of filth, of smooth velvety skin of health in place of my poor parchment-crinkled hide. But I dreamed with a difference, as you shall see.

I awoke. Oh, broad and wide awake I was, although I did not open my eyes. And please know that in all that follows I knew no surprise

whatever. Everything was the natural and the expected. I was I, be sure of that. But I was not Darrell Standing. Darrell Standing had no more to do with the being I was than did Darrell Standing's parchment-crinkled skin have aught to do with the cool, soft skin that was mine. Nor was I aware of any Darrell Standing--as I could not well be, considering that Darrell Standing was as yet unborn and would not be born for centuries. But you shall see.

I lay with closed eyes, lazily listening. From without came the clacking of many hoofs moving orderly on stone flags. From the accompanying jingle of metal bits of man-harness and steed-harness I knew some cavalcade was passing by on the street beneath my windows. Also, I wondered idly who it was. From somewhere--and I knew where, for I knew it was from the inn yard--came the ring and stamp of hoofs and an impatient neigh that I recognized as belonging to my waiting horse.

Came steps and movements--steps openly advertised as suppressed with the intent of silence and that yet were deliberately noisy with the secret intent of rousing me if I still slept. I smiled inwardly at the rascal's trick.

"Pons," I ordered, without opening my eyes, "water, cold water, quick, a deluge. I drank over long last night, and now my gullet scorches."

"And slept over long to-day," he scolded, as he passed me the water, ready in his hand.

I sat up, opened my eyes, and carried the tankard to my lips with both my hands. And as I drank I looked at Pons.

Now note two things. I spoke in French; I was not conscious that I spoke in French. Not until afterward, back in solitary, when I remembered what I am narrating, did I know that I had spoken in French--ay, and spoken well. As for me, Darrell Standing, at present writing these lines in Murderers' Row of Folsom Prison, why, I know only high school French sufficient to enable me to read the language. As for my speaking it--impossible. I can scarcely intelligibly pronounce my way through a menu.

But to return. Pons was a little withered old man. He was born in our house--I know, for it chanced that mention was made of it this very day I am describing. Pons was all of sixty years. He was mostly toothless, and, despite a pronounced limp that compelled him to go slippity-hop, he was very alert and spry in all his movements. Also, he was impudently familiar. This was because he had been in my house sixty years. He had been my father's servant before I could toddle, and after my father's death (Pons and I talked of it this day) he became my servant. The limp he had acquired on a stricken field in Italy, when the horsemen charged across. He had just dragged my father clear of the hoofs when he was lanced through the thigh, overthrown, and trampled. My father, conscious but helpless from his own wounds, witnessed it all. And so, as I say, Pons had earned such a right to impudent familiarity that at least there

was no gainsaying him by my father's son.

Pons shook his head as I drained the huge draught.

"Did you hear it boil?" I laughed, as I handed back the empty tankard.

"Like your father," he said hopelessly. "But your father lived to learn better, which I doubt you will do."

"He got a stomach affliction," I devilled, "so that one mouthful of spirits turned it outside in. It were wisdom not to drink when one's tank will not hold the drink."

While we talked Pons was gathering to my bedside my clothes for the day.

"Drink on, my master," he answered. "It won't hurt you. You'll die with a sound stomach."

"You mean mine is an iron-lined stomach?" I wilfully misunderstood him.

"I mean--" he began with a quick peevishness, then broke off as he realized my teasing and with a pout of his withered lips draped my new sable cloak upon a chair-back. "Eight hundred ducats," he sneered. "A thousand goats and a hundred fat oxen in a coat to keep you warm. A score of farms on my gentleman's fine back."

"And in that a hundred fine farms, with a castle or two thrown in, to say nothing, perhaps, of a palace," I said, reaching out my hand and touching the rapier which he was just in the act of depositing on the chair.

"So your father won with his good right arm," Pons retorted. "But what your father won he held."

Here Pons paused to hold up to scorn my new scarlet satin doublet--a wondrous thing of which I had been extravagant.

"Sixty ducats for that," Pons indicted. "Your father'd have seen all the tailors and Jews of Christendom roasting in hell before he'd a-paid such a price."

And while we dressed--that is, while Pons helped me to dress--I continued to quip with him.

