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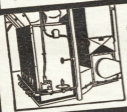
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Volume 1

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That terrible lash ripped open
the pirate's throat

The Fighting Lash

By CHARLES B. STILSON

CHAPTER I

THE WRATH OF GRIMONDE

"**N**OM de Dieu, 'tis a fair day." Petit Tonnerre threw wide his arms and looked up where the bright sun gilded a cloudless sky. His glance roved to the velvety grass slopes of the

little valley stretching to the north—verdure that was sprinkled in many places with red and precious drops, and that here and there made couch for a quiet figure, its still hands clenched in the green tendrils.

Over to the left the green bordered on the brassy sheen of the sand slopes; and still farther beyond to the west lay the



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dunes of the beach and the tossing waves of the English Channel.

Petit Tonnerre looked at the rocks on the hillside, at the men about him; and last and longest he gave his eyes to the silken banner—the *lion d'or* on an argent field—that floated above the sullen guns of the silent battery planted among the boulders.

"Ay, a fair day—in which to die," muttered Gros Loup, and shrugged his heavy shoulders. "Guns and ball, and no powder. An advanced post, and the Spaniard

yonder forming horse and foot for another charge. See the little captain who rides under the trees? *Mordieu*, he shall be mine at the least, if he comes within pistol range. He is for me, *messieurs*; and then—who cares." He shrugged again. "Well, fellow?"

A bearded Russian gunner had disengaged himself from among the futile cannon, and stood, finger to helmet, before Gros Loup, who was the Captain des Orcelles, Comte d'Allier.

"The lad there, captain—so young," he

said haltingly in barbarous French. "This will be the last charge for us of the guns." The Russian turned away, awkwardly twisting his fingers and muttering to himself.

Gros Loup glanced among the guns whither the Russian had pointed.

Across the breach of the fourth cannon leaned a young man, chin on hand, staring steadfastly across the valley whence should come the Spaniard and death.

A splinter of flying rock had gashed his forehead, and his long chestnut hair flowed over the brodered collar of his coat from under a blood-streaked bandage. His was a face at once gay and thoughtful, and it had in it, too, a certain cool daring. His gun useless and half his gun-crew numbered among the slain, he had resumed his coat and rapier. A plumed hat lay on the cannon-barrel near his elbow.

"Aye, the last of an ill-starred house, and who might raise its fallen fortunes should time bring chance his way," said Gros Loup, and his stern eyes softened. He turned to Petit Tonnerre. "Do you remember his brother, he who 'twas said played the traitor at Freiberg in Forty-three? Now I wonder: *Did* he? For 'twas talked that there was a woman, and that he stood out against the great Conde in the matter.

"'Twas all the same; he disappeared, and none ever has told him. And that was fifteen long years ago. Strange! The De Lauvilles have been true men longer than the Conde have been princes. But how different this one from that other. He was steel; this one is gold."

"'Twould be a fair deed to save the lad," said Petit Tonnerre.

"Eh, Marcel!" called Des Orcelles.

THE young man took his hat from the gun and picked his way among the rocks to where the captain waited.

"You are wounded?"

"But a scratch."

"You can ride?"

"Assuredly."

"There are the gun-horses on the other

slope. Take one and ride yonder to the dunes where Mereford the Englishman fights under his dragon banner. My compliments to the general, and say to him that the Captain des Orcelles meets pikes and muskets with rapiers and pistols on the hill St. Quentin; and that if he cannot spare a few of his Puritan fire-eaters, perhaps he can at least spare a few powder-sacks."

De Lauville hesitated. He swept with his eyes the valley and the lines of Spanish infantry already advancing from the trees on the other side, flanked by cavalry.

"But—"

"Not a word more. Mount and ride. Haste!"

De Lauville saluted and was gone, and with a last glance over his shoulder to see the lion banner waving there so bravely.

From the sorry group of gun-horses he chose the likeliest, and rode away to the left toward the sandhills.

Behind the rider the guns across the valley thundered as the Spanish cannoners covered the charge. The trumpets blared, and presently the long lines of men and horses swept up the green slopes, and the Company D'Allier was disbanded.

Every man of it but two died in the lines there among the rocks and the guns. Those two were the young rider of the gun-horse and Mikail Grodov, the bearded Russian gunner, who crept away among the rocks of the hill-peak. A cavalier of Spain tore the lion banner from the stiffening fingers of Petit Tonnerre.

De Lauville remembered little of his ride. He never reached the English lines. A spent ball from a Spanish musket struck him on the temple as he rode, and the sunlight blazed red above him, and the blue of the sky was turned to blackness. . . .

Those things came back to him as he lay staring hard at a thin, bright line of steel over there across from him. What was it? his sluggish fancy queried. It was so like a swordblade, straight and narrow and glittering. It *was* a sword. And then the battle—ah! Across the valley the lines of Spain were forming. Under the flutter-

ing of the golden lion were guns to be served. More powder!

He strove to rise on his elbow; but his limbs were as lead, and he could not. Why was it so dark? And why could he see nothing but a long, straight swordblade?

A man's face was bent above him—a familiar face—but why should it be here on the battlefield? Why was all so quiet?

He closed his eyes and slept, and did not know that four long weeks had passed since Turenne and his English allies loaned by Cromwell the Protector had routed the Spanish in the great battle of the dunes in Flanders.

WHEN the mists of sleep and fever cleared again, De Lauville found that he was in his own rooms in Paris. It was a sword that he had seen indeed—his own sword, hanging there against the wall with his long cloak of blue. The face that he had seen bent over him in his delirium was that of his servant, Felix Alens.

Of how he came to be in Paris; why he had not died on the field; and what had happened in the time that had intervened since a Spanish bullet struck him from his horse, Felix could tell him little. Turenne had won with the aid of the Lord Protector's men. Paris was aglow with victory. The Spaniards were being driven northward from town to town—that was the sum of the gossip of Felix.

And *monsieur*?

Assuredly he had been brought home, but by whom Felix knew not. Rough men and several of them had come in the night, carrying *monsieur*, who was distraught and raved so madly that Felix was frightened sorely.

Those men had left *monsieur* and one of them—a tall fellow wrapped to the eyes in a black cloak—had sworn to flay Felix living, and afterward to eat him, if he did not give to *monsieur* the best of care. As if he, Felix, were at all apt to do aught else when it was his dear master that was concerned.

Events came swiftly after Marcel's strange home-coming

In the north Dunkirk had fallen, and was held by the English allies. The strength of Spain was swept from Flanders. Gravelines fell, and Furnes, and Oudenarde. Even Brussels was threatened. Everywhere the lilies waved over fortunate fields. France was flushed with victory. Paris was drunk with it. Fête succeeded festival.

Still unfit for active duty, a condition that fretted him not a little, Marcel was yet mending rapidly of his illness. As soon as might be he obtained a post with the king's musketeers. He mingled again in the life of Paris; found old friends and made new; danced and sang with the youthful blades and fair dames in the great salons; sported his uniform on the boulevards; dined and drank wine with merry roysterers in the inn, Le Cynge Blanc.

What care he? He had come whole out of the shadow left by that other brother, of whom Gros Loup had spoken—that brother Pierre, now but a dim memory of Marcel's early boyhood, fifteen years before. His estates were small; but they sufficed his wants. He was the last of his family; none was left to shake a head over his pranks except solemn-faced Felix.

There was his love-making, too—and then disaster.

A merry word in his ear in the whirl of a dance at a *bal masque*, the brush of a tress of perfumed hair on his cheek, the slipping of a silken knot, the falling of a mask, soft eyes of brown and red lips. When that knot was tied again, it bound Marcel's heart with it. Followed stolen meetings, sweet dalliances, whispers, and the sacred silences.

Did she love him? He dared to hope that she did. And she was Jeanne Louison le Tournais, daughter of the Vicomte de Grimonde, one of the most powerful men in Paris—and the most forbidding.

Tongues ever were the foes of love. One found the *vicomte* with a tale that left him foaming.

Then came the day of the great fête that celebrated the news of the alliance with the Rhenish princes, a day of processions and flaunting banners and rejoicing.

Jeanne of the bright brown eyes rode in a carriage with her sire, the *vicomte*. On his horse, curvetting proudly in ribbons and silver, Marcel approached the carriage. A word, a smile, and the wave of a hand, and he would pass on. He swept his plumed hat to his stirrup leather. But Jeanne smiled not, nor was there in her face any sign of softness. Her eyes widened and she seemed to shrink.

Grimonde turned in his seat then and fixed Marcel with a fierce gray eye.

"Ah!" His voice grated like a sword-point on rock. "It's *mademoiselle's* latest popinjay, eh. And do you dare, you dog, to address yourself to her in public?"

Marcel turned white to the lips. The grim old man went on mercilessly.

"You miserable whelp of a traitor's breed! Ah, that shot hit, did it? I have heard, and now I see, and I shall not forget. Your case shall have attention anon. In the mean time Grimonde gives you *this!*"

He leaned forward and struck suddenly with the heavy cane on which his hands had rested—full across De Laville's lips.

Grimonde's crackled laughter was flung back as the carriage rolled on. Marcel stanchd the flowing blood with his handkerchief.

The stroke was cruel, following cruel words. But bittermost of all was the memory of his lady's face, turned toward him as the carriage moved away, the fair mouth hardened, the brown eyes cool and distant.

So love was done.

CHAPTER II

INN OF THE GOLDEN SKULL

ON THE day following, De Lauville was summoned by Mazarin. "What now?" he questioned to himself as he followed in the wake of a page through the palace corridors. What further shame impended? What new disgrace was to break upon him through this wily Italian churchman who ruled a nation and molded a king?

He found his eminence in a small study that overlooked a corner of the palace gardens. The cardinal sat near one of the

windows where the late morning sun shone in on him. A small table was at his elbow, and from it he was selecting and eating peaches, of which he was inordinately fond. He was alone except for a clerk, who withdrew as De Lauville was announced.

For some little time Mazarin did not turn, and the young soldier stood waiting.

With great deliberation the cardinal made an end of the peach upon which he was engaged. He wiped his lips and fingers with a napkin and let it fall upon the table. He stared out of the window, apparently in a fit of abstraction, until Marcel thought he was forgotten.

One minute passed, and two; and then his eminence turned sharply. His brows knit when he saw De Lauville. He pushed the table from him and arose. His spare frame was bowed slightly; his dark face with its sheen of silver at the temples was deeply lined. He looked weary and care-bitten.

"Marcel Philippe de Menas, Comte de Lauville?" The man's tones were low, but bell-like in their clarity.

De Lauville bowed.

"Um-m; we have not met before. And yet"—a kindlier expression came into his keen eyes, as though some half-forgotten memory had tempered the austerity of his thought—"and yet, I think I would have known—I knew your sire." He finished his sentence abruptly.

"For a small service that he once did me—trifling, but not forgotten—I would deal kindly with his son. No; interrupt me not; but harken to a word of advice.

"Call a truce to this hot infatuation of yours. Leave Paris for a time, a long time"—he smiled reminiscently—"for the memory of Grimonde is passing long." He frowned again. "Black Grimonde. Yes; leave Paris. Follow Turenne into the north. One of your blood should not be ill at ease where the swords flash. Later—who knows? But leave at once. You are relieved of your duties here."

"Is it a command, Your Eminence?" De Lauville questioned.

"Advice, young man, advice!" cried Mazarin in petulance. "To be taken, or—"

He shrugged, and threw out his hands, as though by a gesture to dismiss Marcel and his fate from his mind.

"I thank Your Eminence. Your advice shall be treasured—"

"But not followed, eh?" The smile of the cardinal was sardonic. "On your head be it. The hot young blood of young days." He extended his hand.

De Lauville kissed it and withdrew.

AS HE passed the palace gates, Marcel met a number of his fellow musketeers. He could not help but notice the coldness of their greeting. One or two of them were open in their avoidance. When he had passed, he knew that they were discussing him in whispers.

He had rounded a corner when he heard hastening feet behind. A hand fell on his shoulder.

It was Sarone who had followed him, Sarone of the black mustachios, with whom Marcel oft had dined and fenced, and dreamed; for Sarone was a sentimental soul. The guardsman hesitated a moment as their eyes met—his own shamefaced, but friendly, those of Marcel cold as the light of ice.

Then Sarone clapped him again upon the shoulder.

"They say you go from among us, comrade," he said huskily.

"And is it known so soon?" asked Marcel, his damaged lips twisting into an unpleasant smile.

"Trust the long tongues for that," replied the guardsman. "Do not look so sour, comrade, you who always have been so gay. You make my heart sore."

He came a step nearer to De Lauville, and his voice sank to a whisper.

"Leave Paris, friend. You will surely die if you do not. Grimonde has set Le Marcou* on to do for you."

De Lauville started and his face flushed.

"What—"

"Yes, lad 'tis true. Never mind how I know it. I know."

From the other street came a gust of oaths and gay laughter. Sarone wrung De Lauville's hand hard.

"God send you better days, friend," he said, and hurried away.

De Lauville hastened home, and there threw himself into a chair and gave his mind to a survey of his crumbling fortunes. But yesterday morning all had seemed so fair; now what a dismal wreck! His dear lady turned from him, his friends grown cold, his place in the guards gone—all his little world rudely shaken about his ears. And now Le Marcou!

Marcel shuddered and he was a brave man. For Le Marcou was not to be met in the daylight and the open. Le Marcou meant a dagger thrust in the back and a sodden corpse to float in the Seine.

Many men had shuddered at the name of Le Marcou. Who he was and whence came none seemed to know; but he was feared and hated as was scarcely another man in Paris, and yet he lived. For nearly ten years he had lurked, a sinister shadow among those other shadows that lay in the under life of the great city.

Le Marcou, "The Tom Cat"—if he had another name none seemed to know of it. His blade was ready to the service of a long purse or a powerful master. He was a bravo, a hired assassin. Marcel could count on the fingers of one hand men as good as himself who had disappeared within his memory, who had gone and not returned, and whose deaths common account laid at the door of the Tom Cat.

Those influences that made use of the Tom Cat protected him, 'twas said. He had a following, an evil, furtive rag-tag, over whom he kinged it, and whereof tales were told that made good, simple folk to quake and shiver in their beds at night.

OLD Felix fetched his master his evening meal and wine, and then at his order more wine, and still more. As he sat and drank over his scarcely tasted food, Marcel's bitterness of spirit grew. With it grew his stubbornness. Resolve formed slowly in his mind until it was set hard

* *Le Marcou*, signifying "The Tom Cat," is of the French of the period, the present form being *le matou*.

and fast. Since he was to die by the dagger of the Tom Cat—for he would not leave Paris—he would go and find the Tom Cat!

He would not be dogged and hunted and slain in ambush. His death-wound, if he got it, should be in front. He would force the issue.

It was late, ten o'clock, when he arose from the table and buckled on his sword. Felix slept erect on the settle by the wall, and did not hear his master go. De Lauville swathed himself in his cloak and plunged into the darkness of the streets. They said that Le Marcou had his lair in a low tavern in the Street of the Five Turns? Marcel would find that inn.

A midnight journey through the crooked streets of Paris was in itself an adventure and a hazard. Wayfarers were wont to thread their ways along the walls groping with drawn swords, when they had business that drew them abroad and would not keep until morning. Oft-times blades crossed in the blackness, and men were slain and never knew whose was the hand that struck them down. Through that maze of blackness and peril De Lauville plunged carelessly.

Occasionally he drew a grudging word of direction from a suspicious watchman. It was nearly three hours before he entered the Rue des Cinq Angles and stood in the light of the red lantern that swung under the gilded death's-head above the open door of the Inn of the Golden Skull.

Here was no quiet of slumber. A drunken lout lay at one side of the step, his stertorous breath poisoning the night air. A jangle of ribald carousal, snatches of song, and the clink of bottles and tankards told a tale of full-pursed prosperity for mine host of *L'Auberge du Crane d'Or*.

In the shadow at one side of the door Marcel paused. Was this the place? he wondered. Up and down the street he glanced. No voices came out of its silence; no other light shone across its blackness. De Lauville patted the pommel of his sword.

"I crave your pardon, good blade, that I must so soil you," he murmured, and muffling himself more closely in his cloak, entered the inn.

A LONG, low hall, with drinking tables here and there, a vast and empty fireplace at its lower end, flanked by two doorways, one of which was open and steaming with kitchen-reek, the other hung with a black curtain—that was the interior in which De Lauville found himself.

The hall was well patronized. Hangdog cut purses, out-at-heel soldiers, evil-faced adventurers of the lowest stamp, shrill-voiced women in tawdry fineries, made up the company that crowded about the drinking-tables. As he entered, a girl who stood on a table was singing a lurid ditty in a husky voice.

On the stone of the hearth lay a large dog. Its fur, many inches long, was snowy white. The animal pricked its sharp ears and stared at the stranger with round, bright eyes that were as blue as the sea. Then it dropped its pointed snout on its paws again and slept.

Marcel seated himself at a table that he found vacant more than halfway down the hall. A frowzy fellow in a stained blouse fetched him wine. It was not bad wine.

Occasionally, when the turmoil raged highest, Marcel noticed that it was stilled suddenly in the neighborhood of the black-curtained doorway at the right of the fireplace. It was as though one within had spoken and quelled the uproar. De Lauville sat too far from the doorway, however, to catch any words if they were spoken.

But he had not sat long at his table before Marcel was sure that a something—man or woman, he knew not—lurked behind that sable hanging; and that, whoever or whatever it might be, he was the object of its fixed regard. He could feel the scrutiny of its eyes.

What was behind that curtain?

He set himself to watch; and doing so attracted the attention of two rough-looking vagabonds who sat at an adjoining table. He became aware that they were eying him curiously and whispering between themselves.

Presently the inn-keeper, a sturdy, greasy-faced rogue, who wore for a cap the long, red stocking of a woman, carried wine

behind the curtain. When he came out, he, too, stared curiously at De Lauville.

Marcel's wine was strong; and he had drunk deeply before he had come to the Crane D'Or. Impatience burned within him with the fumes of the wine. The careless revelers that surrounded him seemed a mockery to the bitterness of his thoughts. The unseen presence behind that black curtain irked him. Then he caught a fragment of conversation and a name from the two rascals who were observing him, and he was beset with a cold fury.

"Why, think you, does the young *monsieur* make such owl's eyes?" asked one of the pair.

"So I would ask," the other replied. "Perhaps he thinks to stare Le Marcou from his den." He laughed

De Lauville arose to his feet. He threw back his cloak and beat loudly on the table-top with his swordhilt. Instantly all noise ceased in the hall. All eyes were turned to De Lauville.

He stood glaring at the curtained doorway.

"Le Marcou!" he called hoarsely. "Where is this Le Marcou? Show me this prince of all thieves and cutthroats. Bring him out, I say! I would see him!"

A gasp of astonishment followed his outcry. The white dog sprang from its place on the hearthstones and gazed expectantly at the covered doorway. The curtain shook and was put aside, and a man came through into the hall.

"Who calls so loudly for Le Marcou?" he asked, and bent his eyes on De Lauville. "I am Le Marcou."

CHAPTER III

MONSIEUR TOM CAT

MARCEL'S long rapier whined from its scabbard. He tossed his plumed hat on the table. "If you are Le Marcou," he cried, "here is one whom your master bade you seek, but who has not waited. Come play a game with me, La Marcou."

"Ay, and my master has marked your face so that I may know you," said the Tom Cat.

His voice cut like a knife across the silence in the hall.

"*Sangdieu!* but you shall surely die for that," whispered Marcel, and made for this enemy, so blinded by rage that he did not see that the Tom Cat wore neither sword nor dagger.

Too late he realized the folly of coming alone into the chosen fastness of the bravo. Before he had gone a yard a score of the Tom Cat's friends were on their feet. A dozen strong hands gripped his arms. Curses and blows were rained upon him. A table was overturned in the struggle. Daggers flashed. But even here it seemed some fairness dwelt.

Through all the clamor of the melee the voice of the Tom Cat penetrated.

"Unhand *monsieur!* You there, Jehan, close the door! Now back, all of you! Let him come on!"

Like magic his orders were obeyed. The heavy door of the inn clanged shut. The menacing daggers vanished. The hands that had held De Lauville released him. Disheveled and somewhat dazed he found himself on a clear path to his foe. Another instant and there was not a sword's length between them.

Excitement and peril had cleared the fumes of wine from De Lauville's brain. In those few steps he regained his poise. He became deadly cool. Then he saw that he fronted an unarmed man. The only menace before him was the great white dog, which bristled between the legs of his master and exhibited his formidable fangs in a snarl.

"Down, Neige! Back, I say," said the Tom Cat. With a rumbling growl and a last baleful glare from his blue eyes, the brute slunk behind the curtain and disappeared.

For a moment the two men regarded each other.

He whom men called the Tom Cat would have been a marked man anywhere. His every feature and action bespoke for him the name he bore. He was tall, nearly six feet, and lean—a wiry, sinewy spareness. His shoulders were narrow when one considered his height; but they were square,

and did not make for weakness. He was long of limb, and his hands hung nearly to his knees. His fingers, too, were long and slender, and they bristled to the second joints with coarse hair.

At some time his face had been terribly gashed or scalded. The hurts had healed into smoth, white lines of scars. The bony structure of his face was prominent, the cheekbones high, the chin peaked, but pronounced.

His thin, curved nose thrust forth from between eyes of greenish-brown—cat's eyes—that men said could see in the dark. His hair, gathered loosely at the nape of his neck, was black. Above each temple was a streak where it had turned snow white. Those two blanched streaks gave the man the odd appearance of having pointed white ears. Except for a sparse, dark mustache, his face was smooth.

He was dressed with scrupulous care in black garments, their somberness unrelieved by gaud of any sort. It was the dress of a gentleman. A white shirt-ruff showed at his throat. Lace cuffs fell from under his coat-sleeves about his hairy wrists.

Add to those characteristics of appearance and garb a lithe and feline grace of movement and a high, wailing, penetrating voice, and one has a picture of the Tom Cat, in his time one of the most powerful figures in the underworld of Paris.

IT WAS a bizarre tableau, that in the Inn of the Golden Skull; that strange, lean man, so quietly self-contained, who stood with his back to the sable hangings; across from him, De Lauville, his sword bared, his chestnut hair tossed back and the brassy light shining on his white face and swollen lips and glinting in his blue eyes; back of him the devil-may-care brood, standing, sitting, leaning on chairs and tables—all struck silent in tense expectancy, with mouths agape for what might happen.

Marcel regarded his foe with sneering contempt. A frosty smile gathered in the Tom Cat's face.

"Well, and what would *monsieur* have of Le Marcou?" he asked.

"That which Le Marcou does not often give—a swordthrust, *in front*," taunted Marcel. He felt that the best he could hope for now was a clean, fair death. For, even though he should vanquish the one enemy, the way to the door was long and beset with much treacherous steel.

"Come, fellow, a sword," he insisted, "or feel the flat of mine."

The muscles twitched in the Tom Cat's scarred cheeks.

"Not a sword, *monsieur*, not a sword, but—"

With marvelous celerity he skipped back to the doorway whence he had come. He thrust a long arm through the curtain and took something from the wall within. In a breath he was facing De Lauville once more. In his hand he carried what appeared to be a small coil of rope and a short stick. With a lightning motion of his arm he shook it out, and the air whined and hissed under it. It was a whip, but a most curious whip.

To a stock of ebony, some two feet in length, inlaid with panels of mother-of-pearl, was attached a ten-foot lash of braided leather thongs. Fine and flexible was the lash. At its tip was hung a five-inch blade of glittering steel. The blade was hiltless. At one end was a ring, into which the thongs were woven. For three-fifths of its length it was round. The last two inches were double-edged. The point was as sharp as a needle.

"No sword, *monsieur*," said the Tom Cat. "A whip must suffice."

Again the lash hissed through the air, and the keen blade sang within a foot of De Lauville's face.

"Ah-h!" Marcel gasped. He growled through his set teeth: "Get a sword, you devil, and defend yourself, or I'll kill you out of hand."

"Guard yourself, *monsieur*," was the Tom Cat's cool answer. The steel point on the snapping lash flashed out once more. A button from Marcel's coat fell at his feet.

There were not in the whole of France ten men who could best De Lauville with the sword. For years he had exercised himself in fence on his estates with old Pierre,

one of his father's men, who had been a famous *maitre d'armes*.

But here was a weapon the like of which he had never met—for the moment that the button fell to the floor he recognized that the lash in the hand of the Tom Cat *was* a weapon, and one over which its wielder had consummate mastery. So the long rapier leaped up to meet the lash, and the master of the good blade was very wary.

HAD the Tom Cat learned the sword as he had learned his whip, no fencer in the world could have met him on even terms. The skill he displayed in the control of his uncanny weapon was far greater than any art of swordsmanship.

Now here, now there swung the writhing lash, never still, ever a manace; for the Tom Cat so made it to play in the air that its darting attack seemed continuous, threatening a dozen places at once.

Thrice De Lauville pressed in. Each time he was forced to spring back from the humming point. Another button was shorn from his coat, and another. A lock of his long hair fell from his head. Still he did not feel the bite of its blade. The man was playing with him.

Marcel ground his teeth. Was there then no way in which to pass this snakelike thing with the bitter tongue; no way to reach that smiling, mocking face? He forsook all caution and rushed blindly, thrusting with his sword. A twinge of pain thrilled his arm. The rapier was wrenched from his grasp and thrown against the side of the room.

A shout of approval went up from the watching crowd. The rakehelly swarm in the Crane D'Or applauded their hero.

"*Monsieur* has let his sword fall. Return it to him," said the Tom Cat.

A roar of laughter shook the hall. A burly rascal retrieved the weapon and thrust it into Marcel's hand.

He rushed again. The only way in which he could hope to overcome this twisting, singing danger was by closing in. Then perhaps he could engage the lash with his swordblade and sever it, or seize it with his hand and tear it away. He thought he

saw an opening and slashed viciously, but struck only the empty air. A hot stinging in his shoulder told him that the Tom Cat had blooded his weapon at last. Again the rapier was whipped from De Lauville's sword-hand.

"No more play, *monsieur*," he heard the Tom Cat say. "I grow weary of it."

Marcel leaped forward, bare-handed. The lash whirred over his shoulder as he sprang, extended to its full length. He felt the thong graze his neck. He thrust up a hand to seize it, and felt it coil around his throat. Its bladed tip flashed before his eyes. Something struck him on the side of the head above the ear.

He strangled. He tore at the folds of the lash, but they tightened. Darkness surged up from the back of his brain and overwhelmed him. He pitched forward to the floor at the feet of the Tom Cat.

The fight was finished.

CHAPTER IV

FAREWELL TO FRANCE

WHEN his senses swam back to him, De Lauville was conscious at first only of pain and a darkness, through which sounded the faint and confused hum of many voices.

His throat and neck ached where the lash of the Tom Cat had gripped, and his shoulder throbbed a reminder of the keen blade's bite. His teeth were clenched in an evil-smacking gag. He strove to move his limbs, and discovered that his wrists and elbows were pinioned tightly to his sides and his legs were bound with cords. He could only roll his body from side to side a few inches.

"Our young gamecock has his wits again," growled a voice close to Marcel.

Then Marcel heard the high, thin tones of the Tom Cat:

"Take him away. Take him to the nest and keep him safely. And you, Jehan, I've work for you, of a sort you love. Come . . ."

The rest of the sentence trailed into an indistinct murmur as the speaker moved away.

Hands seized De Lauville and hoisted him, and he was carried away. He heard the screech of rusted bolts. His lungs gasped hungrily as a breath of fresh night air penetrated to his nostrils through the wrappings which covered his head.

After a momentary parley at the door, the bearers, of whom De Lauville judged there were four, tramped away through the darkness of the Parisian night, carrying him shoulder high, his body swaying to the rhythm of their swinging march. A number of times he could feel that they were turning corners, sensing it through that curious instinct for direction which does not leave a man even though he be blinded. Parts of the way their laboring feet met uneven going, and Marcel's aching body was wrenched and jolted. Once they laid him down while they rested. Then he felt cold stones at his back, and knew that he lay against a wall.

Torches flashed from out a dark street, and with cries and the clank of swords the watch burst upon the Tom Cat's men. They fled, but they carried De Lauville with them. Through twisted ways they scurried, and their captive's body was racked sorely as he bounced along on their heaving shoulders. Calls of their pursuers grew faint behind them; for they had learned their devious paths too well to be trailed.

Even when they had eluded the watch, and leaned against a wall above their prisoner, and panting hard for breath, those four sinister shadows of the night said nothing, made no comment on the fortune of their escape, offered no suggestions as to their next move. It was to be gathered that the men of the Tom Cat served him blindly and well.

Bruised and gashed of body, heartsick, and sore in spirit, De Lauville lay at the feet of his bearers, harkening to their labored breathing, wondering what grist the wheel of mischance would grind him next. Truth to tell, he cared but little.

Jeanne, ah, Jeanne! False and cruel as he believed her, he loved her still, and in spite of all—and would go on loving. He could not forget.

AFTER a brief breathing space his guards took up their burden and went on. Evidently their flight from the watch had been so directed as to take them nearer to the end of their wandering. They had not proceeded far when they paused, turned, and ascended a flight of steps.

A door creaked stealthily and was closed again. The muffling had slipped from about De Lauville's head and given him better use of his senses. He smelled the damp and mustiness of the corridor through which they were taking him.

Another pause, another door, and Marcel was tilted heels above head and borne down an almost interminable stair. Presently his bearers reached the bottom, proceeded a few steps, and laid him on a cold stone floor. Somewhere near him he heard the grating and grinding of a ponderous mechanism and the grunts and gasps of the men who labored at it. He was lifted again, and again set down, with his back leaning against a wall.

A cold draught blew from somewhere along the floor and chilled him. The fretting and rasping of a great weight being shifted from its place began again. The draught and the noise ceased together, and with them all other sound.

De Lauville strained his ears in vain for a sound that should be a hint at the next act in this night's grim entertainment. The silence was absolute. His own breathing, the beating of his heart, were all that he could hear. The four shadows were gone.

Leaning against the chill wall of stone, staring with wide-open eyes into the velvet-black that enveloped him, Marcel gave himself over to reflection. The folly of the wine long since had left his brain, and he could and did think clearly.

He was in a pretty plight, truly. But for those rash bottles of the earlier evening, he might have foreseen the outcome of his mad venture; that one man could not hope to trail the Tom Cat to his lair as he had trailed, and escape the victor. The way to the north had been open, and he had not taken it. More the fool he. He took refuge

in the Frenchman's consolation, and shrugged his shoulders—or started to; for the wound left by the Tom Cat's lash-blade arrested the gesture and evoked a fluent curse.

His words were followed by a sound close to him in the darkness, the first he had heard since the shadows had departed. Something was with him in the place, something that rustled and scurried and sniffed. He kept silent. It came nearer. It touched his out-stretched leg; something small and sharp, that scratched his skin through his hose when it touched him.

The animal squeaked and scuttled away, affrighted by his quick start. Not far away there were others fellow to him. Marcel could hear them, and his gorge rose at the prospect.

Long hours and reaction had told on him. He was drowsy; but he dared not think of sleep. If he slumbered the vermin would creep upon him, doubtless. They were famished, they might attack his helpless body in force. He heard their furtive creeping, their asthmatic wheezing.

He twitched his cramped limbs—and found them free! He staggered weakly to his feet with a gasp of relief. Some one of the shadows before they left had touched a dagger to his bonds. The severed cords fell from him as he arose. Except for stone walls and darkness, he was free. The rats scurried from him squealing. Marcel tore the gag from his mouth.

IMMEDIATELY he set about to chafe his numbed limbs back to feeling and usefulness. Then he started to explore his prison. At his first step he trod on something soft and yielding. He picked it up. It was the cloth in which his head and shoulders had been wrapped. His groping fingers found a snake-clasp that they knew well. It was his own cloak that he held.

Step by step he made his way along the wall. Three paces brought him to an angle. Eight paces more, another angle—four corners he came to in all, and between them was only rough stone masonry. He found no door.

Starting to cross diagonally from angle to angle, Marcel struck his thigh against a sharp corner, and found that a stout wooden table occupied the center of the room. Its plane was nearly a yard from the floor. Its legs were smooth and polished, and all the way around its top it had a goodly overhang. Here was a castle that the rats could not storm.

De Lauville fetched his cloak, wrapped himself in its folds, and clambered stiffly onto the table. In a moment the slumber of exhaustion came, and vanquished for both pain and dangers. He slept for hours.

In his dreams he fought madly at the brink of an abyss of frightful depth—fought with a sword of plaited straw a demon-snake of fire that darted at him from out the mists that rolled above the precipice. Hopeless the battle; his sword burned in his hands, and the serpent struck him again and again. He reeled forward blindly and fell down the declivity of the chasm.

For minutes he fell, and the air around him was red with jets of flame roaring upward. He landed in a great oaken chair that stood in the midst of a far-stretching gray plain. Before him was a table, and on it a most noble roast of beef, crackling and juicy. He became aware of a devouring hunger, but was powerless to stretch out his hands.

From that most disquieting dream Marcel awoke with a start. Strangely enough, the savor of that ghostly roast of beef still lingered in his nostrils and would not be vanquished. Another bit of the dream that remained to challenge reality was not so strange: De Lauville was famished. He struck out impatiently with his arm. The crash and tinkle of shattered glass on the stone floor and an aroma that arose from below apprised him that he had done an almost irreparable injustice to his parched throat.

As quickly as he might, from the pain in his sore joints, he slid from the table and groped along the floor. Ah, he had it! And it was not wholly wrecked and lost. At least a pint of good wine remained in the broken flagon his fingers found. He drank, and

wondered at the persistence of the dream that left in his nostrils a smell of roasted meat.

No, that was a reality, too! He found it on the table, and a generous roast it was. His captors at any rate did not meditate his starvation.

Marcel ate, and despite all his troubles, and prospects for more, his spirits rose appreciably. He explored again every inch of his dungeon that his hands could reach. Somewhere there must be a door if he could find it. His search was vain. He sought until he was weary for a spring, a bolt, or a hinge. Then he slept again, dreamlessly.

STONE grating against stone awakened him. A cold breath of air blew on his face. He heard men laboring as they moved the stone. His time had come to act. Perhaps he might elude them and win free of the place.

Slipping from the table, De Lauville flattened himself in an angle of the wall. A ray of light flashed athwart the dungeon murk. He saw a slowly widening aperture in the masonry as a great stone was turned edgewise. A torch flared in the outer corridor. A man came in through the rift in the wall. Another followed. The torch was flashed before the opening. Now was the time!

Setting his teeth with the pain of it, Marcel sprang from his corner.

Before the two men in the dungeon room had more than glimpsed him he had passed them. Two others flung themselves on him in the corridor. He stretched one of them on the floor with a blow from his fist, and, snatching the torch from the remaining man, De Lauville struck it into the fellow's face. The man bellowed in pain and astonishment. One of the shadows had found a voice. Marcel dashed the torch to the floor and bounded along the corridor.

He had been so long in the darkness that he saw well in the dim light of the passageway, and he thought to distance the men who came after him. But he had lost blood from the gash of the Tom Cat's blade, and

was still weak from his rough handling, and his steps faltered. He heard his pursuers gaining behind him. The light of the torch flared up as one of them whirled it in the air as he ran.

The corridor was treacherous with a litter of fallen rocks and rubbish. Marcel had almost gained the foot of the long stairway when he struck his shins against an ancient cask and fell heavily. Men sprang on his back as he stumbled to his feet. He struggled furiously, but he was overborne.

The gag was thrust between his jaws again. His head was muffled. Helpless and blinded he had been brought to this place; blinded and helpless he left it. He never learned what manner of building it was that had sheltered him or where it was.

His captors carried De Lauville up to the street. Whether it was day or night he could not tell. He was laid not ungently in the bed of a cart, which presently rattled away over the rough streets.

He was lifted out an hour later and carried across a swaying bridge and along a flooring that sounded hollow under his bearer's feet. As he went he heard the bustle of laboring men about him, and a hoarse voice that shouted orders in a foreign tongue.

Down a short stairway his captors bore him and flung him into what seemed to be a narrow, padded box. When they had left him, he tried to sit up and fling the covering from his head. He banged his skull against planking overhead, and his wrappings had been bound securely.

He became aware that the box in which he lay, and the whole structure of which it was a part, were swaying gently up and down. Then his position was a riddle no longer. He was in a bunk in a ship's cabin.

Perhaps an hour later men entered the cabin and flung another man into the berth above that in which De Lauville lay. After they had gone Marcel could hear the painful breathing of the other prisoner and his movements as he tossed and struggled in the narrow bunk. Marcel smiled grimly. He had company that relished confinement as little as he.

Feet clattered on deck. Chains rattled. The swaying of the ship increased. Faintly to the ears of the two captives came the creak of straining cordage and the crash of booms.

The ship was under way.

Paris slipped away behind.

It was many a long year before De Lauville saw again the green shores of France.

CHAPTER V

A SWORD IN CHAINS

AFTER a time that seemed to test the utmost limits of endurance, the door of the cabin rattled and was slammed shut. Footsteps crossed the floor. A port was thrown open. Marcel felt hands busy about his body. The wrappings were loosened and lifted; and, gasping as well as he might with the strangling of the gag in his throat, De Lauville filled his lungs with a deep draft of fresh, salt air.

A man, a swarth-faced fellow of his own age, who wore a sailor's red cap on his curly locks, peered down at Marcel curiously. He whipped out a bright, curved knife and snipped the cord of the gag.

"Water! Water!" cried De Lauville; at least he tried to. The echo of his necessity that issued from his throat was only an inarticulate croaking. His lips were parched and cracked. His tongue was swollen.

The sailor did not comprehend his words, but he was quick to note the need of the prisoner. He fetched an earthen drinking mug of water and propped and held Marcel's head while he drank. De Lauville thanked him, but the man only shrugged and smiled, with a flash of white teeth. He knew no French.

He next clambered to the edge of the bunk and did a similar office for the captive above. The tongue up there seemed to wag freely enough after its confinement. A garrulous flow of profanity followed its release. Impervious to curses, the sailor turned and climbed down from the bunk and left the cabin.

With the first groan and sputter, De Lauville's ears tingled to a sense of old-

time familiarity. Well he knew that voice.

As the door of the cabin closed behind the sailor, he thrust his head over the edge of the bunk and looked up. Simultaneously there popped forth from above a red and perspiring face topped by a heavy and much tousled thatch of gray hair. A sneeze struggling for vent distended the cheeks. The round eyes goggled wildly.

As they met De Lauville's, an indescribably ludicrous expression still further contorted the rubicund countenance. The lips opened, and the imprisoned air escaped, deflating the moonlike face like a collapsed balloon.

