

DARK AGNES DE LA FERRE RED SONYA

Three Stories by Robert E. Howard



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Dark Agnes de La Fere
Red Sonya
Three Stories by Robert E. Howard

“Sword Woman” and “Blades for France”
not published during the author’s lifetime
“The Shadow of the Vulture” first published 1934

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A Dunyazad Digital Library book
Selected, edited and typeset by Robert Schaechter
First published August 2010
Release 1.02a · August 2020

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert E. Howard was born in a small Texan town on January 22nd, 1906, as the only child of the traveling country physician Dr. Isaac Mordecai Howard, and his wife Hester Jane Ervin. During Howard's early years the family moved from one small Texas town to the next, relocating every year or two, until in 1919 they finally settled in the hamlet of Cross Plains, where Dr. Howard would be a well-respected general practitioner — here Howard would spend the rest of his life.

Howard started to write early — from childhood on, he had known that this was what he wanted to do — and he turned into an incredibly prolific author, covering a wide range of action and adventure genres. Howard wrote to earn a living, and since the magazines that bought his stories were paying poorly, he had to make up for this by volume. He was a careful writer, usually writing outlines and several drafts of his stories before he submitted them, but he wrote fast, rarely ran out of ideas (or of older stories to re-use and improve), and above all he was an unremitting worker: “*Writing is pounding out one damn yarn after another, pounding them out whether you want to or not ... the only way I can get anything done is to keep pounding away*” (as quoted by Novalyne Price Ellis, in her biography *One Who Walked Alone*).

Howard pounded away at historical fiction, fantasy, adventure, horror, boxing, western, detective and comedy stories, and also at several hundred poems — though these, he knew, would not be published by the magazines he was writing for.

All this time, Howard's life was troubled. From early age on he suffered from depression, and then he was burdened by the chronic

illness of his mother. It was she who in his childhood had installed in him the love for literature and poetry, and he felt very close to her — when she became bed-ridden, it was he who became her caregiver for many years until her death. His unsteady commercial success as a writer did not mitigate the pain of his depression, and a longstanding on-and-off love affair with the only woman he had ever been closely acquainted with was leading nowhere. On June 11th, 1936, when he was told that his mother would not awake from the coma into which she had fallen, he felt released of his duty to her, walked out to his car, took a gun he had borrowed from the glove box, and shot himself.

ABOUT THIS EDITION

The three stories that are combined in this small e-book are all that we have, in their creator's own writing, of two most remarkable adventure heroines.

The two stories about Dark Agnes in particular, *Sword Woman* and *Blades for France*, demonstrate how far ahead of his time Howard was when he was at his best. Even today, the uncompromising radicalness with which Agnes repudiates traditional female gender roles is stunning. It is noteworthy that Agnes, very unusual for Howard's writings, is the first person narrator of these stories.

Given the potential of this fascinating character, it disappoints us that we will never learn more about her and her further adventures and life. We can only find some comfort in the knowledge that to her, at least, a much longer life was given than to her creator: "*Indeed, in those days men were iron,*" are her words — and such words can only be spoken when looking back, from a ripe old age, on days long past.

A third Dark Agnes story in circulation, *Mistress of Death*, written by Gerald W. Page, allegedly based on a draft by Howard, fails to do justice either to Howard's literary skills or to the heroine's character, and is not included here.

Of Red Sonya we have, and know, even less — she appears in only one of Howard's stories, and there not before the fourth chapter of seven. She has little to do, except lending her name, with the "Red Sonja" who has become a popular heroine of stories, comics and movies by generations of Howard epigones.

The story in which we meet Red Sonya, *The Shadow of the Vulture*,

not only acquaints us with a formidable female fighter, but also shows us Howard's serious interest in history. Except for a few minor inaccuracies, and, of course, the fictional elements, the Siege of Vienna and its historical background are described authentically.

For the present edition the misprinted name *Roggendrof* was corrected to *Roggendorf*, and, more relevant, *Semmering* to *Simmering* — the former being a mountain some 50 miles south of Vienna, while the latter is the Viennese suburb where Suleyman the Magnificent indeed had pitched his tent.

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SWORD WOMAN

1.

“Agnes! You red-haired spawn of the devil, where are you?” It was my father calling me, after his usual fashion. I raked my sweat-dampened hair out of my eyes and heaved the bundle of fagots back on my shoulder. Little of rest was there in my life.

My father parted the bushes and called into the glade — a tall man, gaunt and bitter, darkened with the suns of many campaigns, marked with scars gotten in the service of greedy kings and avaricious dukes. He scowled at me, and faith, I would hardly have recognized him had he worn another expression.

“What are you about?” he snarled.

“You sent me into the forest for wood,” I answered sullenly.

“Did I bid you begone a whole day?” he roared, aiming a slap at my head which I avoided with a skill born of much practise. “Have you forgot this is your wedding day?”

At that my fingers went limp and the cord slipped through them, so the bundle of fagots tumbled to the ground and burst apart. The gold went out of the sunlight, and the joy from the trilling of the birds.

“I had forgot,” I whispered, from lips suddenly dry.

“Well, take up your sticks and come along,” he scowled. “The sun heels westward. Ungrateful wench — accursed jade! — that your father should be forced to drag his old bones through the forest to bring you to your husband.”

“Husband!” I muttered. “Francois! Hoofs of the devil!”

“Will you swear, wench?” snarled my father. “Must I lesson you

again? Will you flout the man I have chosen for you? Francois is as fine a young man as you can find in all Normandy.”

“A fat pig,” I muttered; “a very munching, guzzling, nuzzling swine!”

“Be silent!” he yelled. “He will be a prop to my old age. I cannot much longer guide the plough handles. My old wounds pain me. Your sister Ysabel’s husband is a dog; he will give me no aid. Francois will be different. He will tame you, I warrant me. He will not humor you, as have I. You will eat stick from his hand, my fine lady.”

At that a red mist waved across my sight. It was ever thus at such talk of taming. I dashed down the fagots I had mechanically taken up, and all the fire in my blood rushed to my lips.

“May he rot in hell, and you with him!” I shrieked. “I’ll *not* wed him. Beat me — kill me! Use me as you wish! But I’ll never share Francois’ bed!”

At that hell flamed into my father’s eyes, so that I should have trembled but for the madness that gripped me. I saw mirrored there all the fury and violence and passion that had been his when he looted and murdered and raped as a Free Companion. With a wordless roar he lunged for me and dealt a buffet at my head with his right fist. I avoided the blow, and he smote with his left. Again his fist flailed empty air as I dodged, and then with a cry like the yell of a wolf, he caught my loose hair in his fingers, wrapping the tresses around his hand and wrenching my head back until it seemed my neck would break; and he smote me on the chin with his clubbed right fist, so that the sunlight went out in a wave of blackness.

I must have been senseless for some time — long enough for my father to drag me through the forest and into the village by the hair of my head. Regaining consciousness after a beating was no new expe-

rience, but I was sick and weak and dizzy, and my limbs ached from the rough ground over which he had dragged me. I was lying in our wretched hut, and when I staggered up into a sitting position, I found that my plain woolen tunic had been taken from me, and that I was decked in wedding finery. By Saint Denis, the feel of it was more loathsome than the slimy touch of a serpent, and a quick panic assailed me, so I would have torn it from me; but then a giddiness and a sickness overcame me, and I sank back with a groan. And blackness deeper than that of a bruised brain sank over me, in which I saw myself caught in a trap in which I struggled in vain. All strength flowed out of me, and I would have wept if I could. But I never could weep; and now I was too crushed to curse, and I lay staring dumbly at the rat-gnawed beams of the hut.

Then I was aware that some one had entered the room. From without sounded a noise of talking and laughter, as the people gathered. The one who had come into the hut was my sister Ysabel, bearing her youngest child on her hip. She looked down at me, and I noted how bent and stooped she was, and how gnarled from toil her hands, and how lined her features from weariness and pain. The holiday garments she wore seemed to bring these things out; I had not noticed them when she wore her usual peasant woman's attire.

"They make ready for the wedding, Agnes," she said, in her hesitant way. I did not reply. She set down the baby and knelt beside me, looking into my face with a strange wistfulness.

"You are young and strong and fresh, Agnes," she said, yet as though she spake more to herself than to me. "Almost beautiful in your wedding finery. Are you not happy?"

I closed my eyes wearily.

"You should laugh and be gay," she sighed — it seemed she

moaned, rather. “’Tis but once in a girl’s life. You do not love Francois. But I did not love Guillaume. Life is a hard thing for a woman. Your tall supple body will grow bent like mine, and broken with child-bearing; your hands will become twisted — and your mind will grow strange and grey — with the toil and the weariness — and the everlasting face of a man you hate —”

At that I opened my eyes and stared up at her.

“I am but a few years older than you, Agnes,” she murmured. “Yet look at me. Would you become as I?”

“What can a girl do?” I asked helplessly.

Her eyes burned into mine with a shadow of the fierceness I had so often seen smolder in the eyes of our father.

“One thing!” she whispered. “The only thing a woman can do, to free herself. Do not cling by your fingers to life, to become as our mother, and as your sister; do not live to become as me. Go while you are strong and supple and handsome. Here!”

She bent quickly, pressed something into my hand, then snatched up the child and was gone. And I lay staring fixedly at the slim-bladed dagger in my hand.

I stared up at the dingy rafters, and I knew her meaning. But as I lay there with my fingers curled about the slender hilt, strange new thoughts flooded my mind. The touch of that hilt sent a tingling through the veins of my arm; a strange sense of familiarity, as if its feel started a dim train of associations I could not understand but somehow felt. Never had I fingered a weapon before, or any edged thing more than a woodman’s axe or a cabbage knife. This slim lethal thing shimmering in my hand seemed somehow like an old friend come home again.

Outside the door voices rose and feet shuffled, and I quickly

slipped the dagger into my bosom. The door opened and fingers caught at the jamb, and faces leered at me. I saw my mother, stolid, colorless, a work animal with the emotions of a work animal, and over her shoulder, my sister. And I saw sudden disappointment and a haunting sorrow flood her expression as she saw me still alive; and she turned away.

But the others flooded into the hut and dragged me from the bunk, laughing and shouting in their peasant hilarity. Whether they put down my reluctance to virginal shyness, or knew my hatred for Francois, mattered little. My father's iron grasp was on one wrist, and some great mare of a loud-mouthed woman had my other wrist, and so they dragged me forth from the hut into a ring of shouting, laughing folk, who were already more than half drunk, men and women. Their rude jests and obscene comments fell on heedless ears. I was fighting like a wild thing, blind and reasonless, and it took all the strength of my captors to drag me along. I heard my father cursing me under his breath, and he twisted my wrist till it was like to break, but all he got out of me was a panting oath that consigned his soul to the hell it deserved.

I saw the priest coming forward, a wizened, blinking old fool, whom I hated as I hated them all. And Francois was coming to meet me — Francois, in new jerkin and breeches, with a chain of flowers about his fat red neck, and the smirk on his thick distended lips that made my flesh crawl. There he stood, grinning like a mindless ape, yet with vindictive triumph and lustful meaning in his little pig eyes.

At the sight of him I ceased my struggles like one struck motionless, and my captors released me and drew back; and so I stood facing him for an instant, almost crouching, glaring unspeaking. "Kiss her, lad!" bellowed some drunken lout; and then as a taut spring snaps,

I jerked the dagger from my bosom and sprang at Francois. My act was too quick for those slow-witted clowns even to comprehend, much less prevent. My dagger was sheathed in his pig's heart before he realized I had struck, and I yelped with mad glee to see the stupid expression of incredulous surprise and pain flood his red countenance, as I tore the dagger free and he fell, gurgling like a stuck pig, and spouting blood between his clawing fingers — to which clung petals from his bridal chain.

What has taken long to tell needed but an instant to transpire. I leapt, struck, tore away and fled, all in an instant. My father, the soldier, quicker in wit and action than the others, yelled and sprang to catch me, but his groping hands closed on empty air. I shot through the startled crowd and into the forest, and as I gained the trees, my father caught up a bow and let fly at me. I shrank aside and the arrow thudded venomously into a tree.

“Drunken fool!” I cried, with a shriek of wild laughter. “You are in your dotage, to miss such a mark!”

“Come back, you slut!” he roared, mad with passion.