"It is quite clear, Pons, that you have not heard the news," I said slyly.

Whereat up pricked his ears like the old gossip he was.

"Late news?" he queried. "Mayhap from the English Court?"

"Nay," I shook my head. "But news perhaps to you, but old news for all of that. Have you not heard? The philosophers of Greece were whispering

it nigh two thousand years ago. It is because of that news that I put twenty fat farms on my back, live at Court, and am become a dandy. You see, Pons, the world is a most evil place, life is most sad, all men die, and, being dead . . . well, are dead. Wherefore, to escape the evil and the sadness, men in these days, like me, seek amazement, insensibility, and the madnesses of dalliance."

"But the news, master? What did the philosophers whisper about so long ago?"

"That God was dead, Pons," I replied solemnly. "Didn't you know that? God is dead, and I soon shall be, and I wear twenty fat farms on my back."

"God lives," Pons asserted fervently. "God lives, and his kingdom is at hand. I tell you, master, it is at hand. It may be no later than to-morrow that the earth shall pass away."

"So said they in old Rome, Pons, when Nero made torches of them to light his sports."

Pons regarded me pityingly.

"Too much learning is a sickness," he complained. "I was always opposed to it. But you must have your will and drag my old body about with you--a-studying astronomy and numbers in Venice, poetry and all the Italian fol-

de-rols in Florence, and astrology in Pisa, and God knows what in that madman country of Germany. Pish for the philosophers! I tell you, master, I, Pons, your servant, a poor old man who knows not a letter from a pike-staff--I tell you God lives, and the time you shall appear before him is short." He paused with sudden recollection, and added: "He is here, the priest you spoke of."

On the instant I remembered my engagement.

"Why did you not tell me before?" I demanded angrily.

"What did it matter?" Pons shrugged his shoulders. "Has he not been waiting two hours as it is?"

"Why didn't you call me?"

He regarded me with a thoughtful, censorious eye.

"And you rolling to bed and shouting like chanticleer, 'Sing cucu, sing cucu, cucu nu nu cucu, sing cucu, sing cucu, sing cucu, sing cucu.'"

He mocked me with the senseless refrain in an ear-jangling falsetto. Without doubt I had bawled the nonsense out on my way to bed.

"You have a good memory," I commented drily, as I essayed a moment to drape my shoulders with the new sable cloak ere I tossed it to Pons to

put aside. He shook his head sourly.

"No need of memory when you roared it over and over for the thousandth time till half the inn was a-knock at the door to spit you for the sleep-killer you were. And when I had you decently in the bed, did you not call me to you and command, if the devil called, to tell him my lady slept? And did you not call me back again, and, with a grip on my arm that leaves it bruised and black this day, command me, as I loved life, fat meat, and the warm fire, to call you not of the morning save for one thing?"

"Which was?" I prompted, unable for the life of me to guess what I could have said.

"Which was the heart of one, a black buzzard, you said, by name Martinelli--whoever he may be--for the heart of Martinelli smoking on a gold platter. The platter must be gold, you said; and you said I must call you by singing, 'Sing cucu, sing cucu, sing cucu.' Whereat you began to teach me how to sing, 'Sing cucu, sing cucu, sing cucu.'"

And when Pons had said the name, I knew it at once for the priest, Martinelli, who had been knocking his heels two mortal hours in the room without.

When Martinelli was permitted to enter and as he saluted me by title and name, I knew at once my name and all of it. I was Count Guillaume de

Sainte-Maure. (You see, only could I know then, and remember afterward, what was in my conscious mind.)

The priest was Italian, dark and small, lean as with fasting or with a wasting hunger not of this world, and his hands were as small and slender as a woman's. But his eyes! They were cunning and trustless, narrow-slitted and heavy-lidded, at one and the same time as sharp as a ferret's and as indolent as a basking lizard's.

"There has been much delay, Count de Sainte-Maure," he began promptly, when Pons had left the room at a glance from me. "He whom I serve grows impatient."

"Change your tune, priest," I broke in angrily. "Remember, you are not now in Rome."

"My august master--" he began.

"Rules augustly in Rome, mayhap," I again interrupted. "This is France."