"*Monsieur!*"

"Well, Felix, how came you here?"

But the wits of Felix, none of the quickest at best, were all absorbed with one big idea and did not yet hold answers to questions.

"*Monsieur!* It really is *monsieur*—here in this place! I thought I had lost—ah, *monsieur!*" A tear trembled on the wrinkled cheek.

"Nay, Felix; there is enough of salt water outside," protested Marcel. "But tell me, how did you come here?"

With a snort that was also a sob, Felix replied: "Why, I started—went—that is, I came to find *monsieur*."

"Um-m; it seems to me that you were fetched," said De Lauville dryly. "Where did they gobble you?"

"In our street, *monsieur*, in La Rue des Peupliers. When you did not come on the second night, I feared that you were very—ahem—that is; well, I was afraid. After the big bell of St. Gilliaume's had tolled three o' the morning, I started out. I thought to go to the Inn of the White Swan and ask—"

Felix hesitated. Marcel could not help but be touched at the devotion of this faithful soul. His tones were more kindly as he asked:

"Well, and then?"

"Yes, *monsieur*. Then they caught me and put me in a cart. It was a very hard cart to lie in—"

"But who, Felix? Who caught you?"

"That I do not know, for it was so dark. They came upon me from behind, three men, I think. And now I find *monsieur*, praise be to *le bon Dieu*; and all is well, or nearly so. Where are we going, *monsieur*?"

"It were hard to tell that, *mon cher* Felix. To death and hell, mayhap; for we're in the hands of a devil, Felix. His name's Le Marcou."

FELIX would have crossed himself prayerfully at mention of that dreaded name, but his hands were bound. He rolled back into his bunk with a groan, and for a while his tongue was still. De Lauville heard him wriggling and grunting. Then:

"*Monsieur.*"

"Yes, Felix?"

"*Monsieur*, I am not quick in the head, but *monsieur* knows that I am very strong. I did not think of it before—and I am glad now that I did not, for then, perhaps, I should not have found *monsieur*—but I think that I can break these ropes. Shall I try, *monsieur*?"

Marcel reflected. Little chance would two men have against a ship's company. Still, one could meet any fate, even death itself, with better grace were one free and on one's feet.

Marcel was about to give the word. Then he considered again. Why should he ask the servant to share the fate that was in store for himself? As things lay, he could not see why any should seek to harm the serving man; whereas, if they were found in open resistance, it might mean swift death to them both. He took breath to tell Felix to lie quiet.

Crack!

It was the sound of a breaking strand. Felix had not waited. With full lungs and a mighty wrench of his powerful shoulders, his big biceps flexed to their uttermost, he had snapped a rope.

"I have done it, *monsieur*," he said, and rolled about vigorously in the bunk. In another moment he stood on the floor and busied himself with the knots that secured De Lauville.

Footsteps clattered in the corridor. The dark young sailor again entered the cabin, accompanied by another man, a short, wide-shouldered individual, massively built, who carried in one hand a hammer, while from the other dangled a cluster of clanking chains. He wore a jacket of scorched leather. He evidently was the ship's smith.

When they came within the door and found one of their prisoners freed of his bonds and the other in a fair way to be directly, they wasted no breath in parley. Both of them flung themselves across the cabin. The younger and more agile sailor leaped ahead of his companion.

De Lauville cried out to Felix to stay his hand, but the command came too late.

The old man turned, tossing back his gray mane, took a quick step forward, and caught the sailor on the leap. By an outstretched arm and by a knee he clutched him, and with a single heave of his shoulders sent the lighter man asprawl on the cabin floor, thrown with such a good will that his head was cracked smartly against the door he had just quitted.

He was up again in an instant, and jerking the door open, ran through the corridor calling out lustily.

Seeing those things, the stocky smith slowed up perceptibly, although he still continued to advance upon Felix. He let fall the chains in a heap on the floor and proceeded with caution, lifting his hammer. With him, too, Felix would have closed, for the old man was daunted not a whit by the threat of the lifted weapon; but Marcel called to him sharply, bidding him to desist. He dropped his hands and backed against the bunk in front of his master.

"What do you want?" Marcel asked.

Picking his words awkwardly, for he spoke only indifferent French, the man answered in a grumbling voice:

"I do only as I was bid, master. I can not help it. I must put these chains on you. Tell this old fool here to be careful, or I must crack his head. I do not want to hurt any one. But I must do my orders."

Marcel laughed.

"I think it's you, master smith, that

should have a care, or belike this 'old fool' will do the head cracking. However, since needs must, we will make no resistance. Come on and do your work. He shall not harm you. But why should I wear chains?"

"As to that, I cannot tell," grumbled the smith. "Some one tells my captain that so it must be; and the captain says to me: 'Giuseppe, put the bilboes on the young one.' So here they are."

Excited cries and the trampling of feet heralded reinforcements brought by the young sailor. A half-dozen of dark-skinned fellows burst into the cabin.

"No go away again," rumbled the blacksmith petulantly, as he spread his chains out along the floor. "There's going to be no trouble."

WHEN the smith had made an end to his work, and the dull iron chain and its anklets were fastened securely with rivets, he cut the cords from Marcel.

"That is all," he said. "The young master is not to wear the bracelets." He gathered up the other chains he had fetched and prepared to depart, leaving De Lauville's arms and hands free.

Felix barred his way, quitting his place by the wall with an angry grunt.

"What of me?" he asked. The old man's eyes were snapping with indignation. Tears glistened on his cheeks. His fists were clenched. The smith eyed him with some apprehension.

"What now do you want?" he asked.

"What about me?" repeated Felix. "Shall you chain my master like a mountebank's bear, and I wear none? Here." He thrust forth a foot. "Chain me like my master, or I will break your hammer on your ugly skull."

That conceit tickled the smith most mightily when Felix's meaning became clear to him.

"Ho, ho, ho!" he laughed, throwing back his head; but he sobered in haste and backed away precipitately when Felix made a threatening gesture with his fist.

"Captain said nothing of chains for the old one," said the smith, turning his eyes

to Marcel. "This fellow is sick in the brain."

"Nay, Felix; let be," said Marcel, smiling. "One of us in shackles is enough. Be-think you; you may be of service to me with your sturdy legs at liberty. Chained, you would be as useless as I."

"Well, if *monsieur* puts it that way, I suppose that it is best," answered Felix doubtfully. "But it seems ill to me that I who am but your servant should go free and see this rakehelly rivet up like a gallows-bird." He stood to one side, and the smith edged around him and went out.

As he opened the door there sounded a sniff and the pad of feet and rattle of claws on the wooden floor; and a great white dog trotted into the room and looked about him inquiringly. Marcel at once recognized the brute as the occupant of the hearthstone in the Inn of the Golden Skull that had answered to the name of Neige and had stood ready to do battle for the Tom Cat.

He snapped his fingers and called the dog; but Neige passed him over with an impersonal glance of his bright blue eyes, and after sniffing the air searchingly, turned and stalked from the cabin.

"Where the dog is, there will be the master also," muttered De Lauville.

Scarcely had the dog departed when another man, this time a Frenchman, came in through the door. He looked at the two with a grin that broadened when he saw the shackles on De Lauville's legs. His bold eyes fell before the stern Marcel turned upon him. He beckoned to Felix.

"You come with me. My master would see you," he announced, and Felix followed him out.

PRESENTLY the old man returned to the cabin and sat heavily on a stool. He was pale, and his big hands trembled as he laid them on his knees. Seeing which, he hid them behind him. A hunted look was in his eyes, and on his face the expression of a man greatly shaken by a something that he cannot understand.

"Why, Felix, you look as though you

had seen a ghost," exclaimed De Lauville. "What ails you, man?"

Felix opened his mouth to speak, but closed it at once, and turned misery-stricken eyes on his master.

"Come now, what's happened?" Marcel persisted. "Are we to be murdered, to walk the plank, or be sunk in the sea, that you should so quake and sweat at the thought of it? Master your tongue and out with it."

"No, *monsieur!* Oh, no; we are not going to be killed."

"Since you have learned so much, perhaps you know where we are going. Is Le Marcou on the ship? Have you seen him?"

"Yes, he's on the ship, *monsieur,*" Felix answered. "I have seen him."

"Is he then so terrible that he has scared your tongue from wagging?"

Felix, his face at once sorrowful and stubborn, shook his head and turned it away.

"*Monsieur,* I cannot tell you all that you may ask. Don't ask me what I cannot tell."

"Surely, Felix, although I can make little of this, I will not ask you to tell me anything that you dare not. But at least tell me what you can. Where are we going?"

"That I do not know, *monsieur;* but we are sailing west, and no land is in sight. This ship is the *Uccello*, out of Naples. Her master is Carlo Battista, a Genoese. Most of his men are Genoese, too. But Le Marcou is the real master here. He has five or six Frenchmen with him. The ship has sailed much. She is weatherbeaten and old. There are many guns on deck. That is all I know, *monsieur,*" Felix concluded.

So troubled in spirit was the old man, and so keenly apprehensive of questioning, that Marcel forebore to cause him further discomfort. As there was nothing more to be learned, he arose and hobbled to the port, where the breath of the open sea came in.

What maze was this? he asked himself. What had stirred old Felix so? He was aroused from his musings by an exclamation from Felix.

"*Mon Dieu, monsieur,* I had forgotten." The old man fumbled in the recesses of his waistcoat and produced a folded paper. "Here, this is for you, *monsieur.* A lad brought it to our rooms yesterday morning."

As De Lauville unfolded the paper a faint perfume arose from it to his nostrils—a perfume that brought with it a flood of golden memories, and set his heart thumping madly and his hands to trembling.

It was a note—unsigned.

Behind the mask of cruelty, love and pity weep. Bide your time.

It was unsigned, that strange, sweet, cryptic message; but underneath the sentences were the marks of an erasure; and when Marcel held the paper to the light, his eyes traced the outlines of a "J."

He pressed the scented paper to his lips. All bitterness passed out of his swelling heart. Straight through all besetting dangers the path of a fair future unfolded itself before him. Jeanne was true!

CHAPTER VI

TO YOUR GUNS!

THE little circle of open sea rimmed by the port-frame was all the outer world De Lauville saw for many days. Mostly he saw a dancing expanse of sun-flecked blue and silver. Only occasionally did he see it laden with the sullenness of storms; for the passage of the *Uccello* was fair; and the storms were merely squally flurries.

But ahead of the ship lurked a tempest, not of the heavens' brewing, that broke mightily.

Food was brought to the two captives by the same young sailor who first had come to look after them, a smiling happy-go-lucky fellow who held no grudges. Many a time, with a flash of his white teeth, he patted the top of his head where Felix had thwacked it against the door, and shook his head with a merry grin to show his entire lack of ill will. He even carried his good-natured regard to the point of fetch-

ing to Marcel a number of books, which helped to while away the slow hours of captivity.

De Lauville never left the confines of the cabin. He doubted if he would be allowed to; and he did not make the attempt. Felix at certain times had the run of the ship, a privilege that he availed himself of little, preferring to keep his master company. With the passing of the days, the wound left in Marcel's shoulder by the Tom Cat's sting healed, and he became whole and well again.

One interest now and one only the voyage held for De Lauville. That interest was the end of the journey, that should find him planning his return to France. To that he looked forward with a patient restraint of the spirit within him that cried out for haste and yet more haste. No obstacle should stand in the way of that return, he told himself, no matter what dangers should beset his way. No obstacle would keep him from Jeanne.

Two weeks had passed when the tempest broke.

IT WAS an hour past noon of a brazen day. The *Uccello* drove on before a whipping gale. Marcel had been poring over an ancient volume of the *Chronicles of the Cid*, while Felix dozed in a corner over his cold pipe.

Oppressed by an uneasiness, intangible but growing, De Lauville laid aside his book and clanked his chains across the cabin to the port. He was watching the long, foam-crested waves race past below him, when the door of the cabin was wrenched open.

He turned. The Tom Cat stood behind him, regarding him intently. A curious light smoldered in the green-brown eyes.

Memory whitened Marcel's cheeks and clenched his hands in anger; and those quick eyes saw and comprehended. The glow in them quickened; but the scarred face remained impassive and did not betray whether the gleam was of humor or ire.

"Monsieur le Comte de Lauville is an-

noyed," he said in his disquieting tones that always seemed rising in reflection. "Let it pass. There is time for no quarrelling between us. I have a proposition to make to *monsieur le comte*, if he will listen?"

Marcel swallowed a growing rage.

"I am listening," he answered coldly.

"We are about to go into battle, *monsieur*. Ah, the eyes of *monsieur*; they glisten. He does not forget the traditions of the house from which he is sprung."

It was true. With the saying of the words, a flash of interest, unwilling though it was, lighted De Lauville's features, and his muscles tautened.

"What I have come to ask *monsieur*," the Tom Cat continued crisply, "is—will he fight? No, do not answer until you have heard all the offer. It is like this: Coming against us, and like to be upon us within the hour, is a ship larger than this craft of ours, with many more guns and a great crew. We have some guns, good ones, but not enough good gunners to fight them well. We are in evil straits, *monsieur*. We are not fast enough to run away; we are not strong enough to fight. But"—a note of strength rang in his shrill tones—"we will not yield.

"I am told that *monsieur* is a gun captain of parts. I propose to him that he shall step out of these chains and fight a gun in our behalf. In return I offer to *monsieur* the opportunity to die an honorable death, rather than to die here like a rat, or to be taken and perchance sold into slavery. For these that we are to fight are pirates, *monsieur*."

He paused and studied Marcel narrowly.

"What says *monsieur*?" he asked at length.

Hard and sharp was the laugh of De Lauville.

"And what if I do fight, and if we win? What then?"

"Why, then you shall come back to this cabin and resume your chains," replied the Tom Cat without emotion, and again he waited and studied De Lauville.

Marcel burst again into laughter.

"To the point, Le Marcou," he said. "Man, you do drive a Jew's bargain—everything for nothing. Those are your full terms, then, the complete extent of your generosity?"

"Just."

In spite of the irony with which he greeted the Tom Cat's offer, there was that in the spirit of De Lauville that responded to the audacity of the man. Marcel was little minded to sit quiet in chains with a good fight going on over his head when only a word was lacking to send him into the thick of it, terms or no terms.

"Strike off your chains and show me the gun," he said.

It would seem that the Tom Cat had foreseen the answer, for at his call of Giuseppe, the burly smith, pushed in through the door with hammer and chisels.

"Jehan!" the Tom Cat called, and in came that same out-at-heels rascal who had closed the door of the Inn of the Golden Skull on the night Marcel was taken. He carried a belt and sword. As the chain fell on the floor, Jehan thrust the weapon into De Lauville's hand. It was his own sword.

"This way, *monsieur le comte*," said the Tom Cat, and stepped into the passage.

AS HE strode to the door, Marcel slipped the blade from its scabbard. The sunlight from the port shone on its bright length. His enemy's back was not a yard away.

"What guarantee have you that I'll not spit you like a dog, now that you have put a sword in my hand, Le Marcou?" he asked.

"None," was the reply, flung over the Tom Cat's shoulder, and without a backward glance he proceeded steadily along the passage toward the companionway. Marcel resheathed his sword and followed.

All during the interview in the cabin Felix had sat in his chair with mouth agape. His staring eyes never left the face of the Tom Cat, which seemed to fascinate him. He now followed his master to the deck.

As they emerged from the hatch, a little knot of Frenchmen standing near the mainmast came and grouped themselves around the Tom Cat. Although Marcel knew it not, among them were the four shadows, and they recognized him with covert grins.

From an unclouded sheet of turquoise the summer sun cast its brassy rays and gemmed the sea with brilliants. With creaking timbers and humming cordage the *Uccello* tore her way through the tossing troughs in the fag-end of a twenty-mile gale. In the shrouds her swarthy, barefoot sailors clung like apes. Every face was turned one way.

Now a cannon boomed its dull thunder across the waves, and a cry arose from the sailors as the waves a hundred yards apart were gashed by a solid shot.

De Lauville turned his head and saw the enemy, there where the sailors looked—a looming, dark-hued hulk of a ship, sheering out on the port quarter under a great spread of dust-colored canvas, and scarcely half a mile away.

She came on like a racehorse, throwing up huge fans of spume from her high bow. Her rails were black with men. As Marcel looked there came another spurt of flame from her forward deck, and a second shot hurtled diagonally across the bows of the *Uccello*.

Battista, the Genoese shipmaster, stood aft along the rail studying the stranger ship through his glasses. As the party from the cabin came on deck, he dropped his glasses and trotted to meet them, a sturdy figure of a man, squat and wide-shouldered, with curling hair and beard. He, too, was barefooted, and only the silken shirt fluttering open above his broad chest distinguished him from a common sailor. His little, deep-set eyes glittered with excitement above his high cheek-bones.

"Ah, Signor Tom Cat, the time has come to fight," he said as he trotted up, rubbing his hairy hands together anxiously. "And we are ready here, *signor*."

He indicated with a wave of his hands his orderly decks all set with the paraphernalia of battle. The tarpaulins had been

dragged from the guns, and the gunners stood ready with their matches. Back of the guns, racks of muskets had been distributed, and with them a grim array of long pikes to repel invaders. Over a big brazier near the cook's galley seethed and simmered a caldron of oil, ready to be flung, boiling, into the faces of the enemy did they attempt to board.

"They say who lie that we Genoese, good sailors though we be, are poor fighters," said Battista. "We shall see. We shall see." He glanced up at the mizzen where the broad banner that bore the red cross of Genoa whipped in the wind.

"What make you on yon ship, Master Carlo?" asked the Tom Cat.

His strange eyes were gleaming.

"She shows no name or flag, *signor*; but see how high she's built, bow and stern. I'll wager that keel was laid in Spain," replied Battista. "But as to who keeps her log now—" He shrugged his shoulders. "Santa Maria, how she sails. A thousand tons and fifty guns at the least; and we but eight hundred and our guns but thirty. Well, I've faced worse odds, and I live to say it." He cast an appraising eyes on Marcel. "So this is the young gun-captain, eh? He shall have the best gun on the ship, and the Russian with him. God send—"

A CRASH and a wild cry aloft broke his words. Splinters of wood fell on the deck. One of the stranger's guns had spoken again. A ball through the rigging shattered a spar and carried a human life with it. The body of a Genoese sailor, his face all gashed and bleeding, his arms and legs limply asprawl, hurtled through the air and pitched into the sea beyond the starboard rail.

"We answer now," shrilled the Tom Cat in Marcel's ear. "To your gun, *monsieur*. Yours to fire the first shot. Jehan, guide him."

Across the deck De Lauville hurried, with Felix at his heels, and climbed to the fo'cas'le-head. At the top of the ladder a man met him and saluted—a stocky, bearded fellow, who carried a lighted match in

his hand, and who cried out in villainous French:

"Ho, captain! My little captain; once more we fight the guns together!"

He was Mikail Grodov, the Russian gunner of the Company D'Allier. Then was explained to Marcel the mystery of the so familiar voice that he had heard but could not place on the night in the Inn of the Golden Skull.

Little time had De Lauville to wonder how it was that Grodov had not died with the company in the battle of the Dunes, or how he came to be with the Tom Cat. In the waist of the ship Battista roared hoarsely to his helmsman. The *Uccello* swung off before the wind, and came sharply about to port.

Marcel leaped to the gun that Jehan indicated was his. It was one of the three in the fo'cas'le-head—an eight-pounder of shining brass, shotted and primed and rolled into its port.

As the ship swung, De Lauville caught the match from the hand of the Russian and sighted hastily. The brazen wardog leaped and thundered. Through the drift of smoke belched from its muzzle the gun captain watched the effect of his shot.

It might have been luck or it might have been skill of the gunner that directed the iron ball so surely into the high-built prow of the oncoming ship. A fierce burst of cheering swept up from below as the Genoese seamen and gunners saw the gilded figurehead and a little of planking shorn from under the stranger's bowsprit and pitched into the sea.

From all the port side of the *Uccello* sprang jets of smoke and flame as the Italian gunners delivered their broadside. Twelve guns on a side the *Uccello* carried on the main deck, with three on the fo'cas'le-head, and yet another trio on the poop.

With consummate seamanship the Genoese master maneuvered his craft to keep his guns always busy. For the chase of hours was a battle now, nor was it a running fight.

If the stranger was faster in the stretch,

the smaller *Uccello* was more easily handled at close quarters. Now this way, now that, she came about. From port and then from starboard crashed the broadside volleys. While one side fired, the other reloaded, and at the turning-point—the fo'cas'le-head where De Lauville fought—the guns were never idle.

In the rigging and on the decks the Italians cursed and spat toward their enemy. "Accursed pirates!" they screamed again and again.

For the foe had showed his colors as he went into battle. From his mizzen he had broken out a black flag on which gleamed a silver death's-head and cross-bones.

Once in the thick of the fight, De Lauville forgot all other things. His coat gone, his face and hands begrimed with powder and sweat, he fought among the Genoese gunners; and gave for the man he hated as good a fight as he'd ever given for his king.

Behind the panting, struggling men leaped and chattered the powder-monkeys, fetching their burdens from the magazine. When the guns became so hot that they burned to the touch, the gunners swashed them with buckets of sea-water and fought on. At Marcel's side a solid shot from the pirate ship tore the head from one of his gun-crew and stretched him, a quivering gruesome thing, on the decking, where his blood mixed with the wash from the guns. Felix took his place.

For half an hour the battle raged over the sea path, with crash of cannon and shriek of ball and the grating screech and crack of riven wood when the iron balls went home. Once the fo'cas'le-head was swept by grape that left it a crimson shambles, but De Lauville was unscathed, and found enough men left to man the guns.

They fought on.

A terrific roaring overwhelmed Marcel's ears. Something struck him on the chin. Then sea and sky and circling ships all swam together in a red whirlpool. He felt himself falling, falling. . . .

CHAPTER VII

SONG OF THE WHIP

WHEN Marcel opened his eyes to the light again, everything seemed strangely hushed. As his senses reasserted themselves, there came to his ears, dully at first, the crash of volleys from the deck below, where the fight went on, and the thunder from across the waves where the enemy plied his guns. But in the fo'cas'le-head no cannon roared.

There everything was still, and De Lauville wondered stupidly at the reason for it. What had happened on the fo'cas'le-head? Where was Felix? He heard a wheezing sigh somewhere near, and found strength to roll his head weakly around toward it.

It was Grodov who had sighed. The Russian lay across the breach of the brass gun, his face toward De Lauville. Blood oozed from his lips. Both his hands were clutched at his stomach. He saw that De Lauville lived and was looking at him, and he shook his head like one weary.

"Ah—little captain—you—live," he gasped painfully.

"What has befallen us, Grodov?" Marcel asked.

The gunner swayed his head slowly. "Solid shot—strike. Then—grape."

Through the rail close to the port gun a ball had torn, ripped half the deck to splinters, and carried away several feet of the starboard rail. One of the flying timbers smashed from the rail had struck De Lauville on the chin, stunned him temporarily, and stretched him on the deck, where he had escaped the terrific hail of grape-shot that completed the carnage.

Marcel rolled over on his face, gathered his knees under him, and prepared to arise. A shock that made the deck quiver threw him flat again. Splinters rained around him. Once more he drew himself together and rose to his feet. A shot had cut through the mizzenmast and brought it crashing down. Spars and canvas lay in a tangle half across the fo'cas'le deck.

As De Lauville drew himself erect, the

Russian stood up from the gun. Blood ran from his shoes to the red deck, and Marcel saw that the man was literally holding himself together with his hands. Swaying as he stood, the gunner spoke again:

"Now—they board us. Our port side—all—quiet. We never fight—a gun—again, captain. I never see—holy Russia. Farewell—little captain."

He took two unsteady steps and pitched through the gaping rail into the sea.

At De Lauville's feet lay old Felix. His eyes were closed and his gray hair was dabbled with blood, but his broad chest rose and fell regularly. Marcel, still dizzy, dragged him across the broken deck and pillowed his head on a folded coat. Besides the two of them there was not a living man on the fo'cas'le.

MARCEL looked about him. The wind had died to a whisper. Crippled by the falling of her mizzen, the *Uccello* no more answered her helm. All of her port guns were silenced. As she floundered in the wave-troughs the great, dark ship of the enemy bore leisurely down to board her, undeterred by the clatter of small arms that arose from the Genoese decks.

Those things De Lauville saw, and more. The brass eight-pounder, shotted and primed and ready to fire, stood with the decking broken under it so that its grim nose thrust out and down, pointing at an angle that soon would command the water-line of the approaching conqueror. A tangle of fallen canvas from the mizzen-mast

almost hid the gun. Marcel's head cleared of the last shred of the fog that had benumbed his brain. All his strength came back to him.

One thing only was lacking. Ah, there it was! A tiny spiral of smoke curled up from the hand of one of the dead gunners. Marcel sprang to the man's side and wrenched from the stiffening fingers the fragment of smoldering match they held. Alert and cool, he crouched behind the brazen gun and waited patiently for the exact moment to fire.

Nearer and nearer the stately, high-prowed ship came in. She was swinging to lay alongside now. Along the shining gun-barrel Marcel's hot eyes glanced, keen and steady. Five yards of water danced between the looming hull and the spot where the iron ball would strike.

Two yards!

One!

De Lauville clapped match to priming. The brass gun belched its deadly menace. Shearing the crest from a wave, the ball struck the side of the oncoming ship. Just below the waterline it smote her—the aim of all good gunners of the sea—and plunged deep into her vitals.

At that pointblank range the effect of the shot was staggering. The stout timbers were crushed and rent as though under the blow of a giant's hammer. Through the gash rushed the waters. A wild cry of rage and dismay arose from the swarming decks. A frenzy of cheering went up from the deck of the *Uccello* in answer.



With crowbar and winch Marcel dragged his cannon back from the rail. He snatched a sack of dry powder from the arms of a dead powder-monkey. Alone he rammed the charge home and shotted the gun.

His movements were observed from the deck of the enemy. He saw their captain, a tall, smooth-faced Englishman in a red coat, pointing up toward him and shouting orders that sent a storm of bullets flying through his canvas shelter.

Unheeding of the screaming of the leaden balls, De Lauville worked grimly on. Once more and yet a third time he sent solid shot tearing into the stranger's side. Then the pirate ship began to settle, and he knew that his work was done.

He heard Felix calling to him faintly, and turned to attend the old man's injuries.

A cool fighter and a daring man captained that pirate crew. With his decks going down under him, he marshaled his wild seawolves with a method and precision that prevented panic, and saw every fighting man in the boats before the ship took her last, sullen plunge beneath the waves. He was brave; but he was ruthless, too, after the fashion of his kind. He left his sorely wounded to go down with the ship.

Red Coat himself was the last man to leave the deck. He unshipped his longboats on the far side of his sinking ship, where they could not be reached by the fire of the musketeers on the *Uccello*. Urged by the powerful arms of their rowers, the boats—eight of them, loaded to their gunwales with fighting men—swept around the wreck from fore and aft and spread out to attack the *Uccello*. That was the only hope of Red Coat—to board and master the Genoese bark.

Scarcely were the longboats clear when the dark ship went down in a swirl of foam, the curses and screaming of her wounded men cutting into the inferno of the battle begun again.

THEN was the *Uccello* in evil case indeed. In vain Battista roared up and down his decks, bending every effort to

bring his crippled craft about so that his starboard cannon might be turned on the attackers.

Vainly the Tom Cat directed the fire of the musketeers. Under the silent muzzles of the port guns the longboats drove in. Terrible was the fire the Genoese poured into the boat as the enemy came in; but it did not stop them. To the side of the ship the boats fastened like wolves. The pikemen took up their grim tools of death then, and the battle became hand to hand.

Before they could make their grapnels fast Red Coat's crew had lost frightfully, but they could afford the loss. They outnumbered the Genoese by nearly two to one. Besides, in fighting for possession of the *Uccello*, the pirates were battling for their one chance at life.

Marcel found that Felix, like himself, had been bowled over by a timber when the shot ripped through the rail, and was merely stunned. In a few moments he was able to sit up and learn what had happened. On his knees, ministering to his servant, De Lauville lost sight of the battle for a time. The furious clamor that arose from the deck when the boarders assailed the rail dragged him to his feet.

One glance he gave at the swaying deck below. With an oath he caught up a bucket of water and sluiced the blood and grime from his face and arms. Buckling on his belt and tearing his long sword from its scabbard, he clambered through the wreckage of the fallen mizzen and down the ladder.

From stem to stern of the *Uccello* the battle was joined. Seven of the eight longboats were fast to the side of the ship. Cheering hoarsely, the pirates surged to the attack. Some of them sang. Now and again a man, balancing on the shoulders of his fellows, leaped onto the rail, to pitch backward under the strokes of the long pikes, or to win brief foothold on the deck and die cursing hard under the cutlasses and pistols of the defenders.

The men ran yelling from the brazier by the cook's galley, bearing leather buckets, and threw the searing, sizzling

contents of the great oil caldron into the faces of the boarders with terrible effect. The rattle of musketry was incessant. Over all shrilled the screams of raging, agonized men, as bullet and blade and scalding oil did death's hideous business.

Gallantly he they fought—and the men of the *Uccello* justified their stout master's boast that day—the Genoese sailors were slowly overborne by sheer weight of numbers. Little knots of men from the boats broke over the rail and fought desperately on the deck to make foothold for the comrades crowding behind them. Back and forth behind the line of boats patrolled the eighth longboat, and in its stern-sheets, careless of danger, Red Coat stood and directed his battle.

Midships the crew of one of the boats hacked at the rails with axes. As Marcel plunged into the fight from the fo'cas'le, a length of the rail gave way under the swinging blades and fell inward. Shouting and singing, the men from the boat poured through the breach to rush the deck. The Genoese who opposed them broke and wavered.

THE Tom Cat with his five Frenchmen—the four shadows and Jehan—came from behind one of the musket-racks to stem the rush. Dropping their muskets, the five drew cutlasses. But the Tom Cat carried no sword. In his left hand he clenched a dagger, in his right the coil of the deadly lash with its tip of steel.

In another moment the invaders would break the thin line of the Genoese. Calling out to the sailors to give him room, the Tom Cat threw his high-shouldered form into the open space behind the wavering line of struggling men, uncoiling the lash as he sprang.

A bearded giant, his head wound with a red handkerchief, cut down two sailors with two mighty strokes and broke the line. He shook his dripping cutlass and hurled himself at the Tom Cat. Quick as a lightning flash the long lash hissed through the air and straightened. Into the big man's throat the keen blade ripped and

out again. His cutlass clanged on the deck, and he went down. Others there were, and many, pressing from behind. The Genoese sailors gave way and made room for the Tom Cat to meet them.

Then was demonstrated the full power of the curious weapon he bore. He stood with his tall, thin figure bent a little forward from the waist. His dagger-hand rested at his thigh. His right arm was extended from him, raised a few inches above the level of his shoulder, and almost motionless. But his wrist moved with the sinuous suppleness of a serpent, and under its guidance the lash hissed and darted like a live thing.

He was not cutting buttons from men's coats now, the Tom Cat; but he did his fell work as a man who had a long, hard task ahead of him, to be finished as expeditiously as may be. Every flash of the flying blade was meant to speed a life—and few of them failed.

Where he stood the slant sun-rays fell about him on the deck. But he seemed a stranger to all light. His close-fitting, black coat was buttoned tightly around him. In the shadow of his dark-plumed hat his green eyes shone. The lace at his wrists and the ruff at his breast were flecked with red and grimed with powder-smoke; his snarling voice was a mere croaking and gasping; but the wiry, wonderful strength of his long body was unimpaired.

On the stricken battle-deck his was the dominating influence. In his somber garments and with his strangely scarred face, he seemed indeed like one of the lesser minions of death, stepped down for a space to open his master's gates.

In vain his enemies strove to come to close quarters with him. His were strokes too quick for parrying. Men died under them who had not believed that they were in danger. Because there was little time to reload, the fire of muskets and pistols had slackened, and most of the fighting in that quarter of the deck was done with cold steel—and there the Tom Cat held the mastery of all who might come against him.

Men in the boats fired at him again and again; but he seemed to bear a charmed life, for none of their bullets found him. Those with him were not so fortunate. One by one the four shadows died, as perhaps it was best that their ragged lives should end. Still the long lash flew and the green eyes shone.

Farther along the deck near the stern, Red Coat's men broke over the rail and drove the sailors before them. A tangled, cursing melee bore down on the Tom Cat, now standing almost alone before the breach he defended.

For moments it seemed that the battle was like to be ended with the fall of the Tom Cat; for even the dread lash could not defend him on two sides at once, and Jehan and the Genoese were all too few to turn the rush of Red Coat's men from aft. Then came another blade.

FROM the foot of the fo'cas'le ladder all the way down the long port rail De Lauville fought his way. For a few moments he stood at the side of the Genoese ship's master, and won Battista's admiration of the deft manner in which he handled his sword.

"Wonderful! I would that I could so neatly slit a throat," was the cry of Battista, who fought with an ax.

At whiles through the jangle and clang of the fighting there came to Marcel's ears the high-pitched snarl of the Tom Cat's voice, and he left Battista and followed it. As he wended along the rail his sword was ever busy. With a thrust here and a parry there he made his passing felt.

So it was that when the fighting at the breach came to its tightest pinch the Tom Cat from the tail of his wary eye saw a lithe young figure pass behind him, and a long, bright blade shone at the side of Jehan and made play on the front of the enemy pressing from the afterdeck.

Like the Tom Cat, De Lauville wasted no strokes in fancy fence. His thrusts were short and deadly, his parry so lightning swift that once he seemed to turn three cutlasses in one sweep and dazzled and

confused his opponents. When, a few moments later, Jehan died with a pike-point through his lungs, the one blade took up the work of two, and was not unequal to the task.

A shattering crash forward and the crunching of riven timbers was followed by a cry of dismay that ran down the line of boats. That was the master-stroke of Felix. Left behind by his master, the old man sought work for his returning strength. He found it in one of the fo'cas'le cannon that had been dismantled by a shot.

With a crowbar he rolled it across the deck and through the gap in the rail. Immediately below was one of the longboats swarming with men. In an instant it was a ghastly wreck. Breach first the cannon fell, tearing the bottom out of the boat and sundering the grapnel ropes so that it sank instantly.

Disaster was undoing the English captain, and he saw it in the shape of two men who fought side by side on the *Uccello's* deck and sent his hardest fighting men to death. Well, he was a famous sworder himself. He would go up and test the mettle of those blades. With a curse he ordered his rowers to turn his boat in to the breach in the rail.

As the nose of the longboat touched the side of the *Uccello*, Red Coat left his place in the stern-sheets. Running forward along the thwarts, he took the leap of splendid dangers, high in the air for the Genoese deck. Two of his men, a Spaniard and a Turk, made the leap with him.

The Tom Cat saw them coming, and the whistling flail of death sang through the air to meet them. With a choked cry of "Allah!" the Turk threw up his hands and plunged backward.

"*Dios!*" shrieked the Spaniard; and he died too.

As his feet touched the deck, Red Coat snatched a pistol from his belt and fired. His aim was true. The Tom Cat sank to his knees and settled slowly forward on his face, the ebony whip-stock still clenched in his hand, the lash writhing harmless on the deck.

Back from his stand sprang De Lauville. Over the Tom Cat's body his blade and Red Coat's crossed and hung. But another's was the vengeance.

FROM somewhere in the bowels of the ship came the dog Neige, a frayed end of rope that he had bitten through dangling from his collar. Just as the Tom Cat fell, Neige reached the deck—Neige, whose only religion was his allegiance to his master. The dog bounded across the deck, splashing his white coat with blood. He paused and sniffed at the face of his fallen god. Then he threw up his fierce snout, his sea-blue eyes ablaze.

Marcel heard an unearthly howl in his ears. Past his shoulder shot a long, white flash of fury, and fastened at the English captain's throat. Overbalanced by the plunging weight of the dog, Red Coat staggered back, and man and dog together pitched into the sea between the boats.

Cowed by the loss of their captain, the pirates gave back. Battista came charging aft with all the spare men he could muster and cleared the deck. Their numbers sadly depleted, the sea-wolves put away from the ship's side in the six of their longboats.

Although their case was hopeless so far out at sea, the Genoese would not let them go. Battista mounted a culverin at either end of one of his own boats and gave chase with a score of rowers. When he returned to the *Uccello* the only remaining members of Red Coat's crew were dangling at the yardarms.

Cause for joy and sorrow had the Genoese—joy for a victory bravely won, sorrow for its cost in men. Of her crew of two hundred men, the *Uccello* had lost sixty and five hardy fighters. Scarcely a score of those who lived were unwounded.

From the fo'cas'le came Felix. The old man's face blanched when he saw the Tom Cat stretched on the deck before the breached rail. He turned the long form over. With a gasp and a shudder, the Tom Cat sat up. He rubbed his temple and smiled a wry smile as he looked about him.

His eye lighted upon De Lauville.

"*Monsieur le comte*, we owe you much," he said, "for your gunnery and for your swordsmanship. I have seen both, and I find them admirable."

Marcel bowed.

"Spare compliment, *Le Marcou*," he returned. "I am only one in a company in which I have found no cowards today. And after seeing you fight I find it in my heart to wish that you had been born a gentleman."

"Fate plays us scurvy tricks in the matter of births, *monsieur*—and of deaths," replied the Tom Cat.

He arose from the deck with the aid of Felix's arm and seated himself on a cask, still feeling absently of the furrow along his temple, where Red Coat's pistol-ball had plowed and stunned him.

Presently returned Battista from the chase of the longboats, and brought with him the dog Neige, dragged from the water where one of the sailors had seen him swimming.

Scarcely was the ship's master aboard before he bellowed down the deck:

"Ten florins to the man who finds and returns to me the little finger of my left hand. Some rascally pirate did clip it from me with a pistol-ball. It's not that the finger will be of further use; but it bore a red gold ring with a balas ruby in't that I can ill spare."

CHAPTER VIII

SAVAGE JOURNEY

TWO men sat beneath a tall, green pear-tree in a well-kept garden on the island of Manhattan on the 26th day of October in the year of our Lord 1658. At their backs stood a square, unlovely mansion of wood, the crude outlines of which a mass of creeping vinery tried in vain to mask.

One of the men who sat in the oddly carved chairs beneath the tree was in the iron-gray of a strong middle-age. His face, long and smooth-shaven and square-cornered, bore lines of determination, a stubborn pride in himself, somewhat of asperity, and withal a large kindness.

He was of a stocky above-medium build. His left leg was gone below the knee, and had been replaced by a stout mahogany peg, reinforced at intervals with bands of silver.

His companion, less than half his age, was of sparer figure, more trim and nervous. His features were of delicate turn, but lacking nothing in strength. His deep blue eyes were keen and friendly. Long, chestnut hair fell upon his shoulders.