“To the fires of hell with you,” I retorted; “and may the devil feast upon your black heart!” And that was my farewell to my father, as I turned and fled through the forest.

How far I fled I do not know. Behind me I heard the howls of the villagers, and their stumbling and blundering pursuit. Then only the yells, and those distant and far away, and then even they faded out. For few of my brave villagers had stomach to follow me into the deep woods, where the shadows were already stealing. I ran until my breath was jerked out of me in racking gasps, and my knees buckled, hurling me headlong in the soft leaf-carpeted loam, where I lay in a half-faint, until the moon climbed up, sheathing the higher branches in frosty

silver, and cutting out the shadows yet more blackly. About me I heard rustlings and movements that betokened beasts, and perchance worse — werewolves and goblins and vampires, for all I knew. Yet I was not afraid. I had slept in the forest ere now, when night caught me far from the village with a load of fagots, or my father in his drink had driven me forth from the hut.

I rose and went on through the moonlight and the darkness, taking scant heed of the direction, so I put as much distance as possible between me and the village. In the darkness before dawn sleep overcame me, and throwing myself on the loam, I fell into deep slumber, careless of whether beast or ghouel devoured me before day broke.

But when dawn rose over the forest, it found me alive and whole, and possessed of a ravenous hunger. I sat up, wondering for an instant at the strangeness of it all, then sight of my torn wedding robes and the blood-cruste dagger in my girdle brought it all back. And I laughed again as I remembered Francois' expression as he fell, and a wild surge of freedom flooded me, so I felt like dancing and singing like a mad woman. But instead I cleansed the dagger on some fresh leaves, and putting it again in my girdle, I went toward the rising sun.

Presently I came upon a road which wound through the forest and was glad of it, because my wedding shoes, being shoddy things, were mostly worn out. I was accustomed to going barefoot, but even so, the briars and twigs of the forest hurt my feet.

The sun was not well up, when, coming to a curve in the road, which indeed was little more than a forest trail, I heard the sound of horse's hoofs. Instinct told me to hide in the bushes. But another instinct checked me. I searched my soul for fear and found it not. So I was standing in the middle of the path, unmoving, my dagger in my

hand, when the horseman came around the bend, and pulled up short with a startled oath.

He stared at me and I gave back his glance, unspeaking. He was handsome in a dark way, somewhat above medium height, and rather slender. His horse was a fine black stallion, with trappings of red leather and bright metal, and he himself was clad in silk hosen and velvet doublet, somewhat shabby, with a scarlet cloak flung about him, and a feather in his cap. He wore no baldric, but a sword hung at his girdle in a worn leather sheath.

“By Saint Denis!” he exclaimed; “what sprite of the forest, or goddess of dawn are you, girl?”

“Who are you to ask?” I demanded, finding myself neither fearful nor overly timid.

“Why, I am Etienne Villiers, once of Aquitaine,” he answered, and an instant later bit his lip and shook his head as if in irritation that he had so spoken. He looked at me, then, from crown to slippers and back, and laughed.

“Out of what mad tale did you step?” he asked. “A red-haired girl in tattered wedding finery, dagger in hand, in the green woodlands just at sunrise! ’Tis better than a romaunt! Come, good wench, tell me the jest.”

“Here is no jest,” I muttered sullenly.

“But who are you?” he persisted.

“My name is Agnes de Chastillon,” I answered.

He laughed and slapped his thigh.

“A noble lady in disguise!” he mocked. “Saint Ives, the tale grows more spicy! From what shaded bower in what giant-guarded castle have you escaped, in these trappings of a peasant, my lady?” And he doffed his chaperon in a sweeping bow.

“I have as much right to the name as many who wear high-bellied titles,” I answered, angered. “My father was the bastard son of a peasant woman and the Duc de Chastillon. He has ever used the name, and his daughters after him. If you like not my name go your way. I have not asked you to stop and mock me.”

“Nay, I did not mean to mock you,” he protested, his gaze running up and down my figure avidly. “By Saint Trignan, you fit a high and noble name better than many high born ladies I have seen simpering and languishing under it. Zeus and Apollo, but you are a tall lithe wench — a Norman peach, on my honor! I would be your friend; tell me why you are alone in the forest at this hour, with tattered wedding gown and worn shoes.”

He swung supply down from the tall horse, and stood cap in hand before me. His lips were not smiling now, and his dark eyes did not mock me, though meseemed they glowed with an inward vagrant fire. His words suddenly brought home to me how alone and helpless I was, with nowhere to turn. Perchance it was natural that I should unburden myself to this first friendly stranger — besides Etienne Villiers had a manner about him which induced women to trust him —

“I fled last night from the villege of La Fere,” I said. “They wished to wed me to a man I hated.”

“And you spent the night alone in the forest?”

“Why not?”

He shook his head as if he found it difficult of belief.

“But what will you do now?” he asked. “Have you friends near by?”

“I have no friends,” I answered. “I will go on until I die of starvation or something else befalls me.”

He mused awhile, tugging at his clean-shaven chin with thumb and

forefinger. Thrice he lifted his head and swept his gaze over me, and once I thought I saw a darkling shadow pass over his features, making him for an instant appear almost like another man. Then he raised his head and spoke: "You are too handsome a girl to perish in the woods or be carried off by outlaws. If you will, I will take you to Chartres, where you can obtain employ as a serving wench and earn your keep. You can work?"

"No man in La Fere can do more," I answered.

"By Saint Ives, I believe it," he said, with an admiring shake of his head. "There is something almost pagan about you, with your height and suppleness. Come, will you trust me?"

"I would not cause you trouble," I answered. "Men from La Fere will be following me."

"Tush!" quoth he in scorn. "Who ever heard of a peasant going further than a league from his village? You are safe enough."

"Not from my father," I answered grimly. "He is no mere peasant. He has been a soldier. He will follow me far, and kill me when he finds me."

"In that case," muttered Etienne, "we must find a way to befool him. Ha! I have it! I mind me less than a mile back I passed a youth whose garments should fit you. Bide ye here until I return. We'll make a boy of you!"

So saying he wheeled and thundered off, and I watched him, wondering if I should see him again, or if he but made sport of me. I waited, and the hoofs faded away in the distance. Silence reigned over the green wood, and I was aware of a fierce and gnawing hunger. Then, after what seemed an infinite time, again the hoofs beat through the forest, and Etienne Villiers galloped up, laughing gaily, and waving a bundle of clothes.

“Did you slay him?” I asked.

“Not I!” laughed Etienne. “I but sent him blubbering on his way naked as Adam. Here, wench, go into yonder copse and don these garments hastily. We must be on our way, and it is many a league to Chartres. Cast your maiden’s clothing out to me, and I will take them and leave them on the banks of that stream which turns through the forest a short way off. Mayhap they will be found, and men think you drowned.”

He was back before I had finished putting on the strange garments, and chatting to me through the screening bushes.

“Your revered father will be searching for a maid,” he laughed. “Not for a boy. When he asks the peasants if they have seen a tall red-haired wench, they will shake their bullet heads. Ha! ha! ha! ’Tis a good jest on the old villain.”

Presently I came forth from the bushes, and he stared hard at me where I stood in shirt, breeches and cap. The garments felt strange to me, but gave me a freedom I had never experienced in petticoats.

“Zeus!” he muttered. “’Tis less perfect disguise than I had hoped for. The blindest clod in the fields could tell ’twas no man those garments hid. Here; let me lop those red locks with my dagger; mayhap that will aid.”

But when he had cut my hair into a square mane that fell short of my shoulders, he shrugged his own shoulders.

“Even so you are all woman,” quoth he. “Yet perchance a stranger, passed hastily on the road, would be befooled. Yet we must chance it.”

“Why do you concern yourself over me?” I asked curiously; for I was unused to kindness.

“Why, by God,” quoth he, “would any man worthy of the name leave a young girl to wander and starve in the forest? My purse holds

more copper than silver, and my velvet is worn, but Etienne Villiers holds his honor as high as any belted knight or castled baron; and never shall weakness suffer while his purse hold a coin or his scabbard a sword.”

Hearing these words I felt humble and strangely ashamed; for I was unlearned and untaught, and had no words to speak the gratitude I felt. I stumbled and stammered, and he smiled and gently chided me to silence, saying that he needed not thanks, for goodness carried its own reward.

Then he mounted and gave me a hand. I swung up behind him, and we thundered off down the road, I holding to his girdle, and half enveloped by his cloak which blew out behind him in the morning breeze. And I felt sure that any one seeing us thundering by, would swear it was a young man and a lad, instead of a man and a girl.

My hunger mounted with the sun, but the sensation was no uncommon one in my life, so I made no complaint. We were travelling in a south eastward direction, and it seemed to me that as we progressed a strange nervousness made itself evident in Etienne. He spoke little, and kept to the less traveled roads, frequently following bridle-paths or wood-cutters' trails that wound in and out among the trees. We met few folk, and they only yokels with axe on shoulder or fagots on back, who gaped at us, and doffed their ragged caps.

Midday was nigh when he halted at a tavern — a woodland inn, lonely and isolated, the sign of which was poorly done, and almost obliterated; but Etienne called it the Knaves' Fingers. The host came forth, a stooped, hulking lout, with a twisted leer, wiping his hands on his greasy leather apron, and bobbing his bullet head.

“We desire food and lodging,” said Etienne loudly. “I am Gerard de Bretagne, of Montauban, and this my young brother. We have been

to Caen, and are travelling to Tours. Tend my horse and set a roasted capon on the table, host.”

The host bobbed and mumbled, and took the stallion’s rein. But he lingered as Etienne lifted me off, for I was stiff from the long ride, and I did not believe my disguise was as complete as I had hoped. For the long glance mine host cast at me was not such as a man gives a lad.

As we entered the tavern, we saw only one man seated on a settle and guzzling wine from a leather jack — a fat, gross man, his belly bulging over his leather belt. He looked up as we entered, started and opened his mouth as if to speak. Etienne did not speak but looked full at him, and I saw or felt a quick spark of understanding pass between them. The fat man returned to his wine jack in silence, and Etienne and I made our way to the board on which a slatternly serving wench placed the capon ordered, pease, trenchoirs of bread, a great vessel of Caen tripe, and two flagons of wine.

I fell to avidly, with my dagger, but Etienne ate little. He toyed with his food, his gaze shifting from the fat man on the settle, who now seemed to sleep, back to me, and then out the dingy windows with their diamond shaped panes, or even up to the heavy smoke-stained beams. But he drank much, refilling his flagon again and again, and finally asked me why I did not touch mine.

“I have been too busy eating to drink,” I admitted, and took it up uncertainly, for I had never tasted wine before. All the liquor which ever found its way into our miserable hut, my father had guzzled himself. I emptied the flagon as I had seen him do, and choked and strangled, but found the tang pleasing to my palate.

Etienne swore under his breath.

“By Saint Michele, in all my life I never saw a woman drain a flagon like that! You will be drunk, girl.”

“You forget I am a girl no longer,” I reproved in the same low tone. “Shall we ride on?”

He shook his head.

“We will remain here until morning. You must be weary and in need of rest.”

“My limbs are stiff because I am not used to riding,” I answered. “But I am not tired.”

“Never the less,” he said with a touch of impatience, “we shall rest here until tomorrow. I think it will be safe enough.”

“As you wish,” I replied. “I am utterly in your hands, and wish to do only as you bid in all things.”

“Well and good,” he said; “naught becomes a young girl like cheerful obedience.” Lifting his voice he called to the host who was returned from the stables, and hovered in the background. “Host, my brother is weary. Bring him to a room where he can sleep. We have ridden far.”

“Aye, your honor!” the host bobbed and mumbled, rubbing his hands together; for Etienne had a way of impressing common folk with his importance, as if he were a count at the very least. But of that later.

The innkeeper shambled through a low ceilinged room adjoining the tap-room, and which opened out into another, more spacious room above. It was under the steep roof, and barely furnished, but even so more elaborate than anything to which I had ever been accustomed. I saw — for somehow I had begun instinctively to note such details — that the only entrance or egress was through the door which opened on to the ladder; there was but one window, and that too small even to admit my lithe form. And there was no bolt for the door from within. I saw Etienne scowl and shoot a quick suspicious glance at the innkeeper, but that lout did not seem to notice, rubbing his hands and

discoursing on the excellent qualities of the den into which he had brought us.