Martinelli shrugged his shoulders meekly and patiently, but his eyes, gleaming like a basilisk's, gave his shoulders the lie.

"My august master has some concern with the doings of France," he said quietly. "The lady is not for you. My master has other plans. . ." He moistened his thin lips with his tongue. "Other plans for the lady . . .

and for you."

Of course, by the lady I knew he referred to the great Duchess Philippa, widow of Geoffrey, last Duke of Aquitaine. But great duchess, widow, and all, Philippa was a woman, and young, and gay, and beautiful, and, by my faith, fashioned for me.

"What are his plans?" I demanded bluntly.

"They are deep and wide, Count Sainte-Maure--too deep and wide for me to presume to imagine, much less know or discuss with you or any man."

"Oh, I know big things are afoot and slimy worms squirming underground," I said.

"They told me you were stubborn-necked, but I have obeyed commands."

Martinelli arose to leave, and I arose with him.

"I said it was useless," he went on. "But the last chance to change your mind was accorded you. My august master deals more fairly than fair."

"Oh, well, I'll think the matter over," I said airily, as I bowed the priest to the door.

He stopped abruptly at the threshold.

"The time for thinking is past," he said. "It is decision I came for."

"I will think the matter over," I repeated, then added, as afterthought: "If the lady's plans do not accord with mine, then mayhap the plans of your master may fruit as he desires. For remember, priest, he is no master of mine."

"You do not know my master," he said solemnly.

"Nor do I wish to know him," I retorted.

And I listened to the lithe, light step of the little intriguing priest go down the creaking stairs.

Did I go into the minutiae of detail of all that I saw this half a day and half a night that I was Count Guillaume de Sainte-Maure, not ten books the size of this I am writing could contain the totality of the matter. Much I shall skip; in fact, I shall skip almost all; for never yet have I heard of a condemned man being reprieved in order that he might complete his memoirs--at least, not in California.

When I rode out in Paris that day it was the Paris of centuries agone. The narrow streets were an unsanitary scandal of filth and slime. But I must skip. And skip I shall, all of the afternoon's events, all of the ride outside the walls, of the grand fete given by Hugh de Meung, of the

feasting and the drinking in which I took little part. Only of the end of the adventure will I write, which begins with where I stood jesting with Philippa herself--ah, dear God, she was wondrous beautiful. A great lady--ay, but before that, and after that, and always, a woman.

We laughed and jested lightly enough, as about us jostled the merry throng; but under our jesting was the deep earnestness of man and woman well advanced across the threshold of love and yet not too sure each of the other. I shall not describe her. She was small, exquisitely slender--but there, I am describing her. In brief, she was the one woman in the world for me, and little I recked the long arm of that gray old man in Rome could reach out half across Europe between my woman and me.

And the Italian, Fortini, leaned to my shoulder and whispered:

"One who desires to speak."

"One who must wait my pleasure," I answered shortly.

"I wait no man's pleasure," was his equally short reply.

And, while my blood boiled, I remembered the priest, Martinelli, and the gray old man at Rome. The thing was clear. It was deliberate. It was the long arm. Fortini smiled lazily at me while I thus paused for the moment to debate, but in his smile was the essence of all insolence.

This, of all times, was the time I should have been cool. But the old red anger began to kindle in me. This was the work of the priest. This was the Fortini, poverished of all save lineage, reckoned the best sword come up out of Italy in half a score of years. To-night it was Fortini. If he failed the gray old man's command to-morrow it would be another sword, the next day another. And, perchance still failing, then might I expect the common bravo's steel in my back or the common poisoner's philter in my wine, my meat, or bread.

"I am busy," I said. "Begone."

"My business with you presses," was his reply.

Insensibly our voices had slightly risen, so that Philippa heard.

"Begone, you Italian hound," I said. "Take your howling from my door. I shall attend to you presently."

"The moon is up," he said. "The grass is dry and excellent. There is no dew. Beyond the fish-pond, an arrow's flight to the left, is an open space, quiet and private."

"Presently you shall have your desire," I muttered impatiently.

But still he persisted in waiting at my shoulder.

"Presently," I said. "Presently I shall attend to you."

Then spoke Philippa, in all the daring spirit and the iron of her.