The younger man had asked a question and waited on the answer. The elder pondered with many a pull at a long clay pipe. Through its haze he squinted with narrowed lids down the green garden reaches. He uncrossed his heavy leg with its silver-buckled shoe that swung over the mahogany stump. Removing his pipe, he said:

"Much of a fancy have I taken to you, young sir, and your gracious ways that are not of our plainer folk. You please me well. I am fain to do for you that which you ask; but—"

Again he resumed his pipe, his wide lips tightening at its stem. The young man tugged at his downy mustache and watched the other's deliberation with unconcealed anxiety.

"**H**OW long now is it since he they call the Tom Cat passed up the river?" asked the older man suddenly.

"Full four weeks, your excellency."

"And he whom I have known so long as Du Maurice—he bore another name in France, you say? And the Tom Cat once was supposed to have made way with him there?"

"Yes, your excellency."

"Now all of this does seem to me passing strange. You have no answer to this tangle?"

Under his bushy brows, Stuyvesant turned his keen, gray eyes on Marcel.

"None, your excellency," answered he. "I have told you all I know."

Long the director general pondered. And then:

"Mayhap the red Indians have murdered them ere now. They were a small party.

And yet you ask me to let you go to face the same dangers, and with a still smaller party." He shook his head gravely.

"Dangers are to be faced and overcome, your excellency," De Lauville answered. "I am much beholden to you for many courtesies. I thank you. But crown them all with your permission that shall send me speeding toward New France, and I'll owe you a debt that I never can repay."

Stuyvesant set his foot to the ground in sudden decision.

"You shall go, lad, if you must," he said. "I'll give you a parchment that shall get you the courtesy of the patroons along the river. As far as Fort Orange I can help you, boy. Beyond, your course will be under the guidance of a stronger hand than Peter Stuyvesant's."

Impulsively, Marcel poured out his thanks. The director general checked him.

"Nay, lad, I know how glad you'll be to be gone," he said, "and I know you'll think kindly sometimes of old Peter Stuyvesant. One small cord I tie to this going of yours, though."

"And that?"

"You shall wait for a week more. Make what preparations you have to make, and I'll see to a thing or two. When the week's done, if we've heard nothing from Du Maurice and his ill-favored friend, you shall start up Hendrik Hudson's creek."

MORE than a month had passed since the Genoese *Uccello* had cast anchor under the guns of Fort Amsterdam in Manhattan harbor. True to his promise, the Tom Cat had returned De Lauville to his chains on the day following the sea fight.

Among the New Amsterdam Dutch who met the *Uccello* was a Frenchman at sight of whom Marcel started.

Du Maurice, the man called himself. He greeted the Tom Cat as a bosom friend and benefactor. Yet Marcel had known of him in France a number of years before under a different name, had known of him as one who had incurred powerful wrath and had fallen a victim to the dagger of this same Tom Cat. So men had said.

Now here he was living in a new world under a new name, and he welcomed the Tom Cat with an embrace! More than ever was the Tom Cat an enigma.

This Du Maurice had a certain influence with the director general, and exerted it at the Tom Cat's behest to have Marcel and Felix confined for a time in Fort Amsterdam. The *Uccello* sailed away. The Tom Cat and Du Maurice passed up the Hudson on a mission of unguessed purpose. Then had followed a fast-ripening friendship between De Lauville and the director general. It resulted in Stuyvesant paroling Marcel from the fort as his guest at his Bouwerij farm.

As time went on De Lauville pressed his friendship to the point of telling Stuyvesant all his story. The tale appealed to the romance that was not dead in the heart of the adventurous Dutch soldier-governor. So Marcel won permission to fare forth on the long way to New France.

They left New Amsterdam on the appointed day, almost with the sun, Marcel and Felix.

They went in a sailboat with oars. Four Dutch soldiers from the fort with their muskets and an Iroquois runner went with them. The Dutchmen were to escort the travelers as far as Fort Orange, the northernmost outpost of the New Netherlands. The Indian was to guide them on through the forests to Quebec. The generosity of the director general had not stopped there. Hidden in Marcel's bosom was a purse heavy with good gold-pieces.

They sailed up the broad, forest-fringed river. At intervals on either side stretched farms, like in extent to small provinces. The director general's letter assured De Lauville of the hospitality of the patroons—and it was the hospitality of princes.

One misfortune only—and that did not seem great—happened on the journey to Fort Orange. At one of their stopping places, Red Crow, the Iroquois, deserted them, slipped away into the forest and the night and was gone.

"I am glad. He smelled very badly," commented Felix.

At Fort Orange their four stolid Dutch soldiers left them and sailed back down the Hudson. Marcel hired a hunter, an Englishman named Trant, to pilot them to Quebec. They set out at once.

TRANT shaped his course north through the upper Hudson to reach the lake called Horicon, thence Lake Champlain and the river St. Lawrence. They traveled in a bark canoe. With haste and good fortune, the hunter thought that they might reach and pass down the mighty river to Quebec before winter locked the waterway.

Their waking hours were passed upon the water in almost ceaseless paddling. Marcel developed in this a skill almost equal to that of his teacher. His muscles grew springy and tireless. Even Felix mastered the trick of the slender blade, and was able to spell the others.

They passed through a vast, unpeopled quiet. Mink and otter slipped furtively into the undergrowth of the river banks at the approach of the canoe. Only the feathered things made voices in the wilderness. Overhead the staccato clacketing of a kingfisher sometimes startled the paddlers. At wary distances the crows cawed resentfully. At night the travelers made camp on the bank. Then loons, wailed over the water, and owls hooted among the birches.

One night Marcel waked and saw the moon shining down on the camp through giant pines. The camp-fire had smoldered to embers. Back in the forest a wildcat did murder and snarled spitefully with his mouth full of feathers. Something stirred in a clump of willows at the river bank.

De Lauville turned in his blanket.

At the rim of the patch of moonlight that lay across the camp Trant sat on a fallen log with his back to the willows, a silent, somber figure. His head sagged forward as though the weariness of the watch was overcoming him.

Suddenly De Lauville was wide awake. As his eyes opened, he had an impression that a dark form, bent nearly double, slunk from the willows behind Trant and into the shadow of the trees. He half-raised

himself on his elbow and stared, blinking.

Not the quiver of a twig betrayed that anything living had passed across that moonlit silence. Marcel felt a tightening at the roots of his hair.

Trant sat as he had before. He had not moved a muscle. But his posture did not seem natural. Marcel called to him softly:

"Trant!" and then, when he did not answer, more sharply: "Trant!"

The hunter did not move. Felix stirred uneasily in his slumber.

Marcel threw back his blanket.

As he sat up, the mountain laurel behind him rustled and shook. A naked, sinewy arm shot across his shoulder and doubled under his chin. He was jerked backward violently. As he went down, the camp burst into soundless motion. Men seemed to spring up from the ground. Felix, half-awake, struggled mightily with half a dozen figures that had leaped upon him.

EXERTING all his wiry strength, De Lauville battled to his knees and then to his feet. He grappled his antagonist around the middle. They reeled across the camp, straight through the fire.

In the moonlight Marcel caught a glimpse of his adversary's face. It was red, and smeared grotesquely with black and white pigments. A tuft of hawk's feathers waved above his shaven poll.

They writhed and strained, the Frenchman fighting to reach the knife at his side, the Indian to prevent him from doing so and to pinion his wrists behind him. They stumbled over the log where Trant sat; Trant, who looked at the battle through wide, indifferent eyes.

One of the struggling bodies was flung against him. He slipped from the log to the ground. His coonskin cap fell from his head. At his crown was a horrid circle of raw flesh. Hair and skin had been torn away. For Trant had been stabbed from behind, and the scalping knife had done its work.

At that sight fury seized Marcel. In an access of strength he tore the arms of the Indian from around him and hurled

the redman back. From his belt he drew the hatchet and whirled it up to strike.

Then Red Crow stepped from behind the willows and noosed him with a thong, and they dragged him down. Felix had been subdued by numbers—it required the united efforts of eight of Red Crow's braves to throw and tie the old servant. More than his stubborn resistance, his cursing seemed to enrage the savages. One of them beat him on the head with a club until he lapsed into semi-consciousness. As they drew back from him, one brave staggered dizzily, his head hanging on his shoulders. Felix had nearly twisted it from his neck.

Screened by the fringe of willows were four long canoes in which Red Crow and his men had come. As silently as they had stolen upon the camp they left it. They carried De Lauville and Felix with them. Trant stayed behind, sleeping his long sleep under a tangle of forest undergrowth.

CHAPTER IX

THE RED COUNCIL

ON A December day—the day when in all Christendom folk were making glad the birthday of a Savior—Marcel Philippe de Menas, Comte de Lauville, stood in the swirling smoke of a Seneca council fire—awaiting death.

For hours he had stood with his back to the wall of the council long-house. Beginning with the venerable Do-ne-ho-gaweh, the wolf sachem of the Seneca wolves, chief after chief had spoken. Although their tongue was unknown to him, the Frenchman read death in the tense, red faces around the council fire. Through the drift of the smoke a hundred glaring eyes were focused on him. All spelled death.

De Lauville stood on the raised platform at the north side of the long-house council chamber, well back from the fire and not far from the eastern door. On the flooring at his feet on one side sat the faithful Felix. At his other side crouched the great white dog Neige, muzzled with thongs and hobbled with ropes of bark.

A storm whistled through the branches

of the bare trees without. Snow had come. Driven by the wind, it sifted through the hangings of skins at the doorway of the long-house and made little eddies and whirls of white on the earthen floor of the passage. From the west, muffled by the falling snow, sounded not far away the roaring of a cataract. For the long-house stood almost at the brink of the gorge of the Genesee River in the Seneca village of Ga-sko-sa-go. Below the village were the falls of the Genesee.

"What will be the end, think you, of all this talk, *monsieur*?" asked Felix, peering up through the smoke.

"A bad end, I fear me, Felix," De Lauville answered quietly.

Neige whined and nudged against Marcel's leg. The man reached down and smoothed the long fur of the beast. Somewhere in the wilderness the Tom Cat and Du Maurice and those who had left New Amsterdam with them must have perished. Else why had Neige been found in a Seneca village?

They had found him in the forest, the red warriors had said. They told how they trapped him in the snow; and how the fierce brute tore the life from the throat of a brave before they made him fast. Why they had not killed the beast, De Lauville could not guess; but he was soon to learn. Somewhere in the forest Neige's master lay under the snows; of that Marcel was sure. Neige had recognized Marcel. For the first time, in his loneliness, the dog was friendly. But no redskin was safe from his slashing fangs. So Neige went muzzled and tied.

"WHERE is Red Crow?" Do-ne-ho-ga-weh was speaking. "Let the war-chief of the Hawk Clan stand forth and speak."

From De Lauville's side the tall, draped figure advanced into the circle of fire-light. The gaudy blanket fell at its feet.

There was a moment's silence.

"Fathers, uncles, brothers of the Great Hill People, Red Crow is here," the war-chief began. "You talk now of what to do with the captive Long-hair from across

the great water. Listen to Red Crow. Red Crow is a great chief." He paused. The old men at the fireside nodded and inclined their heads to listen.

"For many moons Red Crow had led the young men of the Wolves to battle. The western door of the long-house has been guarded well, my brothers. Red Crow and the braves of the Nun-da-wa-o-no have kept it. The voice of Red Crow has been heard in the councils of the Ho-de-no-saunee. In the hunting he has not been backward. When have the bellies of the Wolves hungered for meat that Red Crow has not filled them? He has the mighty fire-stick of the pale-faces that kills from afar with a great noise. Neither warrior nor deer nor bear can live when it talks."

The war-chief pointed to a rifle that hung with powder and ball on the wall of the council chamber, the only one of its kind in the village of Ga-sko-sa-go, the most prized possession of the clan.

"Red Crow is the friend of the English. An English brave and brother gave Red Crow the fire-stick and the food for its belly to make it talk.

"My brothers, long from among you Red Crow has tarried in the villages of the fat people of the Corlear* on the Ska-neh-ta-de Ga-hun-da (Hudson River). There, in the castle of the Corlear, Red Crow first saw the Long-hair.

"Brothers, the Long-hair is the friend of the Corlear. Our English brothers hate the Corlear and his people.

"Brothers, the Long-hair is of the tribe of Onontio, father of the Frenchmen. Our English brothers hate the sons of Onontio. Other men from the lands of the Corlear, and they too of the tribe of Onontio, have passed through the lands of the Great Hill People, through the western door of the long-house. They journeyed to the country of the hated Hurons beyond the falls of O-ne-ah-ga. They lost a white dog in the forests. It is here."

He pointed to Neige. As though he understood and resented, the dog snarled furiously, with bristling hackles.

* Title for Peter Stuyvesant.

"Red Crow left the castle of the Corlear with the Long-hair. Then he slipped away in the night and fetched his brothers of the Mohawks. In canoes Red Crow and the Flint People followed up the great river. Red Crow slew the traitor Englishman who guided the Long-hair toward the lodges of Onontio."

In the flame of the council-fire Red Crow shook the dried scalp of the hunter Trant.

"Brothers, since when have the Great Hill People become the friends of the Corlear, whom our English brothers hate? Are the Senecas the friends of Onontio?"

He paused to let the weight and the trend of his argument sink into the minds of his hearers. Only the snapping of the pine-knots in the fire and the muffled vibration of the waterfall disturbed the quiet.

"Brothers, let the Long-hair who is the friend of the Corlear die. So we may avert evil from our lodges. Red Crow has spoken."

Shrouding himself in his blanket, Red Crow left the fire and took his place in the circle of crouching chieftains.

Aged and corpselike, the sachem Do-ne-ho-ga-weh arose from his robe of bearskin.

"We have listened to the wisdom of many chiefs," he said. "We have heard the words of Red Crow. They are good words, words of a wise chief. We have heard the words of Ka-dau-ga my brother, who would take the Long-hair to his lodge as a son. Ke-dau-ga is lonely. He would replace the young warrior who died two summers ago in battle with the Algonquins. Ka-dau-ga speaks from the heart, the lonely heart. Red Crow speaks from the wise mind. Red Crow says let the Long-hair die. Those are good words in the ears of Do-ne-ho-ga-weh. Are they good words in the ears of my brothers?"

From the listening chiefs and warriors arose a general grunt of assent. Again a hundred eyes glared at De Lauville. Do-ne-ho-ga-weh extended his withered arm and pointed it at the captives.

"Ka-dau-ga may not take the Long-hair for a son," he said. "The strong man, the old one, he shall serve us in our fields with

the women. Let the young men of the Wolves test the spirit of the Long-hair. He shall die by the fire test, the slow fire. And that the great spirit, Areskoui, may be pleased, the white dog of the strangers shall burn with the Long-hair."

The sachem sank back on his robe. The council was ended.

CHAPTER X

PARADE FOR DEATH

WITH howls of exultation the younger warriors broke from the outer rim of the council circle and tore De Lauville from his place by the wall. In the midst of a hideous clamor the Frenchman was hustled to the side of the fire. The clothing was torn from the upper part of his body and his limbs were bound tightly with withes of bark.

Felix sprang to his feet and rushed to the aid of his master. Alone the old servant would have faced the entire tribe and his great muscles would have made havoc among the redskins, unarmed though he was; but he was tripped from behind and made fast with ropes that even he could not sunder. The savages rolled the old man to the wall and leaned him against it.

A raging, slaving fury, Neige, too, charged into the scuffle. But his powerful jaws and limbs were confined, and he was able to do none of the damage for which his fierce heart hungered. A brave caught the dog by the forepaws and lifted his hobble rope over the end of an upright stake, around which Neige floundered in rage.

Space was cleared hastily before the eastern door of the long-house. A stout ironwood stake same eight feet in length and of the thickness of a man's calf was fetched in by two of the young braves. It had been soaked in water to prepare it for its use. One end had been chipped to a point. While two of the young men steadied it upright, a third stood on a billet of wood and drove the stake into the ground with repeated blows of a heavy stone-headed maul.

In the next adjoining chamber of the long-house a number of the Seneca women began a weird, plaintive chant, beating time with their knuckles on small gourd drums.

When the stake was set solidly in the ground, De Lauville was placed against it, his back to the eastern entrance to the council-house. The braves bound him fast to the stake with ropes of bark. Like the stake, the withes had been soaked in water so that they might not char in the fire that was to be applied.

As the captive stood at the stake with these preparations going on around him, the tall chieftain, Ka-dau-ga, paused before him.

"Ka-dau-ga would have saved the Long-hair," the chief said, "but Ka-dau-ga's *oki* was angry, and it was not to be. Now the Long-hair must die, and Ka-dau-ga's heart is heavy. It is as though he loses a son. May the Long-hair die bravely when the fire burns. Farewell."

Marcel could not understand the words, but the tones told him that a friend spoke. He looked into the red man's eyes and smiled.

Ka-dau-ga's iron features were shaken by a sudden spasm. He lifted a corner of his blanket and covered his face. With head bent, he stalked sadly from the long-house.

Another shorter stake was driven into the earth in front of De Lauville and about a yard from him. It had a stout crosspiece at its top, making it like a letter T. Two of the warriors swung the snarling Neige

across the top bar, belly down, and facing Marcel. They drew the legs of the dog down taut and bound them all four to the upright stake below the bar. The dog strained his great head toward Marcel and whined.

"And you, too, Neige," De Lauville said, and laughed. "*Mordieu*. I am to die in good company; for you, Neige, are brave, and a gentleman after your own fashion. Courage, good Neige."

FROM the chamber where the women chanted three old men approached the council fire. Chiefs and warriors made way for them with every mark of veneration.

They were the medicine men. Shrouded in their blankets, they stood before De Lauville in silence for a few moments. They then set up a slow, high-intoned chant, and turned from the captive to the dog. One produced from beneath his blanket a bunch of bright-colored ribbons of grass. With great solemnity, he tied the ribbons to the dog, one about his neck, one to his tail, one to each leg, and so on until Neige and the stake whereon he hung were gay with festoons.

The second old man did similarly with tufts of dyed feathers. The third set a small basket of tobacco and beads on the floor at the foot of the stake.

Still chanting, the ancients began a slow march in a circle around the two stakes. The singing women, a score of them, came from the other chamber and joined in behind the spirit-keepers. Behind them

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(Adv.)

came the venerable sachem Do-ne-ho-gaweh, and after him the warchiefs and a number of the older warriors, until nearly a hundred had joined in the procession.

Man after man took up the melancholy chant of the priests as he joined in the circling line. High above the fiendish din of the droning chant and the smitten drums arose the maddened howls of the dog, which struggled furiously in its bonds, and foamed at its muzzled jaws.

Three times around the circle of the two stakes the weird procession marched. Then the priests and the women withdrew, and the warriors resumed their seats on their robes. Crouching on the floor, they formed a wide circle about the captives. The younger braves crowded the raised flooring behind them. The council chamber became very still.

One of the ancients returned and cast on the fire several small packets of skin, over which he muttered as they were consumed. An acrid stench mingled with the smoke of the fire.

Four young men, naked except for loin cloths, then raked the fire apart with rakes of brush and distributed its glowing embers in a small circle around the stakes. They fetched more firewood, and fanned and fed the embers to a blaze.

It was the beginning of the end.

Outside the circle Red Crow stood with folded arms and bent his fierce eyes on De Lauville.

"Neither the Corlear nor Onontio can help the Long-hair now," he said. "He shall burn at the Seneca stake. Presently the Wolves of the Great Hill People shall hear him whimper like a woman."

The chant arose again. Above the clamor sounded the voice of Felix, choked with sobs.

"*Monsieur*, oh, *monsieur*! These sons of the devil will burn you. I cannot help you, *monsieur*. I have prayed to the stinking archfiend yonder by you. I have asked him to burn me instead; but he will not, nor will he let me die with you, *monsieur*. Ah, *mon Dieu! mon Dieu!* I can bear to see it no longer, *monsieur*! I turn my face to

the wall. Would to *le bon Dieu* that I might die for you, my master."

De Lauville called back to the old man, whom he could not see:

"Be of good cheer, old friend. It will not be long. I have heard how these red devils die such deaths as this without flinching. A French nobleman must do no worse. But I must talk no more, Felix. If I talk, my spirit will break. Farewell, old comrade; may *le bon Dieu* bless you and make your lot easy. Farewell."

Toward his torturers De Lauville turned a calm and smiling face.

Jeanne! No, he must not think of her. That would overwhelm him. Resolutely he put from his mind every thought but the will to keep that smile unmarred until the end.

THE heat became intolerable. His skin seemed to crackle. His head hummed, drowning the chant of the savages. His eyeballs burned like coals of fire in his head. Across from him he saw the long hair of Neige begin to curl in the fierce heat.

Strangely enough, though his suffering must have been great, the dog had ceased his snarling, and neither howled nor whimpered. His blue eyes were preternaturally bright. He stared straight past De Lauville, his ears cocked forward as though he listened. Perhaps Neige saw the long snow reaches of Greenland where he was reared, and heard his brothers baying under the midnight sun; for Neige was an Eskimo dog.

De Lauville's head was hanging low; but he had not lost his smile. His brain reeled. Suddenly he shook convulsively as two of the youths who tended the fire sluiced his blistering body with cold water thrown from buckets of bark. Both man and dog were drenched with the icy shower. Exquisite at that torture was, De Lauville set his teeth and made no sound. His smile was steadfast—would be until his body died. Neige howled once and then was still.

One respite the drenching gave the captives. The bonds of bark had shrunk in

the heat until they were so tight as to cut into the flesh. The water loosened them. De Lauville was able to move his limbs slightly; and slight as that motion was, it gave him renewed energy. There was a great reserve of strength in him yet. He would die slowly.

The young warriors replenished the fire. With their rakes they decreased the size of the circle. From Neige's white coat floated clouds of steam. Grunts of unwilling admiration arose from the chieftains. This Long-hair whom they burned was at least a man. But that would not save him.

Again the Red Crow croaked from the fiery circle's rim.

"Does my brother feel aught?" he asked. "Speak. Let the Wolves hear what my brother sees with his faraway eyes. The Long-hair is silent. Presently he shall stand before Areskoui and tell the Great Spirit how his Seneca children deal with an enemy."

"A false prophet!" Out of the smoke and the shadows almost at De Lauville's elbow a high-pitched voice wailed. "Presently you shall tell the great spirit how a Frenchman deals with a Seneca dog!"

Over Marcel's shoulder and straight across the blazing circle hissed a ten-foot lash, and its tip of shining steel lost itself in Red Crow's naked breast.

A HOWL of consternation arose in the long-house. The hangings at the doorway were ripped aside. Through the fire sprang the tall figure of the Tom Cat, plying the lash and its stinging death.

Behind leaped and fought Du Maurice and another white man, unknown to De Lauville—a man who wore the full panoply of an Indian war-chief, with eagle feathers waving above his crown. After them a torrent of red warriors poured into the council chamber. Rifle and pistol shots sounded sharp and fast, and bright blades shone in the firelight. The flying lash hummed.

Du Maurice paused at De Lauville's side and cut his bonds.

"At the eleventh hour," he said. "Can *monsieur le comte* fight?"

He held a sword, Marcel's own blade, before him.

"Ah, *can I!*"

De Lauville seized the weapon and staggered to the stake where Neige hung and cut the dog free. Though the hilt of the good blade was like a red-hot iron to his blistered hand, his entire body a raging flame of pain, his strength was still within him. The fire of his fury burned more fiercely than that the savages had lighted to torture him. Man and dog fighting together threw themselves into the press of battle that raged through the chambers of the long-house.

The resistance of the Senecas was short-lived. The surprise had been complete. Before they could rally, a score of their best warriors were down and their village was in flames. The Senecas fled howling into the forests to the east.

The Tom Cat himself cut Felix from his bonds. The old man, his eyes streaming with thankful tears, threw himself upon his knees and kissed the Tom Cat's hand. It was not until later that De Lauville remembered and wondered that his stanch old servant had called the Tom Cat "master."

One of the last pictures of the red council that De Lauville carried in his mind was that of Neige worrying horribly at the throat of the thing that had been Red Crow.

CHAPTER XI

THE ARROW IS SWIFT

SWIFTLY and as silently as it had stolen upon the village, the war party left it. It was no mean feat, that of the three Frenchmen and their red comrades. With less than sixty men—some fifty Eries and a handful of Hurons—they had surprised and routed a village that could send more than a hundred braves on the warpath.

It was only a matter of minutes when the Senecas would rally and move to the attack. Vengeful eyes watched the invaders from the forests as they left the blazing village. When they were midway across the ford of the Genesee, arrows began to sing after them through the gathering dusk.

"We shall have to travel fast and far," Du Maurice said, as he shook the icy water from his leggins at the west bank of the river. "They will hum like a beehive when they find how few we are. I'll wager that before the dawn there will be three hundred Seneca warriors at our heels. But not you, *mon ami*," he muttered, and threw his rifle to his shoulder.

Made incautious by rage, a Seneca brave had come from the cover of the trees on the farther bank of the river. As he bent bow for a long shot, the rifle cracked. The red man staggered and fell into the water.

Straightway a Huron warrior let himself into the torrent below the ford. Unmindful of Du Maurice's sharp command to return, he disappeared in the swirl.

"Ravenging beasts, all of them," the Frenchman said. "Now he'll get that wisp of hair or lose his own."

Du Maurice was correct in his prophecy. Before the war party was well on its way down the western side of the river, Seneca runners were speeding along the trails, east and south, to raise their brethren for the pursuit. Not lightly should the hated Eries boast that they had taken and burned the village of Ga-sko-sa-go.

Long before dawn not only the painted braves of the Great Hill People had crossed the Genesee; but a war party of their next eastern neighbors and allies, the Gwe-ugweh-o-no, or Cayugas, had also taken to the warpath.

Down the trail to the lower falls of the Genesee the war party from the west passed silently. The flare from the flaming longhouse shone fitfully through the trees. At the lower falls the party turned west.

All night they traveled. With the coming of the dawn, almost exhausted, the runners made a brief camp some two miles to the north of a place known to the Iroquois as De-o-wun-dake-no, "Place where boats were burned"—in after years the village of Albion.

Scarcely a half-hour after they went into camp, the Huron warrior To-ne-ga, who had dropped behind at the river ford on a gruesome errand, came in. In response to a

question from Du Maurice, To-ne-ga shook out with a grim smile the lock of black hair that a short time before had been the pride of a Seneca brave. Then he threw himself on the ground and slept.

TORTURE hardly less than that of the fire test was De Lauville's on that march. His skin was scorched and blistered in many places. Every move was agony. He'd been given a Huron blanket to cover his nakedness. The fretting of its coarse fabric wrung from him many a heartfelt curse. His long hair was singed and ragged, his mustache a dismal ruin of its former jauntiness. Part of the way the Hurons carried him in a litter made of blankets.

Neige had come from the torture stake apparently little the worse for his experience within the fire-ring. With the ribbons and feathers of the spirit-keepers still fluttering about him, the dog trotted all night with his nose close at the heels of the Tom Cat. Marcel had as yet had no opportunity to speak with the dog's master, who seemingly had come back from the dead to rescue him.

Worn out as he was through his terrible ordeal and the fatigue of the thirty-mile march, De Lauville could not rest. The agony of his scorched body banished thought of sleep.

He sat at the foot of an elm in the midst of the slumbering camp. Near him Felix lay, turning and moaning in his sleep. A tall figure with a crest of eagle feathers came from among the trees and paused beside De Lauville.

"Ah, *monsieur le comte* suffers," he said in French as he looked into Marcel's drawn face. "Perhaps I can find that which will relieve him."

He hastened away and presently returned with an Indian bag of fawn-skin. He produced bear's grease, which he warmed at the camp fire and applied tenderly to De Lauville's burns. Relief was instant.

Waving aside De Lauville's thanks, the other lighted a long calumet at the fire and sat down under the elm. Something in

the turn of the man's powerful shoulders and in the way he carried his head struck Marcel as strangely familiar. It was still dark under the trees, and he could not see the man's face. While he was wondering, De Lauville's head nodded and he fell asleep.

After three short hours' rest, the party again took to the trail, speeding westward as fast as their tired limbs would carry them.

Marcel and Felix fell into line behind the tall Frenchman. Somewhere in the lead were Du Maurice and the Tom Cat.

Again memory haunted De Lauville as he watched the broad shoulders swinging along in front of him. He walked abreast of the other and looked into his face.

"St. Denis!" he gasped. "'Tis Courneur!"

"Sh-h!" The big man wrung De Lauville's hand. "Courneur is dead, *monsieur*. I am Chauvanne here—Chauvanne of the Eries." He laughed soundlessly, mirthlessly.

De Lauville was in a maze.

"For the love of God, *monsieur*, explain," he said. "First Du Maurice, who is not Du Maurice. Now Chauvanne, who is not Chauvanne. And in France Le Marcou had credit for the slaying of both of you. I am bewildered. Tell me, *monsieur*, if indeed you know, who and what is this Le Marcou?"

Chauvanne, as he strode, looked down at him and shook his head slowly.

"Who he is, I cannot tell, for I do not know. What he is—ah, *monsieur*, though he wears the guise of a fiend, he is an angel." Chauvanne's solemn earnestness was convincing. "Be assured, *monsieur*, that he is not the hired bravo men picture him. A king of cutthroats? Perhaps yes. But himself? No.

"No assassin's stroke has ever fouled Le Marcou's blade; that I swear. I do not know his purposes with you, *monsieur*; but I assure you that no harm shall come to you through Le Marcou. And listen: in this great, new land I can find you a dozen Frenchmen such as Du Maurice and myself,

who shall lay down their lives at his need.

"Why, look you. 'Twas only yesternorn that we did learn from a vagrant Iroquois turncoat of your predicament. At Le Marcou's orders we traveled all of yesterday with what few picked men we could gather, to stand at that Seneca council-fire—in peace if we might, but in war if needs must."

"But what does Le Marcou here?" De Lauville asked. "I understand it not."

"Only Le Marcou knows that," Chauvanne replied. "He came but a day or two back from the seigniory of De Charteris on Lake Nipissing in the lands of the Hurons. He thought that you, *monsieur le comte*, were safe with the Dutch at New Amsterdam, and did purpose to go and fetch you thence right speedily. Now you have all that I know."

LEAVING Chauvanne, Marcel passed on to the head of the file of runners. He held out his hand to the Tom Cat.

"*Monsieur*, our affairs seem strangely tangled," he said. "Now I find that I owe *monsieur* an apology and my life."

It was the first time De Lauville had given the Tom Cat the title of gentleman. The green eyes looked into his inscrutably; but the proffered hand was taken.

"*Monsieur le comte* owes me nothing," the Tom Cat said. "When this present business is well over we will speak again of untangling *monsieur's* affairs."

And so for a little time longer the riddle remained unsolved.

In the early evening, staggering, wide-eyed, and weary, the party entered the walled stockade of Ga-a-no-geh, Chauvanne's Erie village on the heights above the roaring gorge of O-ne-ah-gah. It was manned by perhaps another two score of Chauvanne's Eries. With that meager garrison and their own worn warriors they must meet and stem the red tide that they knew would be upon them within a few hours. They could flee no farther.

Behind them by two roads the warriors of the Great Hill People came on to avenge in fire and blood the insult and outrage at

Ga-sko-sa-go. Swift, moccasined feet from the towns of the upper Genesee valley traversed the southern trail straight to the cataract of O-ne-ah-gah, and on down the gorge to the Erie village.

Chauvanne, good general, sent two scouts into the night, one to pass the river above the falls, the other to cross the shoulder of the lake below the gorge, and bring down from upper Canada the strength of the Hurons.

"If we can hold back these devils for three days," he said, "then we will give them that which shall remain a memory among them for a hundred years."

Another pale dawn came, and with it battle.

When De Lauville, with sleep in his eyes, came from the cabin of Chauvanne, the forests were echoing with the war-cries of the Nun-da-wa-o-no. Already the besiegers outnumbered the defenders of the stockade by more than two to one. War parties were arriving hourly. And behind the Great Hill People their brothers, the Cayugas, were coming.

Unlike the more open villages of the people of the Five Nations, Ga-a-no-geh was compactly built and surrounded on three sides by a high stockade wall of timbers. On the fourth side was the sheer fall of the gorge declivity.

Chauvanne mustered a score of rifles, one small cannon and an inexhaustible supply of courage to keep his house about his ears.

Two haggard days and nights of peril the defenders fought with their backs to the roaring river and grim death stalking among them.

Out of the forests and over the stockade floated the cry:

"The Erie dogs shall die, and the Seneca Wolves shall pick clean their bones."

Every loophole and cranny of the timber wall was searched with arrows. Place of safety there was not within the enclosure, except close under the walls where the defenders fought, and in the cabins where the Erie women cowered and crooned over their whimpering young. It was death to

cross in the open places. Seneca archers in the leafless tree tops sped their keen messengers surely.

Thrice the braves attacked the great east gate in fury, battering it with logs. But Chauvanne had mounted his cannon there on a well-screened platform. He blew a score of painted fighting men to their Great Spirit before they desisted.

Two of the cabins were consumed with fire from blazing arrows. A dozen times the stockade itself was fired. Of the red warriors of Chauvanne, a quarter were numbered with the slain. Du Maurice alone of the five Frenchmen was wounded, and he but slightly, in the hand. Still the Hurons came not.

DE LAUVILLE, still fevered by his burns, insisted on taking his part in the battle. He could at least sight a rifle. Each time he fired he sped his bullet with a prayer it might find one of his torturers.

In mid afternoon of that third day a black Cayuga war arrow hissed through the loophole where the Tom Cat fought at the northern wall with Neige at his side, and cut the knot of the riddle.

Marcel, at the next loophole, heard a groan as the flint-headed shaft bit deep, and saw the Tom Cat stagger and clutch at the wall. As though aware that something was amiss, the white dog howled long and loudly.

De Lauville and Felix reached the Tom Cat together. He pushed away their supporting arm and groped along the timbers until he found holds for his long fingers. He drew himself erect and rigid with his back to the wall and straightened his drooping head. Under his left breast thrust forth the feathered shaft of the black arrow.

"You will have to fight on without me—until the Hurons come," he said, "for Le Marcou is done with all fighting."

Felix fell on his knees and clasped the Tom Cat's legs. Tears ran down the old servant's cheeks like summer rain.

"My master! My master!" he cried brokenly. "Oh, master, do not leave us!"

"Hush, Felix, hush," the Tom Cat said

sternly. He turned his green eyes on De Lauville. "He knows not what he says, *monsieur*."

But Felix would not be denied. He turned his streaming face to Marcel.

"It is true!" he cried; and as the Tom Cat again tried to quiet him: "Nay, my master, I *will* tell it. You shall not die so."

Again the servant turned to De Lauville.

"Oh, *monsieur*, this is your brother who dies here," he said. "He is giving his life for you—"

"What are you saying, Felix!" De Lauville sprang to the Tom Cat and looked into his eyes. But the mists and scars of fifteen hard years had left no lineament that he might recognize of that face now so dim in his memory.

"Le Marcou! You—"

"Well, then, it is true," said the Tom Cat quietly.

"Pierre! My brother!"

Marcel put his arms tenderly around the long body and supported it. The mists of doubt and bewilderment cleared away. The riddle was answered. This was his brother that was dying.

The Tom Cat's hands fell from their hold. His knees faltered. With a mighty effort he held himself erect.

"I *will*—die—on my feet," he said through clenched jaws.

"You shall if you please, brother," De Lauville said, and strengthened his hold.

The Tom Cat smiled in answer. Suddenly the whole manner of the man was changed.

The hard, strange mask that he had worn through the years fell away from him like a discarded glove. Though the effort was agony, he drew a deep breath and squared his lean shoulders. He lifted his strangely scarified face to the wintry sky.

"Le Marcou is dead," he said evenly. The wailing voice was gone also. "And I who am about to die—I am Pierre Jean Marie de Menas, Comte de Lauville. I bear no stain of dishonor on my conscience. I am guilty of no man's murder."

His groping hands touched the hilt of Marcel's rapier.

"Ah, a sword," he said. "I've never worn a sword since—since France dishonored me and I learned the lash. Brother, may I die with a sword at my side? My hands are clean." His glazing eyes sought De Lauville's.

Felix held the dying man while Marcel buckled the swordbelt about him. He rested his hand on the pommel with a lingering touch of pride. His other hand found the lash at his belt and cast it from him.

"Thank you, brother," he whispered. "Forgive me much, my brother Marcel. It was necessary that none should suspect that I aided you." One of the dangling, restless hands fell on the head of Neige and fondled the dog. "Be good to Neige," he said.

Chauvanne bounded along the wall, crying out exultantly. His shout turned to an exclamation of concern.

"Le Marcou! Wounded?"

"It is the end, Chauvanne," the Tom Cat said, and pointed to the black arrow. His voice was very faint now.

Chauvanne swore a great oath and shook his fists toward the forests.

"Too late! Too late!" he raved. "God knows that I would die for you, Le Marcou. And now you die. And look you, the Hurons come! the Hurons and De Charteris. Yonder burn their signals." He pointed to the west across the gorge.

From a clump of pines on the crest of the cliffs opposite a thin column of smoke curled upward, and farther down the river another.

Along the snow-covered trails of the gorge of O-je-ah-ga, across the river and across the lake, the Hurons were coming—five hundred strong and eager for battle.

The Tom Cat turned his head slowly. He stared across the river.

"I cannot see them," he said. "But 'tis well, Marcel."

"Yes, Pierre."

"Go on—" The Tom Cat's voice broke and became a whisper. "Go on—to the seigniorship of De Charteris. Find Sister Louise. Farewell—brother. Felix—faithful servant—farewell."

His head fell on Marcel's shoulder.

Pierre Jean Marie de Menas, Comte de Lauville, fate's plaything, but a gentleman of France, had passed on.

They buried him on the headland above the rushing river, after the battle was over—a battle that the Nun-da-wa-o-no and their allies remembered a hundred years. He sleeps there until this day; and the white-crested torrent hurled from the mighty cataract of O-ne-ah-ga sweeps crashing through the gorge below him, but cannot break his rest.

For many years, until it crumbled, a wooden slab marked that grave. The inscription it bore was cut there by the hand of Marcel de Menas.

"Brave," and "honor," and "true," were among the words he cut in the slab, and he cut them deep.

CHAPTER XII

THE GRAY SEIGNIORY

ON THE eastern shore of Lake Nipissing, some five miles below the city of North Bay, a shallow inlet dents into the land. At no place is it so wide that a man may not cast a pebble across it. It curves slightly to the north and ends in a sharp angle between two massive, low-lying boulders.

Between the stones there seeps into the inlet a tiny run—it is not large enough even to be called a brook—that has its source in a spring distant two hundred feet up the grassy slope that rises gently from the water's edge. The slope itself is free of shrubbery and is covered with fine, upstanding maples of second growth.