“Sleep, brother,” said Etienne for our host’s benefit; then as he turned away, he whispered in my ear, “I trust him not; we will move on as soon as night falls. Rest meantime. I will come for you at dusk.”

Whether it was the wine, after all, or unsuspected weariness, I cannot say; but laying myself down on the straw pallet in my clothing, I fell asleep before I knew it, and slumbered long.

2.

What woke me was the gentle opening of the door. I wakened to darkness, relieved but little by the starlight in the tiny window. No one spoke, but something moved in the darkness. I heard a beam creak and thought I caught the sounds of suppressed breathing.

“Is that you, Etienne?” I whispered. There was no answer, and I spoke a trifle louder. “Etienne! Is that you, Etienne Villiers?”

I thought I heard breath hiss softly between teeth, then the beam creaked again, and a stealthy shuffle receded from me. I heard the door open and close softly, and knew I was once more alone in the room. I sprang up, drawing my dagger. That had not been Etienne, coming for me as he had promised, and I wished to know who it was that had sought to creep upon me in the darkness.

Gliding to the door I opened it and gazed down into the lower room. There was only darkness, as if I looked into a well, but I heard someone moving across the room, and then a fumbling at the outer door. Taking my dagger in my teeth, I slid silently down the ladder, with an ease and stealth that surprised myself. As my feet touched the floor and I seized my dagger and crouched in the darkness, I saw

the outer door swing open, and a bulk was framed in the opening for an instant. I recognized the stooped top-heavy figure of the innkeeper. He was breathing so heavily that he could not have heard the faint sounds I made. He ran clumsily but quickly across the court-like space behind the tavern, and I saw him vanish into the stables. I watched, straining my eyes in the dim starlight, and presently he came forth leading a horse. He did not mount the beast, but led him into the forest, showing every evidence of a desire for silence and secrecy. A short time after he had vanished, I caught the faint sound of a horse galloping. Evidently mine host had mounted after attaining a discreet distance from the inn, and was now riding hard to some unknown goal.

All I could think of was that somehow he recognize me, knew of me, and was riding to bear word to my father. I turned and opened the door a crack into the tap-room, and peered in. No one was there but the serving wench asleep on the floor. A candle burned on the table, and moths fluttered about it. From somewhere there came a faint indistinct mumble of voices.

I glided out the back door and stole around the tavern. Silence hung over the black shadowed forest, except for a faint far cry of a night bird, and the restless movement of the great stallion in his stall.

Candle light streamed from the window of a small room on the other side of the tavern, separated from the common room by a short passage. As I glided past this window, I halted suddenly, hearing my name spoken. I nestled close to the wall listening shamelessly. I heard the quick, clear though low-pitched voice of Etienne, and the rumble of another.

“— Agnes de Chastillon, she said. What does it matter what a peasant wench calls herself? Is she not a handsome baggage?”

“I’ve seen prettier in Paris, aye, and in Chartres, too,” answered

the rumbling voice; which came, I knew, from the fat man who had occupied the settle when we first entered the tavern.

“Pretty!” There was scorn in Etienne’s voice. “The girl’s more than pretty. There’s something wild and untamable about her. Something fresh and vital, I tell you. Any worn-out noble would pay high for her; she would renew the youth of the most jaded debauchee. Look you, Thibault, I would not be offering you this prize, were it not that the risk is too great for me to ride on to Chartres with her. I am suspicious of this dog of an innkeeper, too.”

“If he does recognize you as the man for whose head the Duc d’Alencon yearns —” muttered Thibault.

“Be quiet, fool!” hissed Etienne. “That is another reason I must be rid of the wench. I was surprised into telling her my true name. But by the saints, Thibault, my meeting with her was enough to jolt the calm of a saint! I rounded a bend in the road, and there she stood, straight and tall against the green wood in her torn wedding gown, with her blue eyes smoldering, and the rising sun glinting red in her hair and turning to a streak of blood the dagger in her hand! For an instant I doubted me if she were human, and a strange thrill, almost of terror, swept over me.”

“A country wench in a woods road frightens Etienne Villiers, a rake among rakes,” snorted Thibault, drinking from a jack with a loud sucking noise.

“She was more than that,” retorted Etienne. “There was something fateful about her, like a figure in a tragic drama; something terrible. She is fair, yet there is something strange and dark about her. I cannot explain nor understand it.”

“Enough, enough!” yawned Thibault. “You weave a romaunt about a Norman jade. Come to the point.”

“I have come to it,” snapped Etienne. “I had intended taking her on to Chartres and selling her to a brothel-keeper I wot of, myself; but I realize my folly. I would have to pass too close to the domain of the Duke of Alencon, and if he learned I was in the lands —”

“He has not forgotten,” grunted Thibault. “He would pay high for information regarding your whereabouts. He dares not arrest you openly; it will be a dagger in the dark, a shot from the bushes. He would close your mouth in secrecy and silence, if he might.”

“I know,” snarled Etienne with a shudder. “I was a fool to come this far east. Dawn shall find me far away. But you can take the girl to Chartres without fear, aye, or to Paris, for that matter. Give me the price I ask, and she is yours.”

“It is too high,” protested Thibault. “Suppose she fights like a wildcat?”

“That is your look out,” callously answered Etienne. “You have tamed enough wenches so you should be able to handle this one. Though I warn you, there is fire in the girl. But that is your business. You have told me your companions lie in a village not far from here. Get them to aid you. If you cannot make a pretty profit of her in Chartres, or in Orleans, or in Paris, you are a greater fool than I am.”

“Well, well,” grumbled Thibault. “I’ll take a chance; after all, that is what a business man must do.”

I heard the clink of silver coins on the table, and the sound was like a knell to me.

And indeed it was my knell for as I leaned blindly and sickly against the tavern wall, there died in me the girl I had been, and in her stead rose the woman I have become. My sickness passed, and cold fury turned me brittle as steel and pliant as fire.

“A drink to seal the bargain,” I heard Etienne say; “then I must ride. When you go for the wench —”

I hurled open the door, and Etienne’s hand froze with the goblet at his lips. Thibault’s eyes bulged at me over the rim of his wine cup. A greeting died on Etienne’s lips, and he went suddenly pale at the death in my eyes.

“Agnes!” he exclaimed, rising. I stepped through the door and my blade was sheathed in Thibault’s heart before he could rise. An agonized grunt bubbled from his fat lips, and he sank from his bench, spurting red.

“Agnes!” cried Etienne again, throwing out his arms as if to fend me off. “Wait girl —”

“You filthy dog!” I screamed, blazing into mad fury. “You swine — swine — *swine!*” Only my own blind fury saved him as I rushed and stabbed.

I was on him before he could put himself into a position of defense, and my blindly driven steel tore the skin over his ribs. Thrice more I struck, silent and murderous, and he somehow fended the blade from his heart, though the point drew blood from hand, arm and shoulder. Desperately he grasped my wrist and sought to break it, and close-locked we tumbled against the table, over the edge of which he bent me and tried to strangle me. But to grasp my throat he must perforce my wrist with one hand, and twisting it free of his single grip, I struck for his life. The point snapped on a metal buckle and the jagged shard tore through doublet and shirt, and ploughed along his breast; blood spurted and a groan escaped him. In anguish his grasp weakened, and I twisted from beneath him and dealt him a buffet with my clenched fist that rocked back his head and brought streams of blood from his nostrils. Groping for me he clutched me, and as I gouged at his eyes,

he hurled me from him with such force that I hurtled backward across the room and crashed into the wall, thence toppling to the floor.

I was half dazed, but I rebounded with a snarl, gripping a broken table leg. He was wiping blood from his eyes with one hand and fumbling for his sword with the other, but again he misjudged the speed of my attack, and the table leg crashed full on his crown, laying open the scalp and bringing blood in torrents. He threw up his arms to ward off the strokes, and on them and on his head I rained blow after blow, driving him backward, half bent, blind and reeling, until he crashed down into the ruins of the table.

“God, girl,” he whimpered; “would you slay me?”

“With a joyful heart!” I laughed, as I had never laughed before, and I struck him over the ear, knocking him back down among the ruins out of which he was groping.

A moaning cry sobbed through his crushed lips. “In God’s name, girl,” he moaned, extending his hands blindly toward me, “have mercy! Hold your hand, in the name of the saints! I am not fit to die!”

He struggled to his knees, streaming blood from his battered head, his garments dripping crimson. “Hold your hand, Agnes,” he croaked. “Pity, in God’s name!”

I hesitated, staring somberly down at him. Then I threw aside my bludgeon.

“Take your life,” I said in bitter scorn. “You are too poor a thing to stain my hands. Go your ways!”

He sought to rise, then sank down again.

“I cannot rise,” he groaned. “The room swims to my gaze, and grows dark. Oh, Agnes, it is a bitter kiss you have given me! God have mercy on me, for I die in sin. I have laughed at death, but now that it is

upon me, I am afraid. Ah, God, I fear! Leave me not, Agnes! Leave me not to die like a dog!"

"Why should I not?" I asked bitterly. "I trusted you, and thought you nobler than common men, with your lying words of chivalry and honor. Pah! You would have sold me into slavery viler than a Turk's harem."

"I know," he moaned. "My soul is blacker than the night that steals upon me. Call the innkeeper and let him fetch a priest."

"He is gone on some mission of his own," I answered. "He stole out the back door and rode into the forest."

"He is gone to betray me to the Duke of Alencon," muttered Etienne. "He recognized me, after all. I am indeed lost."

Now it came to me that it was because of my calling Etienne's name in the darkness of the room above that the innkeeper became aware of my false friend's true identity. So it might be said that if the Duke laid Etienne by the heels, it would be because of my unconscious betrayal. And like most country people, I had only fear and distrust of the nobility.

"I'll take you hence," I said. "Not even a dog shall fall into the hands of the law by my will."

I left the tavern hurriedly and went to the stables. Of the slattern I saw nothing. Either she had fled to the woods, or else was too drunk to heed. I saddled and bridled Etienne's stallion, though it laid back its ears and snapped and kicked at me, and led it to the door. Then I went within and spoke to Etienne; and indeed a fearsome sight he was, bruised and battered, with tattered doublet and shirt, and all covered with blood.

"I have brought your horse," I said.

"I cannot rise," he mumbled.

“Set your teeth,” I commanded. “I will carry you.”

“You can never do it, girl,” he protested, but even as he spoke, I heaved him up on my shoulders and bore him through the door, and a dead weight he was, with limbs trailing like a dead man’s. Getting him upon the horse was a heart-breaking task, for it was little he could do to aid himself, but at last it was accomplished, and I swung up behind the saddle and held him in place.

Then as I hesitated, in doubt as to where to go, he seemed to sense my uncertainty, for he mumbled: “Take the road westward, to Saint Girault. There is a tavern there, a mile this side the town, the Red Boar, whose keeper is my friend.”

Of that ride through the night, I will speak but briefly. We met no one, riding through a ribbon of starlight, walled by black forest trees. My hand grew sticky with Etienne’s blood, for the jolting of the pace set his many wounds to bleeding afresh, and presently he grew delirious and spake disjointedly of other times and people strange to me. Anon he mentioned names known to me by reputation, lords, ladies, soldiers, outlaws and pirates, and he raved of dark deeds and sordid crimes and feats of curious heroism. And betimes he sang snatches of marching songs and drinking songs and bawdy ballads and love lyrics, and maundered in alien tongues unintelligible to me. Ah — I have ridden many roads since that night, of intrigue or violence, but never stranger ride rode I than that ride in the night through the forest to Saint Girault.

Dawn was a hint in the branch-scarred sky when I drew up at a tavern I believed was the one Etienne meant. The picture on the board proved such to be the case, and I shouted for the keeper. A lout of a boy came forth in his shirt, yawning, and digging his fists into his sluggish eyes, and when he saw the great stallion and its riders, all

dabbled and splashed with blood, he bawled with fear and amaze and scudded back into the tavern with his shirt tail flapping about his rump. Presently then a window was cautiously pushed open upstairs, and a night-capped head was thrust out behind the muzzle of a great arquebuse.

“Go your ways,” quoth the night-cap; “we have no dealings with bandits and bloody murderers.”

“Here are no bandits,” I answered angrily, being weary and short of patience. “Here is a man who has been set upon and nearly slain. If you are the innkeeper of the Red Boar, he is a friend of yours — Etienne Villiers, of Aquitaine.”