"Satisfy the gentleman's desire, Sainte-Maure. Attend to him now. And good fortune go with you." She paused to beckon to her her uncle, Jean de Joinville, who was passing--uncle on her mother's side, of the de Joinvilles of Anjou. "Good fortune go with you," she repeated, and then leaned to me so that she could whisper: "And my heart goes with you, Sainte-Maure. Do not be long. I shall await you in the big hall."

I was in the seventh heaven. I trod on air. It was the first frank admittance of her love. And with such benediction I was made so strong that I knew I could kill a score of Fortinis and snap my fingers at a score of gray old men in Rome.

Jean de Joinville bore Philippa away in the press, and Fortini and I settled our arrangements in a trice. We separated--he to find a friend or so, and I to find a friend or so, and all to meet at the appointed place beyond the fish-pond.

First I found Robert Lanfranc, and, next, Henry Bohemond. But before I found them I encountered a windlestraw which showed which way blew the wind and gave promise of a very gale. I knew the windlestraw, Guy de Villehardouin, a raw young provincial, come up the first time to Court, but a fiery little cockerel for all of that. He was red-haired. His

blue eyes, small and pinched close to ether, were likewise red, at least in the whites of them; and his skin, of the sort that goes with such types, was red and freckled. He had quite a parboiled appearance.

As I passed him by a sudden movement he jostled me. Oh, of course, the thing was deliberate. And he flamed at me while his hand dropped to his rapier.

"Faith," thought I, "the gray old man has many and strange tools," while to the cockerel I bowed and murmured, "Your pardon for my clumsiness. The fault was mine. Your pardon, Villehardouin."

But he was not to be appeased thus easily. And while he fumed and strutted I glimpsed Robert Lanfranc, beckoned him to us, and explained the happening.

"Sainte-Maure has accorded you satisfaction," was his judgment. "He has prayed your pardon."

"In truth, yes," I interrupted in my suavest tones. "And I pray your pardon again, Villehardouin, for my very great clumsiness. I pray your pardon a thousand times. The fault was mine, though unintentioned. In my haste to an engagement I was clumsy, most woful clumsy, but without intention."

What could the dolt do but grudgingly accept the amends I so freely

proffered him? Yet I knew, as Lanfranc and I hastened on, that ere many days, or hours, the flame-headed youth would see to it that we measured steel together on the grass.

I explained no more to Lanfranc than my need of him, and he was little interested to pry deeper into the matter. He was himself a lively youngster of no more than twenty, but he had been trained to arms, had fought in Spain, and had an honourable record on the grass. Merely his black eyes flashed when he learned what was toward, and such was his eagerness that it was he who gathered Henry Bohemond in to our number.

When the three of us arrived in the open space beyond the fish-pond Fortini and two friends were already waiting us. One was Felix Pasquini, nephew to the Cardinal of that name, and as close in his uncle's confidence as was his uncle close in the confidence of the gray old man. The other was Raoul de Goncourt, whose presence surprised me, he being too good and noble a man for the company he kept.

We saluted properly, and properly went about the business. It was nothing new to any of us. The footing was good, as promised. There was no dew. The moon shone fair, and Fortini's blade and mine were out and at earnest play.

This I knew: good swordsman as they reckoned me in France, Fortini was a better. This, too, I knew: that I carried my lady's heart with me this night, and that this night, because of me, there would be one Italian

less in the world. I say I knew it. In my mind the issue could not be in doubt. And as our rapiers played I pondered the manner I should kill him. I was not minded for a long contest. Quick and brilliant had always been my way. And further, what of my past gay months of carousal and of singing "Sing cucu, sing cucu, sing cucu," at ungodly hours, I knew I was not conditioned for a long contest. Quick and brilliant was my decision.

But quick and brilliant was a difficult matter with so consummate a swordsman as Fortini opposed to me. Besides, as luck would have it, Fortini, always the cold one, always the tireless-wristed, always sure and long, as report had it, in going about such business, on this night elected, too, the quick and brilliant.