If one were to dig today under the maples and close around the spring, one would surely turn to the light the ruins of a fallen wall of stones, still preserving the shape of a rude rectangle. Persistent, one might come upon the charred and moldering fragments of sturdy oaken pillars, each hewn originally from a single trunk. One might, though that is doubtful, find the decayed remnants, also oak, of paneling and joists and doors; and, if they

have not long since passed into the red dust of corrosion, the rusty reminders of iron hasps and hinges.

Could he that disturbed those relics give them tongue, they would tell him that on that spot in the year 1656 Raoul de Charteris, gentleman, builded him a seigniory of gray stone.

That stronghold remained an outpost of French civilization in upper Canada until it was raided and burned by Timmescamin warriors in 1707, in a war that arose out of a dispute between a trader and a chieftain over a single bale of second-grade otter pelts. The spring that wells up from among the ancient ruins and wanders down the slope, more than two hundred and fifty years ago filled the reservoir of De Charteris's mansion.

On the 7th of January, 1659, the forests about De Charteris's seigniory were white with snow. Lake Nipissing lay a gale-swept sheet of pale-blue ice, whereon one might drive with horses. The graystone mansion and its palisaded grounds stood quiet in the white silence. In a small balcony room above the portico and its oaken pillars two women sat and sewed.

One of the two wore the full habit of the Gray Sisters. Under her coif thin, gray hair framed a square, ruddy face, time-worn and patient, to the gentle dignity of which a pair of twinkling black eyes lent a certain shrewdness and humor.

As she plied her needle with deft and busy fingers on a bit of brodering, belike an altar-cloth for Father Jacques, the nun's eyes often strayed to the face of her companion. She also wore a gown of gray; but on the slender fingers of her small hands rich gems flashed, one a splendid emerald. There was a sheen of pearls at her throat. She was no nun.

Though her fingers were deft, this other woman's, they were not passing industrious, and oft did dally at their work, the while their owner looked forth from the casement across the steel-blue lake. And at such times she tapped impatiently the sanded floor with the tip of a small boot, and sighed. It was then that the nun looked, and smiled.

VERY lovely was this young needle-woman with the gemmed fingers. Her small, proud head with a wealth of chestnut curls poised like a flower on its firm, white stem. Her long-lashed eyes were deepest brown. Above them her delicate eyebrows had an odd trick of curving upward at their outer sweep, adding a piquant distinction to a face in which all features charmed. Just above her left eyebrow was a tiny white scar. Her full lips were crimson warm, her skin fresh and pink as a child's.

"Sister Louise," she said, and laid her brooding by, "'tis more than a week, a long week, since the message came from Chauvanne, and the Sieur de Charteris went south with the red warriors. Can all be well with them, think you, and with those others they went to save? And will they come safely back again? And"—her cheeks flushed—"and will they bring *him* with them? Methinks they are long o'erdue."

The girl's voice was clear and sweet, and there was strength in it, too, a hidden fire.

"Fear not, my daughter," the Gray Sister answered. She, too, put by her work and went and stood beside the girl. "The Sieur de Charteris is a gallant gentleman and good soldier. With him he took the warriors of more than twenty villages. Many of them"—the nun spoke with pride—"thanks be to Father Jacques, be good Christians, and do hear the masses devoutly. Surely, my daughter, the good God will be with such as these and will not suffer the pagans to prevail."

"Would that I had your faith, Sister Louise," the girl replied. "But I do dread and fear and cannot rest or sleep from fearing. This terrible waiting, day by day, in uncertainty, will it never ended be? And I am beset with other doubts. Do I do well to leave my father's house and come thus halfway round the world? And why?"

"Forsooth, because a man did look into my eyes and tell me that he loved me, and my heart did answer. Think, sister, I, Jeanne Louison le Tournais, daughter of Grimonde, have done this—left all that I held dear and come among savages in this

white wilderness, for that, and because another man, that grim and gray man they call Le Marcou, did point this the only way to happiness, and playing my father false, did promise me to bring that man to me through all dangers.

"I left the house of my father in the night, like a very thief. While all France was searched and turned awry to find me, I, in the guise of a poor wench, sailed to the new land, giving out that I was coming hither to wed with a wandering *courier du bois*. Say, sister, did I well or ill?"

"And the young man?" the nun questioned gently. "He is noble and of your station?"

"Yes, sister."

"And he is clean and pure of heart?"

"Above many."

"And you do love him well, I know. My daughter, of my poor experience only can I speak; but I cannot say that you have done ill."

"But, sister, what of him? Suppose he has turned cold and cares no more? Oh, I would surely die if that were so. 'Tis many months since last we met. How know I that—" She hesitated, and her brown eyes flashed quick fire.

"That what, my daughter?"

"That he may not have found him a red princess of the wilds to suit his fancy? Ah-h, the shameless!"

Now the merry black eyes of Sister Louise twinkled still more shrewdly, and the good nun was near to laughing outright.

"Nay, my daughter, the young man did love you purely, you tell me, and for you did dare your father's anger. Your thought does him scant justice. Besides—"

"And what besides, sister?"

Sister Louise studied the perfect oval face a moment, and smiled radiantly.

"Young men do not so soon forget such as you. But harken!"

FROM below in the stockade yard arose a clamor of baying dogs and shouting men. Without in the forest echoed other shouts.

They stood in its opening, waving and shouting with great delight; they beat each other on the back and increased their happy clamor.

Jeanne Louison flew to the window, and the Gray Sister, following more slowly, stood at her elbow.

Serving men of de Charteris hastened down to the gate and swung it wide.

The master and his Hurons were returning.

"See! See! The Sieur de Charteris!" In her excitement, the girl clutched the arm of Sister Louise so tightly that the nun winced. "Ah, see! The great, white dog, and now more men, the red warriors! Oh, sister, if he comes, I am sore afraid; and if he comes not, I shall surely die. Ah, there! 'Tis he! 'Tis he! He enters with an old man I do not know. Now praise be to *le bon Dieu!*"

She buried her face in the Gray Sister's bosom and burst into a storm of weeping.

With the tears still streaming, she seized Sister Louise by the shoulders and whirled her about the room like a mad thing.

"Ah, I shall be the first to welcome him!" she cried, and was gone on flying feet down the stairs, patting her disarrayed curls as she ran.

Halfway across the stockade in the snow-path they met. He looked at her as at a miracle. Then, before them all, his arms were around her and her head on his shoulder.

So they stood for long moments, there in the white wilderness, and there was no need for speech between them. They had found what they sought in the New World.

Old Felix Alens looked out across the frozen lake with misty eyes. In the little balcony room Sister Louise, after watching the meeting of the lovers, turned away from the window and fell to fingering the beads of her rosary, one by one.

THE END

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Knee to knee they
battled, Crusader
against Saracen

Crescent and Cross

By THEODORE ROSCOE

I

THE giant machine was ghostly behind the screen of laurels, and the men who worked on the monster beams were stealthy, cat-silent, so many wraiths in the shadows. Moonlight filtering through the foliage, surprised a steely glint on hammer, adz and saw; caught the glisten of sweat-drenched bodies.

The dark was alive with a whispering, a muffled tapping of mallets, the squeak of straining timber and wooden pins. Workmen heaved on a

Neither fire nor scimitar
can stay these valiant
knights who march proudly
under the banner of the
Cross, to seek glory at the
walls of Antioch

sapling mast to moor it in the base of the mammoth frame. A trio of artisans fought to make fast a rope that would spring the machine's throwing-arm. Carpenters and wagners worked to install a wheel on the throwing-arm axle, laboring in clandestine silence.

There must be no slip in the plans. The mangonel was almost done. By dawn this monster gyn, so many painful weeks in the secret manufacture, would be ready

for the rush. Even now the horses that would race it downhill were waiting in the laurel.

There would be a signal. The mangonel would burst from its hiding

place, wheel swiftly into battle. Trained men waited to snap the ingenious levers, aim the battery. Soldiers would plant heavy rocks on the throwing-arm. The mast would leap in the frame, spring with a crash, send rock after rock to smash enemy walls.

A sense of high excitement pervaded the glade. The building engineers were tense as artists putting the final touches to the masterpiece. Beyond the laurel the pikemen mounting guard watched the slope below with an added caution. Guard meeting guard would give hushed salutation, low-voiced salute.

"Is that you, Robert Big-nose? All's well?" . . . "Aye. Tell me, Fleming. The gyn? It is almost finished?" . . . "By dawn, they say. The Turks, Heaven curse them, will get a fine surprise. Our captain tells us to keep extra watch tonight. Nothing must go wrong this time." . . . "The secret has been well kept, Fleming. Even the troops do not know what has gone on up here. I— Look sharp there, Fleming! Was something moving down there among those thrice-cursed olive trees?"

But the guards were nervous, and they saw it was only the wind making shadows to shift. The valley below the laurel grove was quiet as sleep. Far down the wood-spotted slope the Orontes River was a silent silver belt unwinding through patches of moonlit marsh and meadow. At sunrise the mangonel in the laurels would dash down the slope to the river bank; hurl its missiles thundering at the wall across the stream—at Antioch.

Antioch. There lay the Turkish stronghold, a gray stone beast sprawled slumbering in the confidence of power, impregnable for hundreds of years on the southern bank of the river. Massive, thirty-foot walls behind deep moats. Square watchtowers rearing up sixty feet at intervals in the battlements manned by alert Moslem archers. And a frowning, forbidding shadow behind the wall-encompassed city, the citadel where Yagi Siyan and his Saracen generals laughed defiance at the gesture of a Christian army.

Antioch—the key of Syria and the stumbling block to stop the Crusaders trying to gain the Holy Land. Antioch must be smashed, and the way to smash Antioch was to smash the gates in the wall.

The Bridge Gate lay in that reach of wall that frowned along the river, and the soldiers of the Cross had stormed it to their sorrow. All winter and spring they had reddened the river with their attempts; now they waited in their tents on the north side of the valley, holding siege.

The armies of Bohemund and Adhemar, Tancred and Stephen, St. Giles and Robert and Godfrey of Bouillon. Frenchmen, Normans, and Flemings, Germans and Provençals; soldiers from far corners of Europe came to save the Holy Land for Christendom. Men of iron and steel led by the sterling of Western knight-hood. Antioch, stronghold of Islam, defiantly blocked the path.

But the pikemen guarding the laurel grove were whispering, and a mighty engine of war would soon be ready to strike a crushing blow from behind its veil of trees.

"Look now, Fleming, the gyn will smash that gate to dust!" . . . "Aye, Big-nose, the Moslem curs will find out to their sorrow. A marvelous engine it is. A great engineer, this Raymond of Lombardy who designed it. Only Bohemund and the Lombard and those three others of the engineer corps know how to launch the machine. They have guarded well the secret."

"The Bridge Gate will be stormed and fall to pieces, eh? Those dogs of Turks—God's wounds! Fleming! I swear something moves among those olive trees!"

SOMETHING had moved among those olive trees. The quiet was broken by a soft *ping*, and a silvery shaft came streaking through the moonlight. The guard named Big-nose took four steps forward and three steps back and sat on the ground with an arrow in his throat.

The Flemish guardsman opened his mouth to yell and a metal lightning bolt

shot from the shadow and smashed through his upper teeth to stifle the sound. Simultaneously a second dart whirled into his chest, an arrow spun into his stomach and three shadows detached themselves from a nearby bush and raced for the laurels.

At once the slope was alive with men. Moonlight gleamed on the swarthy beady-eyed faces; caught the shimmer of sabres and scimitars and five-foot bows. A glitter of chain mail hauberks. A quick, live tattoo of hoofs. A knot of horsemen plunging from the dark beneath the olive trees to join the men on foot.

The mounted men wore coats of uniform mail, all save their leader. Low in saddle, his henna-dyed beard blowing like a flame on his face, a spotted mantle of fur streaming a weird splash of black-and-yellow color in the night, this leader was the very spirit of Mahound, savage and barbaric, as he led his men through the dark.

Fleet, swift as a wind-breath, horsemen and soldiers swept into the grove of laurels. The quiet fell to shards with a blasting howl. Shadows blew to pieces in a wild kaleidoscope of movement, color and noise. Arrows sang, blades struck and clashed, men screamed.

"The Moslems!" . . . "Blood of heaven, we are betrayed!" . . . "Men of Normandy! Provençals! To arms! To arms!"

A shrill battle-cry wailed through the dark. "Yah! Yah! Yah Allah!" And then a chorus of mortal terror. "We are betrayed! It is the Leopard! The Leopard!"

The shriek echoed down the slopes and through the trees and caromed off down the valley. Lights sparked in the dark encampments. Men shouted. Boots and hoofs came pounding. "The Leopard! To arms! Men of the Cross, to arms! The Leopard! Up there in the laurels—"

The laurels might have been struck by a whirlwind. Dust and noise roared up to the sky. Then something else went up to the sky. A flicker of scarlet whipped high in the dark, danced, grew, hung wavering in the night. Wind caught the blaze and

flung it towering. Men fled shrieking with scorched cheeks; and a wild horseman with a black-and-yellow cloak flapping from his shoulders and a blazing torch in his fist crashed yelling and away through the brush.

Smoke and red light flooded the glade. A French guard with a lance in his hand sprang into the horseman's path. The torch went sailing, and a monstrous, shining scimitar swept high in the rider's freed hand. The lance missed. The scimitar flashed down. The French guard fell headless to the ground.

When the three knights thundered into the laurel grove, their horses lathering, swords slashing into the brush, they found their soldiers butchered and the enemy gone. So was the mangonel. The mighty engine was a tottering skeleton of flame that collapsed in a fountain of fire, shot a blazing geyser at the stars and shed for an instant a furnace-hot glow all the way across the valley to paint with crimson light the distant walls of Antioch.

RAYMOND of Lombardy struck the table with a crashing mailed fist, and the copper flagons jumped. "And I say again that Denis of England is a coward!"

The big Lombard's dark eyes were bitter. The voice from his ragged, iron beard filled the tent with a sullen thunder. "A coward I say, by God's wounds! Where has he been each time Arsland the Leopard attacks us? When this mightiest Turk of them all comes to raid us and shatter our schemes, where is Denis the Briton? Never has he been on the field when the Moslem Leopard's standard appeared!" With an angry gesture Raymond spat through his sword-scarred lips. "I say Denis of England is afraid of the Leopard. I say Denis of England is a coward!"

"Raymond, I say you are wrong!" The white-haired knight at table's end looked up from the clutter of jars and mortars and vials, tossed aside his alchemist's spoon, and addressed the giant Lombard sharply. This was Baldwin of Flanders,

blue-eyed, wrinkled, bearded with snow, old in the craft of war and men, with a heart divided three ways between alchemy, fighting and religion.

"I say you are wrong to call Denis craven. What has come over you, Raymond? No truer knight than Denis rides in all our army. No finer soldier has pledged his soul to the service of the Cross. At Doryleum, at Nicea, at Rodosto he was always first to charge the Turk, his longsword never failing. Have you forgotten how, only last month, Denis slew Madud the Seljuk?"

"Is it right to talk thus of one who has marched at our side these two desperate years, sharing our tent and food, our privation and battle and prayer, sword for sword with us and never a cavil at the hardship—our sworn comrade? Denis of England is never a coward!"

"With your nose in those smell-pots you do not see!" Raymond of Lombardy growled. "It is only of late—" But his words were interrupted by a rataplan of hoofs without. The tent door swished open, and a lean, tight-nerved figure, immaculately accoutered in polished chain-mail, leapt for the table, snatched a wine tankard, drank gurgling mouthfuls, and blurted:

"Comrades! The devil to pay. Bohemund and our generals are wild! Counting on this mangonel of ours to smash the Bridge Gate this morning, they had planned elaborate assault. Godfrey's Rhinelanders were to charge the bridge, the army was to assault the wall westward, and John of Toul was dispatched early last night with a flying corps of axmen to surprise the east wall at first signal of conflict.

"John cannot be located, the assaults are canceled, the council rages with fury. With the mangonel ruined the plans are hopeless. A thousand curses—" The speaker stopped short; glared at the two before him. "God's burden! You, Raymond. Baldwin. You are—by my faith! I think you have been quarreling."

Baldwin shook his head. "Raymond is

bitter. He has let last night's defeat curdle his soul. The morning finds him ugly with disappointment, and he vents his anger on our comrade, Denis, calling him coward."

"Look then," the Lombard demanded. "Is not Denis acting strangely these days? Pale, uneasy, silent with us. Never at our side to battle the Leopard devil. Always wandering off by himself, too, and seldom sharing our camp fire as he used to. Only since we have stood before Antioch with the Leopard to threaten our lines has Denis acted thus. I say he seeks excuse for safety when the Moslem fiends attack. What think you, Longlegs? Am I right?"

HUGH, Count of Poitiers, lounged on a bed of blankets, and carefully crossed the legs that had won him his nickname. With an indolent gesture he removed the conical French helmet with its furbished helm, shook free his auburn curls, tossed aside his gauntlets. Smooth-shaved, wire-lean, with cynical pale eyes and ironic mouth was Hugh of Poitiers.

"What say you, Longlegs?" the hulking Raymond insisted doggedly. "Do you not think our Denis acts cowardly of late?"

"But so it might seem," the Frenchman admitted, a respectful eye on Baldwin. "I know you love him, my old one. So do Raymond and I. But on thought one realizes that Denis has never been on hand when the Leopard struck."

"Always behind the lines or off with dispatches," the Lombard denounced. "I only realized this when the demon Leopard wrecked my mangonel last night and Denis was not with us to the charge. Dispatches, pah! More likely visiting the tents of Count Edmund's hospital, safe behind Lance Hill. It is the talk of every camp how Denis spurs over to the hospital encampment—"

Baldwin of Flanders growled. "Now I perceive! Raymond is jealous. Perhaps it is that Denis of England is winning the heart of Edmund's daughter, the lovely

Josselin, who has such eyes of blue and hair of gold and bravely follows her father's mission into this devil's land. You slander Denis, Raymond, because the lady is favoring his hand—"

"Untrue!" the giant shouted, his massive face stained red. "You know I could take the lady, her or any other, for my own if so I wished. A warrior, I, too busy scheming to slay the foul Turk for time with love. I only say Denis is craven because—"

"In truth he has acted queerly these past days," Hugh put in. "Since we have laid siege on Antioch."

Standing to his feet, Baldwin of Flanders pushed aside his chemist's jars with a growl. "Were Denis to hear you, his sworn comrades, thus doubting him," the old knight protested grimly, "there would be trouble for us all."

"But I did hear them!"

The door of the tent whipped open; and Denis of England stood white-lipped on the threshold.

II

EARLY sunshine tipped with pale fire the point of the belted longsword, shone bronze on mailed shoulders and breastplate. Tall, chin high, strong shoulders squared, he stood there framed against the new day; bareheaded, his hay-colored, short-sheared hair a-toss across his white forehead.

One could have found humor in the line of the mouth and puckered blue eyes, but it was not there now. Now the mouth was bloodless beneath a mask of grime, and the eyes, worn with fatigue, flashed savage topaz to match the glint of the sword at his side.

"I heard you." The bitter mouth broke a silence cut from stone. The eyes flung their gleam at the Frenchman on the blankets, at the white-maned Baldwin tense-posed at table's end; finally rested on the sullen countenance of Raymond the Lombard. "So, my Raymond. You think me a coward, do you?"

"Afraid," the Lombard snarled, his eye on the other's sword-hand. "I said you were afraid. Of Arslan the Leopard—"

"And you!" The metal eyes burned on Hugh of Poitiers. "Speak, Longlegs. By the bones of Holy St. Giles! You believe me craven, too?"

The Frenchman shifted uneasily. "Only—but I do not like to say this, Denis. We four have stood together like brothers with a common heart. Yet what has come over you these past weeks, Denis? Holding off by yourself as if keeping something from us. No longer joining us at campfire or communion. Aye. It is true the mighty Bohemund calls you often to the service of the council. But—my faith! Denis, with every soldier of the Cross burning to smite the Moslem champion, you are off on other affairs. And last night when he scoured our engineers' camp, and we strove to trap him, you were not even to the fray—"

"But most likely holding rendezvous in that monkish hospital camp safe quartered behind Lance Hill," Raymond dourly accused, "while your comrades did battle with the Moslem scourge. It would appear you no longer are an engineer. I would think the station of a knight was hard by the ground of conflict, and it is become common talk among the troops how Denis the Briton goes often to the hospital camp.

"Twice I, myself, have seen you of late, lounging in the shade of that dead oak which marks the highway-turn to Lance Hill. It is so. Lounging under that tree by the road-fork where that old Armenian peasant tills a field; and he far busier than you. More seemly, I would think, if you spent less effort in visiting the flawless Josselin—"

With a crackling oath the tall warrior leapt from the doorway; hand speeding to the hilt of his sword. The quickened fury of his eyes brought Hugh starting up from his blankets, Baldwin springing around from the table amidst a clatter of bottles, and Raymond snatching fast for his blade.

"By my holy rood!" Denis's voice was a snapping whip. "I go for duty to the council on errands which are no choice of mine. And first you name me coward! And then you bring the fair name of Count Edmund's daughter into your jealous slander—"

"Comrades!" Baldwin cried, shrill with dismay. "We four have always been together. There must be no quarrel between us. Hold, Denis. Friend. We do trust you—"

"But only you," the Briton panted. "And if these other two were not my sworn friends I would lay my steel on their faithless hides, and—"

A BRASSY scream rang through the tent to stifle the chorus of angry words. A quivering, tenor trumpet blast that pealed through the tent door, stayed Denis's upraised fist, stopped the waving, knotted hands of Hugh and Baldwin and the Lombard. At the second blast each knight made a rush for the open; bounded out to a day that had waked to the signals of alarm.

Down the slope where the tents of Godfrey's Rhinelanders squatted in shabby alignment men were shouting for the mounts, squires and archers were running. A squad of mailed knights had started down the valley, trailing dust plumes through the olive groves. Among the trees a supply train had stopped, the waggoners craning their necks and pointing in the direction of the river.

Beyond the track where the carts had halted stood the peaked pavilion of Bohemund the Mighty, the council tent of the Christian generals. Orderlies were racing from the pavilion door; and a standard bearer, hoisting the blue gonfalon of Godfrey's cavalry, bounded past the council guard, screaming the Rhineland battle-cry.

"Look!" Raymond of Lombardy flung up a fist. "See there! A dust cloud below the Antioch wall. Not the bridge. Farther east. By those cursed marshes where the river bends—"

"Horsemen!" Denis of England glared under a shading hand. "The Turks by my faith! They sally from that postern hard by the tower. Those green Moslem banners. Under their wall!"

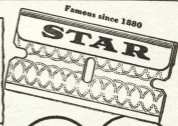
"God's wounds!" Baldwin gasped. "I see the red pennant of John of Toul. It is John of Toul in that marsh, and the Moslems have ambushed him! See! See! He is surrounded by the charging sons of Mahound—"

It was a morning of azure, fresh green and gold, and the crystal air of the uplands afforded a clear vision for miles. Down the valley the river was a winding, heliotrope ribbon under the scowling Antioch battlements. Running close under the crenellated stone escarpments where a beetling tower marked the stronghold's eastern corner, the river spilled blue through a shallow green marshland.

Where marsh birds should have wheeled in the dawnshine, sabres flashed and ban-



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ners flagged among the reeds. Sunbeams twinkled on helmets and hauberks and chain-coats. A faint jingle of metal striking metal echoed across the valley.

Tiny cries trebled shrill above the clangor of arms; and the soldiers in the camp of the Cross could see outstanding in the miniature melee a lonely red banner ringed by banners of green. Soldiers were like swarming bright ants pouring from the postern near the tower. The red banner had become engulfed.

"It is John of Toul—his corps of axmen!" Baldwin of Flanders shouted hoarse oaths. "Watch! The Turks! They have cut off his retreat—"

"John of Toul. A handful against a thousand!" Denis was ghostly pale, pointing a shaking hand. "They will smash John to dust. We—"

"Quick!" It was Hugh of Poitiers. "Must we stand here like clodfooted serfs entranced by gleemen? To horse, I say. It is only five leagues by the back road. We can beat Godfrey's cavalry, by heaven! The clumsy dogs are taking the longest route. But fast. To the rescue of John!"

"Never can we get there in time!" Denis shouted. "The marsh—"

BUT Hugh was screaming for mounts. Squires came scampering. Meantime every tent on the slope was spilling squads of soldiery, the guard trumpets continued to shrill, and the whole valley echoed with sound as half the Christian army started on foot to gain the river.

For a moment Denis hesitated; then sprung to join the others. Sure-footed and lithe as an animal, he swung into saddle with the ease of one born to ride wild steeds down wind-swept moors; and only a warrior who had spent half his life on horseback could have ridden so, with a barbaric, effortless grace that made of rider and mount a fleet and rhythmic wind.

The engineers' camp disappeared in a gust of dust. Hugh took the lead; skirted the laurels where a hill of black ashes

smoked, and smashed into underbrush unmarked by a road. "We gain the road farther east," the Frenchman shouted, "and avoid the marsh by a league. God give us time—"

Longswords drawn and blazing like streaks of silver fire, the four raced neck and neck. Through rank bracken and across a swampy field. Past a crumbled ruin and through a grove of old pines. Topping a stony ridge, they lost sight of the camp of the Cross, and clattered down a narrow, barren canyon. A mile to southward a dust cloud smoked in the wake of Godfrey's cavalry riding an easier road by the river. But the Rhinelanders would soon encounter a swampy morass and be slowed in green mire.

The walls of Antioch appeared—a nearing black shadow; and the clamor of conflict beneath that shadow loudened. Spurring furiously, the four knights crashed through a tangle of briar at canyon's end and plunged out on a brown pike that curved down the valley to the marsh.

With a Saxon battle-yell Denis swept into the lead; pounded down the roadway in a brown haze. Now he could clearly distinguish the bowmen on the high stone cliffs reared across the marsh, the lancers pouring from the opened postern, the fighting men in shining, screaming tangle beneath the corner tower. He could plainly see the tattered red pennon marooned in a whirl of green flags.

Standing stiff in his stirrups, the Briton pointed out the red banner with his sword, screamed back at the men behind him. "Too late! By God's wounds, we cannot save him—"

"Press on!" the others screamed. But there was a half mile yet to go, and a marsh to ford. Denis groaned to himself and put spurs to his striving horse, his eye on that fundered dot of crimson beneath the gray sweep of stone wall. Wind dashed cold sweat-beads from his face. Too late. No chance with that marsh. But to stay behind at this race would be a fatal admission. "Press on!" Hugh's screams pierced the din of flying hoofs. "Press on!"

DENIS of England held the lead, riding low in saddle, taut-nerved, yellow hair streaming, teeth clenched. The road turned sharply; gained a bend where the highway forked two ways at the foot of a giant oak that jabbed dead black arms at the sky.

The valley here swept down to the river, a long, grassy hillside. And by the side of the road near the lone dead oak stood a withered plowman, his bony horse and share deserted in the field. Eyes shaded by a twig-like hand, he was like something in dead wood, too, watching the conflict at valley-bottom.

Seeing the knights riding down on him, he turned with a cheer. "Warriors of the Cross! But fast! The Leopard is there! The Moslem!"

The squeaky wail pierced shrill above the racket of hoofs, and Denis of England heard. A strange cry flew from the Briton, and he made a quick twist in the saddle. At the move his horse swerved suddenly, reared kicking in a frantic curvet that almost hurled the Briton clear. Coming fast on his heels, it was all Baldwin could do to keep from crashing into Denis. Raymond's mount stopped short on its haunches; and Hugh of Poitiers gave a wild, sideways leap, avoiding collision by a hair's breadth.

It was only a second's delay; and once more the four were charging down the hill road, eyes on the tower that stood black against the sun and the high, sharp-cornered wall from which bowmen sent a rain of arrows at the marsh.

Backed against the wall, the red pennant that was John of Toul's wavered desperately in a broil of spikes and green spears. Just as Denis reached the rim of the reeds he saw the red pennon go down. Hugh was bawling for more speed, but the horses were floundering in the dark mud; and Raymond of Lombardy shrieked: "John is gone now! See! The Leopard! John and the Leopard—"

John of Toul and the Leopard of Islam! Face to face they stood the narrow mud-bank under the tower. John of Toul—

a bleeding, knife-torn figure; back pressed against the shadowy wall, red pennon caught under one arm, an arrow jutting from the chain-mesh on his chest, his right arm struggling to slash and whip the longsword that seemed so heavy to his hand.

And dancing in and out with fiendish agility around the trapped Christian, the massive warrior with a glittering hauberk and lush henna beard, the leopard-skin mantle that floated on his shoulder like grisly butterfly wings. The mighty scimitar flickered, stabbed, cut and jabbed till it was steel no more, but a livid streak of red light. The Moslem lancers were standing at distance, a cheering audience; and the knights across the marsh could see.

They saw the scimitar flash and the longsword parry; the scimitar whip upward, and the blundering blade of the Christian go flying through the air. Like a bolt of lightning the scimitar smote down; cut the brave red banner from its staff and slashed deep into the head of John of Toul.

A trumpeting cheer rose from the Antioch wall. The Leopard hurled the red, dripping sickle high above his head and caught it with a triumphant scream. Godfrey's cavalry charged up from the west to join the four, stunned in saddle, on the northern marsh-bank; and the Moslem lancers fled, jeering, through their waiting postern.

John of Toul and his axmen were left behind; but Arsland the Leopard waited, too. An instant he stood there with the dead about him; held high in one fist the scarlet scimitar, in the other a little leathern bag. A moment he posed in silence; then a guffaw burst from his henna beard and rattled across the marsh. Arsland the Leopard laughed and flung out a hand and sent a little leather bag whirling over the reeds to drop among the warriors of the Cross.

Then he bounded for the postern; the gate crashed behind the spotted robe; and the bowmen in the tower dropped

a rain of arrows to warn the Christians away.

III

RAYMOND THE LOMBARD snatched wine. Hugh polished his sword. Denis kicked his wet saddle into a corner and slumped down, hands to his face. It was old Baldwin, seated at his inevitable table with his colored jars, who finally broke the bitter silence.

"Now by the crown, here was a foul morning's game to have to see." The old Fleming's hands quivered among the jars. "Would God I could find some alchemy here, some devil's concoction to poison that Antoch away. Poor John. Trapped. Ambushed. Cut down."

Denis lifted a white face from his hands, and his voice was tortured. "War! That is all right. But this Leopard is a torturer. I knew John could not be rescued. The Leopard must have caught him long before dawn, but forced him to the river bank and slew him slowly so that we of the Cross could see."

"Most horrible," the French knight snarled. "That thrice-cursed brother of Mahound! He smashes our mangonel in the night, finding it out by demon's divining; then tracks John's axmen sent by Bohemund to flank the wall from the east. Hearing no signal for battle, John must have guessed the plans were fouled, and tried to regain our camp. But the Leopard had surrounded him.

"Holy Mother! I would sell my soul to know how this fiend of Islam uncovers our every plan, strikes to the very center of our camp to wreck our gyns, knows that John has crossed the river when John led his men many leagues upstream and crossed under cover of night. Does Satan reveal our council's schemes? I would sell—"

"And I," blurted Raymond, "would sell my soul to meet this Leopard in honest battle, sword for sword. You hear him taunt us with a laugh? What of that thing he threw at us? You recall? Some object sailed from his hand—"

"The Rhinelanders picked it up." Denis nodded, his eyes narrowing. "Some heathen charm, no doubt, with which the Godless champion hoped to work us an ill."

"But look!" Baldwin demanded suddenly, holding up a jar. "I have just discovered something to work them ill. Denis! Ho, lad, see this!" The Fleming's eyes were like furbished stones as he sprung to his feet. "By heaven, I just now fathomed the secret. You know how I sought the secret of that strange fire the soldiers of Byzantium were throwing at us through iron tubes when we stormed their outpost last year? How we labored to discover the ingredients of that blaze which came not from wood? But just now I brushed by accident a sulphur into this jar of naphtha and resin and—"

"You have it!" Denis was on his feet, face twisting with excitement. Now the blue eyes were bright, and he flung a shaking hand to Baldwin's shoulder. "You have found it, then! How we hunted the secret! Greek fire! Hugh! Raymond! Naphtha, resin, sulphur—why, it is just the mixture I recall overhearing that Byzantine monk— But, by the rood! now I can—"

"What?" Baldwin shouted. But the words had gone on Denis's tongue, and he stood in sudden silence, shaking his head. "I was thinking," he whispered, "that some day Raymond might build us a fire gyn of some manner. I—look you, Raymond—"

"It's nonsense." Sullenly the Lombard shook his heavy beard. "Playing with witchcraft will bring us harm. I say the sword alone can conquer this Arsland and his Antioch. This monster who works us evil throwing at us his charms wrapped in leather bags."

THERE came a sudden interruption. "But a message it was!" The voice that spoke from the tent door was followed by the face of a Flemish pikeman, cheeks swollen with quicken breath, peering through the flap.

"A message from the Turks, my mas-

ters. The barons of the seigneur, Godfrey, carried it to our camp, saying it was for one of you. It is written, my lords, in French—"

"Then mine it is!" Hugh of Poitiers snatched at the leathern pouch. Baldwin swore and threw a cape over his mysterious jars. Raymond pushed the messenger from the tent, Denis shot a quick glance at his comrades, then bent to watch Hugh pour a little handful of colored stones from the sack, and draw to light a crumpled sheaf of parchment.

"Read it!" Raymond was dancing with excitement. "Be quick!"

"Would to heaven it were mine," Hugh panted, "but to me never falls such good fortune. By my blood, comrades, this challenge comes from Arsland!"

"Challenge! Arsland the Leopard!" The others yelled with one voice. "Read it, in heaven's own name!"

"Listen, then." Low-voiced, the French knight began to read. "With the aid of Allah and in the reign of our sovereign Yagi Siyyan, asylum of the world, greatest and most powerful of monarchs. I, Arsland the Leopard, emulator of Mohammed and sword of death to Unbelievers, extend this challenge.

"Will the Infidel who slew my most honorable cousin and defender of the True Faith, Madud the Seljuk, in battle a quarter moon past, dare give me the honor of meeting in fair contest, his sword alone against mine? My standard will be raised on the Infidel's own ground, the north bank of the river in open field by that road which leads to the marsh, tomorrow at rise of sun. Let that Infidel come if he dare; he who slew Madud the Seljuk."

"A challenge to single combat!" Eyes twinkling with delight, Baldwin caught at the Briton's arm; clapped at his shoulder with a cry.

"By Holy Saint Leo, Denis, this challenge is yours. You who slew Madud the Seljuk! Yours, and what fortune! By God's rood, you can meet the champion of Islam!

"To Denis!" he cheered, lifting a flagon to the roof. "Our comrade and sworn friend. He will bring honor to our tent. He—" But the Fleming's exultant voice faded in his white beard; for a strange expression had come into the face of Denis of England.

Standing there, the tall warrior seemed to shrink. Pallor crept slowly to his temples, washing his cheeks with wet snow. His eyes, on the parchment in Hugh's hand, were suddenly dark as deep wells, and his colorless lips seemed struggling for speech that did not want to come.

With a cry the old Fleming shook at the Briton's sleeve. "What is ill? You will honor this challenge from Islam and drive your sword to the heart of this devil? You will go to the field? You will meet Arsland the Leopard at rise of tomorrow's sun—"

Cords stood down the Briton's jaw. Slowly he lifted a weighted hand to remove the Fleming's finger from his arm. Slowly he struck his head. Fighting hard to speak, the bloodless lips could only murmur: "No, Baldwin. No, comrades. I—I am given leave by Bohemund, and go to Lance Hill tonight. I—I will not return in time. I cannot meet Arsland the Leopard at tomorrow dawn."

Baldwin's voice was low. "Then Raymond was right; and Hugh was right. And I, my fine Briton, was wrong. You are craven, Dennis, and afraid. You, Denis of England, are a coward!"

The words left on the Briton's cheek a crimson, smoldering flush. Turning on heel, Denis of England strode swiftly from the tent.

SWINGING from the saddle with an ease of motion that scarcely jinked the links of his chain-coat, Denis hurried to the pavilion of Bohemund the Mighty.

"Let by!" he demanded bluntly of the guardsman. "It is Denis of England who wishes to see the great seigneur."

"Your pardon, my master." The sentry lowered his pike. "But Lord Bohemund is not here—"

"Not here!" Denis barked, making a fist of his gantlet. "You say Bohemund has left camp?"

The sentry gaped at him.

Denis crashed a mailed fist against the man's breastplate. "Speak, you ape! Is he gone? Answer me!"

"But shortly after noon." The guard nodded. "With orders to say he would not return until midnight. He had ridden to the camp of Lord Stephen, sire, taking his bodyguard with him—"

"Not return until midnight!" With a harassed gesture, Denis turned back to his champing mount. "Blood!" he whispered through his teeth, swinging to horse. "And to the camp of Stephen. A long ride. Too long. And Bohemund alone holds the key to this cursed affair of mine—"

A weight seemed to sag the Briton's shoulders, and with heavy hand on bridle he spurred away. The sentry had not heard his words, but had marked the expression on his face. "A look of strange sadness," he told the captain of the guard later. "That knight of the engineers' tent. The young Briton who rides like a warrior. By my faith, he looked like one struck from behind when I told him Lord Bohemund's order—" "Aye," the captain returned, "that one is called Denis. You have not heard the story, then? It is said he was challenged by the Leopard of Islam, and—"

Fortunate for the guardsmen that Denis of England had not returned to hear their words. Riding through woods filled with dusk, the Briton's face was like something savage in iron. At one point in the trail he turned with a sudden oath, yanked free his blade and started back for the camp. Then the sudden flush was gone from his face, and he wore a bleak smile.

"Heaven's crown and St. Giles," he whispered to his mount, "this temper of mine will be my ruin one day. But I am trapped, comrade, trapped. And Bohemund departed, to trap me the more. God give me time and courage enough to do what I have yet to do!"

IV

TWILIGHT made a cool liquor that flowed down the valley, gentling hard outlines with mauve and shedding long shadows down the slope to dim the somber battlements of Antioch across the sunset-lacquered river. High in the watch-towers the Moslem guards were lighting their resin flares, and deep in the walled city's heart pious muezzins were chanting the evening call to prayer.

"*Haya Allah Salat . . . Haya Allah Falaah . . .*"

The somnolent singsong drone echoed softly across the dusk, and the plowman on the hill stopped his horse to stand listening; then trudged on behind the crude share, leaving a long black furrow in his wake. He steered an oblique, tired path across the slope, marking his course by the dead oak tree that reared in dismal silhouette against a sky of rose and that marked the fork of the road that divided for a northward turn to Lance Hill and a southward curve toward the river.