“Etienne!” exclaimed mine host. “I will be down. Assuredly I will be down. Why did you not say it was Etienne?”

The window slammed and there was a sound of stairs being rapidly descended. I slid from the stallion and received Etienne’s toppling form in my arms, easing him to the ground as the keeper rushed forth with servants bearing torches.

Etienne lay like one dead, his face livid where it was not masked with blood, but his heart beat strongly, and I knew he was partly conscious.

“Who did this, in God’s name?” demanded mine host in horror.

“I did,” I answered shortly. He gave back from me, paling in the torchlight.

“God ha’ mercy on us! A youth like — holy Denis protect us! It’s a woman!”

“Enough of this babble!” I exclaimed, angered. “Take him up and bear him into your best chamber.”

“B-b-but —” began mine host, still bewildered, while the menials backed away.

I stamped my foot and swore, which is a custom always common to me.

“Death of the devil and Judas Iscariot!” quoth I. “Will you allow your friend to die while you gape and stare? Take him up!” I laid hand on his dagger, which I had girdled to mine own waist, and they hastened to obey me, staring as though I were the arch-fiend’s daughter.

“Etienne is always welcome,” mumbled mine host, “but a she-devil in breeches —”

“You will wear your own longer if you talk less and work more,” I assured him, plucking a bell-mouth pistol from the girdle of a servant who was too frightened even to remember he had it. “Do as I say, and there will be no more slaying tonight. Onward!”

Eye, verily, the happenings of the night had matured me. I was not yet fully a woman, but on the way to being one.

They bore Etienne to what mine host — whose name was Perducas — swore was the best chamber in the tavern, and sooth to say, it was much finer than anything in the Knave’s Fingers. It was an upper room, opening out upon the landing of a winding stair, and it had windows of proper size, though no other door.

Perducas swore that he was as good a leech as any man, and we stripped Etienne and set to work reviving him. Indeed, he showed to be as roughly handled as any man I had ever seen, not to be mortally wounded. But when we had washed the blood and dust off his body, we found that none of his dagger-wounds had touched a vital spot, nor was his skull fractured, though the scalp had been split in several places. His right arm was broken and the other black with bruises, and the broken bone we set, I helping Perducas with some skill, for accidents and wounds had always been common enough in La Fere.

When we had his wounds bandaged, and him laid in a clean bed,

he recovered his senses enough to gulp wine and inquire where he was. When I told him, he muttered: "Leave me not, Agnes; Perducas is a man among men, but I require a woman's tender care."

"Saint Denis deliver me from such tender care as this hell-cat has shown," quoth Perducas under his breath. And I said: "I will remain until you are upon your feet again, Etienne." And he seemed satisfied therewith, and went into a calm slumber.

I then demanded a room for myself, and Perducas, having sent a boy to attend the stallion, showed me a chamber adjoining that of Etienne's, though not connected with it by any door. I laid myself down on the bed just as the sun was coming up, it being the first feather bed I had ever seen, much less lain on, and slept for many hours.

When I came again to Etienne, I found him in full possession of his senses, and free of delirium. Indeed, in those days men were iron, and if their wounds were not instantly mortal, they quickly recovered, unless their hurts became poisoned through the carelessness or ignorance of the leeches. Perducas would have none of the nauseous and childish remedies praised by the physicians, but divers clean herbs and plants he gathered in the depths of the woods. He told me that he learned his art from the *hakims* of the Saracens, among whom he had traveled in his youth. He was a man of many unexpected sides, was Perducas.

Together he and I tended Etienne, who healed rapidly. Little speech passed between us. He and Perducas talked much together, but most of the time Etienne merely lay and looked silently at me.

Perducas talked to me a little, but seemed to fear me. When I spoke of my score, he replied that I owed him naught; that as long as Etienne desired my presence, food and lodging were mine, without pay. But

he earnestly desired me not to converse with the towns' people, lest their curiosity lead to the discovery of Etienne. His servants, he said, could be trusted to silence. I asked him naught of the reason for the Duc d'Alencon's hatred for Etienne, but quoth he: "It is no common score which the Duke holdeth against Etienne Villiers. Etienne was once in this nobleman's train, and was unwise enough to perform for him a most delicate mission. D'Alencon is ambitious; 'tis whispered that naught but the rank of constable of France will satisfy him. He is now high in favor with the king; that favor might not shine with such lustre were it known what letters once passed between the Duke and Charles of Germany, whom men now know as the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.

"Etienne alone knows the full extent of that plotted treason. Therefore d'Alencon burns for Etienne's death, yet dares not strike openly, lest his victim damn him forever with his dying breath. He would strike subtly and silently, by hidden dagger, poison or ambush. As long as Etienne is within his reach, Etienne's only safety lies in secrecy."

"Suppose there are others like that rogue Thibault?" I demanded.

"Nay," quoth he. "'Tis no doubt there are. I know that band of gallows' bait well. But 'tis their one point of honor that they betray not one of their comrades. And in time past Etienne was one of them — cut-purses, women-snatchers, thieves and murderers that they are."

I shook my head, musing on the strangeness of men, insomuch that Perducas, an honest man, was friend to a rogue like Etienne, knowing well his villainies. Well, many an honest man secretly admires a rogue, seeing in him that which he himself would be, if he lacked not the courage.

Ah well, I heeded well Perducas' desires, and time dragged heavily

on my hands. I seldom left the tavern, save at night, and then only to wander in the woods, avoiding the people of the countryside and of the market-town. And a growing restlessness stirred me, and a feeling that I was waiting for something I knew not what, and that I be up and doing — I knew not what. A week had passed in this manner, when I met Guiscard de Clisson.

3.

*Beyond the creak of rat-gnawed beams in squalid peasant huts:
Above the groan of ox-wain wheels that ground the muddy rats:
I heard the beat of distant drums that call me night and day
To roads where armored captains ride, in steel and roses panoplied,
With banners flowing crimson-dyed — over the world away!*

— Drums in My Ears

I entered into the tavern one morning, after an early walk in the woods, and halted at the sight of the stranger gnawing a beef-bone at the board. He too stopped short in his gorging and stared at me. He was a tall man, rangy and hard of frame. A scar seamed his lean features, and his grey eyes were cold as steel. He was, indeed, a man of steel, clad in cuirass, thigh-pieces and greaves. His broadsword lay across his knees, his morion rested on the bench beside him.

“By God!” quoth he. “Are you man or woman?”

“What do you think?” I asked, leaning my hands on the board and looking down at him.

“Only a fool would ask the question I asked,” said he, with a shake of his head. “You are all woman; yet your attire strangely becomes you. A pistol in your girdle, too. You remind me of a woman I once knew;

she marched and fought like a man, and died of a pistol ball on the field of battle. She was dark where you are fair, but there is something similar in the set of your chin, in your carriage — nay, I know not. Sit ye down and converse with me. I am Guiscard de Clisson. Have you heard of me?”

“Many a time,” I answered, seating myself. “In my native village they tell tales of you. You are a leader of mercenaries and Free Companions.”

“When men have guts enough to be led,” quoth he, quaffing, and holding out the flagon to me. “Ha, by the tripe and blood of Judas, you guzzle like a man! Mayhap women are becoming men, for ’tis truth, by Saint Trignan, that men are become women, these days. Not a recruit for my company have I gained in this province, where, in days I can remember, men fought for the honor of following a captain of mercenaries. Death of Satan! With the Emperor gathering his accursed Lanzknechts to sweep de Lautrec out of Milan, and the king in such dire need of soldiers — to say nothing of the rich loot in Italy — every able-bodied Frenchman ought to be marching southward, by God! Ah, for the old-time spirit of men!”

Now as I looked at this war-scarred veteran, and heard his talk, my heart beat quick with a strange longing, and I seemed to hear, as I had heard so often in my dreams, the distant beating of drums.

“I will ride with you!” I exclaimed. “I am weary of being a woman. I will make one of your company!”

He laughed and slapped the board with his open hand, as if at a great jest.

“By Saint Denis, girl,” quoth he, “you have a proper spirit, but it take more than a pair of breeches to make a man.”

“If that other woman of whom you spoke could march and fight, so can I!” I cried.

“Nay.” He shook his head. “Black Margot of Avignon was one in a million. Forget this foolish fancy, girl. Don thy petticoats and become a proper woman once more. Then — well, in your proper place I might be glad to have you ride with me!”

Ripping out an oath that made him start, I sprang up, knocking my bench backward so it fell with a crash. I stood before him, clenching and unclenching my hands, seething with the rage that always rose quickly in me.

“Ever the man in men!” I said between my teeth. “Let a woman know her proper place: let her milk and spin and sew and bake and bear children, not look beyond her threshold or the command of her lord and master! Bah! I spit on you all! There is no man alive who can face me with weapons and live, and before I die, I’ll prove it to the world. Women! Cows! Slaves! Whimpering, cringing serfs, crouching to blows, revenging themselves by — taking their own lives, as my sister urged me to do. Ha! You deny me a place among men? By God, I’ll live as I please and die as God wills, but if I’m not fit to be a man’s comrade, at least I’ll be no man’s mistress. So go ye to hell, Guiscard de Clisson, and may the devil tear your heart!”

So saying I wheeled and strode away, leaving him gaping after me. I mounted the stair and came into Etienne’s chamber, where I found him lying on his bed, much improved, though still pale and weak, and his arm like to be in its sling for weeks to come.

“How fares it with you?” I demanded.

“Well enough,” he answered, and after staring at me a space: “Agnes,” said he, “why did you spare my life when you could have taken it?”

“Because of the woman in me,” I answered morosely; “that cannot bear to hear a helpless thing beg for life.”

“I deserved death at your hands,” he muttered, “more than Thibault. Why have you tended and cared for me?”

“I did not wish you to fall into the hands of the Duke because of me,” I answered, “since it was I who unwittingly betrayed you. And now you have asked me these questions, I will e’en ask you one; why be such a damnable rogue?”

“God knows,” he answered, closing his eyes. “I have never been anything else, as far back as I can remember, and my memory runs back to the gutters of Poitiers, where I snatched for crusts and lied for pennies as a child, and got my first knowledge of the ways of the world. I have been soldier, smuggler, pander, cut-throat, thief — always a black rogue. Saint Denis, some of my deeds have been too black to repeat. And yet somewhere, somehow, there has always been an Etienne Villiers hidden deep in the depths of the creature that is myself, untarnished by the rest of me. There lies remorse and fear, and makes for misery. So I begged for life when I should have welcomed death, and now lie here speaking truth when I should be framing lies for your seduction. Would I were all saint or all rogue.”

At that instant feet stamped on the stair, and rough voices rose. I sprang to bar the door, hearing Etienne’s name called, but he halted me with a lifted hand, harkened, then sank back with a sigh of relief.

“Nay, I recognize the voice. Enter, comrades!” he called.

Then into the chamber trooped a foul and ruffianly band, led by a pot-bellied rogue in enormous boots. Behind him came four others, ragged, scarred, with cropped ears, patched eyes, or flattened noses. They leered at me, and then glared at the man on the bed.

“So, Etienne Villiers,” said the fat rogue, “we ha’ fund ye! Hiding from us is not so easy as hiding from the Duc d’Alencon, eh, you dog?”

“What manner of talk is this, Tristan Pelligny?” demanded Etienne, in unfeigned astonishment. “Have you come to greet a wounded comrade, or —”

“We have come to do justice on a rat!” roared Pelligny. He turned and ponderously indicated his ragamuffin crew, pointing a thick forefinger at each. “See ye here, Etienne Villiers? Jacques of the Warts, Gaston the Wolf, Jehan Crop-ear, and Conrad the German. And myself maketh five, good men and true, once your comrades, come to do justice upon you for foul murder!”

“You are mad!” exclaimed Etienne, struggling upon his elbows. “Whom have I murdered that you should be wroth thereat? When I was one of you did I not always bear my share of the toil and dangers of thievery, and divide the loot fairly?”

“We talk not now of loot!” bellowed Tristan. “We speak of our comrade Thibault Bazas, foully murdered by you in the tavern of the Knave’s Fingers!”

Etienne’s mouth started open, he hesitated, glanced in a startled way at me, then closed his mouth again. I started forward.

“Fools!” I exclaimed. “He did not slay that fat swine Thibault. *I* killed him.”