It was nervous, tingling work, for as surely as I sensed his intention of briefness, just as surely had he sensed mine. I doubt that I could have done the trick had it been broad day instead of moonlight. The dim light aided me. Also was I aided by divining, the moment in advance, what he had in mind. It was the time attack, a common but perilous trick that every novice knows, that has laid on his back many a good man who attempted it, and that is so fraught with danger to the perpetrator that swordsmen are not enamoured of it.

We had been at work barely a minute, when I knew under all his darting, flashing show of offence that Fortini meditated this very time attack. He desired of me a thrust and lunge, not that he might parry it but that he

might time it and deflect it by the customary slight turn of the wrist, his rapier point directed to meet me as my body followed in the lunge. A ticklish thing--ay, a ticklish thing in the best of light. Did he deflect a fraction of a second too early, I should be warned and saved. Did he deflect a fraction of a second too late, my thrust would go home to him.

"Quick and brilliant is it?" was my thought. "Very well, my Italian friend, quick and brilliant shall it be, and especially shall it be quick."

In a way, it was time attack against time attack, but I would fool him on the time by being over-quick. And I was quick. As I said, we had been at work scarcely a minute when it happened. Quick? That thrust and lunge of mine were one. A snap of action it was, an explosion, an instantaneousness. I swear my thrust and lunge were a fraction of a second quicker than any man is supposed to thrust and lunge. I won the fraction of a second. By that fraction of a second too late Fortini attempted to deflect my blade and impale me on his. But it was his blade that was deflected. It flashed past my breast, and I was in--inside his weapon, which extended full length in the empty air behind me--and my blade was inside of him, and through him, heart-high, from right side of him to left side of him and outside of him beyond.

It is a strange thing to do, to spit a live man on a length of steel. I sit here in my cell, and cease from writing a space, while I consider the

matter. And I have considered it often, that moonlight night in France of long ago, when I taught the Italian hound quick and brilliant. It was so easy a thing, that perforation of a torso. One would have expected more resistance. There would have been resistance had my rapier point touched bone. As it was, it encountered only the softness of flesh. Still it perforated so easily. I have the sensation of it now, in my hand, my brain, as I write. A woman's hat-pin could go through a plum pudding not more easily than did my blade go through the Italian. Oh, there was nothing amazing about it at the time to Guillaume de Sainte-Maure, but amazing it is to me, Darrell Standing, as I recollect and ponder it across the centuries. It is easy, most easy, to kill a strong, live, breathing man with so crude a weapon as a piece of steel. Why, men are like soft-shell crabs, so tender, frail, and vulnerable are they.

But to return to the moonlight on the grass. My thrust made home, there was a perceptible pause. Not at once did Fortini fall. Not at once did I withdraw the blade. For a full second we stood in pause--I, with legs spread, and arched and tense, body thrown forward, right arm horizontal and straight out; Fortini, his blade beyond me so far that hilt and hand just rested lightly against my left breast, his body rigid, his eyes open and shining.

So statuesque were we for that second that I swear those about us were not immediately aware of what had happened. Then Fortini gasped and coughed slightly. The rigidity of his pose slackened. The hilt and hand against my breast wavered, then the arm drooped to his side till the

rapier point rested on the lawn. By this time Pasquini and de Goncourt had sprung to him and he was sinking into their arms. In faith, it was harder for me to withdraw the steel than to drive it in. His flesh clung about it as if jealous to let it depart. Oh, believe me, it required a distinct physical effort to get clear of what I had done.

But the pang of the withdrawal must have stung him back to life and purpose, for he shook off his friends, straightened himself, and lifted his rapier into position. I, too, took position, marvelling that it was possible I had spitted him heart-high and yet missed any vital spot. Then, and before his friends could catch him, his legs crumpled under him and he went heavily to grass. They laid him on his back, but he was already dead, his face ghastly still under the moon, his right hand still a-clutch of the rapier.

Yes; it is indeed a marvellous easy thing to kill a man.

We saluted his friends and were about to depart, when Felix Pasquini detained me.

"Pardon me," I said. "Let it be to-morrow."

"We have but to move a step aside," he urged, "where the grass is still dry."

"Let me then wet it for you, Sainte-Maure," Lanfranc asked of me, eager

himself to do for an Italian.

I shook my head.

"Pasquini is mine," I answered. "He shall be first to-morrow."