Twilight shafting through the leafless branches of the tree found a shimmer of steel beneath; and the plodding plowman was surprised to see a warrior standing there in the shadow, hands folded on the hilt of his longsword, yellow head bowed with chin on breast like one in deep prayer. Halting his share by the road, the peasant called greeting; and the soldier looked up with a start.

"You toil late, my old one. Sunrise to dark I see you tilling that field of yours."

"Aye, master," the peasant whined. "A fruitless ground, torn by many wars. Were it not for your barons of the Cross encamped at valley's end I should have starved. We of the valley have suffered much at the hands of the Turk." The old man shook a knotty fist at the tower across the river and cackled with querulous vehemence. "A curse on them, sire, and may you of the Cross smite them soon."

"Tell me." The knight's blue eyes searched the old man's withered face.

"Are you not the Armenian who brings produce to Bohemund's camp at the end of the valley?"

"And sell it as cheap as I may," the old one nodded, "earning only enough to keep my humble body alive. God help your armies to take Antioch, sire, for if the Turks drive you away they will slay every Christian farmer in Syria."

Mumbling and dejected, the old man started his horse. They were ghosts in the blue dusk, blundering over the hilltop in their mutual struggle with the plow. Denis of England sighed back against the tree, watched them go.

From the crudely furrowed field the Briton's eye wandered to the frowning stone walls of Antioch a half mile distant across the valley. But the dusk was fragrant with the smell of fresh-turned earth, a smell of springtime. He glared at the plowed hillside, black-striped by the clumsy Armenian share. The wind brought a scent of wet grass. There were fields in England like that.

Angrily the Briton shook his shoulders; gripped his sword-hilt. "I am a soft-hearted serf!" he cursed himself under his breath. "If only the dark would come. And then I will show Raymond and Baldwin and Hugh, those poor deluded fools—"

Memory brought a flush to his face, as he thought of the engineers' tent in the camp beyond the hill. His fingers tensed on his sword. A dangerous incident, that quarrel in the tent. At a time when

the smallest slip would prove fatal he had almost overplayed his hand. He must keep the grip of an iron vise on himself, and—What was that sound?

"HOOFBEATS!" His own voice startled his ear, and Denis of England drew back in the shadow of the tree, stiff-muscled, his eye on a cloud of dust that had puffed up on the ridge where the road to Lance Hill wound.

The dust cloud traveled down the brown pike, coming toward him. Sharp-eyed, Denis made out a group of fast-riding horsemen, lancers, clad in buff jerkins, and in their midst a rider in a flowing, white cloak. A startled exclamation escaped the English knight. Belting his longsword, he stepped out from under the tree to take a stand in the middle of the highway.

In a swirl of dust the horsemen drew rein; there was a sharp cry; the mounted men pulled to the side of the road to let the rider in the white cloak advance. As she spurred to the fore, the twilight found a gleam of gold in her tumbled hair; caught the glitter of the jewel at her throat.

Denis flashed his longsword in salute; then darted to catch the reins of her mount with a cry. "Josselin!"

"And you." In the twilight her cheeks were very white as she sat her saddle like a carving, tossed the gold hair back from her forehead with a delicate hand and looked down. "Denis, we must talk—"

"I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

You too may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 7, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 7, Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.

He nodded, and led the roan horse into the shadows of the ancient oak. "But, Josselin! What are you doing here? So far from your father's camp."

"Denis." Her voice was low, brook-clear. "I came to see you."

"To see me!"

"That is so." Nervously she caught her cloak about her; let slim fingers play with the gem that sparkled at the white arch of her throat. "I told my father I was off at the bidding of mighty Bohemund; riding to his camp on an errand of mercy. But an hour ago I left Lance Hill with my squires. I will stay tonight with the nuns of Adhemar in Bohemund's camp. I had to see you." The emerald in her fingers was dancing green light. "Oh, Denis—"

"You are beautiful—beautiful!" Catching at her cloak, he touched his lips to the mantle's hem in courtly gesture. "But, my Josselin, you must not do these dangerous things. The Moslems strike like a wind. Only this morning—"

"I know." She pointed. "In those marshes at the end of that road. It was there they ambushed John of Toul. It was there his axmen were slain! It was there the Turkish warrior called Arsland the Leopard—"

Denis of England stepped back. "You have heard—"

"Yes," she whispered. "The story reached father's camp. The soldiers are talking. They call you a coward, because they think you dare not fight the Moslem. I—but I do not believe. I had to see you, Denis. It is not true, Denis. A lie, it is. A lie spread by those who envy the might of your unvanquished sword. Tell me, Denis. Tell me the story is a lie. You are going to meet the Turk tomorrow at dawn—"

"No!" he whispered.

"Denis!"

"No!"

"Denis, you must! For my sake! You must!"

His hands gripped her saddle, steel-fingered. For a moment the slow crimson

fire burned like fever on his cheek, fading, left his face wool-gray in the gloom. "You must believe me. For me this has been a terrible day, my Josselin. First to see John slain! Then branded by the others, and no fair chance to claim my honor true. You—you must believe!" The words came through his teeth. "I cannot meet the Leopard at dawn!"

But the hand came away from her throat, fierce and swift; and the gem cast from her fingers fell to glitter, a tiny green spark, among the dead roots at her feet. "It is yours to keep, Denis of England. No daughter of Count Edmund could tolerate the gift of a coward. Until I have learned otherwise of you—then—"

The roan horse curveted. The white oak left a wind in the shadows. The girl and the buff-jerkined body-guard clattered on up the road. Alone beneath the tree, Denis of England stood in a well of cold dark and listened to hoofbeats echo away in the direction of the camp of the Cross.

FOR a long time the figure by the tree did not seem able to move. Then suddenly it laughed. The crow-harsh laugh died, and a whisper, vehement with quick fury, came from the thin-drawn lips. "So then! I am to lose all! All!"

Denis shook a knotted gauntlet at the dark before his face, and his eyes were like points of iron. "To the devil then, with Lord Bohemund! Denis of England is craven, so? But they shall soon see!" A moment he stared at the green gem winking in the roots. Abruptly he clapped hand to swordhilt, and ran.

On the descending roadway the dark lay thick; closed over him like a turbid veil. No sound save the pad of his feet in dust, the muted jangle of his oiled chain-coat. But twice he stopped, certain he had heard feet on the road other than his own. A third time he crouched in roadside brush, hunched down with long-sword drawn, hot-eyed, nerves tight as cord.

"Nothing but wind in the leaves! God's

mercy, I am acting like a boy." Sheathing the blade, he ran on, surefooted on a path that he could not see; he sped silently off the road and into underbrush with the stealth of one used to the woods at night. His fury had gone now; tempered into a stern, Saxon determination. Weighted with mail, Denis could still slip through the dark like a fox. Over the marshes the night hung thick as wizard's ink; but the torch-flares in the Antioch tower made a beacon.

Smell of reeds and dank water freighted the sceneless dark; and at last his boots squashed in mud, and he was following the bank of the river. Across the stream the stronghold wall was a ghostly, looming cliff flushed with pink haze where the sentries high on the parapet held their flares.

Tensed, panther-like, the Briton moved through the reeds, feet sinking, soundless, in mire. On the wall scarce a stone's throw distant, a guard appeared. Crouching motionless as rock, Denis watched the face of the Moslem sentinel move off high in the dark.

When the light and the face had dimmed away in the swirling black, Denis silently stripped off chain-coat and gannets, breastplate and leather vest and mailed sleeves. Black air was cool on his naked back, and a faint beam gleamed on the rope-like muscles of his bare arms. Quickly unhooking baldric and sword, he hid them with his armor in the rushes.

Naked to the waist, he crouched on the mud bank, every sense alert. The Saracen guard had appeared and faded out three times on the ghostly wall before Denis heard the sound for which he listened—the whisper of a body moving through the rushes.

A SOFT, clicking note like the chuckle of a sleeping bird. A sibilant answer. Then, in the reeds in front of the Briton, a bearded face appeared; white teeth and beady eyes in a dark countenance.

A quiet word breathed from Denis's lips. The head in the reeds nodded; a

spectral hand beckoned. Mere shadow in the gloom, the Briton glided across the mud to grasp the waving hand. The gesture was followed by low-voiced consultation. Words muted by the flash of the seeping stream and the nocturnal rustling of the marsh. Then the naked shoulders of the Briton and the bearded face of his guide melted in the darkness.

A patch of reeds trembled gently; became still. A moment later any one near enough to suspect would have heard come from beyond the rushes a muffled plash of water disturbed by the movements of unseen swimmers who strove for quiet.

And the one near enough to suspect did hear.

Silent, swift, he crept out through the reeds. A wraith in the darkness, he fumbled fierce hands among the rushes till his seeing fingers found the breastplate and chain-coat, the abandoned baldric and sword.

Then the wraith turned to vanish in the darkness whence it had come, rushing off through the smothered undergrowth with the caution of one at night on an unfamiliar path. When the path reached the open roadway the figure breathed a deep, savage oath, and ran.

The figure fled up the dark-hung road, past the fork where the dead tree stood black against the stars, past the field where the peasant had plowed, on up the narrow canyon where the briars were massed claws in the gloom. He was running like an antelope when he passed the laurels where a stench of burnt timber still lingered; and only slowed pace when he came within the lights of bonfires burning in Bohemund's encampment.

Startled guards on the night watch lowered their pikes to let him pass, and the bonfires made of him a frantic, white-bearded gnome as he rushed down the line of ragged tents.

But a figure in a flowing white mantle stepped suddenly in his path, caught at his cape.

"Lady Josselin! What—"

"Baldwin! You are pale! I heard you

running! You—you bring bad news! What has happened?" she cried out, eyes glowing with alarm. "Baldwin! Did you find Denis? You bring word of Denis?"

Catching the pale hands tight in his, Baldwin of Flanders moved her gently to one side. "Stand back, Josselin. Yes—foul news!" The old Fleming panted, and snarled. "He is worse than a coward, Josselin! A traitor!"

V

A RANCID odor of strange things burning filled the tent. Green flame in the porcelain jar in his fist shed a strange light on Baldwin's face, matched the phosphorescent glow of his eyes beneath the snowy brows.

A pinch of this, a pinch of that, and the little fire puffed hot, flooding the tent with a wavering luminescence. The white-bearded face of the old Fleming, bent over bottles and jugs, was savage. At last he shoved the smoking vessels aside, and, gripping the table with veiny hands, tugged himself to his feet.

"Comrades, I am ready."

"By my bones, it is just about time." Seated with his tankard near the door, Raymond of Lombardy glowered. "Why did you call us here, my old one? I was busy instructing squires with the oiling of my mail—those fools!—when your summons came. And the armorers were honing for me my longsword."

Unclasping the hands from behind his head, Hugh of Poitiers lounged up from his blankets. "An evil stench with which you poison the tent, Baldwin. But certainly you did not call Raymond here and keep me awake with your alchemies for the sole purpose of showing us a fire that burns without wood. Then what is that reason of this midnight conference?"

"You asked me to bring my longsword handy," the Lombard growled.

"And me to wear mine," the pale-eyed Frenchman reminded. "And then you make us watch a black magic, and offer no word to explain. This pot of fire—this stench—

out with it, Baldwin. What means this mystery?"

"A fouler stench than you two have ever known!" The old knight grinned savagely through the wisping, green smoke. "For I speak of Denis of England!"

"And I have no time to hear of him," Raymond countered, rising.

"Nor I," snarled Hugh. "No time for the Briton since—"

"Wait!" Baldwin of Flanders shook a fist at the roof. "You will have time to hear this. Listen! Comrades! You know how this morning the Briton refused to accept the Leopard's challenge to combat? We thought him craven, and by my blood, I felt sorry for the boy. When he did not return for evening meal and nowhere had been seen about the camp, my heart was turned. He had been a good soldier; had helped me with my alchemies, and I did not want him scourged by the army's scorn.

"I set out to find him, comrades, thinking I might change his intention and inspire him to meet the Moslem after all. He had said he was riding to Lance Hill, and I, set out for the hospital encampment." Baldwin gulped wine, and went on.

"I found him at the fork of the road. You know where the dead oak divides the highway? Coming in sight of the road, I saw Denis, running like a fox. I followed him," Baldwin snarled, "down to the marsh by the river.

"And there, by God's wounds, he took a bath through the marsh, coming to a place where he divested himself of sword and mail, and, hiding in the dark, encountered one who had come to meet him there. I heard them talking together, comrades; then they vanished and went swimming away. I say, by heaven's crown, their words burned in my ears, and I heard them speak in the tongue of the Moslems."

The Fleming struck the table with a fist, and his voice came harsh as grating iron. "I have learned enough of the language to comprehend! Denis spoke to tell the secret of the fire I have only just dis-

covered. He spoke of a secret tunnel, and asked about certain secret plans.

"His companion swore an oath by the name of Allah, and the Briton made known he would return to that spot in the marsh at an hour before daybreak. We will be there to meet him, my comrades! We will be there to greet this cursed Denis of England who speaks the tongue of Mahound and whispers of plans and betrays my new-found secret fire and swims across the river in the night to join the Turks of Antioch."

Baldwin's eyes blazed, and his fist was shaking, smashing at the table. "We will be there to catch Denis the Briton. The betrayer! The traitor! The spy!"

HOT oaths burst from the Lombard at the tent door. Hugh of Poitiers beat a fist on his chest, his eyes gone wintry behind a tumble of curls. "The dog! He has betrayed us all! Befouled our tent! Muddled the very name of the Cross! So that is how Arsland the Leopard came to know every plan, every move of our army. No wonder Denis refused the Turk's challenge. The message was a command in secret code!

"You see, comrades? You understand? And if Denis killed Madud the Seljuk it was by order of the Turks themselves, who wished the Seljuk destroyed for reasons of their own. And the challenge was a code-message to Denis—"

"Our friend!" the Lombard panted. "Our sworn comrade. And every minute a spy who sold our secrets."

"My own plan!" Baldwin of Flanders leaned across the table, hoarse-voiced. "We will catch the Briton when he returns for his mail and sword at his accursed rendezvous in the marsh. To us, comrades, betrayed by his lying tongue and praying blasphemies, he owes a debt. We shall collect the debt, we three.

"He would not fight Arsland the Leopard, but he shall fight us. First, Raymond! He shall fight you, Raymond. You shall take with you two battle-axes; one for you, one for him! You, the finest axman in

God's army. We shall carry the Briton to the field by the dead oak tree, and you shall play with him as the Leopard played with John of Toul!"

The gaunt Lombard cursed softly. "A splendid plan, my Baldwin. I will show him what an axman of the Cross can do to traitors. Just smash in his shoulder or gash off an ear—"

"But leave enough for Hugh. And then it is Longlegs's turn. You will take two daggers, Longlegs. A pikeman's dagger for him, and your own jeweled dagger for you. You will make him play, you the most deadly of knife-players in the world. You cut his face, his fingers—"

The Frenchman's ironic mouth twisted in a thin smile. "Knife for knife, Baldwin, and I shall see him bleed from a hundred wounds. A beautiful plan, my old one. I shall slash the betrayer to—"

"But leaving enough for me!" The old Fleming's face was a contorted mask. "You will leave enough for me, my brave count, and then the turn is mine. Has he not betrayed me more than all the others? Have I not treated him as if he were my own son? To me he owes the great debt, and I shall kill him. I shall fight him with longwords and smash his befouled weapon from his hand and drive my own blade to his lying heart. And then—"

"And then," the others whispered.

"By then," whispered Baldwin, "it will be dawn. The standard of Arsland, the Leopard will be floating in mockery on the north bank of the river by the marsh. The Turks on the Antioch wall will be laughing. The Leopard will laugh.

"But then he will see fire. A blaze on the hill near the dead oak tree. For the corpse of the traitorous Briton shall burn; be consumed by the deadly flame of my discovery, the secret of which was carried to Antioch by the traitor but a few hours past. His treacherous body shall burn by that fire, the flame that destroys like God's lightning."

The flame in the porcelain jar sputtered, and a resinous smoke wreathed the tent. Baldwin of Flanders dropped a hand

to his swordhilt and stepped to the center of the floor.

"To his death, my comrades! To the death of Denis the spy!"

Three swords flashed out in the smoke.

VI

DOWN where the fog writhed in lazy white streamers over the marsh there came a spectral sound of conflict. A faint disturbance muffled by the mists. The slosh of boots and wheeze of straining breath. A dim jingling and bumping and groaning.

But the four who fought there were ghosts in the vapor, the trampled reeds deadening the noise of floundering legs, and the guards on the wall across the river did not hear. Hushed oaths and gasps and stifled panting.

"Your cloak, in Heaven's name! And quickly, old one, before I break every bone in his spine—"

"Wounds! The ruffian is crushing my arms. Keep his face under water, there, you big Lombard ox. Get the cloak over his head! Aaah! The cur is killing me! Choke him! Smash him on the skull—"

"Blood!" A muffled splash. A steamy bubbling of breath gurgling up through water. The dulled crunch of iron smiting flesh. "So! He will lie quiet, now. Longlegs! Quick; help me with this cloak. Do not drown him, Raymond. So! Drag his legs; I have his neck. Hurry!"

Three specters running with a ghost between them. Out of the marsh, and across a muddy bank, and into a scramble of briar. Then through to a road where the mists lurked like escaped steam. Lumbering, heavy-burdened in the dark fog, the eerie trio called their captive up the hill, coming at last to the base of an oak that loomed dripping and shiny-black in the vapor.

Wind circled the tree and cleared the steam away, and the first, obscure suggestion of daylight discovered the glint of metal weapons propped against the tree-trunk. Two heavy maces, a pair of

longswords and knives. Metal gleamed sharply in the damp. Water glistened on the rounded bellies of three big porcelain jars.

"Stand him up there, Longlegs. The dog gains his senses fast. Keep a good hold on his wrists. Ha! He opens his eyes. So, then, Denis of England. Perhaps you were surprised?"

"Baldwin! Raymond! Hugh—" Denis of England shook his head to clear a crimson cloud from his brain. A trickle of blood dribbled from behind one ear and seeped across his naked shoulder. The muscles of the shoulder strained and bulged under the skin as he made a sudden wrench that threw him to his knees. Kneeling so, his arms caught by hands that gripped like a torturer's vise, he glared at the three who stood over him. He saw the faces of Baldwin and Raymond and Hugh of Poitiers like three griffin masks glaring down through the wisping haze, and suddenly the tongue went wild in his teeth.

"Blood! It was you! You three! You three who trapped me back there in the brushes. Why do you hold me here? By the rood, you, Longlegs, let me go! I must report to the council. I—"

THE white-bearded griffin mask swooped down, its eyes winking like little blue stones. The voice that came from the beard brought the Briton lunging to his feet. "You report to nobody but us, Denis of England. And to the three of us for the last time—"

"We trapped you, indeed," Raymond snarled. "Caught you swimming back from Antioch like the thief should always be caught by men of honest heart. You have spied on us, my Briton, for the last time. Traitor! You have betrayed our plans, sold our lives to the heathen dogs—"

"Fools!" The Briton snapped the word. "You will pay for this night's mummery, and be more than sorry, I promise you. I am no traitor—"

"But a liar, also!" Hugh of Poitiers snarled. "No traitor, eh? Then what of

these mysterious actions of yours these last few months? Aye! And who else but you has betrayed every plan of our army to the Moslem Leopard so that he finds our secrets in the dark and strikes at the heart of our schemes? And I am thinking, too, of how your mount halted our race on this very road when we sped to the rescue of John of Toul. Had you not made sudden halt we might have gained John in time. A scheming, lie-tongued killer and spy!"

"Fools! You will learn to beg forgiveness for these—"

"And what," Raymond of Lombard demanded harshly, "were you doing, swimming this river in the dark, consorting with the Turks, sneaking like a leper to hide your movements?"

"A business of my own!" The Briston's voice shook with passion. "By God's wounds, when Bohemund hears of this—"

"He will hear no more of your lies!" Hoarse-voiced with fury, Baldwin of Flanders fastened his fingers on the Briston's throat, pinning him against the tree. "You would not fight the Leopard of Islam, but you shall fight us, clapperclaw, and pay to us the debt of treachery. Aye.

"First Raymond shall fight you. His ax against yours. And because you are a traitor he shall slash the bones of your chest. Then to Hugh you will pay—with daggers. And because you are a liar he will cut your mouth from your face. Then to me, to Baldwin you will pay. And because you are a spy I will fight you longsword for longsword, drive the spying eyes out of your head and cut my blade through to your heart.

"And so no living man must again be cursed by the sight of you, your corpse will burn to black ashes for the wind to play with and that old Armenian peasant to grind down into his field!"

"Choose, then, your weapon!" Stepping to the tree, the giant Lombard seized the battle axes; held out the hafts. Holding the ax-head in either fist, he carefully ran a thumb down the massive blades. "Sharp as lightning," he whispered, "and

true. Choose, scum of Briton, and may God take pity on your soul."

DENIS had chosen his mace. For a moment his eyes searched the roots that burrowed through the wet moss at his feet and when they found the tiny twinkle of a green gem there his head came up with a jerk. "I am ready!"

Baldwin of Flanders and Hugh of Poitiers backed away, leaving Lombard and Briton on a carpet of moss three yards distant from the tree. Slowly the warriors circled; slowly; glances meeting and fixed, feet whispery on the damp, green carpet, their poised axes shimmering above their heads. Slowly the two bodies moved.

Raymond of Lombard stooped in a gorilla-like crouch, hairy fists like knots of iron on the taut ax-haft. Denis of England stepping as the panther steps, his naked shoulders and arms rippling muscles, his face turned to something in stone.

"Have at you!" With an oath, the Lombard charged. Smash! Smash! Smash! Blade against blade, throwing spark-showers up in the dawnlight. Ax on ax, flashing silver fire, whipping, lashing till the air whistled and rang and the space between the Lombard and the boy was filled with deafening sound and blinding light.

Hugh of Poitiers shouted and danced. "At him, Raymond! Cut his face! Let the spy be butchered as they butchered John of Toul, his comrade and ours!"

Baldwin of Flanders howled: "Let him feel your mace, Raymond! Again! Cut him again!"

Faster and faster flew the streaks of fire. Sparks burst, scattering lightning. Raymond's ax smiting down; struck aside by the Briton's fast blade. Clang! Like the fracturing of a gong. Toe to toe, axes beating together overhead, arms swinging like the fans of a windmill. Chain-mail glowing in the sun.

The Lombard's blade shot down like a bolt from the sky. It sheared through

the haft of the Briton's mace, and sent the mace-head flying through the air. Denis cried out; thrown to his knees; a futile stick of wood waving helplessly in his numbed hands. Raymond of Lombardy hurled himself forward, ax upraised.

But the ax was hung wavering in the dawn-shine. A scream caught it there. A scream that came through the early morning light to strike that scene of conflict into stone. A scream that was echoed by the desperate drumming of hoofs, a furious crashing in the road-hedge behind the dead oak.

THEN a horse burst from the underbrush, plunged rearing under the tree. A white-cloaked rider with face of marble and hair of spun-gold and eyes that were shining blue flames flung herself from the saddle and dashed forward, her white hands whipping out her sword.

"Josselin!" Four voices chorused the cry.

"Denis!" she screamed. "Fly! Take my horse! Run!" Like a wind she sprang, driving an astonished Lombard before her.

Hugh made a catch at her arm, and the flat of her blade caught his knuckles. Baldwin and Raymond did a dance. "My hores, Denis," she screamed. "Go! Fly—"

"Josselin!" Baldwin of Flanders roared. "Go, in Heaven's name! The Briton is a traitor—a spy! Catch her, Raymond! The girl is mad!"

"Fly, Denis!"

"Josselin—he is a spy!"

"Stay back, Baldwin!" The sword was singing. "Next time I cut!" The white cloak billowed and the gold hair tossed. "Back, all of you! You dogs! Who are you to torture a fellow knight, branding him a spy without fair trial? Throw down that ax, Raymond, or I stab! Hurry, Denis, while yet there is time!"

There was no evading that dancing swordpoint. Stumbling, floundering, the three knights shouted, "You aid a traitor—"

"I love him!" she cried out. "I do not care! I heard you planning in your tent.

Who are you to stand in judgment? If traitor he is—then God will punish him. You would have tortured him—burned him! Cowards!"

The sun peeped above the hills of the east, cast shafts of colored light down the misty valley and bathed the hillside with a glow. The stone walls of Antioch were washed with color. The river was winding silver. The mists dissolved in the marshes. On the northern slope where the highway forked, the dead oak gleamed in an abrupt bath of daylight. A fleet shadow sped under the tree; stopped to snatch a longsword that leaned against the tree-trunk; made a flying leap to the back of a waiting horse.

"Ride, Denis! Ride—"

And Denis of England was riding. The horse cleared the roadway at a bound. A ball of dust rolled back from the pounding hoofs and swept into the eyes of the stunned knights held at bay against the oak. Their baffled outcry reached the ears of the Briton; and the Briton waved his longsword and shouted a laugh. On the northern rim of the field an old plowman had appeared, plodding behind a crude share.

He had started an oblique furrow down the hill when he saw what was coming, but he never got out of the way. That roan horse was racing like a winter's gale. That half-naked warrior bent low in the saddle, his face a-gleam beneath a fan of tossing yellow locks, sword whistling over his head, was a doom speeding down on Death's wind. The Armenian's fingers were knotty drumsticks rattling on the handles of his plough, and with a hopeless cry he dropped sick knees to the fresh-turned clods.

Deep in the heart of Antioch the muez-zins chanted the morning prayer, but the singsong drone was drowned by the thunder of the roan's flying hoofs, by Denis's fierce yell, by the old peasant's screech. The roan horse sprang to clear the peasant and plowshare at one leap, but the sword of the Briton lashed down.

Those paralyzed figures posed under the

oak at the road saw a scarlet shower spurt high in the air, saw a mangled body roll flopping in a furrow, saw the roan horse wheel and race like a wind down the hill.

VII

STRAIT down that furrow-gashed hill Denis rode, and his wild cry echoed across the valley. Clods spurted from the roan's pounding hoofs. Lightning flashed from the Briton's swinging sword. Half standing in his stirrups, he goaded the horse to greater speed, whipped the blade in a shimmering arc above his wind-thrashed hair, and sent an exultant shout pealing down the wind.

The walls of Antioch, the hills far away, the figures at the road-fork picked up the yell in breathless, astonished echo; and so did the rider who came spurring across the field by the marsh.

This rider's hauberk glittered and his conical helmet gleamed. A kite-shaped metal shield tossed light on his mailed arm; the beard on his face was a henna flame; a spotted black-and-yellow cloak billowed from his iron shoulders; and a sickle of silver fire was the scimitar in his hand.

When the warrior saw the half-naked rider armed with nothing but a longsword, he laughed. When he sighted the champion in mail, Denis the Briton laughed, too.

"Yah!" cried the red beard. "Yah! Allah—"

"For St. George and England!" came Denis's answer. "For the Cross, and by God's holy rood—"

Two fierce battle-cries joined in echo down the hill; then the echo burst into a clang. Poised lithe above his saddle, Denis raced at the enemy with singing sword; the gray wind struck the black-and-yellow splash; the longsword smashed on the scimitar. The horses reared, bucked, plunged in a shrieking tangle; lightning shivered from the blades.

With a dazzling, whipping blade Denis

strove to beat down the lashing sickle and drive steel to the red-bearded face. But the Leopard was not named so for nothing. Tossing heavy shield as if it were made of parchment, returning cut for cut with moon-shaped scimitar, the Turkish champion fended off the Briton's fierce charge, danced his horse, gave a masterful side-leap, and flung in hard against Denis's flank.

The scimitar flickered; and if ever Denis wished himself in armor he wished it then. Both hands on swordhilt, he slashed to parry the stroking sickle. A scalding pain shot up his left arm and blood spouted from his elbow. Teeth clenched, he smashed the longsword down on the shield, and crimson flowed from the Turk's crushed nose.

But the ricocheting blade tangled in spotted leopard-hide, and before Denis could yank free, the scimitar smashed on his shoulder. Only the instinct that threw him over backward saved his left arm from being sliced clean away. Half blinded with pain, he hung out of saddle in a swirl of blood, thunder and dust.

With a shriek of triumph, Arslan the Leopard closed in. One, two, three the sickle fell, blows coming fast as light. *Clang! Clang! Clang!* Each blow missed the dodging yellow head and found nothing but cold steel. With an effort that wrung from his mouth a cry of agony, Denis swung upright in saddle, eyes streaming, mouth dry, head bursting with the pain of his gashed shoulder. His whole left side seemed to be stone, and the longsword in his hand was a stone-weighted log. Stroke for stroke, blow for blow, he held on, rocking and weaving in his saddle, playing with every ounce of power in his arm to beat off the lashing steel crescent.

THE Leopard's mount would rush. The roan horse would leap to one side. Scimitar and sword would meet, slash and smash in a brief and deafening encounter. Try as he would Denis could not beat down the metal shield, could

not pierce through the Moslem's guard and smash the armor. He could only swing there, raw and bleeding in a heaving, bounding saddle, and fight off that lightning-fast scythe.

Now the horses were racing in a desperate wheel, the sword in Denis' hand was cumbersome as a joustingpole, his fist was cotton, his shoulder a flame. The blowing, spotted wings and fiery face came swooping out of the fog with a roar of triumph. Denis swung saddle; struck out. The longsword missed. The scimitar whizzed past his eyes. The Moslem horse crashed into the roan like a battering ram, and the horse crashed down floundering in a *screaming tangle of plunging hoofs and snapping teeth.

Thrown from saddle, Denis vaulted through dust, landing mouth-down in hoof-trampled mire. Hoofs pounded past his head, and a hundred-weight of mail dropped with a smash on his spine. But the Leopard was half-stunned, too, and with a mighty effort the Briton heaved his fractured shoulder to fling off his enemy.

The Moslem lunged up from his knees with a shout; and then Denis was at him, flailing his blade at the weaving helmet, driving blows at the heaving shield. But the longsword was weakening. The scimitar was wielded by a master hand. Weighted with armor, the champion of Antioch might have been at a disadvantage against an unwounded man. Now he had only to bide his time; wait for blood to flow.

A moan burst from Denis. Not long could he stand with that scalding arm dragging him down. The world was black, save for the face of fire and that swinging, deadly moon. The fire-face laughed and the moon swung.

Reeling and choking, Denis caught the scimitar blows on swordpoint and tossed them aside.

But every one came back faster, faster, ripping at his chest, razoring at his arm, slicing and slashing past his dripping jaw. Sparks and blood-drops blew past his face.

The moon hung above him and fell. He struck it off. But the curved blade skidded down his sword and crashed flat on his wounded shoulder. In a crimson fountain Denis went down. His knees buckled. His legs and back caved.

Kneeling, he strove to whip the failing longsword. Clouds rolled before his eyes, and a moon sped about in the smoke.

Then something else was there in that moon-wild cloud. A mocking and blinking green eye. A little green eye that winked under a tree of black arms. But the green eye seemed to fade and a voice spoke out of the ringing din. "I love him—love him—"

And where the eye had been there formed a smile.

DENIS of England found a yell deep in his lungs. Denis of England found his feet. He found a longsword in his hand, and a Turk like a gorilla in armor plunging at him; and he sprang up from his knees.

Arsland the Leopard, rushing to deliver the finishing blow, yelled, too. He had seen no scoffing emerald in the mist; had seen no gem change into a smile; had heard no voice. He only saw a fainting warrior come to life like a revived whirlwind. He saw a lean, grim-jawed Briton, face suddenly aglow beneath his mat of flaxen hair. He heard a savage cry burst from that face; saw the warrior leap to battle like one insane. Bloody arm a-dangle, good arm flexing and lunging, head down, sword flaying the scimitar with a wild criss-cross stroke, Denis flung himself at his foe.

He laughed as he struck down the livid steel moon. He laughed as he brought his sword against the clanging shield. Leaping and skipping, waving his red arm, ducking his yellow head this way and that in a ghastly dance, he laughed and fought a crimson demon back down the hill toward the marsh, step for step, blow for blow, till the enemy cried out at every stroke and the air flashed and shook with the sound of laughter and

shrieking and smashing steel and whistling breath.

Down the field they battled, and back up the slope. Along the marsh edge where the dark water splashed, they slipped and lunged. Stumbling and reeling in the grass. They cried to Allah; cried to God. Driven by a hurricane, the Moslem fell back. Streaming blood from a hundred wounds, head down, Denis pressed on.

A flat blade smashed against his chin, but his sword never stopped. The shield was in his face, but he flung it aside with a smashing riposte, and ripped the Moslem's jaw. Spitting blood, the Leopard rocked back on his heels; whirled and launched a fierce cut at the weaving yellow head.

Bounding to dodge the blow, Denis tangled in the spotted cloak. A moment the Moslem and Briton spun in a frenzied whirl, wound together in the leopard-hide, bare chest against iron breastplate, toe trampling toe, face close to face, blades locked overhead. Slowly the muscles bulged in swelling knots on Denis's straining sword-arm. Slowly the longsword pushed back the scimitar. Blue cords bulged on the Moslem's forehead. Stamping, weaving, his left arm trapped in the cloak and fastened against the Briton's mangled shoulder, the Leopard strove to throw the longsword aside.

But the Briton had a leg wound about the Moslem's knee; a wall of muscle pressed against the breastplate. Inch by inch the longsword pressed back the sickle; the Moslem's spine bent backward. Blood welled and seeped down the leopard-hide. The Moslem's face became a twisted mask. With a last final effort the Briton brought the sword blade sliding down the scimitar's curved edge, and drove the cross-hilt slugging into the contorted face.

With a crash of mail the Leopard hurtled down. The shiny sickle went soaring. The longsword fell like white light. A helmet-topped head with sprouting eyes went bouncing across the grass; and Denis of England stooped to wipe clean his blade on a leopard-skin spotted with red.

In the high tower at the east corner of Antioch there rose a terrible cry. "The Leopard! The Leopard is slain—"

Down the valley at the Bridge Gate there burst a stunning reply. A light roared skyward, a volcano-like eruption of Greek fire that smothered the gate with its thunderous bellow. As if smashed by magic, gateway and arches tumbled earthward and sank in a pall of bright flame and dust. Masonry ruptured.

Antioch shook with the wails of its terrified guardsmen; and a heroic, wild cheer chorused up from the river's north bank. On the bridge there flowed a sudden bright flood of armored men. Blue banners and scarlet went pouring through the breach torn out of the wall. Godfrey and Bohemund were charging.

BOHEMUND the Mighty was standing; and the council tent waited in silence. The great leader's face, massive under the stack of red-yellow hair, wrinkled in a rare smile as he mounted the dais under the colored lanterns and turned on the knight summoned there. Generals, lords and barons flashed their furbished blades in salute; and Denis of England was alone, ill at ease when the greatest general of all Christendom answered with drawn blade, then lowered that blade to rest it on the Briton's bandaged shoulder.

"Seigneurs," the leader rumbled, "with God's help Antioch fell to us this day. All have fought bravely, and well. But to Denis of England goes all honor and all praise, for his courage and might of sword alone could have forged such a broad path of victory. All honor to you, Denis, and praise from the Army of the Cross. Antioch is taken. The Moslem champion lies dead. In spite of my order forbidding you to engage in single combat until Antioch had fallen, you went to the field—"

"Your pardon, sire," Denis bowed, flushing. "I could but reply to the challenge when I—I hastened to your council tent for permission, and found you had gone, and—"

"You went to the field," Bohemund roared, "and proved your judgment better than mine. I had not wished the chance of losing so valuable a warrior, but you are not lost. You breaking my ruling? So! Henceforth you shall make some of your own.

"Rewarded you must be for your service to the council in spying out the enemy who betrayed us in our midst, for your work as alchemist and engineer, leading your secret corps of engineers to tunnel under the Bridge Gate wall, undermine the Moslem battlements and plant there your wizard's fire.

"Without your unfailing daring the sappers would never have dared the work. Your wit alone could have timed the fires to burst in the tunnel at dawn and bring the walls caving. It was your plan alone to dig that tunnel in the night, roof the cavern with logs and bring the roof crashing down with your well-timed fire so that the walls above would fall." Bohemund the Mighty bellowed with enthusiasm.

"And who but you, Denis of England, discovered the Moslem spy who masqueraded as a peasant and signaled our plans to Antioch by writing them on the hillside with a plow for the guards in their towers to read?"

"Aye," was the humble answer, "but I only guessed it too late, when I should have long before known that no plowman digs crescents and crosses down the side of a hill. I only guessed it that last night we tunneled under Antioch, wondering who it could be that revealed our plans—"

"But the peasant. And you thought

out his infamous scheme. All honor, my Denis of England; and the reward of a thousand picked knights to henceforth answer at your word of command." Bohemund the Mighty bowed his massive head, and chuckled. "But then perhaps there is also a favor or two within my power to grant. Any matter concerning your new-formed command, or perhaps, a privilege in the way of leaving-taking—"

"Sire, since you speak of these things—" Denis's voice was low.

"Aye?"

"Then perhaps I could keep at my side three knights whose tent I have long shared; valiant, honorable warriors guilty of nothing save great zeal for the Cross, and only led to err as I, myself, would have erred under similar circumstance. I beg you, sire, do not hold them in further disgrace. Raymond of Lombardy, Baldwin of Flanders and Hugh—"

"Those three! By my blood! These are odd requests from one nearly slain by their clumsy hands. But, then, it shall be as you wish." Bohemund shrugged twice, and smiled. "You have another foolish request you wish granted?"

"But it is not foolish, my lord."

"What then?"

"And I am humble in fear that only another may grant it—"

She was lost behind a jostle of glittering shoulders and iron backs, that diminutive white figure with the green gem twinkling at her throat; and loud was the noise of chuckling warriors and jingling chain-coats. But she made herself heard. Denis' request was granted.

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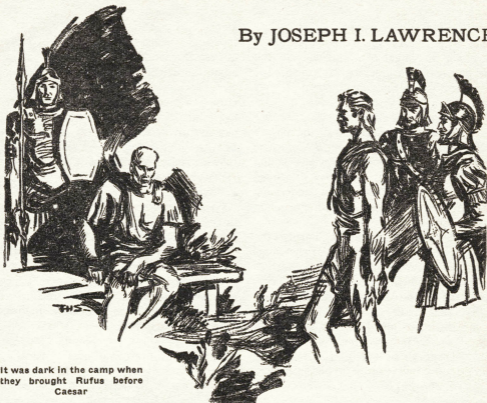
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FOREIGN LEGION ADVENTURES

A Red Star magazine

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By JOSEPH I. LAWRENCE



It was dark in the camp when they brought Rufus before Caesar

Peacocks for Caesar

He had not yet become Caesar Emperor, Conqueror of the World; he was merely a rather stuffy proconsul, addicted to barley-water and edifying sentiments—and a disastrous guest at dinner

IF NOTHING comes of it save a good dinner and a pleasant evening, 'twill do you no harm to make the acquaintance of the Proconsul of Gaul."