“Saint Denis!” laughed Tristan. “’Tis the wench in the breeches of whom the slattern spoke! You slew Thibault? Ha! A pretty lie, but not convincing, to any whom knew Thibault. The serving wench heard the fighting, and fled in fright into the forest. When she dared to return, Thibault lay dead, and Etienne and his jade were riding away together. Nay, ’tis too plain. Etienne slew Thibault, doubtless over this very

hussy. Well, when we have disposed of him, we will take care of his leman, eh lads?"

A babble of profane and obscene agreement answered him.

"Agnes," said Etienne, "call Perducas."

"Call and be damned," said Tristan. "Perducas and all the servants are out in the stable, drenching Guiscard de Clisson's nag. We'll have our task done before they return. Here — stretch this traitor out on yonder bench. Before I cut his throat, I'd fain try my knife edge on other parts of him."

He brushed me aside contemptuously, and strode to Etienne's bed, followed close by the others. Etienne struggled upright, and Tristan struck him with clenched fist, knocking him down again. In that instant the room swam red in my gaze. With a leap I had Etienne's sword in my hand and at the feel of the hilt, power and a strange confidence rushed like fire through my veins.

With a fierce exultant cry I ran at Tristan, and he wheeled, bellowing, fumbling at his sword. I cut that bellow short as my sword sheared through his thick neck muscles and he went down, spouting blood, his head hanging by a shred of flesh. The other ruffians gave tongue like a pack of hounds and turned on me in fear and fury. And remembering suddenly the pistol in my girdle, I plucked it forth and fired point-blank into the face of Jacques, blasting his skull into a red ruin. In the hanging smoke the others made at me, bawling foul curses.

There are actions to which we are born, and for which we have a talent exceeding mere teaching. I, who had never before had a sword in my grasp, found it like a living thing in my hand, wielded by unguessed instinct. And I found, again, my quickness of eye and hand and foot was not to be matched by these dull clods. They bellowed and flailed blindly, wasting strength and motion, as if their swords

were cleavers, while I smote in deadly silence, and with deadly certainty.

I do not remember much of that fight; it is a crimson haze in which a few details stand out. My thoughts were moving too swiftly for my brain to record, and I know not fully how, with what leaps, ducks, side-steps and parries I avoided those flailing blades. I know that I split the head of Conrad the German, as a man splits a melon, and his brains gushed sickeningly over the blade. And I remember that the one called Gaston the Wolf trusted too much in a brigandine he wore among his rags, and that under my desperate stroke, the rusty links burst and he fell upon the floor with his bowels spilling out. Then as in a red cloud, only Jehan was rushing at me, and flailing down with his sword. And I caught his descending wrist on my edge. His hand, holding the sword, jumped from his wrist on an arch of crimson, and as he stared stupidly at the spouting stump, I ran him through with such ferocity that the cross-piece struck hard against his breast, and I pitched over him as he fell.

I do not remember rising and wrenching free my blade. On wide braced legs, sword trailing, I reeled among the corpses, then a deadly sickness overcame me, and I staggered to the window and leaning my head over the sill, retched fearfully. I found that blood was streaming down my arm from a slash in my shoulder, and my shirt was in ribbons. The room swam to my gaze, and the scent of fresh blood, swimming in the entrails of the slain, revolted me. As if through a mist I saw Etienne's white face.

Then there came a pound of feet on the stair and Guiscard de Clisson burst through the door, sword in hand, followed by Perducas. They stared like men struck dead, and de Clisson swore appallingly.

“Did I not tell you?” gasped Perducas. “The devil in breeches! Saint Denis, what a slaughter!”

“Is this your work, girl?” asked Guiscard in a strange small voice. I shook back my damp hair and struggled to my feet, swaying dizzily.

“Aye; it was a debt I had to pay.”

“By God!” muttered he, staring. “There is somethin dark and strange about you, for all your fairness.”

“Aye, Dark Agnes!” said Etienne, lifting himself on elbow. “A star of darkness shone on her birth, of darkness and unrest. Where ever she goes shall be blood spilling and men dying. I knew it when I saw her standing against the sunrise that turned to blood the dagger in her hand.”

“I have paid my debt to you,” I said. “If I placed your life in jeopardy, I have bought it back with blood.” And casting his dripping sword at his feet, I turned toward the door.

Guiscard, who had been staring like one daft, shook himself as if from a trance, and strode after me.

“Nails of the Devil!” quoth he. “What has just passed has altered my mind entirely! You are such another as Black Margot of Avignon. A true sword-woman is worth a score of men. Would you still march with me?”

“As a companion-in-arms,” I answered. “I’m mistress to none.”

“None save Death,” he answered, glancing at the corpses.

4.

*Her sisters bend above their looms
And gnaw their moldy crumbs:
But she rides forth in silk and steel
To follow the phantom drums.*
— The Ballad of Dark Agnes

A week after the fight in Etienne's chamber, Guiscard de Clisson and I rode from the tavern of the Red Boar and took the road to the east. I bestrode a mettlesome destrier and was clad as became a comrade of de Clisson. Velvet doublet and silk trunk-hose I wore, with long Spanish boots; beneath my doublet plain steel mail guarded red locks. Pistols were in my girdle, and a sword hung from a richly-worked baldric. Over all was flung a cloak of crimson silk. These things Guiscard had purchased for me, swearing when I protested at his lavishness.

"Cans't pay me back from the loot we take in Italy," said he. "But a comrade of Guiscard de Clisson go bravely clad!"

Sometimes I misdoubt me that Guiscard's acceptance of me as a man was as complete as he would have had me think. Perchance he still secretly cherished his original idea — no matter.

That week had been a crowded one. For hours each day Guiscard had instructed me in the art of swordsmanship. He himself was accounted the finest blade in France, and he swore that he had never encountered apter pupil than I. I learned the rogueries of the blade as if I had been born to it, and the speed of my eye and hand often brought amazed oaths from his lips. For the rest, he had me shoot at marks with pistol and matchlock, and showed me many crafty and savage tricks of hand to hand fighting. No novice had ever more able

teacher; no teacher had ever more eager pupil. I was afire with the urge to learn all pertaining to the trade. I seemed to have been born into a new world, and yet a world for which I was intended from birth. My former life seemed like a dream, soon to be forgotten.

So that early morning, the sun not yet up, we swung on to our horses in the courtyard of the Red Boar, while Perducas bade us God-speed. As we reined around, a voice called my name, and I perceived a white face at an upper casement.

“Agnes!” cried Etienne. “Are you leaving without so much as bidding me farewell?”

“Why should there be such ceremony between us?” I asked. “There is no debt on either side. There should be no friendship, as far as I can see. You are well enough to tend yourself, and need my care no longer.”

And saying no more, I reined away and rode with Guiscard up the winding forest road. He looked at me sidewise and shrugged his shoulders.

“A strange woman you are, Dark Agnes,” quoth he. “You seem to move through life like one of the Fates, unmoved, unchangeable, potent with tragedy and doom. I think men who ride with you will not live long.”

I did not reply, and so we rode on through the green wood. The sun came up, flooding the leaves with gold as they swayed in the morning wind; a deer flashed across the path ahead of us, and the birds were chanting their joy of Life.

We were following the road over which I had carried Etienne after the fight in the Knave’s Fingers, but toward midday we turned off on another, broader road which slanted southeastward. Nor had we

ridden far, after the turn, when: "Where man is not 'tis peaceful enough," quoth Guiscard, then: "What now?"

A fellow snoozing beneath a tree had woken, started up, stared at us, and then turning quickly aside, plunged among the great oaks which lined the road, and vanished. I had but a glimpse of him, seeing that he was an ill-visaged rogue, wearing the hood and smock of a wood-cutter.

"Our martial appearance frightened the clown," laughed Guiscard, but a strange uneasiness possessed me, causing me to stare nervously at the green forest walls that hemmed us in.

"There are no bandits in this forest," I muttered. "He had no cause to flee from us. I like it not. Hark!"

A high, shrill, quavering whistle rose in the air, from somewhere out among the trees. After a few seconds it was answered by another, far to the east, faint with distance. Straining my ears, I seemed to catch yet a third response, still further on.

"I like it not," I repeated.

"A bird calling its mate," he scoffed.

"I was born and raised in the forest," I answered impatiently. "Yonder was no bird. Men are signalling one another out there in the forest. Somehow I believe 'tis connected with that rogue who fled from the path."

"You have the instincts of an old soldier," laughed Guiscard, doffing his helmet for the coolness and hanging it on his saddle bow. "Suspicious — alert — 'tis well enough. But your wariness is wasted in this wood, Agnes. I have no enemies hereabouts. Nay, I am well known and friend to all. And since there are no robbers nigh, it follows that we have naught to fear from anyone."

"I tell you," I protested as we rode on, "I have a haunting pre-

sentiment that all is not well. Why should that rogue run from us, and then whistle to some hidden mate as we passed? Let us leave the road and take to a path.”

By this time we had passed some distance beyond where we had heard the first whistle, and had entered a broken region traversed by a shallow river. Here the road broadened out somewhat, though still walled by thick trees and bushes. On the left hand the bushes grew densely, close to the road. On the right hand they were straggling, bordering a shallow stream whose opposite bank rose in sheer cliffs. The brush-grown space between road and stream was perhaps a hundred paces broad.

“Agnes, girl,” Guiscard was saying, “I tell thee, we are as safe as —”

Crash! A thundering volley ripped out of the bushes on the left, masking the road with whirling smoke. My horse screamed and I felt him stagger. I saw Guiscard de Clisson throw up his hands and sway backward in his saddle, then his horse reared and fell with him. All this I saw in a brief instant, for my horse bolted, crashing frantically through the bushes on the right hand side of the road, and a branch knocked me from the saddle, to lie half stunned among the bushes.

As I lay there, unable to see the road for the denseness of the covert, I heard loud rough voices, and the sound of men coming out of their ambush into the road.

“Dead as Judas Iscariot!” bawled one. “Where did the wench go?”

“Yonder goes her horse, splashing across the stream, gushing blood, and with empty saddle,” quoth another. “She fell among the bushes somewhere.”

“Would we could have taken her alive,” said yet another. “She would have furnished rare sport. But take no chances, the Duke said. Ah, here is Captain d’Valence!”

There was a drumming of hoofs up the road, and the rider shouted: "I heard the volley, where is the girl?"

"Lying dead among the bushes somewhere," he was answered. "Here is the man."

An instant silence, then: "Thunders of hell!" roared the captain. "Fools! Bunglers! Dogs! *This is not Etienne Villiers!* You've murdered Guiscard de Clisson!"

A babble of confusion rose, curses, accusations and denials, dominated by the voice of him they called d'Valence.

"I tell you, I would know de Clisson in hell, and this is he, for all his head is a mass of blood. Oh, you fools!"

"We but obeyed orders," another growled. "When you heard the signal, you put us in ambush and bade us shoot who ever came down the road. How did we know who it was we were to murder? You never spoke his name; our business was but to shoot the man you should designate. Why did you not remain with us and see it well done?"

"Because this is the Duke's service, fool!" snapped d'Valence. "I am too well known. I could not take the chance of being seen and recognized, if the ambush failed."

They then turned on some one else. There was the sound of a blow, and yelp of pain.

"Dog!" swore d'Valence. "Did you not give the signal that Etienne Villiers was riding this way?"

"'Tis not my fault!" howled the wretch, a peasant by his accent. "I knew him not. The taverner of the Knave's Fingers bade me watch for a man riding with a red-haired wench in a man's garb, and when I saw her riding by with the soldier, I thought he must be this Etienne Villiers — ahhh — mercy!"

There was a report, a shriek and the sound of a falling body.

“We will hang for this, if the Duke learns of it,” said the captain. “Guiscard was high in the favor of the Vicomte de Lautrec, governor of Milan. D’Alencon will hang us to conciliate the Vicomte. We must guard our own necks. We will hide the bodies in the stream, and none will be the wiser. Scatter now, and look for the corpse of the girl. If she still lives, we must close her mouth for ever.”

At that, I began to edge my way backwards, towards the stream. Glancing across, I saw that the opposite bank was low and level, grown with bushes, and walled by the cliffs I have mentioned, in which I saw what looked like the mouth of a ravine. That seemed to offer a way of retreat. Crawling until I came nearly to the water’s edge, I rose and ran lightly toward the stream, which glided over a rocky bed scarcely knee-deep there. The bravos had spread out in a sort of crescent, beating the bushes. I heard them behind me, and, further away, on either side of me. And suddenly one gave tongue like a hound who sights the prey.