"Are there others?" Lanfranc demanded.

"Ask de Goncourt," I grinned. "I imagine he is already laying claim to the honour of being the third."

At this, de Goncourt showed distressed acquiescence. Lanfranc looked inquiry at him, and de Goncourt nodded.

"And after him I doubt not comes the cockerel," I went on.

And even as I spoke the red-haired Guy de Villehardouin, alone, strode to us across the moonlit grass.

"At least I shall have him," Lanfranc cried, his voice almost wheedling, so great was his desire.

"Ask him," I laughed, then turned to Pasquini. "To-morrow," I said. "Do you name time and place, and I shall be there."

"The grass is most excellent," he teased, "the place is most excellent,

and I am minded that Fortini has you for company this night."

"'Twere better he were accompanied by a friend," I quipped. "And now your pardon, for I must go."

But he blocked my path.

"Whoever it be," he said, "let it be now."

For the first time, with him, my anger began to rise.

"You serve your master well," I sneered.

"I serve but my pleasure," was his answer. "Master I have none."

"Pardon me if I presume to tell you the truth," I said.

"Which is?" he queried softly.

"That you are a liar, Pasquini, a liar like all Italians."

He turned immediately to Lanfranc and Bohemond.

"You heard," he said. "And after that you cannot deny me him."

They hesitated and looked to me for counsel of my wishes. But Pasquini

did not wait.

"And if you still have any scruples," he hurried on, "then allow me to remove them . . . thus."

And he spat in the grass at my feet. Then my anger seized me and was beyond me. The red wrath I call it--an overwhelming, all-mastering desire to kill and destroy. I forgot that Philippa waited for me in the great hall. All I knew was my wrongs--the unpardonable interference in my affairs by the gray old man, the errand of the priest, the insolence of Fortini, the impudence of Villehardouin, and here Pasquini standing in my way and spitting in the grass. I saw red. I thought red. I looked upon all these creatures as rank and noisome growths that must be hewn out of my path, out of the world. As a netted lion may rage against the meshes, so raged I against these creatures. They were all about me. In truth, I was in the trap. The one way out was to cut them down, to crush them into the earth and stamp upon them.

"Very well," I said, calmly enough, although my passion was such that my frame shook. "You first, Pasquini. And you next, de Goncourt? And at the end, de Villehardouin?"

Each nodded in turn and Pasquini and I prepared to step aside.

"Since you are in haste," Henry Bohemond proposed to me, "and since there are three of them and three of us, why not settle it at the one time?"

"Yes, yes," was Lanfranc's eager cry. "Do you take de Goncourt. De Villehardouin for mine."

But I waved my good friends back.

"They are here by command," I explained. "It is I they desire so strongly that by my faith I have caught the contagion of their desire, so that now I want them and will have them for myself."

I had observed that Pasquini fretted at my delay of speech-making, and I resolved to fret him further.

"You, Pasquini," I announced, "I shall settle with in short account. I would not that you tarried while Fortini waits your companionship. You, Raoul de Goncourt, I shall punish as you deserve for being in such bad company. You are getting fat and wheezy. I shall take my time with you until your fat melts and your lungs pant and wheeze like leaky bellows. You, de Villehardouin, I have not decided in what manner I shall kill."

And then I saluted Pasquini, and we were at it. Oh, I was minded to be rarely devilish this night. Quick and brilliant--that was the thing. Nor was I unmindful of that deceptive moonlight. As with Fortini would I settle with him if he dared the time attack. If he did not, and quickly, then I would dare it.

Despite the fret I had put him in, he was cautious. Nevertheless I compelled the play to be rapid, and in the dim light, depending less than usual on sight and more than usual on feel, our blades were in continual touch.

Barely was the first minute of play past when I did the trick. I feigned a slight slip of the foot, and, in the recovery, feigned loss of touch with Pasquini's blade. He thrust tentatively, and again I feigned, this time making a needlessly wide parry. The consequent exposure of myself was the bait I had purposely dangled to draw him on. And draw him on I did. Like a flash he took advantage of what he deemed an involuntary exposure. Straight and true was his thrust, and all his will and body were heartily in the weight of the lunge he made. And all had been feigned on my part and I was ready for him. Just lightly did my steel meet his as our blades slithered. And just firmly enough and no more did my wrist twist and deflect his blade on my basket hilt. Oh, such a slight deflection, a matter of inches, just barely sufficient to send his point past me so that it pierced a fold of my satin doublet in passing. Of course, his body followed his rapier in the lunge, while, heart-high, right side, my rapier point met his body. And my outstretched arm was stiff and straight as the steel into which it elongated, and behind the arm and the steel my body was braced and solid.