Lucius Crastinus frowned impatiently as he puzzled over the apparent indifference of his friend and host to the agreeable scheme that he had outlined to him.

Rufus Frontinus glanced about the

atrium of his handsome villa—one of the most luxurious in Tusculum—with a wistful, apologetic smile.

"My entertainments have gone from modest to meager of late, Lucius," he said: "the cost of good living has become so excessive. The demands of fashion, however, seem to grow out of all proportion to the increase in prices, and a bachelor's purse is supposed to be bottomless, and ever open.

"Do not think that I underestimate the honor, I beg of you," he continued hastily, as the frown of Lucius deepened, "nor that I would shirk a duty which you make so apparent. Neither is it merely a matter of entertaining the Proconsul: the company of

Julius Caesar, in any rank, would be overmuch honor for a house as humble as mine."

Lucius nodded solemnly, visibly mollified.

"The office is temporary," he said, affecting an air of some mystery. "I believe that you and I will live to see Caesar in higher seats of authority than he has yet aspired to; and it will not be bad for any man to be counted among his friends."

"I will do as you suggest," said Rufus, sinking back upon his couch with a scarcely audible sigh. "I shall provide, of course, for his party and their retinue. There will be, I suppose—"

"No more than fifty or sixty, I'm sure," answered Lucius readily. "He is traveling quietly, with a small guard, and some eight or ten gentlemen, including myself."

Rufus winced at the number which his friend named so carelessly, but affected to agree with him that it was trifling.

"We shall be leaving Formiae in the morning, I believe," Lucius went on easily, "so we should arrive near here before night-fall. So many of the villas are closed, while their owners are in Rome, that I am certain Caesar will intend to stop at an inn."

"Do you therefore send one of your servants well forward on the road to meet us, with a message to me. I will convey your compliments to Caesar and inform him that you earnestly desire his company at dinner. It will be a pleasant message to deliver, for he loathes these roadside taverns, and I dare say that I shall lose nothing by it."

"I will remember your instructions," said Rufus soberly. "My steward shall set about the preparations at once. Would you suggest, for the dinner—"

"Merely an ample repast for tired and hungry travelers," returned Lucius, with a luxurious sigh. "An assortment of appetizing shellfish and the like at first, you know, and whatever your excellent taste may suggest for the principal courses. A couple of braces of peacocks for the main table, perhaps, and a boar or two—"

The countenance of Rufus did not lighten at the reference to peacocks.

"And now I shall take my leave, Rufus," said the guest magnificently, "if

you will be so good as to have my carriage called. Unfortunately I was not able to stop at my banker's in Rome before setting out for Formiae, so I shall be considerably obliged if you can accommodate me with a small loan for traveling incidentals."

The young host tried to keep up an appearance of cheerfulness. He ordered the preparation of the guest's carriage, then left the apartment and returned presently with a purse of silver coins.

"I, too, have failed to visit my banker lately," he apologized, flushing painfully, "and I find that I have but about two hundred *denarii*. If you can—"

"'Twill do until I join my friends at Formiae," said Lucius Crastinus, and took the entire contents of the purse, with the greatest good humor.

RUFUS got through the formal leaving with a set smile, and watched the carriage roll away through the gardens; then he frowned and sent hurriedly for his secretary.

"Have you received any more money in rents or other revenues, Cato?" he inquired anxiously. "My purse is quite empty, and in three days I shall have a company of gentlemen to entertain."

The secretary shook his head sadly.

"Your honor's tenants had more tales of hardship than money to offer," he answered, "and there is nothing due before next month."

"Have a carriage made ready at once," ordered Rufus, sighing profoundly. "I must go to Rome today."

Late in the afternoon, when all the business of the Forum was over, he sought out one Marcus Vicus in that part of the city where money-lenders swarmed.

"The hour is never late when a gentleman comes to me with payments upon loans," said the banker, in reply to the young man's perfunctory apologies.

"But I come singing another tune, Marcus," said Rufus, with an attempt at a lightness. "The returns from my tenants have been worse than poor, and I am in urgent need of money."

The banker grew grave.

"Let us see," he mumbled, consulting certain tablets, with a cold glint in his eye. "There is interest yet to be paid, Rufus Frontinus. Ah! you young bachelors! Well, what amount will do for your honor at the moment?"

Rufus made a show of referring to his tablets, to cover an increasing confusion and nervousness.

"I am forced to consider the expense of entertaining a company of gentlemen," he explained, by way of justification. "My house is to be honored, I believe, by a visit from the Proconsul, Julius Caesar."

His idea of impressing the money-leader favorably by the statement was ill judged. The man's face clouded over immediately.

"Friends of Julius Caesar may expect little favor in Rome," he muttered, wagging his head. "Pompeius does not think well of gentlemen who give entertainments for the Proconsul. But—well, it is not for me to take charge of a young gentleman's politics. What is the smallest amount that will suffice for the occasion, Rufus Frontinus?"

"I shall need twenty thousand *sesterces*," Rufus said slowly.

"Prodigious!" cried Marcus Vicus.

THREE days later, some two hours before sunset, a considerable cavalcade halted at the villa of Rufus Frontinus, and his gardens took on the appearance of a military camp.

Julius Caesar, as Rufus had heard, was not a terrible person to meet; his easy manner and unassuming speech were both reassuring and winning.

"Your generosity has given us a pleasant stopping place upon our way, Rufus Frontinus," said the Proconsul, after the formal greetings, "and saved us from the machinations of the inn-keeper. Lucius Crastinus gives an excellent account of you, and it is my misfortune that we have not met before. You have the build of a soldier, yet I believe you have not been in the wars?"

"I have been for some years in Athens, pursuing my studies," answered Rufus

apologetically. "Of late, I have been occupied in administering the estates of my father, but I am contemplating a military career."

"Nay, do not make excuses," protested Caesar. "You are young, sir; you have ample time. Had you been with us in Gaul, you might not be here now, you see; and we might be biting our nails in the inn, with a poor dinner in prospect."

At dinner that evening Caesar reclined in the place of honor at the host's left, and the ebullient Lucius Crastinus won a place for himself upon the same *lectus*.

The twenty thousand *sesterces* obtained from the Roman money-lender were reduced to a mere handful of coins by now, but the anxious young host beamed with pleasure as his servants paraded about the table with costly plate, bearing such appetizers as sea-hedgehogs, field-fares, asparagus, spiced mussels and fresh oysters.

While the several officers and gentlemen at the table partook heartily of the dainties, Caesar complimented the host upon the appointments of the table, and chose for himself exactly two of the fresh oysters.

"These," he explained, as a look of consternation spread over the face of the host, "suit me admirably, and I am not violating the orders of my physician. I should have him buzzing about my ears if I indulged more freely in the early courses of the dinner."

Lucius Crastinus partook liberally of all the dishes, and smacked his lips with no abatement of relish as the second course came on. There were small broiled birds concealed cunningly in egg-shaped pastries, roasted boars' heads, spiced hares, roasted fish and fowl; and, lastly, borne in with ceremony, roasted peacocks dressed in their own plumage, with the great shimmering tails spread fanwise.

Rufus was delighted as he listened to the murmurs and exclamations, but he could not forget what those gorgeous birds had cost him. They were at that time as scarce and costly as they were fashionable, and their appearance upon a table spoke of wealth, if not of prodigality.

As a crowning feature, flagons of choice Falernian wine were brought in, and Caesar remarked that this was indeed a banquet.

"But you will graciously pardon me, I know," he said presently, "if my eyes show more appreciation than my palate. A general has need of a clear head at all times, all hours—so I have long forbidden myself the luxury of wine. I shall call, with your king indulgence, for a cup of barley-water; and with that I shall take a bit of bread and a morsel of that white fish. Then, please rest assured, Rufus Frontinus, I shall have dined excellently well."

LUCIUS CRASTINUS chuckled hugely as he allowed a servant to heap his plate with an assortment of the viands.

"The Proconsul trusts his officers to eat for him, Rufus," he said thickly, through a mouthful of pastry. "His temperance is exceeded only by his valor and wisdom."

Rufus Frontinus was aghast, unable to conceal his astonishment and chagrin. To provide Julius Caesar, Proconsul of Gaul, with two oysters, a bit of fish, and a cup of barely-water, he had borrowed twenty thousand *sesterces* upon the strained security of his already debt-ridden estate.

"The older man offers counsel," said Caesar presently, "and the younger one listens respectfully, but with his tongue in his cheek. However, I could wish that you youngsters might learn your lessons before the age of gout and dyspepsia."

Lucius Crastinus winked slyly at one of his neighbors, and took a second helping of peacock-breast and a third goblet of Falernian. The wink was returned covertly, with an appreciative smile, and the smile went around the table, for Caesar's weakness for the sound of his own voice was one of the favorite jokes of his followers.

"Believe me, I, too, am much given to abstemiousness," said Rufus earnestly. "It is not often that I give entertainments or share in them, and my personal table is almost severly plain. I learned frugality in Greece, and—"

Caesar interrupted him with a good-humored laugh.

"You are kind, to pretend to agree with me," he said, "but in your present position, good friend, you might sing more convincingly of the delights of the palate and the senses. A host with four peacocks on his board is joking when he speaks for frugality."

"Nay, I protest!" cried Rufus. "I am—"

His voice was drowned in a burst of laughter, and the guests raised their goblets and toasted him for a good fellow and a lavish entertainer.

As the last course was served, musicians and dancers, hired from Rome for the evening, came in and amused the guests until Caesar announced his intention of taking his leave and proceeding on his journey.

WHILE the distinguished guest waited for his carriage, he chatted with Rufus, standing in the peristyle.

"I spoke of adopting a military career," said Rufus, when he found an opportunity of getting in a word, "and I meant it seriously. I am told by Lucius Crastinus that further campaigns are projected in Gaul, and he mentioned that there might be room for new officers in the army. If I might presume to hope for your favor—"

Caesar smiled and placed his hand on the young man's shoulder.

"You have my favor, Rufus Frontinus," he said, "and that means that I have your interests at heart. Therefore, be advised, my friend: Continue to administer your estates and pursue the classical studies. Frankly, I do not think that you are adapted to the rough life of the soldier. I have seen delicately nurtured men wither and fade in the blight of war, and there is nothing to be gained by it.

"In the military camp we have no baths scented with rose-water. In place of peacocks and ortolans, we have tough bullock meat and black bread; instead of reclining on a cushioned couch and listening to soft music, we sink down exhausted among sticks and stones, and hear the battle chants of the barbarians."

"I know all that; I understand!" cried Rufus desperately.

"The young always know, they always understand," said Caesar kindly, "but they suffer acutely while they are gaining more knowledge, more understanding. No, Rufus Frontinus, your hands are not hardened to the sword-hilt; you may write excellent poetry and philosophy under your Greek masters, and in that way you may find contentment.

"Write war songs and ballads for us, my friend, but let us do the marching and the fighting. Each man to his place and to his own peculiar happiness. You shall sit at home with your goblet of Falernian and roasted peacocks and write our praises, and in that way you will perform your service worthily."

"I beg you to hear me!" cried Rufus, distracted. "This is all a terrible misunderstanding. I have little taste for Falernian; I hope I may never taste another roasted peacock! I am—"

"One's appetite is at low ebb after dinner!" said Caesar, with his inevitable smile and his patronizing kindness. "Tomorrow night you will be ready for peacock and Falernian again."

"The carriage is ready," announced the elderly officer. "If the Proconsul has taught our young host the philosophy of life, we may proceed to Rome."

Caesar laughed indulgently, nodded to the officer, then gave the young man his hand.

"Rufus Frontinus," he said, "you have my thanks for some pleasant hours of rest at your beautiful villa, and for as excellent a cup of barley-water as I ever drank. The oysters and the fish, too, were beyond reproach. For your feast, my eyes assured me that it could not be surpassed by an Oriental potentate, and on behalf of my officers, I thank you for it."

As he made his adieu and turned away, Lucius Crastinus came up, breathing heavily.

"One of the most splendid dinners I ever ate, Rufus!" he declared. "I am proud to claim you as a friend. By the way, some of those rascally officers persuaded me to play at dice, and I am

stripped. If you could accommodate me with a little silver—"

"I am sorry," said Rufus soberly, "but I, too, am well nigh stripped. My purse is very low, and my resources are taxed beyond all warrant. I do not reproach you, Lucius; but on your assurance of the ease with which Caesar's favor might be secured, I spoke to him of my military aspirations. He would scarcely listen to me, and he discouraged me completely."

"Um! that's the way of it!" exclaimed Lucius, with a sudden groan as a twinge of indigestion assailed his stomach. "You can never tell what sort of a mood you'll find him in. Well, at any rate it was a noble dinner."

CAESAR was in Gaul; his friends, Marcus Antonius and Quintus Cassius, had fled from Rome to join him; Pompeius had fled with the other consuls to Capua; and Rome was in a ferment.

A young gentleman named Rufus Frontinus remained precariously in his villa at Tusculum and subsisted upon black bread and barley-water. The diet was not adopted in emulation of the outlawed Proconsul of Gaul, but for economic reasons. His revenues, difficult of collection in normal times, ceased entirely with the tottering of the republic.

His slaves were sold, one by one, to pay instalments of the interest which the money-lenders demanded with increasing clamor. His servants left him when there was no longer food to hold them to their frail allegiance, and about the time he found himself the sole occupant of the handsome villa a civil officer arrived from Rome and summoned him before a *pretor* to answer the charges of the money-lender, Marcus Vicus, who was his principal creditor.

The *pretor* who heard the case was an old man, hard-visaged, with a fixed prejudice against youth in general. All young men were spendthrifts in his eyes, and all money-lenders innocent and persecuted victims.

Marcus Vicus told a pathetic tale, mov-

ing the *pretor* almost to tears. He had, he said, virtually maintained the handsome establishment at Tusculum for the reckless and irresponsible youth. More than a mere money-lender, he had been like a father, and an indulgent one, and his reward had been shameless ingratitude and breach of faith.

Rufus was humbled and apologetic before the *pretor*, and he meekly said something about the impracticability of extracting blood from a stone. At that the magistrate hotly rebuked him for his impertinence.

The decision was readily found that Marcus Vicus, and not Rufus Frontinus, owned the villa at Tusculum, with all its lands and appurtenances; and the *pretor* remarked that the wretched young man might thank a beneficent judge that he was not given in bondage to his creditor as well.

Marcus Vicus, wrought to a state of high emotion, plaintively added that the last loan, of twenty thousand *sesterces*, had been made that the prodigal might give a feast.

"To evil companions of his own sort!" observed the scandalized *pretor*.

"Nay, I beg that you will make it no worse than it is," protested Rufus indignantly. "I did no more than give a dinner to a company of gentlemen, unless you choose to call the Proconsul of Gaul an evil companion."

The *pretor* pricked up his ears and grew more outraged.

"And I do!" he cried. "If there's a more evil fellow this side the Styx than Julius Caesar, it has not been reported to me.

"This wretched young man, then," he continued, turning to the money-lender, "is a friend of the arch-enemy of the republic and has entertained him and his villainous conspirators at our very doors!"

Marcus Vicus observed that it seemed incredible, but was to be denied in the face of the evidence.

"Then my decision is altered! thundered the *pretor*. "The plaintiff shall take not only the property of the defendant to

satisfy the debt, but his person, to be held or sold in slavery."

Marcus Vicus was surprised and highly gratified; he lauded the admirable processes of justice and the law.

Rufus Frontinus was stunned, and he left the august presence of the *pretor* in silence with his master.

"You should appeal for a fair hearing and obtain an advocate, my friend," said a man who stood at the portal of the court, as Rufus passed him. "You are a victim of prejudice and injustice."

Rufus shook his head dully. Doubtless the man was an advocate in search of employment.

"This," he murmured to himself, as Marcus Vicus led him ostentatiously through the Forum, "is the cap to the climax! I submerge my patrimony in mortgages to buy peacocks for Caesar; then Caesar scorns me and I am cast into slavery for my pains. Now let the republic fall, or do whatever best suits it. Nothing matters with me!"

"I shall establish my residence at Tusculum, Rufus," said Marcus Vicus sociably, as they marched along, "and do not fear that you will be harshly treated. I have a stupid fellow now for my secretary, and you shall take his place and be more my companion than my slave."

Rufus shrugged his shoulders.

"Make me your goat-herd; 'twill please me better!" he exclaimed bitterly.

MARCUS VICUS took possession of the villa at Tusculum at once and reorganized the menage according to a money-lender's idea of what a gentleman's country place should be.

Rufus, against his will, was put in charge of the accounts, and his clerical duties, though not very arduous, irked him sorely.

His master admonished him against any effort to escape, explaining that death would be the penalty, and that the country was swarming with brigands and Greek pirates who would quickly seize him and sell him into slavery among barbarians.

The warning brought inspiration to

Rufus. Either death or the society of barbarians seemed eminently desirable to him at the moment. He watched his chance, caught the swiftest horse of the stables as it grazed in the field, and galloped away without regard to direction or destination.

He met the brigands, who were roving the disordered country in quest of plunder, but he escaped them on the fleet horse. Day by day put many leagues between himself and Rome. He was still dispirited and half-dazed by his misfortunes, and he moved without plan or design; but he thought vaguely that he would come at last to some tranquil spot, away from politicians and brigands, where he could rest and think.

He asked a peasant on the road to inform him of the country in which he found himself one evening, and learned that he was approaching the frontier town of Ariminum, and that there were many men-at-arms gathered there. Ariminum meant nothing to him, but men-at-arms did, and he turned back to another road in order to avoid them.

In the darkness of the late evening he forced his horse onward, unwilling to camp so near danger. Even as he began to think himself safe again, an archer rose out of the darkness and threatened to put an arrow through him if he did not halt instantly.

Rufus was unarmed, and he surrendered. His capture was inevitable, he reflected gloomily; and his dreams of security had been figments of a disordered mind.

The archer turned him over to other archers, and they marched him on foot, at no gentle pace, to the town of Ariminum. There he was led into the camp of soldiers. A bearded officer declared that he was a spy from the enemy's camp, or he would not have been riding away from Ariminum in the darkness of night, when the air was swarming with evil spirits and goblins.

A conference of the guard followed, and it was decided that Rufus was so suspicious a person that he must be presented before the general without delay.

Thus it was that Rufus Frontinus found

himself in the presence of Julius Caesar for the second time.

"A SPY, caught while riding speedily away from our camp," repeated Caesar, when the report of the guard was given. "And unless my eyes deceive me," he added suddenly, "it is the gentleman who dines on an evening upon peacocks and Falernian! Could it be, then, that you were a spy when you entertained me and my retinue so magnificently a while ago?"

"I am no spy!" answered Rufus defiantly. "I am a convicted debtor, a bond slave, a fugitive—most of all, a fool—but no spy!"

"That remains to be proven," remarked Caesar. "And I would counsel you, my friend, to abandon this defiant manner and plead your case with care. Bear in mind that the penalty for spying upon our movements is death."

"I could expect nothing better," returned Rufus bitterly, "and it may well be that that is good enough. The world no longer fits me, it seems, and the sooner I'm done with it the better."

"Take this man away and guard him closely," said Caesar to an officer. "You will be tried fairly before my appointed judges on the morrow," he added, turning coldly to Rufus again.

"It would be poetic justice," remarked Rufus, almost flippantly, "if I might be drowned in a cask of Falernian, or have my eyes pecked out by peacocks!"

"I am fond of humor, of a sort," replied Caesar, "but it is a rash man that ventures to turn a jest upon me."

An officer—one of Caesar's trusted spies—had arrived from Rome that day with important information. He had been standing by the fire with a group of his companions, but now he started suddenly and darted forward, peering into the face of the captive.

"Surely!" he cried. "It is the young gentleman that was thrown into bondage for debt the other day. You remember me," he added to Rufus. "I am the man that counseled you to obtain an advocate."

"I remember you," said Rufus glumly. "Perhaps you can tell Caesar enough of me now to insure and hasten my end."

"Why, I've no such intention," said the man, laughing. "I'd take my oath," he went on, saluting Caesar, "that this man is no spy. Else, why was he stripped of his estates and condemned to slavery by one of Pompey's own *pretors*. In fact, Caesar, he named you as a friend, and brought down added wrath upon his head. His property was taken from him to satisfy a creditor, and he was to be let go, but he named you in a luckless moment and lost his liberty for it."

"Naming me has been a luckless thing for more than one," remarked Caesar grimly. "But I am puzzled. Why was this prodigal young man, who lived like a Persian prince, so soon adjudged a debtor?"

"I heard something of the case," answered the officer, while Rufus stood silent, "and it seems that his revenues ceased and he was forced to borrow money for the maintenance of his house. He borrowed, at last, some twenty thousand *sesterces* in order, as he stated, to give a dinner to some gentlemen—one of whom was Julius Caesar."

CAESAR'S coldness gave place to sudden mirth. "It has been told among the barbarians," he cried, "that I am ten feet tall, that I have hoofs and a tail, that I eat children. But who spread the rumor that Caesar's dinner cost twenty thousand *sesterces*? Come, tell us, young man, what lead you to such a measure?"

"There is little to tell, but the story of my own folly," responded Rufus soberly. "Lucius Crastinus offered me the honor of your company, and counseled me to win your favor by giving a suitable entertainment. My own tastes are modest, and I knew little of the customs of such affairs, so I asked for advice. I was told to obtain peacocks and all available delicacies of the market. And I promptly did so."

Caesar burst into a roar of laughter, and

at once he was joined by all his officers.

"Then 'twas our glutton that set the stage and ruined a young gentleman's fortunes for an evening's diversion!" said Caesar when he caught his breath. "I'd have him trounced for that if he were not such a clown. So we ate and drank you out of your patrimony, Rufus Frontinus," he added, "and embittered your soul as well. And it seems that you did not call us ingrates or robbers, at least in public. Could you not call on Caesar for relief and aid in such a crisis?"

"There are some things which a Roman gentleman cannot do," replied Rufus simply. "I was easily gulled by Lucius Crastinus. The folly was mine, and the penalty was no less so. In the house of Frontinus we do not cry for quarter."

Caesar regarded him with a speculative smile.

"And I believe I said that you had not the spirit for a soldier," he murmured softly. "Tell me, how came you near the camp this evening?"

"I escaped from slavery, and was fleeing from all men—from all civilization," Rufus explained.

"Ah, it takes a man of spirit to become so bitter!" observed Caesar. "Now, Rufus Frontinus, what can we do to dispel this mood of yours? At present I am in rebellion against the republic; I am proscribed—an outlaw. I can offer you—if you follow me—nothing more sure than hardship, labor, and perhaps death. If my star remains bright, I may see Rome again, and you may see your estates restored."

"I do not fear hardship or death," replied Rufus. "When I sought your service, and was rejected, I understood the nature of the service."

Caesar studied him, smiling again. "It is hard for Caesar to confess himself in error," he said, "but there's nothing else to do. I was wrong, Rufus Frontinus, when I said you were not a soldier. You are a soldier, and a centurion in the army of Caesar. Now, let Pompey look to his laurels!"

The Devil Is a Woman

By GEORGE CHALLIS

Tizzo, beware the claws of the tigress, who rules the richest state in all Italy. Your swordsman's skill and courage has met no more dangerous enemy than the countess with the tyrant's hands. A vivid short novel

CHAPTER I

FIREBRAND IN THE DUST

CATERINA, Countess Sforza-Riario, mistress of the rich town of Forli, was tall, slenderly strong, and as beautiful as she was wise. She used to say that there was only one gift that God had denied her, a pair of hands that had the strength of a man in them. But if she had not a man's strength, she had a man's will to power, and more than a man's headlong courage.

She was not quite as cruel as Cesare Borgia, who now was overrunning the Romagna with his troops of Swiss and French and trained peasants, but she was cruel enough to be famous for her rage and for her vengeance. Sternness showed in the strength of her jaw and in the imperial arch of her nose, but usually she covered the iron of her with smiling pleasantry.

Three husbands had not been able to age her; she looked ten years younger than she was. This morning she looked younger than ever because her peregrine had three times outfooted the birds of the rest of the hawking party and swooped to victory from the dizzy height of the blue sky.

The entire troop had been galloping hard over hill and dale, sweeping through the soft soil of vineyards and orchards; crashing over the golden stand of ripe

wheat; soaring again over the rolling pasture lands until the horses were half exhausted and the riders nearly spent.

Her men-at-arms kept at a distance—picked men, every one, covered with the finest steel-plate armor from Milan. Most of them were armed with sword and spear; but a few carried the heavy arquebuses which were becoming more fashionable in war since the matchlock was invented.

Forty strong men-at-arms—to guard a hawking party! But at any moment danger might pour through a gap in the hills; might thrust down at them from the ravaging bands of the Borgia's conquering troops; or might come across the mountains from the treacherous and insatiable Florentines. Therefore even a hawking party must be guarded, for the countess would prove a rich prize.

The danger was real, and that whetted her sport. As she sat on her horse and stroked the hooded peregrine that was perched on her wrist, she looked down the steep cliff at whose edge she halted, at the long, rich sweep of land that was hers—still hers until the brown mountains of the Apennines rolled back into blueness and distance.

HER glance lowered. Two men and a woman were riding along the road, so far away that it seemed she could take all three into the palm of her hand. Yet



Gleaming ax lifted, Tizzo charged up the stairs, one man against three

her eyes were good enough to see the wind snatch the hat from the lady's head and carry it away across a hedge.

Before that cap landed, the rider of the white horse flashed over the hedge, caught the hat, and returned it to the lady.

The countess laughed with high pleasure. "A gentleman and a gentle man," she said. "Here, Gregorio! Do you see those three riding down there? Bring them to me. Send two of the men to invite them. If they won't come, bring them by force. I want to see that white horse; I want to see the man who rides it."

Gregorio bowed to cover his smile. He admired his lady only less than he feared her. And it was a month since any man had caught her eye.

He picked out two of the best men-

at-arms—Emilio, a sergeant in the troop, and Elia, an old and tried veteran of the wars which never ended in sixteenth-century Italy. They were quickly in the road ahead of the three travelers.

The two men-at-arms, their lances raised, the bright pennons fluttering near the gleam of the spear-heads, accosted the three, talked briefly, turned their horses, took a little distance, and suddenly couched their spears in the rests, leaned

far forward, rushed straight down the road at the strangers.

"Rough—a little rough," said the Countess Sforza-Riario. "Those two fellows are unarmed, it seems to me. That Emilio must be told that there is something more courteous in the use of strangers than a leveled lance."

But here something extremely odd happened. For the two men who were assaulted, instead of fleeing for their lives, rode right in at the spearmen!

One drew a long sword, the other a mere glitter of a blade. Each parried or swerved from the lance thrust. He of the long sword banged his weapon down so hard on the helmet of Emilio that the man-at-arms toppled from the saddle, rolled headlong on the ground, and reached to the feet of the horse of the lady.

She was on the ground instantly, with a little flash of a knife held at the visor of the fallen soldier.

"Good!" said the countess. "Oh, excellently good!" She began to clap her hands softly.

THE second rider—he on the white horse—had grappled with hardy Elia. Both of them were whirled from the saddle, but the man-at-arms fell prone, helpless with the weight of his steel; and the other perched like a cat on top of him. The gleam of his hair in the bright sunlight was flame-red.

"And all in a moment!" said the countess, laughing. "Roderigo, you should have better men than that in your command."

The captain, scowling, swore that there had been witchcraft in it.

"Aye," said the countess. "The witchcraft of sure eyes and quick, strong hands. . . . Did you see the lady leap from her horse like a tigress and hold her poniard above the helmet of your friend? Look, now! They are stripping the two of their armor. The big fellow is putting on that of Emilio; the redhead takes that of Elia.

"Roderigo, take three of your best

lances. Down to them again, and let me see them fight against odds, now that they are armed like knights. . . . Ah, what a glorious day—to go hawking for birds and end by swooping out of the sky at men!"

The four men-at-arms were quickly in the saddle and sweeping down the short, steep road; but here the countess found herself too far from the crash and dust of the battle. To gain a nearer view, she galloped after the four leaders, and her party followed in a stream.

Those loud trappings hardly could fail to be heard by the men in the roadway beneath; in fact, when her ladyship turned the shoulder of the cliff and could look at the scene, she found her four warriors already charging, heads down, lances well in rest, straight in on the pair. And these, in their borrowed armor, with their borrowed lances, galloped to meet the fresh shock.

Six metal monsters, flaming in the sun, they crashed together. The big fellow had lifted one of the men-at-arms right out of the saddle, but the counter-shock knocked his own horse to its knees; and at that instant the rearmost of the four men-at-arms caught the stranger with a well-centered spear that bowled him in his turn out of the saddle and into the dust.

The readhead had a different fortune. Riding straight, confident, he dropped suddenly to the side. One spear missed him utterly, while the second glanced off his shoulder. But his own spear caught fairly on a man-at-arms, knocking him over like a ninepin.

"This is jousting!" cried the countess. "Glorious God, *these* are men!"

He of the white horse, his spear shattered to the butt by the shock, whirled his horse and hurled against the last of the men-at-arms. In his hand he swung the old battle-ax which the veteran Elia had kept at the bow of his saddle.

In his hand, it became both a sword to parry with and a club to strike; a side sweep turned a driving spear of the soldier away, and a shortened hammer-blow

with the back of the ax rolled another foe on the road. All was a flying mist of dust, through which the countess heard the voice of a girl crying:

"Well done, Tizzo! Oh, bravely done!"

She had ridden to the spot where the larger of the two strangers had fallen, and leaning far down, helped him to his feet. Springing instantly into an empty saddle, he unsheathed his sword and prepared for whatever might be before them.

THE men-at-arms of the countess, swiftly surrounding the cyclone of dust, were ranged in a dense, invulnerable semicircle. And as Tizzo saw this, he began to rein his white horse back and forth, whirling the ax in a dexterous hand as he shouted in a passion of enthusiasm:

"Ah, gentlemen! We only begin the dance. Before the blood gets cold, take my hand again. Step forward. Join me, gallants!"

One of the men-at-arms, infuriated by these taunts, rushed horse and spear suddenly in on Tizzo; but a side twist of the ax turned the thrust of the spear aside, and a terrible downstroke shore straight through the conical crest of the helmet, through the coil of strong mail beneath, and stopped just short of the skull. The stricken fighter toppled from the saddle and seemed to break his neck in his fall.

Tizzo, still reining his horse back and forth, continued to shout his invitation, but a calm voice said: "Bring up an arquebus and knock this bird out of the air."

Not until then did the lady call out: "Stay from him. My friend, you have fought very well. . . . Pick up the fallen, lads. . . . Will you let me see your face?"

Tizzo instantly raised his visor.

"Madame," he said, "I should have saluted you before, but the thick weather prevented me."

The countess looked at his red hair and the flame-blue of his eyes. "What are you?"

Some of her men were lifting the fallen to their feet and opening their helmets

to give them air; by good fortune, not one was very seriously hurt. The huge, heavy rounds of the plate armor had secured them.

Tizzo answered the countess, with the utmost courtesy: "I am under the command of an older and more important man, my lady."

He turned to his companion, who pushed up his visor and showed a battered, grizzled face in which the strength of youth was a little softened into folds, but with greater knowledge in his brow to make him more dangerous.

"I am going to take the short cut, Tizzo," said the other. "Trust is a two-edged knife that hurts the fellow who uses it, I know, but here's for it, Madame, I am the Baron Henry of Melrose; this is the noble Lady Beatrice Baglione, sister of Giovan Paolo Baglione; this is my son Tizzo. We are on the road from near Faenza, where we've just escaped from the hands of Cesare Borgia, after a breath of poisoned air almost killed me. We are bound back toward Perugia. There is our story."

THE countess rode straight to Beatrice and took her by the hands. "My dear," she said, "I'm happy that you escaped from that beast of a Borgia. Come with me into Forli. You shall rest there, and then go forward under a safe-conduct.

"My Lord of Melrose—those were tremendous blows you gave with that sword; Sir Tizzo, you made the ax gleam in your hand like your name. I thought it was a firebrand flashing! Will you come on with me? Some of you ride to the castle. Have them prepare a welcome. . . ."

"Ah, that Borgia! The black dog has put his teeth in the heart of the Romagna, but he'll fight for my blood before he has it!"

The countess, talking thus cheerfully, put the little procession under way again, and they streamed up the winding road toward the top of the cliff. But all her courtesy was not enough to cover the eyes of Beatrice.

Caterina of Sforza-Riario headed the riders, naturally, and Tizzo was at her right hand, by seeming accident. A little back of the two came Beatrice at the side of Henry of Melrose. And the girl was saying: "Do you see how she eyes Tizzo? She is making herself sweet as honey, but I know her. She's a famous virago. . . . How can Tizzo be such a fool as to be taken in by her? I don't think she's so very handsome, do you?"

The baron looked at her with a rather grim smile for her jealousy. "She is not worth one glance of your eyes, Beatrice," he declared. "But Tizzo would be a greater fool still if he failed to give her smile for smile. She has three birds in her claws, and if she's angered she's likely to swallow all of us. She never was so deeply in love that could not wash her hands and her memory of the lover clean in blood.

"Be cheerful, Beatrice, or you may spoil everything. I have an idea that after the gates of Forli Castle close behind us it will be a long day before we come out again."

They passed over the green uplands, and sank down into the road toward the walled town of Forli. The city itself was a place of considerable strength, but within it uprose the "Rocca"—or castle on the rock—which was the citadel and the stronghold of the town. No one could be real master of Forli until he had mastered the castle on the rock. And young Tizzo, riding beside the countess, making his compliments, took quiet note of the mouths of the cannons in the embrasures of the walls.

The drawbridge had already been lowered. They crossed it, with the hollow echoes booming beneath them along the moat.

Tizzo was the first on the ground to offer his hand to hold the stirrup of the countess. But she, laughing, avoided him, and sprang like a man to the ground. She was tall—almost the very inches of Tizzo; she had power in her hand and speed in her foot. She looked at Tizzo

like an Amazon; he could not help glancing past her to the more slender beauty of Beatrice and wondering what the outcome of this strange adventure would be.

CHAPTER II

THE LIONESSE TAKES THOUGHT

THE courtesy of the countess might be perfect, but it was noticeable that she assigned to the three strangers three rooms in quite different parts of the castle.

The Countess Riario, stepping up and down in her room, said to her maid: "You, Alicia—you have seen him—what do you think?"

"When I saw the flame of his hair, madame, and the blue of his eyes, I understood that he was a very proper man, though not exactly a giant—"

"Judge a dog by the depth of his bite, not by the length of his muzzle," said the countess. "I saw him carve Giulio's helmet almost down to the skull—the helmet and mail beneath it!"

"Jesu!" cried the maid.

"And with a stroke as light and easy as the flick of a hand. He is a man, Alicia. I want to send him a gift of some sort. What shall it be? . . . Wait—there is a belt of gold with amethyst studs—have that carried to him at once, and give him my wish that he may rest comfortably after his hard journey.

"Ah—if you had seen him battling, Alicia! If you had seen him rushing among my men, and tumbling them over—*pouf*—like that. It was a picture to fill the heart, Alicia. . . .

"Why are standing there like a lack-brain? Why don't you take the belt to him instantly?"

"I beg the pardon of madame. . . . You forget that you already have given it to Giovanni degli Azurri."

"Ah—ah—that Giovanni? . . . Is he still in the castle?"

"Madame, you had supper with him last night; and dinner before it; and breakfast in the morning—"

"Did I? That was yesterday. And I

hate a man with a greasy skin. Besides he talks too much! Here! Take this lute to Tizzo. Tell him it is from my hand, and then we'll see if he has wit enough to sing a song with it; and through the singing, he may be able to discover that his room is not very far from mine—not very far—hurry, Alicia!

"Wait—give something to the others. To the baron—let me see— Ten years younger, and I would not have changed a dozen Tizzos for one such big-shouldered fighter. Have a good warm cloak of English wool carried to him. And then the girl—I hate silly faces, Alicia. I hate silly, young, witless, thoughtless faces. . . . Do you think that young Tizzo has an eye for her?"

"One would call her pretty enough to take a young man's eye," said the girl.

"Pretty enough? Silly enough, you mean. Take her a dish of sweetmeats with my compliments. Pretty enough? Look at *me*, Alicia. Tell me how I appear, now that I'm no longer a girl, in the eyes of a man."

ALICIA, thus challenged, trembled so that her knees hardly would bear her up. If she did not tell truth, she would be beaten; if she did not convey some sort of a compliment, she would be cast out like rubbish.

"Madame," she stammered, "when men see you in the morning they are filled with delight; in the full light of the noon-day—a time for which madame the countess doesn't care a whit anyway—a man would think you a very handsome good friend; and in the evening light, madame is always adored."

"At noon the wrinkles show, eh?" asked the countess.

"No, madame, but—"

The countess turned her head slowly, like a lioness, so that the strength of her chin and the powerful arch of her nose stood in relief against the blue Apennines beyond the window.

"Well—" she said. "Well, run about your business. And don't forget to take the lute."



It was ten minutes later when Alicia, out of breath, tapped at a door in a certain way; and it was opened almost at once by a tall, powerfully built man in early middle age, his beard and mustaches close-cropped to permit the wearing of a helmet, his complexion swarthy, his eye easily lighted, like a coal of fire when a draught of air blows upon it.

He took her by the elbows, kissed her, and drew her into the room.

"Now, Alicia, what's the news?" he asked.

"Trouble for you, Giovanni," she said. "In that lot of people whom the countess picked up while she was hawking, there was a red-headed and blue-eyed young fellow who has caught her eye. She sent me to him with that enameled lute as a present."

"The one which I gave to *her*?" exclaimed Giovanni.

"The very same one. She never can remember who has given her things," the girl said.

"I had better find a way to call the man into a quarrel," said Giovanni. "The countess will always forgive what a sword-stroke accomplishes honestly."

"Yes, of course," said Alicia. "And if the stranger should happen to cut your throat, she would bury you today and forget you tomorrow. The Tizzo of Mel-

rose—have you heard about him?"

"No," said Giovanni.

"Well, there is a rumor running about the castle now. One of the men-at-arms was at the taking of Perugia, when Giovan Paolo Baglione returned to the town, and this is the Tizzo who rode beside him. He does strange things with an ax. There is a story that he shore through the chains that blocked the streets of Perugia against the horsemen of Baglioni."

"Cut through the street-chains? With an ax? Impossible!" said Giovanni.