“There she goes! Halt, damn you!”

A matchlock cracked and the bullet whined past my ear, but I ran fleetly on. They came crashing and roaring through the bushes after me — a dozen men in morions and cuirasses, with swords in their hands.

One broke cover on the very edge of the stream, as I was splashing across, and fearing a thrust in the back, I turned and met him in midstream. He came on splashing like a bull, a great, whiskered, roaring swashbuckler, sword in hand.

We fell to it, thrusting, slashing and parrying, in water knee-deep, and I was at disadvantage, for the swirling stream hindered my footwork. His sword beat down on my helmet, making sparks glint before my eyes, and seeing the others closing in, I cast all on a desperate

attack, and drove my sword so fiercely through his teeth that the point transfixed his skull and rang on the lining of his morion.

I wrenched my blade free as he sank down, crimsoning the stream, and even at that instant a pistol ball struck me in the thigh. I staggered, then recovered myself and limped swiftly out of the water and across the shore. The bravos were across the stream, bawling threats and waving their swords. Some loosed pistols at me, but their aim was vile, and I reached the cliff, dragging my injured leg. My boot was full of blood, and the whole limb numbed.

I plunged through the bushes at the mouth of the ravine — then halted with icy despair gripping my heart. I was in a trap. It was no ravine into which I had come, but merely a wide cleft in the rock of the cliff, which ran back a few yards and then narrowed to a crack. It formed a sharp triangle, the walls of which were too high and sheer to be climbed, wounded leg or no.

The bravos realized my plight, and came on with shouts of triumph. Dropping on my uninjured knee, behind the bushes at the cleft's mouth, I drew pistol and shot the foremost ruffian through the head. That halted their rush and sent them scattering for cover. Those on the other side of the stream ducked back into the trees, while those who had gained this side spread out among the bushes near the bank.

I reloaded my pistol and lay close, while they bawled to one another, and began loosing at my covert with matchlocks. But the heavy balls whined high over head or pattered futilely on the rocky walls, and presently, noting a black-whiskered rogue squirming across an open space toward a bush nearer my retreat, I put a ball through his body, whereat the others yelled blood-thirstily and renewed their fire. But the range was too far for those across the stream to do good

shooting, and the others were shooting from difficult angles, not daring to show any part of themselves.

Presently one shouted: "Why do not some of you bastards go down stream and find a place to climb the cliff, and so come at the wench from above?"

"Because we could not injure her without showing ourselves," answered d'Valence from his covert; "and she shoots like the devil himself. Wait! Night will soon fall, and in the darkness she can not aim. She cannot escape. When it is too dusky for good shooting, we'll rush her and finish this matter with the steel. The bitch is wounded, I know. Bide your time!"

I chanced a long shot at the bushes whence d'Valence's voice issued, and from the burst of scorching profanity evoked thereby, do guess that my lead came too close for comfort.

Then followed a period of waiting, punctuated now and then by a shot from the trees. My injured leg throbbed, and flies gathered in a cloud about me. The sun, which had at first beat down fiercely into the crevice, withdrew, leaving me in deep shade, for which I was thankful. But hunger bit me, until my thirst grew so fierce that it drove hunger from mind. The sight and rippling noise of the stream nigh maddened me. And the ball in my thigh burned so intolerably that I made shift to cut it out with my dagger, and then stanchd the bleeding by cramming crumpled leaves into the wound.

I saw no way out; it seemed I must die there, perish all my dreams of pageantry and glory and the bright splendor and adventure. The dim drums whose beat I had sought to follow seemed fading and receding, like a distant knell, leaving only the dying ashes of death and oblivion.

But when I searched my soul for fear I found it not, nor regret nor

any sorrow. Better to die there than live and grow old as the women I had known had grown old. I thought of Guiscard de Clisson, lying beside his dead horse, with his head in a pool of blood, and knew regret that death had come to him in such a sorry way, and that he had not died as he would have wished, on a field of battle, with the banner of his king flowing above him, and the blast of the trumpets in his ears.

The slow hours dragged on. Once I thought I heard a horse galloping, but the sound faded and ceased. I shifted my numb body and cursed the gnats, wishing mine enemies would charge while there was yet enough light for shooting.

Then, even as I heard them begin to shout to each other in the gathering dusk, a voice above and behind me brought me about, pistols raised, thinking they had climbed the cliff after all.

“Agnes!” The voice was low and urgent. “Hold your fire! It is I, Etienne!” The bushes were thrust aside, and a pale face looked over the brink of the cleft.

“Back, fool!” I exclaimed. “They’ll shoot you like a pigeon!”

“They cannot see me from where they hide,” he assured. “Speak softly, girl. Look, I lower this rope. It is knotted. Can you climb? I can never haul you up, with but one good arm.”

Quick hope fired my nerves.

“Aye!” I hissed. “Let it down swiftly, and make the end fast. I hear them splashing across the stream.”

Quickly then, in the gathering darkness, a snaky length came sliding down the cliff, and I laid hands upon it. Crooking a knee about it, I dragged myself up hand over hand, and sinew-stretching work it was, for the lower end of the rope dangled free, and I turned like a pendulum. Then the whole task must be done by my hands alone, for my

injured leg was stiff as a sword sheath, and anyway, my Spanish boots were not made for rope-climbing.

But I accomplished it, and dragged myself over the lip of cliff just as the cautious scrape of leather on sand, and the clink of steel told me that the bravos were gathering close to the crevice mouth for the rush.

Etienne swiftly gathered up the rope, and motioning to me, led the way through the bushes, talking in a hurried, nervous undertone. "I heard the shooting as I came along the road; left my horse tied in the forest and stole forward on foot to see what was forward. I saw Guiscard lying dead in the road, and understood from the shouts of the bravos that you were at bay. I know this place from of old. I stole back to my horse, rode along the stream until I found a place where I could ride up on the cliffs through a ravine. The rope I made of my cloak, torn to strips and spliced with my girdle and bridle-reins. Hark!"

Behind and below us broke out a mad clamor of yells and oaths.

"D'Alencon yearns indeed for my head," muttered Etienne. "I heard the bravos' talk while I crouched among the trees. Every road within leagues of Alencon is being patrolled by such bands as these since that dog of an innkeeper divulged to the Duke that I was again in this part of the kingdom.

"And now you will be hunted as desperately. I know Renault d'Valence, captain of those rogues. So long as he lives, your life will not be safe, for he will endeavor to destroy all proof that it was his knaves who slew Guiscard de Clisson. Here is my horse. We must not tarry."

"But why did you follow me?" I asked.

He turned and faced me, a pale-faced shadow in the dusk.

"You were wrong when you said no debt lay between us," quoth he. "I owe you my life. It was for me that you fought and slew Tristan Pelligny and his thieves. Why cling to your old hatred of me? You have

well avenged a plotted wrong. You accepted Guiscard de Clisson as comrade. Will you not let me ride to the wars with you?"

"As comrade, no more," I said. "Remember, I am woman no longer."

"As brothers-in-arms," he agreed.

I thrust forth my hand, and he his, and our fingers locked briefly.

"Once more we must ride both on the same horse," he laughed, with a gay lilt of his old-time spirit. "Let us begone before those dogs find their way up here. D'Alencon has blocked the roads to Chartres, to Paris and to Orleans, but the world is ours! I think there are brave times ahead of us, adventures and wars and plunder! Then hey for Italy, and all brave adventurers!"

BLADES FOR FRANCE

1.

How I Met Men Wearing Masks

“Stripling, what do you with a sword? Ha, by Saint Denis, it’s a woman! A woman with sword and helmet!”

And the great black-whiskered rogue halted with hand on hilt and gaped at me in amaze.

I gave back his stare no whit abashed. A woman, yes, and it was a lonely place, a shaded forest glade far from human habitation. But I did not wear doublet, trunk-hose and Spanish boots merely to show off my figure, and the morion perched on my red locks and the sword that hung at my hip were not ornaments.

I looked at this fellow whom chance had caused me to meet in the forest, and I liked him little. He was big enough, with an evil, scarred face; his morion was chased with gold, and under his cloak glimmered breastplate and gussets. This cloak was a notable garment, of Cyprus velvet, cunningly worked with gold thread. Apparently the owner had been napping under a huge tree nearby. A great horse stood there, tied to a branch, with rich housings of red leather and gilt braid. At the sight I sighed, for I had walked far since dawn, and my feet in my long boots ached.

“A woman!” repeated this rogue wonderingly. “And clad like a man! Throw off that tattered cloak, wench; I’d have a better sight of thee! Zounds, but you are a fine, tall, supple hussy! Come, doff your cloak!”

“Dog, have done!” I admonished harshly. “I’m no whimpering doxy for your sport.”

“Who, then?” he ogled.

“Agnes de La Fere,” I answered. “If you were not a stranger here, you’d know of me.”

He shook his head. “Nay, I’m new come in these parts. I hail from Chalons, I. But no matter. One name’s as good as another. Come hither, Agnes, and give me a kiss.”

“Fool!” My ever ready anger was beginning to smolder. “Must I slay half the men in France to teach them respect? Look ye! I wear these garments but as the garbs and tools of my trade, not to catch the attention of men. I drink, fight and live like a man —”

“But shalt love like a woman!” quoth he, and lunging suddenly at me like a great bear, he sought to drag me into his embrace, but reeled back from a buffet that split his lip and brought a stream of blood down his black beard.

“Bitch!” he roared in swift fury, his eyes blazing. “I’ll cripple you for that!” He made at me again with his great hands clutching, but as I wrenched out my sword, suddenly he seemed sobered by what he saw in my eyes, and, as if he realized at last that this was no play, he gave back and drew his own blade, casting off his cloak.

Our blades met with a clash that woke the echoes through the forest, and I came near killing him at the first pass. It was mainly by chance that he partially parried my fierce thrust, and as it was my point ploughed along his jaw-bone, so the blood gushed over his gorget. He yelled like a mad dog, but the wound steadied him, and made him realize that it was no child’s task he had before him.

He wielded his blade with all his strength and craft, and no mean swordsman I found him. Well for me that I had learned the art from the finest blade in France, for this black-bearded rogue was mighty and cunning, and full of foul tricks and murderous subterfuges, whereby

I knew he was no honest man, but a bravo, one of those hired killers who sell their swords to any who can pay their wage.

But I was no child at the game, and my quickness of eye and hand and foot was such as no man could match. Failing in all his tricks and strategy, Blackbeard sought to beat me down by sheer strength, raining thunderous blows on my guard with all his power. But this availed him no better, because, woman though I was, I was all steel springs and whale-bone, and had the art of turning his strokes before they were well begun, and thus avoiding their full fury. Presently his breath began to whistle through his bared teeth, and foam to mingle with the blood on his whiskers, and his belly to heave beneath his cuirass.

Then as his strength and fury began to fail, I attacked relentlessly, and beating down his weakening guard, drove my point into the midst of his black beard, above his gorget, severing jugular, wind pipe and spine at one thrust, so he gasped out his life even as he fell.

Cleansing my blade, I meditated upon my next action, and presently emptied out his pouch, finding a few silver coins therein, and I was disappointed at the poorness thereof, for I was without money, and hungry. Still, they would suffice for a supper at some woodland inn. Then, seeing that my cloak was, as he had said, worn and ragged, I took his, which I much admired because of the curious quality of the gold thread which decorated it. When I lifted it a mask of black silk fell out of it, and I thought to leave it where it fell, but thought better of it, and thrust it under my girdle. I wrapped the body in my old cloak and dragged it into the bushes, where it would not be seen by any chance passer-by, and mounting the horse, rode on in the direction I had been travelling, and very grateful for the easing of my weary feet.

As I pushed on through the gathering dusk, I fell to brooding on the events which had befallen me since I, as an ignorant country girl,

had knifed the man my father was forcing me to marry, and had fled the village of La Fere, to become a swordwoman, and a swashbuckler in breeches.

Truly, violence and death seemed to dog my trail. Guiscard de Clisson, who taught me the art of the sword, and with whom I was riding to the wars in Italy, had been shot down from ambush by bravos hired by the Duc d'Alencon, thinking him to be my friend Etienne Villiers. Etienne had knowledge of intrigue against King Francis on the part of the Duke, and for that knowledge his life was forfeit. Now I too was being hunted by Renault d'Valence, the leader of those bravos, since they thought me to be the only one besides themselves who knew the true facts of de Clisson's murder.