Heart-high, I say, my rapier entered Pasquini's side on the right, but it did not emerge, on the left, for, well-nigh through him, it met a rib (oh, man-killing is butcher's work!) with such a will that the forcing

overbalanced him, so that he fell part backward and part sidewise to the ground. And even as he fell, and ere he struck, with jerk and wrench I cleared my weapon of him.

De Goncourt was to him, but he waved de Goncourt to attend on me. Not so swiftly as Fortini did Pasquini pass. He coughed and spat, and, helped by de Villehardouin, propped his elbow under him, rested his head on hand, and coughed and spat again.

"A pleasant journey, Pasquini," I laughed to him in my red anger. "Pray hasten, for the grass where you lie is become suddenly wet and if you linger you will catch your death of cold."

When I made immediately to begin with de Goncourt, Bohemond protested that I should rest a space.

"Nay," I said. "I have not properly warmed up." And to de Goncourt, "Now will we have you dance and wheeze--Salute!"

De Goncourt's heart was not in the work. It was patent that he fought under the compulsion of command. His play was old-fashioned, as any middle-aged man's is apt to be, but he was not an indifferent swordsman. He was cool, determined, dogged. But he was not brilliant, and he was oppressed with foreknowledge of defeat. A score of times, by quick and brilliant, he was mine. But I refrained. I have said that I was devilish-minded. Indeed I was. I wore him down. I backed him away from

the moon so that he could see little of me because I fought in my own shadow. And while I wore him down until he began to wheeze as I had predicted, Pasquini, head on hand and watching, coughed and spat out his life.

"Now, de Goncourt," I announced finally. "You see I have you quite helpless. You are mine in any of a dozen ways. Be ready, brace yourself, for this is the way I will."

And, so saying, I merely went from carte to tierce, and as he recovered wildly and parried widely I returned to carte, took the opening, and drove home heart-high and through and through. And at sight of the conclusion Pasquini let go his hold on life, buried his face in the grass, quivered a moment, and lay still.

"Your master will be four servants short this night," I assured de Villehardouin, in the moment just ere we engaged.

And such an engagement! The boy was ridiculous. In what bucolic school of fence he had been taught was beyond imagining. He was downright clownish. "Short work and simple" was my judgment, while his red hair seemed a-bristle with very rage and while he pressed me like a madman.

Alas! It was his clownishness that undid me. When I had played with him and laughed at him for a handful of seconds for the clumsy boor he was, he became so angered that he forgot the worse than little fence he knew.

With an arm-wide sweep of his rapier, as though it bore heft and a cutting edge, he whistled it through the air and rapped it down on my crown. I was in amaze. Never had so absurd a thing happened to me. He was wide open, and I could have run him through forthright. But, as I said, I was in amaze, and the next I knew was the pang of the entering steel as this clumsy provincial ran me through and charged forward, bull-like, till his hilt bruised my side and I was borne backward.

As I fell I could see the concern on the faces of Lanfranc and Bohemond and the glut of satisfaction in the face of de Villehardouin as he pressed me.

I was falling, but I never reached the grass. Came a blurr of flashing lights, a thunder in my ears, a darkness, a glimmering of dim light slowly dawning, a wrenching, racking pain beyond all describing, and then I heard the voice of one who said:

"I can't feel anything."

I knew the voice. It was Warden Atherton's. And I knew myself for Darrell Standing, just returned across the centuries to the jacket hell of San Quentin. And I knew the touch of finger-tips on my neck was Warden Atherton's. And I knew the finger-tips that displaced his were Doctor Jackson's. And it was Doctor Jackson's voice that said:

"You don't know how to take a man's pulse from the neck. There--right

there--put your fingers where mine are. D'ye get it? Ah, I thought so. Heart weak, but steady as a chronometer."