"Just now, when the fighting men of the countess attacked him, he knocked them about, and whacked them off their horses. A sword is like a magic flame in his hands. It burns through armor like a sting of a wasp through the skin of the hand."

"Ah?" said Giovanni.

"The countess saw the fighting and is enchanted. Giovanni, have a good care—"

"Hush!" said he. "Listen!"

HE HELD up his hand and began to make soft steps towards the single casement that opened out of his room upon one of the castle courts. Alicia followed him, nodding, for the trembling music of a lute had commenced, and then a man's voice began to sing, not over loudly, one of those old Italian songs which have originated no one knows when or where. Roughly translated, it runs something like this:

*What shall I do with this weariness of light?
The day is like the eye of a prying fool
And the thought of a lover is burdened by it.
Only the stars and the moon have wisdom.
Of all the birds there is only a single one,
Of all the birds one who knows that night
is the time for song.
And I of all men understand how to wait
for darkness.
Oh, my beloved, are you, also, patient?*

From the casement, leaning into the deep of it, Giovanni saw a crimson scarf of silk, with a knot tied into the center of it, drop from a window, and as it passed a casement immediately below, a

swift hand darted out and caught it. There was only a glimpse of a young fellow with flame red-hair, and gleaming eyes, and laughter. Then he and the scarf he had caught disappeared.

"Did you see?" said Giovanni, drawing back darkly.

"I saw. And I had warned you, Giovanni."

"Yes, and before night," said he. "But if the devil is so apt with weapons—well, there is wine and poison for it, Alicia."

"There is," agreed the girl, simply.

"What was in that scarf?"

"A ring—or an unset jewel, with the fragrance of her favorite perfume drenching it. Giovanni, you must send him away."

"Aye, but how?"

"Well, you have a brain and I have a brain. Between the two of us we must devise something. Sit there—sit there still as a stone, and I'll sit here without moving until we've devised something. The air of Italy cannot be breathed without bringing thoughts."

CHAPTER III

DEATH WAITS IN SHADOW

TIZZO of Melrose whistled and did a dance along a crack in the timber floor of his room. His feet fell with no noise, and always, as he bounded forward and backward, they alighted exactly on the line. It was a mere *jongleur's* trick, but Tizzo, when the humor seized upon him, was merely a *jongleur*. And one day he wanted to do that same dance high in the air on a tightly stretched rope.

A soft tap at the door stopped him. He heard a soft rustle whisper down the outer hall and vanish from hearing. After that he opened the door and found on the threshold a little folded missive.

He opened it, and inside found the writing which most quickly made his heart leap. It was the hand of Beatrice—a little more roughly and largely flowing than the writing of that high lady, perhaps, but still so exactly like it that Tizzo did

not pause to consider the differences. He kissed the letter twice before he closed the door and then read it.

TIZZO:

There is frightful danger for all of us in the Rocca. But we have found an unexpected friend. Your father and I already have been smuggled out of the castle. We are waiting for you outside the town.

When you receive this letter, go straight to the eastern court. There you will see a horse covered by a large blanket. It will be your own Falcone. The man leading it will unlock the postern for you. Go quietly through the town, keeping your face covered with your mantle and the blanket on the horse so that you will not be known. On the main road to Imola, beyond Forli, you will reach a farmhouse with a ruined stable beside it. The house will seem to be unoccupied, but go straight in through the front door and call. Your father and I are waiting.

God bless you and keep you. The countess is a devil incarnate. Come quickly.

BEATRICE.

Tizzo went quickly.

He clapped on his head his hat with the strong steel lining, belted his sword about him, and was instantly in the corridor.

TIZZO passed out into the eastern court, where he saw not a living soul. He looked up at the windows, most of them dark. Then, in a farther corner, something stirred. A man leading a draped horse stepped out into the starlight and Tizzo went to him. When he was closer, the blanketed horse lifted head and whinnied, a mere whisper of sound. But it told Tizzo louder than trumpets that this was Falcone.

The fellow who led the stallion gave the strap instantly into Tizzo's hand. Not a word was spoken. The man fitted a key into the postern gate. The lock turned; the door opened; over the narrow causeway Tizzo led the horse.

"Whom do I thank?" he murmured as he went through the gate.

But the postern was shut quickly, silently behind him.

An odd touch of suspicion came up in

the heart of Tizzo; and at this moment he heard the whining music of strings come from a distant casement with such a sense of warmth and hospitality and brightness about it that he could not help doubting the truth of Beatrice's letter.

This hesitation did not endure a second. His sword was at his side, his dagger was in his belt, and if only he could have been in his grasp, once more, that woodsman's ax with its head of the blue Damascus steel, he would have felt himself once more a man free and armed against the perils of the world.

He jugged the stallion through dark by-streets. Falcone galloped softly, safely out of the town onto the broad surface of the famous road which slants across the entire north of Italy.

A moon came up and helped him to see, presently, a ruined farmhouse fifty steps from the edge of the pavement; the roof of the stable beside the house had fallen in through two-thirds of its length. The house itself had settled crookedly towards the ground.

Tizzo dismounted, and walked forward gingerly. The long black of his shadow wavered before him with each step.

Tizzo stood at the threshold. "Beatrice!"

The sound of his voice traveled swiftly through the place, came emptily back to him in an echo.

HE STEPPED forward. Through the door, the moon streamed into the interior. He could make out a pile of rubbish that had fallen from the wreck of half the ceiling; a huge oil jar stood in a corner; he could make out, dimly, the outlines of the fireplace.

"Beatrice!"

"Here!" shouted a man behind him. And at once: "At him, lads, before his sword's out—in on him from every side—"

Three men were rushing through the doorway full upon him, the moon flashed on their morions, on their breastplates and the rest of their half-armor.

Tizzo whipped out his sword so that it whistled from the sheath. If he could get through them to the door, Falcone was outside, but only a ruse would take him that far. He ran at them with his sword held above his head, shouting a desperate cry, as though with his unarmored body he would strive to crush straight through them. And they, all as anxious to drive their weapons into him, thrust out with one accord.

He was under the flash of their swords, hurling himself headlong at their feet. Once before he had saved his life by that device.

The fellow who had tripped over him fell headlong, crashing. Another had been staggered and Tizzo, as he gained his knees, thrust upward at the back of the man's body. A scream answered that stroke. A scream that had no ending as the man leaped about the room in a frightful agony.

And Tizzo, gasping, breathless, rose to face the attack of the third soldier.

The strokes of the short sword might be parried; but the shield gave the man a terrible advantage and he used it well, keeping himself faultlessly covered as he drove in, calling at the same time: "Up, Tomaso! Up! Up! Alfredo, stop screeching and strike one blow, you dog. Take him behind! Have you forgot the money that's waiting for us? Are fifty ducats thrown into our laps every day?"

Alfredo had stopped his dance, but now he lay writhing on the floor; and still that horrible screeching cut through the ears, through Tizzo's brain.

He saw Tomaso lurching up from the floor. His sword and shield would put a quick end to this battle of moonlight and shadow, this obscure murder.

Tizzo fainted for the head of the third soldier; the shield jerked up to catch the stroke which turned suddenly down and the point drove into the leg of the fellow above the knee. He cursed; but instinct made him lower his shield toward the wound and in that moment Tizzo's sword was in the hollow of his throat.

He fell heavily forward, not dead, fighting death away with one hand and striving to hold the life inside his torn throat with the other. Tizzo snatched up the fallen shield and faced Tomaso, who had been maneuvering toward the rear of the enemy to make a decisive attack.

"Mother of Heaven!" groaned Tomaso. "What? Both down?"

THE screeching of Alfredo turned into frightful, long-drawn groaning, sounds that came with every long, indrawn breath. Tomaso fell on his knees.

"Noble master! Mercy!" he said.

He held up sword and shield.

"By the blood of God," said Tizzo. "I should put you with the other two. But I was born a weak-hearted fool. Drop your sword and shield and I may give you your life if you tell the truth."

The sword and buckler instantly clattered on the floor. "I swear—the pure truth—purer than the honor of—"

"Keep good names out of your swine's mouth," said Tizzo.

The soldier arose and Tizzo leaned on his sword to take breath. He saw the man who had been stabbed in the throat now rise from the floor, make a staggering stride, and fall headlong. He who lay groaning turned, lay on his face, and began to make bubbling noises.

"Do you hear me, Tomaso?" asked Tizzo.

"With my soul—with my heart!" said Tomaso.

"Who was to pay you the fifty ducats?"

"Giovanni degli Azurri."

"Ah?" said Tizzo. He looked back in his mind to the dark face and the bright eyes of the man who had appeared at the table of the countess for the mid-day meal. In what manner had he offended Giovanni degli Azurri? Undoubtedly the fellow was acting on the orders of the countess.

"Tell me, Tomaso," he asked, "what is the position of Giovanni degli Azurri in the castle of the countess?"

"How can I tell, lord? He is one of

the great ones. That is all I know, and he showed us fifty ducats of new money."

"Fifty ducats is a large price for the cutting of a throat."

"Be silent," said Tizzo, freshening his grip on the handle of his sword. He had to pause a moment, breathing hard, to get the disgust and the anger from his heart. "This Giovanni degli Azurri," he said, "is one of the great ones of the castle, and a close adviser of the countess?"

"He is, *signore*."

The thing grew clear in Tizzo's mind. The countess already knew that he and his father had parted from the Borgia with sword in hand. Would it not be a part of her policy to conciliate the terrible Cesare Borgia, therefore, by wiping an enemy out of his path? But she would do it secretly, away from the castle. Otherwise, the thing might come to the ears of the High and Mighty Baglioni of Perugia, who would be apt to avenge with terrible thoroughness the murder of their friend.

And Henry of Melrose? Beatrice Baglione? What would come to them?

It was a far, far cry to Perugia. Help nearer at hand must be found to split open the Rocca and bring out the captives alive.

He began to remember how, to please the fair countess, he had accepted the lute from her and sung her the love song. And a black bitterness swelled in his heart; a taste of gall was in his throat.

CHAPTER IV

APPOINTMENT WITH THE RACK

HIS name was Luigi Costabili; his height was six feet two; his weight was two hundred; the horse that carried him was proud of the burden. Luigi Costabili wore a jacket quartered with the yellow and red colors of Cesare Borgia, with *Cesare* written across the front and across the back.

Among the enrolled bands of the Romagnol peasantry who followed the Borgia

there was not a finer specimen than Costabili. He knew his own worth even better than he knew his master's. Therefore he paid little heed to a slender man who rode out onto the Faenza highway on a white stallion. But when the stranger came straight on toward him, Luigi Costabili lifted his pike from his foot and stared, then lowered the weapon to the ready.

The stranger had red hair and bright, pale blue eyes, like the blue one sees in a flame. When he was close to Luigi he called out, in the most cheerful and calm voice imaginable, "Defend yourself!" and drew a sword.

"Defend myself? I'll split you like a partridge!"

And he let drive with his pike. He had practiced a maneuver which the master of arms said was infallible. It consisted of a double feint for the head, followed with a hard drive straight for the body. Luigi used that double feint and thrust with perfect adroitness and facility, but the sword did a magic dance in the hand of the other; the pike was slipped aside, and the white horse, as though it was thinking on behalf of its master, sprang right in to the attack.

He was far lighter than the charger Luigi bestrode, but he drove his shoulder against the side of Luigi's big brown gelding with such force that man and rider were staggered.

Luigi caught for the reins, snatched out his dagger, and then had his right arm numbed by a hard stroke that fell on it below the shoulder.

If that blow had been delivered with the edge, Luigi would have been a man without a right arm and hand during the rest of his days; but the whack was delivered with the flat of the blade only and the result was merely that the dagger dropped from the benumbed fingers of the big soldier.

He looked down the leveled blade of the red-headed man and felt that he was blinded. Helplessness rushed over him. Bewilderment paralyzed him as effectively as though he had been stung by a great

wasp. So he sat without attempting resistance and allowed a noosed cord to be tossed over him and his arms cinched up close against his sides.

A turn of the cord about the pommel of the saddle secured him as efficiently as though he were a truss of hay.

"What is your name?"

"Luigi Costabili. And God forgive me!"

"God *will* forgive you for being Luigi. Do you know me?"

"I know the trick you have with your sword."

"I am Tizzo of Melrose."

Costabili closed his eyes. "Then I am a dead man."

"Luigi, how do you come to ride such an excellent horse?"

"It was given to me by the Duke of Valentinois himself," said Luigi, "because I won the prize at the pike drill of the whole army."

"He is going to give you a greater gift than that," said Tizzo, "if you will carry safely and quickly to him a letter which I'll put in your hands."

"I shall carry it as safely as a pigeon, highness. But you—pardon me—you are not Tizzo. He is half a foot taller than you."

"I am Tizzo," was the answer, accompanied by a singular little smile and a glint of the eye that made Luigi stare.

"Yes, highness," he said. "You are whatever you say, and I am your faithful messenger."

"Luigi, if I set you honorably free and let you have your weapons, will you do as you promise and ride straight to the duke?"

"Straight, my lord! Straight as an arrow flies or as a horse can run . . . Tizzo . . . the captain himself!"

The last words were murmured.

IN THE Rocca of the town of Forli, Caterina Sforza strode up and down. Anger made her eyes glorious, her color was high. Only occasionally did she sweep her eyes over the figures of the two who were before her, their hands and their

feet weighted down with irons. Henry of Melrose carried his gray head high and serenely. But his jaw was set hard and his eyes followed the sweeping steps of the virago. The Lady Beatrice looked calmly out the window and seemed unconscious of the manacles that bound her.

"Treachery!" said the Lady of Forli, panting out the words. "Treachery and treason!"

The men-at-arms who remained in a solid cluster just inside the door of the room stirred as they listened, and their armor clashed softly. Giovanni degli Azurri, their leader, actually gripped his sword and looked at the big Englishman as though he were ready to rush at him with a naked weapon.

"One of you or both of you know where the sneaking, hypocritical, lying thief has gone and how he managed to get out of the castle," cried Caterina Sforza.

"If my son is a thief," said the Baron of Melrose, "will you tell us what he stole?"

"My smallest jewel case with my finest jewels in it!"

Here the eyes of Giovanni degli Azurri glanced down and aside suddenly. And the corners of his mouth twitched slightly.

"A great emerald, two rubies, and a handful of diamonds!" said the countess. "Gone—robbed from me—stolen—by a half-breed dog! A half-breed dog!"

She stopped and stamped, and glared at the Englishman. His color did not alter as he answered without heat: "You have tied up my hands with iron, madame. But even if you had not, in my country a man cannot resent a woman's insult."

"A scoundrel!" cried the countess. "I could see it in his face. A sneaking, light-footed, quick-handed thief! Ah, God, when I remember the red heart of fire in the biggest of my rubies . . . and gone . . . gone to an adventuring, smiling, singing, damned mongrel! But I'll tear it out of you! The executioner knows how to tear conversation out of the flesh of men. Stronger men than Henry of Melrose have

howled out their confessions, and I've stood by and listened with my own ears—and laughed and listened—and laughed. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you, madame."

"Will you tell me now," demanded the countess, "where Tizzo has gone? Or must the rack stretch you first? Will you tell me what poisonous treason enabled him to get out of my castle without permission?"

"Could no one else have let him go?"

"Giovanni degli Azurri," said the countess. She turned and fixed a blazing eye on the face of her favorite.

But Giovanni smiled and shook his head. "Is it likely that I'd steal the jewels of your highness and give them to that redhead?" he asked. "Had I any reason for loving him?"

"No," declared the countess, convinced suddenly and entirely. "No, you had no reason. But treachery was somewhere in this castle."

SHE strode across the room and gripped the bright hair of Beatrice. A jerk of her hand forced the girl's head back. "If the Englishman has the strength to hold out in the torture room," said the countess, "how long will your courage last, eh? How long before you will be squealing and squawking and yelping out everything you know?"

"Try me, then," said the Lady Beatrice. "Take me down quickly. Heat the pincers. Oil the wheels of your rack."

The countess relaxed her grip and stepped back. She began to stare with narrowed eyes into the face of the girl. "There's as much as this in you, is there?"

"I am the sister of Giovan Paolo Baglione," said the girl. "And I shall be the wife of Tizzo. And what can you rats of the Romagna do to the old Perugian blood?"

The countess struck with a powerful hand, twice. "Take her! Now! Take her! Giovanni, drag her by the hair down to the dungeon rooms."

Giovanni degli Azurri made two or

three eager steps across the room before the sudden thunder of Melrose's voice shocked him to a pause.

"Do you forget the Baglioni?" Melrose shouted. "Do you know that Perugian banners will be flying all around your town of Forli within a month? For the two blows that have struck her face, two hundred of your men will die, madame!"

The countess stared curiously at Melrose, half her passion almost instantly gone.

"Take the girl—but not by the hair of the head," she said to Giovanni degli Azurri. "And now away with you. Let me stay here a moment with the baron, alone."

The girl walked uncompelled toward the stairs. From the head of them she smiled back over her shoulder towards Melrose. "We'll find each other again," she said.

"We shall, by the grace of God."

"I'd put a quicker trust in Tizzo," said Beatrice.

Giovanni degli Azurri, going down last, called back: "Are you safe with him, alone?"

The countess pulled from her girdle a dagger with a seven-inch blade, the light dripping from its keenness like water from a melting icicle. "This is enough company for me," she said. "See the girl safely locked up before you come back."

WHEN Giovanni was gone, she turned to Melrose again. The last of her passion was falling away from her, though she still breathed deep.

"My lord," she said to Melrose, "what was the mother of Tizzo?"

"An angel out of the bluest part of heaven."

"Is the thief's blood in you, then?"

"He would no more steal from a woman than he would lie to the face of the Almighty."

"But the jewels are gone," said the countess, "and he has gone with them."

The face of the baron grew very pale. He said: "Madame, what you say seems

to be true. He was here—and now he is gone. I tell you my answer. You see my right hand. Well, this hand is not such a true servant to me, or so close to my blood, as my son is. That is all I can say."

"So?" said the countess. "Well—perhaps you are right. Perhaps you are right. But your face is a little too white, my lord. I think that strange things are happening in Rocca and that you know something about them. And the executioner will ask you questions on the rack. I am sorry to say it. You have an old head and a young eye. I am very sorry for you."

"Madame," said Melrose, "I am young enough to be afraid of you; but I am old enough not to be afraid of death."

She looked at him with a smile that was almost pleasant. "I like that," she said. "There's something neat in what you say. Will you speak as well when you're on the rack?"

"I hope so," he answered.

"Go before me down the stairs, then," said the lady. "For once be discourteous to a lady and walk before her. Thank you."

She began to laugh, and the sweet echoes of her laughter ran before them down the steep stairs and came softly back from below.

CHAPTER V

I OFFER MY SWORD

CESARE BORGIA lay on his back in the sun with a mask over the slightly swollen deformity of his upper face, his eyes closed, his attention fixed on nothing but the stir of the wind in the grass about him, and the clean fragrance of moist earth and flowers.

Beside him, always standing erect, was Allesandro Bonfadini, the pallor of whose face would never be altered by all the sunshine of Italy. Men said that his body was so filled with the poisons which he took as preventatives in the service of his dangerous master that neither sun

nor air could work upon him as it worked upon other men. It was even said that, when he sat in a perfectly dark room, a dim halo was visible creeping out of his skin. So that he seemed, in the darkness, like a ghost.

And even in the broad daylight, one could not look at his cadaverous face without thinking of death.

The door to the walled garden of the tavern opened. An armored soldier called: "Bonfadini! Bonfadini!"

Bonfadini turned and waved a hand to command silence. But the soldier persisted: "A message from Captain Tizzo—"

The Borgia leaped suddenly to his feet. "From Captain Tizzo?" he exclaimed. "Bring the man to me instantly."

He went striding off with great steps, a huge man, startlingly powerful the moment he was in motion. Through the silk of his hose, the big calf muscle slipped or bulged like a fist being flexed and relaxed.

Before him, voices called orders that were repeated far away. And Bonfadini ran to keep close to his master.

They were halfway through the garden before Luigi Costabili appeared, with the dust of his hurried ride still white on his uniform. He was busily trying to dust off that white when he saw the duke and fell on his knees.

"Get up and don't be a fool," said the Borgia. "Soldiers kneel to their king or their God; but in the Romagna my men in armor kneel to nothing but a bullet or a sword stroke. Stand up, and remember that you are a man. Have you seen Captain Tizzo?"

"I have here a letter from him. I met him on the highroad," said Luigi.

"Why didn't you arrest the traitor and bring him here?" asked the Borgia.

His voice was not angry, but the peasant turned a greenish white.

"My lord, I tried to arrest him, but I was prevented—"

"You had bad luck with him and his sword," said the Borgia. "Well, other people have had bad luck with that will-o'-

the-wisp. Bonfadini, read the letter to me. Was Captain Tizzo alone? On the white horse, Falcone? Was he well?"

"Alone, my lord. There was no one with him; he seemed—I don't know, my lord. He doesn't seem like other men."

"He is *not* like other men," agreed the Borgia. "Because you brought me a letter from him, here is five ducats."

"My lord, I thank you from my heart; you are very kind."

"And because you failed to bring the man himself—holla! Lieutenant! Catch this fellow and give him a sound flogging!"

Poor Luigi was led off.

"Read! Read!" said the Borgia, and began to walk up and down in a great excitement.

THE white face of Bonfadini, unalterable as stone, slowly pronounced the words of the letter: "My noble lord: I left you the other night in such a hurry that I hardly had time to tell you why I was going. And certainly I did not know where. The only thing that was obvious was that my father was fighting for his life.

"Since then, I've heard something about a moonlight night, a dead cat, and poison in the air. It seems that my father, not knowing as I do the excellent heart of your highness, grew a little excited . . ."

"Good!" said the Borgia. "Not knowing as he does, eh? Ah, Bonfadini, there is a red devil on the head and in the heart of that Tizzo that pleases me. I wish I might have him back with me again."

"Would it be wise, my lord, since he knows that his own father was almost poisoned in your house?"

"But not by my orders, perhaps. Who can tell?"

"Yes," said Alessandro Bonfadini, "who can tell?"

"Continue the reading."

Bonfadini went on: "First he warned Lady Beatrice to leave the tavern. His mind was half bewildered by the effects of the poison. He looked for me, failed

to find me, and then went on with the next part of his program, blindly. You, my lord, were to die. He went straight to your room, broke into it, and, at the moment when I heard you call out for help, was about to cut the head of your serene highness from your noble neck. You may recall the moment when I got to the spot.

"However, the three of us managed, as you know, to escape from the hands of your men; we rode like the devil across country and found ourselves in the morning of the next day surrounded by the men-at-arms of the Lady of Forli. You know her, of course. She's a big creature, handsome, with a good, swinging step, and a hearty laugh and an eye that brightens wherever it touches. But a twist of strange circumstances made her decide that I would be better under ground than above it. Unlike your tactful self, she used three murderers instead of a whiff of poisoned fragrance on a moonlight night. However, the moon helped me. I danced with the three of them till two fell down and the third was willing to talk. He told me a story that leaves my blood cold and my skin crawling.

"My lord, I am safely out of Forli. But inside of it remain the two people I love—my father and my lady. To ride to Perugia is a long journey; and it would take them a long time to attack Forli from that distance.

"But your highness is within arm's stretch of Forli. You easily can find the will to attack the place. It is just the sort of a morsel that would slip most easily down your throat.

"Well, I can offer nothing of great value, because I have spent my fortune as fast as it was showered on me. I hate to use pockets or hang purses around my neck, and therefore I have no place to carry money.

"However, my lord, I have one thing remaining, and it shall be yours. Will you have it? Two hands, two feet, and a heart that will never weaken in your service.

"For how long shall I serve you?" That, my lord, is a bargaining point. The Devil might demand my service for life. But the Borgia, perhaps, will let me off with three months. For three months, my lord, I am at your beck and call, but there are certain slight conditions that I would like to make and certain Borgian duties which I would avoid as, for instance:

"Stabbing in the back.

"Poison in wine or elsewhere.

"Midnight murder in the dark.

"But otherwise, I am completely yours. If my lord chooses me and my service on these terms, he may ride out of the tavern and take the road towards Forlì. I shall be waiting to meet him if he is accompanied by not more than two men-at-arms.

"Ever my lord's faithful servant and obedient friend—Tizzo."

THE Borgia began to laugh again. "Where is the Florentine secretary?" he asked. "Where is Machiavelli? Call him down to me here and let me have his advice on this letter and its writer. This Machiavelli has a young brain but a good one."

Accordingly, a young man dressed all in black entered the garden a moment later. He was of a middle size, and when he took off his hat to the duke, he showed a head of rather small dimensions, covered with glistening black hair. His lips were thin and secret. Perhaps it was they that gave a slight touch of the cat to his face. His eyes were very restless, very bright.

"Niccolo," said the duke, "here is a letter. Read it and tell me what to think of the writer."

Machiavelli read the letter half through, raised his head to give one bright, grave look to the duke, and then continued to the end.

After that he said, without hesitation: "If this is an elderly adventurer, I'd have him put out of the way as soon as possible; if it is a low-born man, have him thoroughly flogged where ten thousand

men may hear him howl; but if he is young and well-born, I would attach him to me at any price."

"Good!" said the Borgia. "Machiavelli, you have a brain that the world will hear from one day. There is something about you that pleases me beyond expression. . . . Do you notice that he is willing to meet me if I don't bring with me more than two men-at-arms? That's characteristic of this Tizzo. If the odds are only three to one, he feels at home. . . . Horses! Horses! Machiavelli, you and Bonfadini alone shall ride out with me to meet this red-headed fellow!"

CHAPTER VI

CRY BORGIA

THEY rode from the tavern, the duke giving orders for the company of Tizzo's Romagnol infantry to be gathered at once. And with that word behind, the Borgia rode on between Machiavelli and Alessandro Bonfadini. In his hand, Cesare Borgia carried a naked ax that looked like the common ax of a woodsman, except that the color of the steel was a delicate blue.

They had not gone down the road for a mile when something white flashed behind them from a tuft of willows and a rider on a white stallion was in the way to their rear.

The Borgia called out, and waved the ax over his head.

"That's Tizzo," he said. "As wary as a cat, and as dangerous as a hungry tiger. I tell you, Machiavelli, that if he thought any great purpose would be served by it, he would ride at us and put his single hand against the three of us."

"He may be a very sharp tool," said Machiavelli, "but he will be in the hand of a very great artisan."

At this, the Borgia smiled. He rode out ahead of the other pair, and Tizzo came to meet him, doffing his hat, then closing to take the hand of the Duke of Valentino. The duke kept that hand in a great grasp.

"Now, Tizzo," he said, "I have you. I accept your own terms. Three months of service. And this evening I start with my army for Forli. It is, as you suggest, a morsel of exactly the right size to fit my throat. But what if that hard-hearted devil of a Caterina Forza murders her prisoners before we can storm the walls of the castle?"

"Aye," said Tizzo, "I had thought about that, too. What other chance can I take, though?"

"Here is Bonfadini whom you remember well," said the duke.

"My father remembers him better, however," said Tizzo, looking grimly at the stone-white face of the poisoner.

"And here is my friend and adviser, good Niccolo Machiavelli. He has come from Florence to look into our ways."

"He will find many wonderful things," said Tizzo, dryly.

But the Borgia merely laughed; for his spirits seemed high from the moment he had read the letter of Tizzo. "Ride on ahead of us," he said to Tizzo. "There are your Romagnol peasants that you were forming into good soldiers. They haven't forgotten you. Go on to them. They're good fellows and they love you."

A swarm of the peasants, bright in the red and yellow quarterings of the Borgia, had poured across the road from the tavern. Tizzo galloped his white horse towards them and was greeted by a loud shouting of: "Duca! Duca!" in honor of the duke, followed by a thundering roar for Tizzo, the captain.

"Now that you've seen him," said the duke to Machiavelli, "what do you think of him?"

The young statesman said: "That is the sort of a sword that I would leave in the scabbard until there was straightforward work to do."

"Perhaps. His men love him. They shout themselves hoarse. I knew they were fond of him, but this is devotion. Such a man could be a dangerous force in an army, Niccolo."

"When a tool has accomplished its pur-

pose," said Machiavelli, "it should be broken before it is thrown away."

The Borgia glanced aside at him, and then, slowly, smiled.

THAT blue-headed ax of steel which the Borgia had carried to the meeting on the road by Faenza was once more in the hands of Tizzo. His sword was at his side. The white horse stepped lightly beneath him. He was not cased from head to foot in complete steel, as most mounted soldiers were, but wore merely an open helmet, or steel cap, with a breastplate and shoulder-pieces.

The dawn had not yet commenced but it would not be long delayed; and Tizzo's peasant soldiery, armed with arquebuses and pikes and short swords, moved behind him with a steady thrumming of feet.

He had been given the vanguard; a mile back of him came the French soldiers with the famous Swiss pikemen behind them; and last of all, at such a distance that the rumbling of its wheels could not be heard, moved the clumsy artillery which might have to batter down the gates of the town if Tizzo could not take them with the first rush.

Another rumbling, a growing thunder, was beginning to come down the road at a walking pace toward Forli, and Tizzo reined back his horse to ask what the noise might be.

"The carts of the farmers bringing in produce for the markets," said one of the peasant soldiers. "They load their carts in the evening, and they start in the darkness so as to get to Forli just before daybreak. The market must be opened at sunrise, you see."

"Carts . . . sunrise . . . produce . . . Perhaps those carts will carry something more than vegetables when they get through the gates of Forli. Down in that ditch, every man of you. Do you hear? If one of you stirs, if one of you coughs or sneezes, if one of you allows the head of a single pike to shine in the moonlight, I'll have that man's head on the ground at my feet."

He saw his column sink down out of sight into the ditch. And suddenly he was alone in the road with the brilliant moonlight flooding about him and Forli lifting its gilded shoulders in the distance.

He could see the fort of the Rocca looming above the city.

With a hundred men to surprise such a place? He felt as though he had empty hands.

HE PASSED on a short distance toward the town, then turned his horse and let it jog softly back up the road. The carts were in view, now, a whole score of them trudging along, the owners walking at the heads of the horses, the carts piled high with all sorts of country produce.

Tizzo held up his hand when he came to the first cart.

"Halt there, friend!" he commanded.

"Halt yourself and be hanged," said the Romagnol. "We're already late for Forli. What puts *you* on the road so far from a warm bed at this time of the morning?"

Two or three of the other peasants ran up with clubs in their hands to join in any altercation that might follow, but Tizzo knew these hardy Romagnols too well to interfere with them in this fashion. He reined the white horse aside and called out: "Up, lads, and at them!"

The thing was ended in one rush, Tizzo's voice calling: "Hands, only! No daggers or swords! Don't hurt them, boys!"

So it was done, in a moment; the tough Romagnols, overwhelmed by numbers, were quickly helpless, and over the brief babbling noises could be heard only the voices of several of the farmers' wives, crowing out their laments as they sat up on the tops of the loaded carts.

Tizzo brought quiet.

He rode up and down the line, saying cheerfully: "Friends, you have been robbed and cheated and taxed by the Countess Sforza-Riario for a good many years.

"Here I am with some of the men of

the Duca. If I open the gates of the town with your help, it will belong to Cesare Borgia before mid-day. Do you hear me?"

A man growled out the short answer: "Why change one robber for another?"

"The Duke of Valentinois and the Romagna does not rob peasants," said Tizzo.

"All dukes are robbers," said a peasant.

"Of course they are," answered Tizzo, chuckling, "but this one only robs the lords and ladies and lets the peasant alone. For the food that his troops need, he pays hard cash."

The readiness of this reply and the apparent frankness of it brought a laugh from the peasants.

"I leave you your cart-loads unharmed," said Tizzo. "I put a ducat in the hand of every man of you. I leave your women behind you on the road here. I throw a few of my men into each cart, and we roll on through the gates. Do you hear? If we pass the gates unchallenged, all is well. If one of you betrays us, we cut your throats. Is that a bargain?"

And one of the peasants answered with a sudden laugh: "That's a soldier's true bargain. Come on, friends! I'd as soon shout 'Duca!' as yell 'Riario!' Let's take the bargain; because we can't refuse it!"

CHAPTER VII

ROOM OF TORMENT

CATERINA, Countess Sforza-Riario, gathered a big woolen peasant's cloak more closely about her and raised the lantern so that she could see better the picture before her.

It was the Baron of Melrose, naked except for a cincture, and lashed up by the hands so that his toes barely rested on the floor. In this posture he could support his entire weight only for a few moments on the tips of his toes, after which the burden of his body depended from his wrists.

He had been lashed there long enough to be close to exhaustion and now a continual tremor ran through his body, and

the big muscles of his legs twitched up and down, and shudders pulled at the tendons about his shoulders. But still his gray head was carried straight.

The countess broke off a bit of bread and ate it, and then swallowed a bit of wine which a page offered her on one knee, holding the silver salver high.

"How long before the strength goes out of his legs?" she asked. "How long before he hangs from the wrists like a heavy sack tied up by the two ears?"

A tall, powerful man stepped out of the shadows a little and looked more closely at the prisoner. He reached up and felt the shoulder muscles of Melrose, then the trembling, great muscles of the thighs.

"He'll endure until not long after dawn," said the executioner.

"There is something Christian in the sight of suffering like this," said the countess. "After watching you, my lord, I'll be able to say my prayers with more feeling, for a long time."

"Of course you will," said the executioner. "I always go to church after I've killed a man in here."

He looked without a smile over his domain, the gibbet-like beams that projected from the wall, here and there, and the iron machines with projecting spokes, the iron boots, also, together with the little wedges which are driven between the metal and the knee, gradually crushing the bone as wedge after wedge is added. And there were other devices such as strong gloves which pulled on easily but were fitted with fishhooks inside; in fact, there were a thousand little devices that helped Adolfo to play on human flesh and nerves like a great musician.

But best of all, the foundation of all the most perfect torments, was the great rack, whose sliding beams could be extended through the pressure exerted by a big wheel which worked against a screw. Here the body could be drawn out to the breaking point—or literally torn in two. But, when the flesh was all taut, the accepted practice was to strike the limbs and the joints one by one with a small

iron bar, so breaking the tensed bone with ease.

Adolfo, looking over his possessions, had good reason to smile. He felt like a miser in the midst of his hoard.

"HOW long will it be before dawn?" asked the countess. "Very often they go to pieces when the gray of the morning commences to strike their faces."

"Another half-running of the hour glass, highness."

"Very well."

"No, it is beginning even now," said the jailer.

"The day is about to commence," said the countess to Melrose. "Will you tell me now, my friend, where I'll be able to find Tizzo, and who it was in my castle that let him go free from it?"

Melrose, staring at her, parted his lips as though to speak, but he merely moistened them and set his jaws hard again. His eyes were commencing to thrust out from his head under the long-continued pressure of the torment.

Here a confusion of tumult broke out in the town.

"What's that?" asked the countess. "Are my silly people starting a fiesta before sunrise?"

Adolfo, running to the casement, leaned into it and listened. He started to cry out: "This is no fiesta, highness, but a trouble of some—"

But here the countess herself cried out: "Do you hear it? They have passed the wall, they have broken into Forli. Oh, the careless, treacherous, hired dogs that are in my army! Do you hear? Ring the alarm bells. Call for—"

The uproar was washing rapidly across the lower level of the town, and the voice of the crowd streamed like a flag across the mind of Melrose. He could hear the shouting grow from confusion into syllables that were understandable: "Duca! Duca! Tizzo! Tizzo! Tizzo!"

It seemed to him that the voices were pouring from his own throat in an ecstasy. And in fact they were. He was shouting

involuntarily: "Tizzo! Tizzo! Tizzo!" and he began to laugh.

The countess had jerked a door open and was crying orders to the men-at-arms who waited outside it; Adolfo leaned, fascinated, at the casement and still was there when the countess slammed the door and hurried back into the torture chamber.

"The red-headed wildcat has come into Forli to claw us all to death!" cried the countess. "Set his father free—quickly, Adolfo! Suppose Tizzo dreamed what had been happening here—he would make the stones of the Rocca melt away and come in at us with all his devils behind him."

Melrose, released from the ropes that held him, leaned feebly against the wall, breathing hard, his head for the first time bowed.

"Have him taken to the Lady Beatrice," said Caterina Sforza. "Guard them both as you would guard the balls of your eyes. Hai! How they yell in the streets! Are the Borgia and Tizzo saints and deliverers to my own people? Ah, if I were only a man—but today I *shall* be a man!"

CHAPTER VIII

MACHIAVELLI'S GENTLE PRINCE

THE captain of the gate was something seldom seen in Italy in those days—an honest fighting man worthy of his hire. And when the string of carts halted just inside the walls and out of the greens tumbled armed men, the captain had the trumpet sounded, called for a charge, and headed that charge himself in valiant style.

But one of Tizzo's Romagnol pikemen drove a spear straight through the unguarded throat of the captain and that was the only life lost at the winning of the gate. The rest of the hired soldiers threw away their weapons to lighten their heels and ran as hard as they could.

The holding of the gate was the important thing. Tizzo put a score of men in the towers on either side of it, and the

first shout from them emptied the nearest guard towers and sent more of Caterina Sforza's fighting men scampering for the Rocca with shouts of: "Treason! Treason!"

With half of his pikes and arquebuses, Tizzo marched straight on into Forli, his men beginning that shout of: "Duca! Duca! Tizzo! Tizzo!"

And the results were amazing. For on every hand shutters were opened and doors thrown wide. Women stood in the casements yelping: "Duca! Duca!" to show that that house was in favor of the assailants; and the men came out, half-dressed, each one with a weapon. For all of these fellows in the Romagna had the making of tough soldiers in them.

In five minutes Tizzo had five hundred volunteers about him to reinforce his band; and now, as the dawn came glimmering out of the mountains, Cesare Borgia and his picked horsemen streamed in through the captured gate. Forli, almost without a blow, had fallen into the hands of the duke.

But the calm eye of the Borgia saw at once that no sudden attack could sweep the walls of the fortress. The soldiers of Caterina Sforza might have been unwilling to maintain the walls of the town with a population behind them filled with hatred of the Sforza rule; but the Rocca was a different matter. It looked like an impregnable height, with arquebuses at every shot window and loophole and casement, and heavy guns already being trained down on the town.

The Borgia, with cat-faced Machiavelli always beside him, called to Tizzo who was shouting for volunteers, to attack the fortress.

"You've done very well, Tizzo," he said. "You've put the nut inside the jaws of the cracker; but we have to smash the shell before we can eat the meat. Listen! The guns are coming up and getting into position every moment!"

The rumbling, great wheels of the gun-carriages rolled nearer and nearer to the ears of Tizzo. But he looked anxiously

up towards the armed heights of the walls and made no answer to his master.