For d'Valence knew that if it were known that he and his bravos had slain de Clisson, the famous general of the mercenaries, d'Alencon would hang them all to pacify de Clisson's friends. Guiscard's body was rotting in the river where the bravos had thrown it, and now d'Valence was hunting me on his own account, even while he hunted Etienne for the Duke.

Villiers and I had run and hidden and dodged like rats from the dogs, desirous of getting into Italy, but so far being penned in that corner of the world through fear of our enemies, who combed the kingdom for us. Even now I was on my way to a rendezvous with Etienne, who had gone stealthily to the coast, there to find, if he could, a certain pirate named Roger Hawksly, an Englishman, who harried the shores, for to such extremities were we forced that it was imperative that we get out of the country, however we could, since it was certain that we could not forever avoid the bloodhounds on our trail. I was to meet my companion at midnight, at a certain spot on the road that meandered down to the coast.

But as I rode through the twilight, I found no regret in my heart that I had traded my life of drudgery for one of wandering and violence. It was the life for which mysterious Fate had intended me, and I fitted it as well as any man: drinking, brawling, gambling, and fighting. With pistol, dagger or sword I had proved my prowess again and again, and I feared no man who walked the earth. Better a short life of adventure and wild living than a long dreary grind of soul-crushing household toil and child-bearing, cringing under the cudgel of a man I hated.

So I meditated as I came upon a small tavern set beside the forest road, the light of which set my empty belly to quivering anew. I approached warily, but saw none within the common room except the tap-boy and a serving wench, so I gave my horse into the care of a stable-boy, and strode into the tavern.

The tap-boy gaped as he brought me a tankard of wine, and the wench stared until her eyes were like to pop out of her head, but I was used to such looks, and I merely bade her bring me food, and sat me down at the board, with my cloak about my shoulders, and my morion still on my head — for it served me well to be alert and full-armed at all times.

Now as I ate, I seemed to hear doors opening and closing stealthily in the back part of the tavern, and a low mumble of voices came to my ears. What this portended I knew not, but I was minded to finish my meal, and feigned to give no heed when the innkeeper, a silent, swarthy man in a leathern apron, came from some inner chamber, stared fixedly at me, and then departed again into the hinterlands of the tavern.

It was not long after his disappearance when another man entered the tavern from a side door — a small, hard-figured man with dark sharp features, somberly dressed, and wrapped in a black silk cloak.

I felt his eyes upon me, but did not appear to regard him, except that I stealthily loosed my sword in its scabbard. He came hurriedly toward me, and hissed: “La Balafre!”

As he was obviously speaking to me, I turned, my hand on my hilt, and he gave back, his breath hissing through his teeth. So for an instant we faced each other. Then:

“Saint Denis! A woman! La Balafre, a *woman!* They did not tell me — I did not know —”

“Well?” I demanded warily, not understanding his bewilderment, but in no mind to let him know it.

“Well, it’s no matter,” he said at last. “You are not the first woman to wear breeches and a sword. Little matter what sort of a finger pulls the trigger, the ball speeds to the mark. Your master bade me watch for your cloak — it was by the gold thread that I recognized you. Come, come, it grows late. They await you in the secret room.”

Now I realized that this man had mistaken me for the bravo I had slain; doubtless the fellow had been on his way to a tryst for some crime. I knew not what to say. If I denied that I was La Balafre, it was not likely his friends would allow me to go in peace without explaining how I came by his cloak. I saw no way out except to strike down the dark-faced man, and ride for my life. But with his next words, the whole situation changed.

“Put on your mask and wrap well your cloak about you,” he said. “None knows you here but I, and I only because that cloak was described to me. It was foolish of you to sit here openly in the tavern where any man might have seen you. The task we have to do is of such nature that all our identities must be hidden, not only tonight but henceforward. You know me only as Jehan. You will know none of the others, or they you.”

Now at these words a mad whim seized me, born of recklessness and womanish curiosity. Saying naught, I rose, put on the mask I had found on the body of the real La Balafre, wrapped my cloak about me so that none could have known me for a woman, and followed the man who called himself Jehan.

He led the way through a door at the back of the room, which he closed and bolted behind us, and drawing forth a black mask similar to mine, he donned it. Then, taking a candle from a table, he led on down a narrow corridor with heavy oaken panels. At last he halted, extinguished the candle, and rapped cautiously on the wall. There was a fumbling on the other side, and a dim light glimmered through as a false panel was slid aside. Motioning me to follow him, Jehan glided through the opening, and after I had entered, closed it behind us.

I found myself in a small chamber, without visible doors or windows, though there must have been some subtle system of ventilation. A hooded lanthorn lit the room with a vague and ghostly light. Nine figures huddled against the walls on settles — nine figures wrapped closely in dark cloaks, feathered hats or black morions pulled low to meet the black masks which hid their faces. Only their eyes burned through the holes in the masks. None moved nor spake. It was like a conclave of the damned.

Jehan did not speak, but motioned me to take my place on a settle, and then he glided across the chamber and drew back another panel. Through this opening stalked another figure, masked and cloaked like the rest, but with a subtle different bearing. He strode like a man accustomed to command, and even in his disguise, there was something faintly familiar to me about him.

He stalked to the center of the small chamber, and Jehan motioned toward us on the settles, as if to say that all was in readiness. The tall

stranger nodded and said: “You received your instructions before you came here. You know, all of you, that you have but to follow me, and obey my commands. Ask no questions; you are being well paid; that is sufficient for you to know. Speak as little as possible. You do not know me, and I do not know you. The less each man knows of his mates, the better for all. As soon as our task is completed, we scatter, each man for himself. Is that understood?”

Ten hooded heads wagged grimly in the lanthorn light. But I drew back on my settle, gathering my cloak more closely about me; he was understood better than he knew. I had heard that voice, under circumstances I was not likely to forget; it was the voice that had shouted commands to the murderers of Guiscard de Clisson, as I lay wounded in a cleft of the cliff and fought them off with my pistols. The man who commanded these villains amongst whom I had fallen was Renault d’Valence, the man who sought my life.

As his steely eyes, burning from his mask, swept over us, I unconsciously tensed myself, gripping my hilt beneath my cloak. But he could not recognize me in my disguise, were he Satan himself.

Motioning to Jehan, mine enemy arose and made toward the panel through which he had entered. Jehan beckoned us, and we followed d’Valence through the opening single file, a train of silent black ghosts. Behind us Jehan extinguished the lanthorn, and followed us. We groped our way through utter darkness for a short space, then a door swung open, and the broad shoulders of our leader were framed for an instant against the stars. We came out into a small courtyard behind the inn, where twelve horses champed restlessly and pawed the ground. Mine was among them, though I had told the servant to stable him. Evidently everyone in the tavern of the Half Moon had his orders.

Without a word we mounted and followed d’Valence across the

court, and out into a path which led through the forest. We rode in silence, save for the clop of the hoofs on the hard soil, and the occasional creak of leather or clank of harness. We were headed westward, toward the coast, and presently the forest thinned to brush and scattered trees, and the path dwindled and vanished in a bushy maze. Here we rode no longer single file, but in a ragged clump. And I believed my opportunity had come. Whither we were riding I knew not, nor greatly cared. It must be some work of the Duc d'Alencon, since his right-hand man d'Valence was in command. But I did know that as long as d'Valence lived, neither my life nor the life of Etienne Villiers was worth a piece of broken copper.

It was dark; the moon had not yet risen, and the stars were hidden by rolling masses of clouds, which, though neither stormy nor very black, yet blotted out the light of the heavens in their ceaseless surging from horizon to horizon. We were not following any road, but riding through the wilderness. A night wind moaned through the trees, as I edged my horse closer and closer to that of Renault d'Valence, gripping my poniard beneath my cloak.

Now I was drawing up beside him, and heard him mutter to Jehan who rode knee to knee with him, "He was a fool to flout her, when she could have made him greater than the king of France. If Roger Hawksly —"

Rising in my stirrups I drove my poniard between his shoulders with all the strength of sinews nerved to desperate work. The breath went out of him in a gasp, and he pitched headlong from the saddle, and in that instant I wrenched my horse about and struck the spurs deep.

With a desperate heave and plunge he tore headlong through the

shapes that hemmed us in, knocking steeds and riders aside, plunged through the bushes and was gone while they groped for their blades.

Behind me I heard startled oaths and yells, and the clank of steel, Jehan's voice yelling curses, and d'Valence's, choking and gasping, croaking orders. I cursed my luck. Even with the impact of the blow, I had known I had failed. D'Valence wore a shirt of chain mail under his doublet, even as I did. The poniard had bent almost double on it, without wounding him. It was only the terrific force of the blow which had knocked him, half stunned, from his steed. And knowing the man as I did, I knew that it was very likely he would quickly be upon my trail, unless his other business be too urgent to permit it — and urgent indeed would be the business that would interfere with d'Valence's private vengeance. Besides, if Jehan told him that "La Balafre" was a red-headed girl, he would be sure to recognize his old enemy, Agnes de Chastillon.

So I gave the horse the rein and rode at a reckless gallop over bushy expanses and through scattered woodlands, expecting each moment to hear the drum of hoofs behind me. I rode southward, toward the road where I was to meet Etienne Villiers, and came upon it more suddenly than I expected. The road ran westward to the coast, and we had been paralleling its course.

Perhaps a mile to the west stood a roadside cross of stone, where the road split, one branch running west and the other southwest, and it was there that I was to meet Etienne Villiers. It lacked some hours till midnight, and I was not minded to wait in open view until he came, lest d'Valence come first. So when I came to the cross, I took refuge among the trees, which grew there in a dense clump, and set myself to wait for my companion.

The night was still, and I heard no sounds of pursuit; I hoped that

if the bravos had pursued me, they had lost me in the darkness, which had been easy enough to do.

I tied my horse back among the trees, and hardly had I squatted among the shadows at the roadside when I heard the drumming of hoofs. But this noise came from the southwest, and was but a single horse. I crouched there, sword in hand, as the drumming grew louder and nearer, and presently the rising moon, peeping through the rolling clouds, disclosed a horseman galloping along the white road, his cloak billowing out behind him. And I recognized the lithe figure and feathered cap of Etienne Villiers.

2.

How a King's Mistress Knelt to Me

He pulled up at the cross, and swore beneath his breath, speaking softly aloud to himself, as was his custom: "Too early, by hours; well, I'll await her here."

"You'll not have long to wait," said I, stepping from the shadows.

He wheeled in his saddle, pistol in hand, then laughed and swung down to earth.

"By Saint Denis, Agnes," said he, "I should never be surprised to find you anywhere, at any time. What, a horse? And no crow-bait, either! And a fine new cloak! By Satan, comrade, you have had luck — was it dice or the sword?"

"The sword," I answered.

"But why are you here so early?" he asked. "What portends this?"

"That Renault d'Valence is not far from us," I answered, and heard his breath hiss between his teeth, saw his hand lock again on his pistol butt. So quickly I told him what had passed, and he shook his head.

“The Devil takes care of his own,” he muttered. “Renault is hard to kill. But listen, I have a strange tale to tell, and until it is told, this is as good a place as another. Here we can watch and listen, and death cannot steal upon us behind closed doors and through secret corridors. And when my tale is told, we must take counsel as to our next move, because we can no longer count on Roger Hawksly.

“Listen: last night, just at moonrise, I approached the small isolated bay in which I knew the Englishman lay at anchor. We rogues have ways of learning secrets, as you know, Agnes. The coast thereabouts is rugged, with cliffs and headlands and inlets. The bay in question is surrounded by trees which grow down rugged slopes to the very edge of the water. I crept through them, and saw his ship, *The Resolute Friend*, lying at anchor, true enough, and all on board her apparently in drunken sleep. These pirates be fools, especially the English, who keep vile watch. I could see men stretched on the deck, with broken casks near them, and judged that those who were supposed to keep watch, had drunken themselves into helplessness.

“Now as I meditated whether to hail them, or to swim out to the ship, I heard the sound of muffled oars, and saw three longboats round the headland and sweep down on the silent ship. The boats were packed with men, and I saw the glint of steel in the moon. All unseen by the sleeping pirates, they drew up alongside, and I knew not whether to shout or be still, for I thought it might be Roger and his men returning from some raid.