"It's only twenty-four hours," Captain Jamie said, "and he was never in like condition before."

"Putting it on, that's what he's doing, and you can stack on that," Al Hutchins, the head trusty, interjected.

"I don't know," Captain Jamie insisted. "When a man's pulse is that low it takes an expert to find it--"

"Aw, I served my apprenticeship in the jacket," Al Hutchins sneered. "And I've made you unlace me, Captain, when you thought I was croaking, and it was all I could do to keep from snickering in your face."

"What do you think, Doc?" Warden Atherton asked.

"I tell you the heart action is splendid," was the answer. "Of course it is weak. That is only to be expected. I tell you Hutchins is right. The man is feigning."

With his thumb he turned up one of my eyelids, whereat I opened my other eye and gazed up at the group bending over me.

"What did I tell you?" was Doctor Jackson's cry of triumph.

And then, although it seemed the effort must crack my face, I summoned all the will of me and smiled.

They held water to my lips, and I drank greedily. It must be remembered that all this while I lay helpless on my back, my arms pinioned along with my body inside the jacket. When they offered me food--dry prison bread--I shook my head. I closed my eyes in advertisement that I was tired of their presence. The pain of my partial resuscitation was unbearable. I could feel my body coming to life. Down the cords of my neck and into my patch of chest over the heart darting pains were making their way. And in my brain the memory was strong that Philippa waited me in the big hall, and I was desirous to escape away back to the half a day and half a night I had just lived in old France.

So it was, even as they stood about me, that I strove to eliminate the live portion of my body from my consciousness. I was in haste to depart, but Warden Atherton's voice held me back.

"Is there anything you want to complain about?" he asked.

Now I had but one fear, namely, that they would unlace me; so that it must be understood that my reply was not uttered in braggadocio but was meant to forestall any possible unlacing.

"You might make the jacket a little tighter," I whispered. "It's too

loose for comfort. I get lost in it. Hutchins is stupid. He is also a fool. He doesn't know the first thing about lacing the jacket. Warden, you ought to put him in charge of the loom-room. He is a more profound master of inefficiency than the present incumbent, who is merely stupid without being a fool as well. Now get out, all of you, unless you can think of worse to do to me. In which case, by all means remain. I invite you heartily to remain, if you think in your feeble imaginings that you have devised fresh torture for me."

"He's a wooz, a true-blue, dyed-in-the-wool wooz," Doctor Jackson chanted, with the medico's delight in a novelty.

"Standing, you are a wonder," the Warden said. "You've got an iron will, but I'll break it as sure as God made little apples."

"And you've the heart of a rabbit," I retorted. "One-tenth the jacketing I have received in San Quentin would have squeezed your rabbit heart out of your long ears."

Oh, it was a touch, that, for the Warden did have unusual ears. They would have interested Lombroso, I am sure.

"As for me," I went on, "I laugh at you, and I wish no worse fate to the loom-room than that you should take charge of it yourself. Why, you've got me down and worked your wickedness on me, and still I live and laugh in your face. Inefficient? You can't even kill me. Inefficient? You

couldn't kill a cornered rat with a stick of dynamite--real dynamite, and not the sort you are deluded into believing I have hidden away."

"Anything more?" he demanded, when I had ceased from my diatribe.

And into my mind flashed what I had told Fortini when he pressed his insolence on me.

"Begone, you prison cur," I said. "Take your yapping from my door."

It must have been a terrible thing for a man of Warden Atherton's stripe to be thus bearded by a helpless prisoner. His face whitened with rage and his voice shook as he threatened:

"By God, Standing, I'll do for you yet."

"There is only one thing you can do," I said. "You can tighten this distressingly loose jacket. If you won't, then get out. And I don't care if you fail to come back for a week or for the whole ten days."

And what can even the Warden of a great prison do in reprisal on a prisoner upon whom the ultimate reprisal has already been wreaked? It may be that Warden Atherton thought of some possible threat, for he began to speak. But my voice had strengthened with the exercise, and I began to sing, "Sing cucu, sing cucu, sing cucu." And sing I did until my door clanged and the bolts and locks squeaked and grated fast.