"We can try another trick of fence, now," said the Borgia. And turning in the saddle, he called out: "Bonfadini! Sound the trumpets for a parley and bring out the brats of Caterina Sforza!"

STRIGHTWAY, the horns began to blow, and Tizzo saw a pair of young boys, both sleek and slim in red velvet, brought forth to the mouth of a street near the Rocca. When they appeared, a great shouting of dismay resounded from the castle.

A moment later Tizzo had the news: They were the sons of the countess and in exchange for them the Borgia would ask for the fortress. That same night, a raiding party had surprised the children in the Apennine dwelling where they were kept.

Tizzo, pressing up to the side of the Borgia, said to him rather curiously than fiercely: "Would you cut the throats of those lads in sight of their mother, if she fails to give up the Rocca?"

The Borgia looked at him with a cold eye and then turned to Machiavelli.

"Tell me, Niccolo," he said. "What should I do in a case like this? Of course the woman will surrender the fortress in exchange for the safety of her sons. But suppose that she should refuse?"

"There are certain matters," said the Florentine, "in which a prince should keep his word. Promises of money, of favor, of lands and estates may be forgotten. But promises of blood and vengeance never should be allowed to fall lightly to the ground."

The Borgia looked back to Tizzo.

"Do you hear?" he asked.

Here the noise of the trumpets was answered by a snarling of horns from the walls, sounding thin and far because of the height from which they were blown; and almost at once there appeared on the walls a party of halberdiers and arquebusiers, with Giovanni degli Azurri at their head.

Beside him stepped a warrior of something less than middle height to whom the other soldiers gave precedence. This figure now raised the visor and showed Tizzo the face of Caterina Sforza. From the soldiers of the Borgia came a brief shout; but the townsmen raised a wild and prolonged howling at the sight of the tyrant they hated.

In answer to this cry, the countess walked calmly up and down the wall until the noise sank down to a silence through which came only the distant rumbling of the gun-carriages.

THEN she called out in a melodious, clearly audible voice: "Do you yell, you dogs, when you see your mistress? You will yell again when I have brushed the Borgia pest away and laid my whip on your back once more!"

A fresh outburst of fury came from the townsmen, but the countess merely laughed, as though she enjoyed their clamoring. And a singular admiration rose in the breast of Tizzo as he watched her. Her hands might even now be freshly washed after the murders of Beatrice and his father. He could not tell. And yet he could say to himself that he hated her only in part.

The Borgia rode his horse forward a little and in his turn lifted the pointed, long visor of his helmet, which made his head look like that of an immense ant.

"Caterina—my dear lady!" he called.

"Ah, Cesare?" said the lady. "You look well, you Spanish dog. Have you been drinking plenty of raw blood, lately? Where is your poisoner? Where is your Bonfadini? Will he poison the air that blows toward the Rocca?"

"If you'll look here beside me," said the Borgia, "You'll see something that ought to interest your eyes a good deal more than Bonfadini. . . . Stand out, lads. Lead them forward, Bonfadini."

They were taken from behind the horsemen and exposed to the eyes of their mother. Tizzo saw the woman strike her hands suddenly together and heard her cry

out: "My dears—my dear boys—ah, what a cruel God is in heaven! Has the Borgia put his hand on you?"

"You see them, Caterina," said the Borgia. "Will you have their throats cut, or will you hand over the Rocca to me with no further talking?"

"Ha!" cried the Countess Caterina. "Give you the entire Rocca for the sake of two lives—and such young ones as those? Make the bargain of a fool with you? Who are you speaking to, Cesare? To a witless, doddering old woman or to Caterina Sforza?"

"Stand out, executioner!" called the Borgia, loudly.

A tall man strode forward and caught the children by their arms. He was all in black, and the darkness of his figure made the red velvet of the children shine more brightly through contrast.

"You see them, madame," said the Borgia, calling up to her. "And now I give you your choice. To let them live and give me the Rocca, or to let them die here, before your eyes."

He added: "Be ready, executioner!"

The man in black caught a wrist of either child in one capacious hand and with the other drew out a scimitar with a blade four inches wide. This great weapon he poised and looked up toward Caterina Sforza.

Tizzo pressed close to the Borgia.

"This is your little joke, my lord?" said Tizzo.

"Joke? And why should it be a joke?" asked the Borgia.

"If the children die, I'll try to give you reasons," said Tizzo.

He had in his hand that common-looking ax with the head of shimmering blue steel, and the Borgia, glancing down at the weapon, saw the sunlight trembling on it. Cesare Borgia took a quick, deep breath.

THERE had been an outcry of horror from the people of the Rocca, and a sort of groaning sound from the men of the town. But now the voice of Caterina Sforza rang down clearly through the air.

"Do what you will with them! If they

die, I'll furnish more sons to the world, but there's only one Rocca of Forli!"

As she spoke, she struck her body with her gauntleted hand so that the clashing noise came clearly to the ears of Tizzo. The two boys in red velvet dropped to their knees and began to scream supplications; the groaning of the townsmen of Forli was a terrible sound. But the executioner turned his head to get the final order. The Borgia looked at the light which trembled on the deadly ax of Tizzo. And the duke remembered, at that moment, a certain heavy helmet of the best Milanese plate steel with a great clean gash carved in it. Tizzo had delivered that other stroke. The head of the Borgia ached a little.

"The woman's an animal," said the duke to the executioner. "But let her children be. I won't cut the throats of the calves. I'll wait for the cow."

The executioner released the wrists of the boys; and they flung themselves down weeping with relief in front of the horse of the Borgia.

Tizzo heard the quiet voice of Machiavelli say: "Don't waste this opportunity. As long as you've decided to make a kind gesture, let the whole world see you do it. It will be remembered perhaps longer than a dozen bad deeds."

Here the duke, without a word of answer, sprang from the saddle—a thing that few men could do in that burden of massive armor—and raised up the boys one by one. Cheers broke from the Rocca. The men of Forli raised an amazed yell of approbation. And Caterina Sforza, stunned after the crisis which she had defied, could be seen leaning against one of her soldiers for support.

Tizzo took off his steel cap and rode far forward with the sunlight red and flashing in his hair. He held up the helmet and ax to attract attention.

"Madame the countess!" he called. "Noble lady—do you forget me?"

"I see you and know you, thief," said Caterina Sforza.

"I am no thief, madame," said Tizzo. "But you see that we do not put hand on

the helpless. And I remember that two people are in your hands."

"You'll see them long before the Rocca is won," said the countess. "You'll see them hanging from the walls!"

She turned and walked back from view.

CHAPTER IX

CLAWS OF THE TIGRESS

THE cannons were up. Tizzo went back to the guns and watched them at work—all big weapons and all with names. Roberta was the largest of the guns, Giulia was the smallest, but Ardwin was the champion when it came to doing effective work on the walls of the castle. At the third round, big Roberta burst into fragments and knocked half a dozen men into perdition.

The master gunner merely said: "There goes a good many florins in carved work. But I've always said that a dance of nymphs was a silly thing to have around the muzzle of a gun."

Giulia was firing about once in ten minutes, being swabbed out with water and sponged dry in between shot, so that she might not become too hot in the throat. But big Roberta and her kind could hardly be discharged more than once in twenty minutes.

Tizzo watched the flight of the balls, seeing the ponderous round masses turn into almost invisible streaks of darkness, wraiths, shadows flying headlong through the air. These little streaks of speed then landed with terrible force against the wall of the Rocca.

The master gunner, being a true artist, did not scatter his fire but concentrated it on one place. On this spot, the surface of the masonry began to look pock-marked, and presently it was battered into wavering lines. After that, the tremendous assault caused whole rocks to commence falling from their place; the outer skin of heavier and better-fitted and cemented masonry was being stripped from the wall, and the rubble of the central stuffing quickly went to pieces under the bombardment.

This was not carried on without trouble. The Rocca had plenty of artillery and from the walls, after a time, these guns began to do heavy execution. But, as Cesare Borgia said: "The malice of Caterina keeps that fire from being effective. Instead of concentrating all of it on my battery of heavy guns and trying to disable them, she has to scatter her fire all over the town that's risen against her."

"Angry men throw away their brains," answered Machiavelli.

A shout of joy from the besiegers and of dismay from the besieged now accompanied the crashing noise of the downfall of a whole upper section of the wall. A cleft appeared, running straight through it; and the following discharges quickly widened this gap.

"Now, Tizzo," said Cesare Borgia. "You shall have the honor of being first through the breach. Pick your men for the work."

"Give me some of those Swiss; and a few wild Gascons," said Tizzo. "And my own company of Romagnol peasants to follow as soon as we've established a foothold. Has enough rubbish fallen to let us pass the moat?"

That was reported practicable; the storming party gathered quickly.

TIZZO looked over those volunteers, the rangy big Swiss, the quick little Gascons, and his own more sluggish peasants. He put the cat-footed Gascons in the front line and jumped on the wheel of a gun to make a speech.

He merely said: "Lads, we're the wedge. Once we get past the wall, the whole weight of the army will fall behind us to drive us home. There's plenty of loot inside the Rocca to fill your arms and bend your backs. There's plenty of glory in the breach, also, and the Duca who has an eye to see you and remember you. Here's a flag for you to follow, and so—come on with me and the Devil bite the heels of the last man into the breach!"

As he ended, he waved over his head the "flag," which was simply the bright jacket which had been pulled from the

dead body of one of the duke's soldiers and stuck on the blade of Tizzo's sword. He held that in his left hand and the blue-headed ax in the other. And when the storming party looked up at the fringe of red hair that curled up from beneath the edge of his steel cap, and saw the smile on his face, they uttered one deep, quick shout of impatience.

Tizzo took them on the crest of their enthusiasm and led them at a run. They were instantly out of the shelter of the houses which were being battered down in places by the vengeful fire of guns from the walls of the Rocca. They crossed the moat, stumbling and staggering on the loose, uncertain surface of the broken masonry.

A storm of fire struck them here. With a flanking tower on either side of the breach, Caterina's soldiery had posted themselves well and they maintained a heavy fire from little cannon, from arquebuses, from crossbows. In addition, a solid body of troops were posted behind the breach and several cannon had been dragged up to help in the defense.

It was a bullet from one of those cannon that tore in two the first man in the breach, a great, long-striding Swiss. A thin red spray whipped through the air and struck into the face of Tizzo as he ran on into the gap in the wall.

He saw the range of arquebuses before him, and a tall knight in complete armor that shone like silver, in command. The knight steadied a flag standard with one hand and waved his sword over his head with the other, shouting out the command to fire.

"Down! Down on the ground, lads!" yelled Tizzo, and set the good example by diving for the ground.

The volley from the arquebuses thundered in his ears. He sprang up, casting a single glance behind him. Smoke veiled the line of soldiers inside the breach; but behind him it seemed that half of his chosen company of fifty had been struck down in that murderous moment. A few, right about him, were on their feet, but wavering.

His own action rallied them. He let them have a glimpse of the waving standard on his sword; then he ran straight through the smoke toward the place where the splendid figure of the knight glimmered through the mist. The sweeping stroke that was aimed at him he ducked under, and came up with a lifting blow of the ax. It drove right through the weaker plates under the raised arm of the knight; it clove straight into the body, and the knight fell dead, his splendid armor clashing in a heap, the standard toppling idly to the ground.

THAT was the first blood for the assailants in this fierce attack. They drew more immediately, however. A little Gascon came running in with no other weapon than an old-fashioned war club that had steel spikes sticking out of its head. With that he brained one of the arquebusiers. And yonder was a tall Swiss striding through the press delivering terrific blows with a two-handed sword that had a blade five feet long.

And here came others, and others; the living half of the storming party rushed into the court of the castle and swept before them the soldiers of the guard. One of the cannoners was cut down even before he could discharge his piece. A ghost had leaped at him through the mist of smoke.

But now Caterina Sforza showed herself as able a commander and as brave as any trained general. The big doors at the base of one of the towers beside the breach were thrown open, and a solid stream of heavily armored men charged out to man the breach.

That unexpected blow struck Tizzo's men into a confusion and cast them back, not toward the moat but deeper into the interior court. Tizzo saw the first rush of the main body of the Borgian army reach the moat and sweep up toward the breach, but there the unexpected appearance of a new wall of steel checked them; fire from the walls told heavily; that wave of attack suddenly yielded and washed back.

"Captain," panted one of his stout peasants, a fellow now freshly dipped in

blood, "Captain, we've fought our way into the trap, but we'll never fight out again."

Tizzo looked desperately around him. The mass of heavily armed men in the breach was a force with which his own forlorn hope could not expect to deal. For the moment, all pressure from the outside had ended. He had about him hardly two score of his original hundred, and more of them were falling every moment as guns from the casements around the court were turned on these intruders. And from a window of the big central court, Tizzo saw the face of the captain of the defense herself, Caterina Sforza, with the visor of her helmet raised, and laughter in her handsome face.

It was death to remain in the court; it was impossible to cut through the living wall of defenders in the breach.

Tizzo had a dozen hands help him to swing around that undischarged cannon. This he pointed at the heavy doors of the central tower, in one of whose upper windows he had seen the countess. The burning match lay on the ground beside the gun; the powderhorn for priming was in the dead grasp of the artillery man still. So Tizzo primed and touched the match to that cannon.

The force of the explosion jumped the gun back for a yard; but the great door of the tower was beaten open by the shot.

"The tower! The tower!" shouted Tizzo. "We'll be safe enough inside those walls. Come on, lads!"

THEY went on with a yell of delight. Through the wide door they passed into a sort of armory, the walls set around with all manner of weapons, and suits of armor hanging from central columns.

Behind them followed in a swift charge a full hundred of the men-at-arms who had been manning the breach, but the heavy door was slammed and propped against them; and while they vainly battered and hacked at the doors, Tizzo led a score of his men to the story above.

From that very place Caterina Sforza had been looking out and laughing her triumph, the moment before.

Well, she could take her laughter and her triumph to another place now. Down distant corridors, Tizzo heard shouts of fear and wild stampeding of footfalls. The soldiers had fled from their posts. They even had left their well-charged arquebuses behind them at the casements, and the long arrow-vents in the wall.

Tizzo had those arquebuses manned instantly. The muzzles being depressed, a single volley knocked over half a dozen of those gallants who were trying to batter a way through the door below. That blow from above was enough for them. They scattered as fast as their heavy armor would let them run.

"Aim at the men in the breach," Tizzo commanded. "Let them have a bit of hell from the rear and see how they like it. We have the game in our hands. They've trapped us, friends, but we'll eat our way into the heart of the Rocca. The duke will throw another attack at them in a moment. A dozen of you are enough for these guns. The rest of you follow me!"

He led the way at a run out of the room and up the winding stairs. Two stories above, half a dozen frightened defenders threw down their weapons and begged for quarter. Tizzo granted it. He gained the very top of the tower and leaped into an embrasure of the rampart, standing on top of the cannon which stood there. From that height he could overlook the breach and see the masses of men forming confusedly for the next assault on the breach.

And now it was that he began to wave his sword.

"Shout, boys!" he said to the dozen men around him. "Cheer a few rounds, and then listen!"

They gave a hearty cheer, and in the silence that followed they heard a wild yelling of joy from the men of the Borgia beyond the walls. A wave of them started for the moat; another wave and another followed. Here and there soldiers were knocked over, but the rest hurried on, blind with the enthusiasm of victory.

Before them stood a solid mass of the heavy men-at-arms of the Rocca. But on

that line the arquebuses from the lower story of the tower were playing. Struck at from behind, attacked from in front, that massive line of practiced fighters held their ground not a moment but scattered right and left, and the inflooding troops of the Borgia rushed on to the fruits of victory.

* CHAPTER X

MEETING BY STEEL

IT WOULD not be many minutes now, Tizzo knew, before the rioting soldiery of the Duca had penetrated into every part of the castle; and somewhere in the Rocca were his father and Beatrice. They must be reached at once.

It was true that the Borgia controlled his men carefully during nearly every emergency, but when a stronghold had been taken by open assault, there was only one sort of a reward that could be offered to the victors—the sacking of the place. And when the wild-headed victors found women . . .

Tizzo looked grimly over his little group of prisoners. There was one elderly fighting man with a grizzled head, his face now as gray as his hair. Tizzo took him by the arm with a strong hand.

"In the Rocca," he said, "there are two prisoners. One is the Englishman—the big Englishman with gray hair and a red face—the Baron Melrose. And there is a girl—Beatrice of the Baglioni. Do you know where they may be kept now?"

A dull eye rolled toward the face of Tizzo in utter lack of comprehension. Fear had numbed the brain of the prisoner. Tizzo used the most powerful stimulant known to the Italian mind. He snatched a handful of silver out of his purse and jangled the ducats in front of the man.

"This money goes to you if you can tell me where they're apt to be found. If you can lead me to them before some of the raiders reach them, you get this money today and a whole purse of it tomorrow."

The man opened his mouth and eyes as though he were receiving both spiritual and mental food.

"I think I know where they could be found," he said. "Follow me, highness. Quickly, because they may be clear on the opposite side of the Rocca."

He set off at a run, down the stairs, and then at full speed along a corridor that rose and fell and twisted and angled. Not a single man of Tizzo's company followed. Doors right and left invited them to hunt for plunder.

Groups of plunderers lurched into the runway, here and there, but the shout of Tizzo made them scatter before his coming. He had thrown off his steel cap so that his red hair would make him more readily known.

Wherever he was seen, the men of the Borgia gave him a cheer—and went on about their business which would strip the famous Rocca to the bone long before noon in that day.

THE panting voice of Tizzo's companion halted him, led him now through a side door and up another winding stairs into a tower where there was a great noise of trampling and battle.

So he rushed up into a big room with an old, vaulted ceiling that rested on stout piers. At the head of the stairs a half dozen of the Borgians were fighting against a larger band of the defenders of the Rocca. And yonder in a corner he saw what he had been praying for sight of—Henry of Melrose, unarmored, but with a sword in his hands, heedless of the outcome of the fighting as he held his place in front of a smaller, slender figure. That was Beatrice Baglione. It must be she—now he could see the color of her dress—now her face, like a star.

"Beatrice!" he shouted, and leaped into the fight, his head unarmored as it was. "Beatrice!" he cried again. It was his battle-cry, and with each shout he struck with the terrible swift ax, right and left.

He was like wildfire.

He had come at a good time, for the Borgians were having enough of this fierce struggling and were giving up when he sprang into the lead and rallied them.

And he heard a woman's voice coming out of a visored helmet and shouting, shrill and high: "Giovanni degli Azurri! There is your man! There is the one who brought all this ruin down on Forli! There is Tizzo of Melrose! Kill him now, and I swear that this is the happiest day of my life."

The outcry of the countess inspired all her men. They had been on the verge of retreating; now they made a sudden rally. Two of the Borgians were driven back over the edge of the floor and fell into the well of the stairs; Giovanni degli Azurri put his sword with a downright stroke through the throat of a third.

The other pair gave back from the side of Tizzo, and called on him to give up a hopeless fight. But he could not be drawn away. Down the length of the room he saw the big form of his father striding; and Beatrice, helplessly unarmed as she was, hurrying after him.

When he should have retreated, he leaped in suddenly, springing here and there like an erratic dancer. He used the light sword in his left hand like a dagger to ward off blows; the ax in his right hand made lightning circles.

One of these flashing arcs of light glanced against the helmet of Giovanni degli Azurri and staggered that champion.

The second blow would have killed him outright, but here Caterina Sforza herself ran forward and struck a good two-handed blow at the head of Tizzo.

He had not expected actual fighting from the countess. His hastily reared guard received the blow and turned the edge of it, but the force of the flat sword was enough to knock him to his knees.

He heard the scream of Beatrice, like a ray of light gleaming across his mind. The two Borgians, inspired by the attack he had delivered, had closed in from the sides and they lustily struck out to protect him. But the decisive blow came from Henry of Melrose.

He had come in on the rear of the Sforza men on the run. A long lunge drove the point of his sword through the gorget rivets at the back of the neck of one man-at-arms.

That fellow was down never to rise again. And now with a huge stroke the baron dropped a second man-at-arms.

THAT second of interval had put Tizzo back on his feet again. He swerved from the lunging sword of Giovanni degli Azurri and struck with his ax at the junction between the helmet and the gorget. The steel split; the ax sank in; and Giovanni degli Azurri, dropping his sword, clasped his throat with both hands and fell sprawling to his knees.

His fall was the end. The other defenders threw up their mailed hands and shouted for quarter. Only the virago, Caterina Sforza, scorning surrender, lifted her sword over her head and rushed in for a final attack. A side-stroke of Tizzo's ax knocked the sword out of her grip and sent it clanging against the wall. He caught her by the hands and held her fast. She groaned with rage like a man and suddenly stopped struggling.

"There is no justice, there is no God!" cried the countess, "or a red-headed thief could not have robbed me, and then come back to be my master!"

A strange voice called to them from the floor. It was Giovanni degli Azurri, his visor raised so that he could gasp in more air, and the blood-bubbles breaking on his lips. He had risen to his knees, but now he began to sink down again.

"I confess—may God forgive me!—it was your maid who stole the jewels; and I forged a letter in the hand of Lady Beatrice to draw him out of the Rocca; I posted the three men to murder him at the rendezvous beyond the town. And now—now—"

He slipped to his side. Caterina Sforza dropped on her knees and cried: "Giovanni, what do you mean? What do you say? You cannot have been such a traitor."

"Aye—for love of you," muttered Giovanni.

The countess struck him with her mailed hand across his bleeding face. But he was already past feeling. He fell on his back and died with one groan, one quick updrawing of the knees.

THE Countess Riario looked up from his dead face at Tizzo and Beatrice in one another's arms. The girl was wiping the sweat and the blood from the face of her lover with the puffed velvet sleeve of her dress.

They were laughing together; and the baron stood by them leaning on his sword, smiling faintly as he watched their joy.

Except for Tizzo, the Borgians had rushed on to find less fighting and more loot, herding their new prisoners before them.

And now from the wounded and the dead the blood spread across the floor in widening pools that interlinked and made little flowing streams.

The countess walked straight up to Melrose.

"My lord," she said, "I have given you the treatment of a common criminal. Will you reward me for it by giving me good advice?"

"Madame," said the Englishman, "a knight is sworn to serve *all* ladies."

"Tell me what to do, then," she demanded. "Surrender to Cesare Borgia or throw myself from the casement there?"

"If you were my daughter," said the baron, "I'd hope to see you leap from the wall and die; but since you are the noble Countess Riario, I expect you to take my arm and let me lead you to the Duke of Romagna."

She hesitated, glaring savagely at him. Then, with a shrug of the shoulders and a laugh, she accepted his arm.

All day the riot rang and roared through the streets of Forli and through the courts and rooms of the Rocca; but when night came, joy had exhausted itself. A few drunken voices sang in the town and Niccolo Machiavelli listened to them with a pleased smile as he sat by the side of the duke at the casement. Cesare Borgia rather lay than sat in a great chair, his head flung back.

"A successful day," said Machiavelli. "You have Forli, town and citadel. It has cost you only a few men, and the work has been done by one who has rewarded himself."

"Ah—Tizzo?" murmured the duke.

"I see him standing on the rampart with the girl in his arms. They are like one bit of black paper, curiously carved and held up against the moon between thumb and forefinger."

"Fools always find happiness in foolish ways," said the Borgia. "But you see that I know how to use edged tools?"

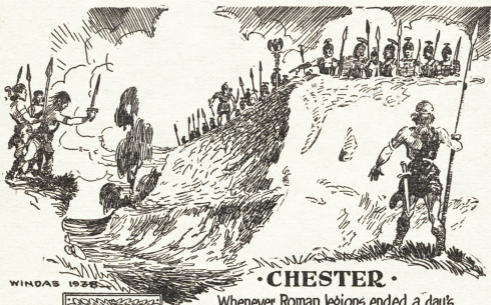
Machiavelli smiled slightly, and he said in his cool voice:

"This time—yes. But the next time you may cut your hand to the bone!"

THE END



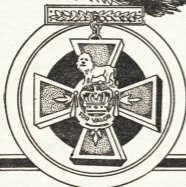
LEXICON of the FIGHTING MEN



WINDAS 1928

•CHESTER•

Whenever Roman legions ended a day's march in hostile country, they built a mud fort around their castra (camp). During the Roman invasion, these camps became dotted over England, and were named. Towns growing around the camps kept these names. Time changed the word 'castra' to 'chester', hence we have Manchester, Westchester etc!

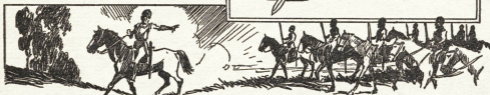


•VICTORIA CROSS•

The most prized decoration of Great Britain. Every cross is made from cannon captured at Sebastopol during the Crimean War.

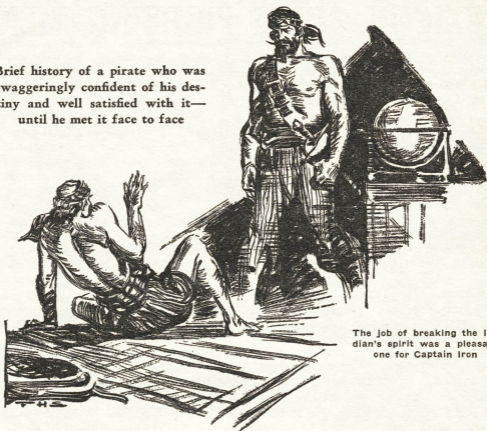
•STRATEGY•

This word is derived from the ancient Greek 'Strategio', a name given any general commanding mercenaries.



•FELLOWSHIP• In the middle ages was spelled 'feleship', and meant a troop of mounted men-at-arms.

Brief history of a pirate who was swaggeringly confident of his destiny and well satisfied with it—until he met it face to face



The job of breaking the Indian's spirit was a pleasant one for Captain Iron

Pirates Die in Bed

By THEODORE G. ROBERTS

CAPTAIN IRON was a fearless commander, for he knew that his life was safe from all manner of weapons and from drowning or hanging. He knew that his passing would be in his bed or his hammock, and with his boots off, when the time came. Soothsayers of various nations had told him so, and he had believed what they said. Thus he felt secure in his calling, which was that of a pirate; and he was remarkably successful in it.

Captain Iron's last command was the

main-topsail schooner *Red Hawk*. That schooner was at once fast and seaworthy, and a blight on the coastwise and narrow seas from Chesapeake Bay southward to Recife. The king's ships—sloops-of-war, ten-gun brigs and even lordly frigates—had cracked on after the *Red Hawk*, and sprung their tapering tops in windy pursuit of her, and always in vain.

In spite of his sense of security, Captain Iron was a man of dangerous tempers and terrible humors. When he learned of the escape of his slave, Gunpowder, his cabin steward and valet, his white and brooding rage was a horrible thing to witness.

Then every hard-bitten rogue of the *Red Hawk's* company wished himself somewhere else. For a wonder, Israel Iron did not strike on that occasion; but by his very restraint he deepened men's fear of his mysterious black soul.

Gunpowder was a Carib, or Island Indian. Two years earlier he had been picked up from a drifting canoe which was a long way to leeward of a certain group of precipitous, jungle-clad, untamed islands. At the moment of rescue, the young savage had been on the verge of death from hunger and thirst; but he had been fed and nursed back to health by one of the men who possessed a smattering of medicine. Then the horror of existence as Captain Iron's body-servant had commenced for him.

Israel Iron had no use for a man of spirit as a personal steward and servant; he delighted in breaking men. He must be served in his cabin by one who crawled—or, better still, by one whom he was teaching to crawl. It was his whim. He had broken many such, and had killed or maimed most of them in breaking. Some had been fed to the sharks, others had been put ashore.

But his attitude toward the regular members of his ship's company—the seamen and professional cut-throats—was quite different, for he was a practical man. He needed men of spirit aboard—everywhere but in his cabin. As long as his officers and crew feared and obeyed him, he was content; the fiercer their spirits the better.

Captain Iron had been eighteen months at breaking that proud and courageous Indian. And even now, though of late the fellow had crawled and cringed like a whipped dog, the captain was not sure that the fierce spirit had been entirely cowed, the wild heart entirely tamed. The escape itself suggested remnants of courage.

"I was too soft with him," reflected Iron. "I put the fear o' hell in 'im, but I didn't cripple 'im; so he swam ashore. The dog! But my mark's on 'im. He'll not forget Israel Iron."

Captain Iron knew of and used a dozen safe and hidden anchorages for his big

schooner, in all of which he could fill his water casks and revictual at his leisure, with impunity. In two of them he could even careen the *Red Hawk* for scraping or calking. It was for one of these careenages that he was bound now, after a very successful cruise of seven weeks' duration to the north and west.

Sea-gardens of weed and barnacle grew fast on ships' bottoms in those waters; but even so, few commanders would have considered the *Red Hawk* foul enough to worry about. Israel Iron, being an exacting commander, was fully aware of the fact that a clean ship was a fast one, and also that it was the fast ship that bagged the fat prizes.

IN THE meantime, Gunpowder, the escaped cabin steward who had slid down a taut cable until submerged, and then had swum off like a hurt fish, slept in the security of a hanging jungle.

He slept until the sun was high. He awoke, realized that he was free, and wanted to shout with joy. Then he remembered the scars of his body, his limbs, his face—his soul. Some were still open wounds. He remembered that he had crawled like a whipped dog; and he turned over and pressed his face to the rotting leaf-mold of the jungle and shivered with hate and shame.

Later, he heard from afar the chanting of pirates breasting the capstan bars, and the clank of the iron pawl. Later still, he found fruits that he knew. He ate his fill, after which he slept again; and just before the sudden fall of the tropic night, he stole down to the spring of sweet water at which the *Red Hawk's* casks had been refilled, and drank deep.

That island was no more than a cluster of sharp, jungle-clad peaks. Gunpowder explored it, slowly and painfully, and for days feared that it was uninhabited. But on the fifth day he discovered its people, a few men and women and children of his own race who had escaped from slavery in a Spanish settlement.

They had their own scars of the whips

of overseers—scars that were nothing beside those of Gunpowder.

Gunpowder spent half a year in winning back to his birthplace, where he was received by his family and his tribe as one returned from the grave.

CAPTAIN ISRAEL IRON and his main-topsail schooner continued on their way. The escaped Carib was soon replaced in the personal service of the commander, but the new body-servant did not last long in that employment. His master kicked him overboard one day.

Others followed, but not one with as tough a spirit as the young Carib's. Gunpowder's had been a spirit worthy of Iron's best efforts and most hellish devices.

Though somewhat disappointed in the pursuit of his favorite hobby, the commander of the *Red Hawk* continued to prosper professionally. The capture of the Bristol ship *Queen Mab* off Grand Turtle was one of the triumphs of his career.

"When my time comes," said Captain Iron to his first mate, while both were drinking at their ease after that victory, "I'll die with my boots off, in bed or hammock, all decent an' peaceful, like an alderman. 'Tis writ so in the stars. A man can't deny his stars, Tom."

"Nay, but I'd give 'em a chance," returned the first mate. "I bin lucky myself, but I'll be a-haulin' ashore arter one more good cruise, an' settin' up respectable."

"Luck be damned!" cried Iron. "Bain't luck, ye fool! Fate's the name o' it—wot's writ in the stars. Luck? They let off pistols an' musketoon fair in me face today, an' no more'n singed me eyelashes."

"I don't hold altogether with this here dyin' a-bed, take it by an' large," argued Tom. "I've saw many a passin' in bed as I wouldn't wish on no shipmate o' mine. It bain't allus peaceful an' easy—nor even respectable—even with yer boots off. I'll say a good word for a gunshot in the brain, or a dirk in the heart, I will!"

"And for the gallows, maybe, or the yard-arm o' a king's ship? Ye be a fool, Tom Matchum. Drink up!"

FOUR months after the notable capture of the rich Bristol ship, and just when Captain Iron had made up his mind to set about arranging his affairs for retirement from the sea, the *Red Hawk* was sideswiped by the tail of a hurricane, in a narrow place.

Had there been sea room to run in, she would have suffered nothing worse than the loss of a topmast and a deckhouse. But there was not enough room for running blind with impunity, and blind it had to be. The big schooner was rammed against a rocky fore-shore, shouldered up and broken across. Her spars snapped off like pipestems, her timbers and planks parted and were flung ashore like broken bundles of kindlings.

Captain Israel Iron, safe under the protection of his stars, was hurled shoreward on the main hatch, and was flung sprawling on the frothy sand, breathless but uninjured. He crawled clear of the undertow and in the edge of the jungle took shelter from the flying, sand-laden spray. He had suffered no serious hurt, but he had swallowed a quart or so of brine. He got rid of that unwelcome ballast, then sank into a sound sleep of exhaustion.

When Israel Iron awoke, sunshine touched his face and flooded over him. The gale had passed, but the great seas continued to roll in and crash to bursting spray on the rock and sand. The pirate lay in a hammock slung between two coconut trees. In bewilderment he gazed up at the blue sky and the thinned, frayed crests of the palms.

"What's this?" he asked himself. "Lollin' in a hammock ashore, hey?"

Then he remembered the hurricane and the disaster, his own mad passage through the boiling surf, and his sickness. But why the hammock? And how? Was he hurt? Had others escaped, uninjured and finding him unconscious, slung the hammock for him? His brain was not quite clear; and he had a bitter-sweet taste in his mouth, as of some drug. Had his shipmates been doctoring him? And if so, for what?

He raised his head and looked along his

body at the hammock. It was of woven wild grasses, such as he had often seen and used—a commonplace hammock. But it felt curiously warm and clinging. He looked more closely.

Now this was a strange thing! Here was an inner wrap of skin, of green hide, the freshly flayed hide of a bullock. It enveloped him from his shoulders to his heels. It was raw and bloody, and the raw side was out. It was laced across his breast with raw thongs; and his arms were within, pressed against his sides.

Then his wits cleared, and panic seized him, and he struggled and screamed. His struggles were useless. He could not even turn over, for the grasses of the hammock clung to the raw surface of the bullock's hide. Presently he ceased his screaming and lay still. He closed his eyes and tried to think. He heard a voice he knew, and opened his eyes and beheld the face of the savage Carib whose spirit he had broken.

"Wot d'ye want o' Gunpowder, master?"

"Gunpowder, is it? Cast me loose, ye dog!"

"Dog? The dog be master now, white devil."

After a minute's silence, during which the

two gazed steadily into one another's eyes, Israel Iron spoke in a changed tone of voice. "Ye know my riches, Gunpowder. Wot d'ye say to a half o' all I got stowed away here an' there?"

For answer, the Carib smiled. It was a terrible smile. Then he withdrew silently.

Israel Iron fell to cursing, then to screaming again, then to silence. The sun rose higher and struck harder. The green hide began to harden and shrink. Israel cried out for water; and the Carib appeared again and told him that there was no water in Hell. By the noon he was raving. He cried out against the stars that had fated him to die in a hammock, with his boots off. He cursed them; and the day he was born; and the parents that had begotten him.

Captain Iron died slowly; but long before he died he was stark mad. It was not until the afternoon of the second day that his black heart and his leather lungs were quite stilled by the relentless contraction of the green hide.

Thereupon, Gunpowder, the Carib, went away from the spot. Pride and gratitude were in his heart, for now his shameful scars were honorable and he was a man again.

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Cavalier Off Guard

THE gallantry of other days is being saluted with increasing enthusiasm by readers. We can tell by our mail. Several months ago people began to write in about the first issue of CAVALIER CLASSICS, and their letters were the kind editors like to get.

Well, we're still getting them; apparently the second issue did not disappoint anyone. Now here's the third, and to our way of thinking it has a right to march in the proud company of the others. (Mr. Stilson's "The Fighting Lash" seems to us to have about everything you look for in costume-adventure fiction.)

One thing our readers seem to want is a letter department. So we are going to launch one right here and now, presenting readers' comment on each of the previous issues. Space will not permit us to turn very much of our mail over to you; but here, first of all, is

DICK UNDERWOOD

I have just finished the first number of CAVALIER CLASSICS and enjoyed it very much.

I note the stories are reprints of stories that appeared in your *Argosies* of the last decade or so. Not that I'm kicking. Oh, no; I'm glad to have my favorite type of story between two covers so that I can keep them for a long time for an occasional re-reading.

But may I suggest that you go back further to previous decades and get such stories as "Clovally," by Max Brand and Charles Stilson's "Ace of Blades," "Black Wolf of Picardy," "Sword Play," and "A Cavalier of Navarre" and reprint them? I know the members of my fencing club and our friends would go for those in a big way.

Couldn't you persuade Max Brand to write another story of the "Clovally" type, of England under the Merry Monarch, of dark intrigue, of inns and country places, of furious rides along moonlit highways, of dexterous

swordmanship, and such for either *Argosy* or CAVALIER CLASSICS? A sequel to "Clovelly" would get a joyous welcome. Another D'Orroc tale by James Warner Bellah would be tops.

Here's hoping you will keep up your good work, and I'm waiting for the second number of CAVALIER CLASSICS.
Chicago, Ill.

Well, Mr. Underwood seems to like Charles Stilson, and so this issue should please him. Perhaps we'll be able later on to do something about those favorites of his. . . . Now a brief and highly encouraging note from

W. WALLACE LLEWELLYN

I think your new magazine is great. The only thing I can find wrong with it is that it is a bi-monthly, instead of monthly or even semi-monthly. How about using new stories? New stories by Theodore Roscoe and Richard Sale. If the magazine does go monthly, be sure and have a serial novel.

By all means have a readers' department.

I hope you will have the magazine go monthly real soon—maybe next issue.
San Jose, California

BOTH the readers above, and a number of others, have asked about the possibility of new stories appearing in CAVALIER CLASSICS. It is only fair to them that we should make an answer here.

We do plan to publish new stories in CAVALIER CLASSICS. But the magazine is still very young, and the progress toward maturity is not always an easy one. Then there is this to remember: In these first issues we have set ourselves an extremely high standard, and we will have to find new stories of an equal quality or else the magazine will not satisfy either you or us. So we are going to be very careful in our selecting; and we ask for your patience.

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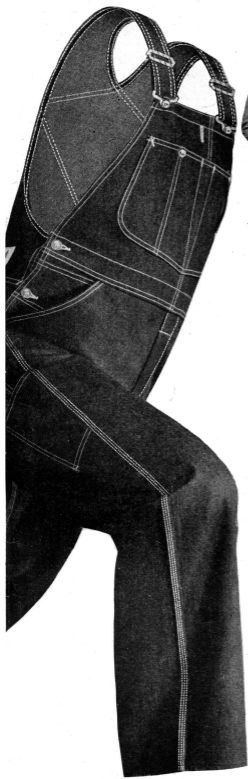
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