“In the moonlight I saw them swarming up the chains — Englishmen, beyond doubt, dressed in the garb of common sailors. Then as I watched, one of the drunkards on deck stirred in his sleep, gaped, and then suddenly scrambled up, screaming a warning. Up out of the hold and out of the cabin rushed Roger Hawksly and his men, in

their shirts, half asleep, grasping their weapons in bewilderment, and over the rail swarmed these newcomers, who fell on the pirates sword in hand.

“It was a massacre rather than a fight. The pirates, half asleep and evidently half drunk as well, were cut down, almost to a man. I saw their bodies hurled overboard. Some few leaped into the water and swam ashore, but most died.

“Then the victors hauled up the anchor, and some of them returning into the boats, towed *The Resolute Friend* out of the inlet, and watching from where I lay, I presently saw her spread her sails and stand out to sea. Presently another ship rounded the headland and followed her.

“Of the survivors of the pirate crew I know nothing, for they fled into the woods and vanished. But Roger Hawksly is no longer master of a ship, and whether he lives or died, I know not, but we must find another man who will take us to Italy.

“But herein is a mystery: some of the Englishmen who took *The Resolute Friend* were but rough seamen. But others were not. I understand English; I know a high-born voice when I hear it, and tarry breeches cannot always conceal rank from a sharp eye. The moon was bright as day. Agnes, those seamen were led by noblemen disguised in mean apparel.”

“Why?” I wondered.

“Aye, why! ’Tis easy to see how the trick was done. They sailed up to the headland, where they anchored, out of sight from the inlet, and sent men in boats to take their prey. But why take such a desperate chance? Luck was on their side, else Hawksly and his sea-wolves had been sober and alert, and had blown them out of the water as they came on. There is but one solution: secrecy. That likewise explains

the noblemen in seamen's shirts and breeks. For some reason someone wished to destroy the pirates swiftly, silently, and secretly. As to the reason for that, I do not know, since Hawksly was a man hated equally by the French and the English."

"Why, as to that — hark!"

Down the road, from the east, sounded the pound of racing hoofs. Clouds had rolled again over the moon, and it was dark as Erebus.

"D'Valence!" I hissed. "He is following me — and alone. Give me a pistol! He will not escape this time!"

"We had best be sure he is alone," expostulated Etienne as he handed me a pistol.

"He's alone," I snarled. "'Tis but one rider — but if the Devil himself rode with him — *ha!*"

A flying shape loomed out of the night; at that instant a single moonbeam cut through the clouds and faintly illumined the racing horse and its rider. And I fired pointblank.

The great horse reared and plunged headlong, and a piteous cry cut the night. It was echoed by Etienne. He had seen, as had I, in the flash of the shot, a woman clinging to the reins of the flying steed.

We ran forward, seeing a slender figure stirring on the ground beside the steed — a figure which knelt and lifted helpless arms, whimpering in fright.

"Are you hurt?" gasped Etienne. "My God, Agnes, you've killed a woman —"

"I struck the horse," I answered. "He threw up his head just as I fired. Here, let me see to her!"

Bending over her, I lifted her face, a pallid oval in the darkness. Under my hard fingers her garments and flesh felt soft and wondrous fine.

“Are you hurt badly, wench?” I demanded.

But at the sound of my voice she gave a gasping cry and threw her arms about my knees.

“Oh, you too are a woman! Have mercy! Do not hurt me! Please —”

“Cease these whimperings, wench,” I ordered impatiently. “Here is naught to hurt you. Are your bones broken by reason of the fall?”

“Nay, I am only bruised and shaken. But, oh, my poor horse —”

“I’m sorry,” I muttered. “I do not slay animals willingly. I was aiming at his rider.”

“But why should you murder me?” she wailed. “I know you not —”

“I am Agnes de Chastillon,” I answered, “whom some men call Dark Agnes de La Fere. Who are you?”

I had lifted her to her feet and released her, and now as she stood before us, the moon broke suddenly through the clouds and flooded the road with silvery light. I looked in amaze at the richness of our captive’s garments, and the beauty of her oval face, framed in a glory of hair that was like dark foam; her dark eyes glowed like black jewels in the moonlight. And from Etienne came a strangled cry.

“My lady!” He doffed his feathered cap, and dropped to his knee. “Kneel, Agnes, kneel, girl! It is Francoise de Foix!”

“Why should an honest woman kneel to a royal strumpet?” I demanded, thrusting my thumbs into my girdle and bracing my legs wide as I faced her.

Etienne was stricken dumb, and the girl seemed to wince at my peasant candor.

“Rise, I beg of you,” she said humbly to Etienne, and he did so, cap in hand.

“But this was most unwise, my lady!” said he. “To have come alone and at night —”

“Oh,” she cried suddenly, catching at her temples, as if reminded of her mission. “Even now they may be slaying him! Oh, sir, if you be a man, aid me!”

She seized Etienne by the doublet and shook him in the agony of her insistence.

“Listen,” she begged, though Etienne was listening with all his ears. “I came here tonight, alone, as you see, to endeavor to right a wrong, and to save a life.

“You know me as Françoise de Foix, the mistress of the king —”

“I have seen you at court, where I was not always a stranger,” said Etienne, speaking with a strange difficulty. “I know you for the most beautiful woman in all France.”

“I thank you, my friend,” she said, still clinging to him. “But the world sees little of what goes on behind the palace doors. Men say I twist the king about my finger, God help me — but I swear I am but a pawn in a game I do not understand — the slave of a greater will than that of Francis.”

“Louise of Savoy,” muttered Etienne.

“Aye, who through me, rules her son, and through him, all France. It was she who made me what I am. Else I had been, not the mistress of a king, but the honest wife of some honest man.

“Listen, my friend, oh, listen and believe me! Tonight a man is riding toward the coast, and death! And the letter which lured him there was written by me! Oh, I am a hateful thing, to thus serve one who — who loves me —

“But I am not my own mistress. I am the slave of Louise of Savoy. What she bids me do, that I do, or else I smart for it. She dominates me and I dare not resist her. This — this man was in Alençon, when he received the letter begging him to meet me at a certain tavern near

the coast. Only for me would he have gone, for he well knows of his powerful enemies. But me he trusts — oh, God pity me!”

She sobbed hysterically for an instant, while I watched in wonder, for I could never weep, my whole life.

“It is a plot of Louise,” she said. “Once she loved this man, but he scorned her, and she plots his ruin. Already she has shorn him of titles and honor; now she would rob him of life itself.

“At the tavern of the Hawk he will be met, not by my miserable self, but by a band of hired bravos, who will slay his servants and take him captive and deliver him to the pirate Roger Hawksly, who has been paid well to dispose of him forever.”

“Why so much planning and elaborate work?” I demanded. “Surely a dagger in the back would do the job as well.”

“Not even Louise dares discovery,” she answered. “The — the man is too powerful —”

“There is only one man in France whom Louise hates so fiercely,” said Etienne, looking full into Francoise’s eyes. She bowed her head, then lifted it and returned the look with her lustrous dark eyes.

“Aye!” she said simply.

“A blow to France,” muttered Etienne, “if *he* should fail — but my lady, Roger Hawksly will not be there to receive him.” And he swiftly related what he had seen on the coast.

“Then the bravos will slay him themselves,” she said with a shudder. “They will never dare let him go. They are led by Jehan, the right hand man of Louise —”

“And by Renault d’Valence,” muttered Etienne. “I see it all now; you were with that band, Agnes. I wonder if d’Alencon knows of the plot.”

“No,” answered Francoise. “But Louise plans to raise him to the

rank of her victim; so she uses his most trusted man, Renault d'Valence for her schemes. But, oh, we waste time! Please will you not aid me? Ride with me to the tavern of the Hawk. Perchance we may rescue him — may reach him in time to get him away before they arrive. I stole away, and have ridden all night at top speed — please, please aid me!”

“Francoise de Foix has never to ask twice of Etienne Villiers,” said Etienne, in that strange unnatural voice, standing in the moonlight, cap in hand. Perhaps it was the moon, but a strange expression was on his face, softening the lines of cynicism and wild living, and making him seem another and nobler man.

“And you, mademoiselle!” The court beauty turned to me, with her arms outstretched. “You would not kneel to me, Dark Agnes; look, I kneel to you!”

And she so did — down in the dust on her knees, her white hands clasped and her dark eyes sparkling with tears.

“Get up, girl,” I said awkwardly, ashamed for some obscure reason. “Kneel not to me. I’ll do all I can. I know nothing of court intrigues and what you have said buzzes in my skull until I am dizzy, but what we can do, that we will do!”

With a sob she rose and threw both her soft arms about my neck and kissed me on the lips, so I was further ashamed. It was the first time I remembered anyone ever kissing me.

“Come,” I said roughly. “We waste time.”

Etienne lifted the girl into his saddle and swung up behind her, and I mounted the great black horse.

“What do you plan?” he asked me.

“I have no plan. We must be guided by the circumstances which confront us. Let us ride as swiftly as may be for the Inn of the Hawk. If Renault wasted much time in looking for me — as doubtless he did —

he and his bravos may not yet have reached the tavern. If they have — well, we are but two swords, but we can but do our best.”

And so I fell to recharging the pistol I had taken from Etienne, and a tedious task it was, in the darkness, and riding hard. So what speech passed between Etienne and Francoise de Foix I know not, but the murmur of their voices reached me from time to time, and in his voice was an unfamiliar softness — strange in a rogue like Etienne Villiers.

So we came at last upon the tavern of the Hawk, which loomed stark against the night, dark save for a single lanthorn in the common room. Silence reigned utterly, and there was the scent of fresh-spilled blood —

In the road before the tavern lay a man in the livery of a lackey, his white staring face turned to the stars, and dabbled with blood. Near the door lay a shape in a black cloak, and the fragments of a black mask, soaked in blood, lay beside it, with a feathered hat. But the features of the man were but a ghastly mask of hacked and slashed flesh, unrecognizable.

Just inside the door lay another lackey, his brains oozing from his crushed head, a broken sword still gripped in his hand. Inside the tavern was a waste of broken settles and smashed tables, with great gouts of blood fouling the floor. A third lackey lay huddled in the corner, his blood-stained doublet showing a dozen sword-thrusts. Over all hung silence like a pall.

Francoise had fallen with a moan when she saw the horror of it all, and now Etienne half led, half carried her in his arms.

“Renault and his cutthroats were here,” he said. “They have taken their prey and gone. But where? All the servants would have fled in terror, not to return until daylight.”

But peering here and there, sword in hand, I saw something

huddled under an over-turned settle, and dragging it forth, disclosed a terrified serving wench who fell on her knees and bawled for mercy. "Have done, jade," I said impatiently. "Here is none to harm you. But say quickly what has occurred."

"The men in masks," she whimpered. "They came suddenly in at the door —"

"Did you not hear their horses?" demanded Etienne.

"Would Renault warn his victim?" I asked impatiently. "Doubtless they left their steeds a short distance away and came softly on foot. Go on, girl."

"They fell on the gentleman and his servants," she blubbered. "The gentleman who had arrived earlier this night and who sat silently at his wine, and seemed in doubt and meditation. As the masked men entered he sprang up and cried out that he was betrayed —"

"Oh!" It was a cry of agony from Françoise de Foix. She clasped her hands and writhed as in agony.

"Then there was fighting and slaying and death," wailed the wench. "They slew the gentleman's servants, and him they bound and dragged away —"

"Was it he who so disfigured the bravo who lies outside the door?" I demanded.

"Nay, he slew him with a pistol ball. The leader of the masks, the tall man who wore a chain-mail shirt under his doublet — he hacked the dead man's face with the sword —"

"Aye," I muttered. "D'Valence would not wish to leave him to be identified."

"And this same man, before he left, passed his sword through each of the dying lackeys to make sure they were dead," she sobbed in

terror. "I hid under the settle and watched, for I was too frightened to run, as did the innkeeper and the other servants."

"In which direction did they go?" I demanded, shaking the wretched girl in my intensity.

"That — that way!" she gasped, pointing. "Down the old road to the coast."

"Did you overhear anything that might give a clue as to their destination?"

"No — no — they spoke little, and I so frightened."

"Hoofs of the devil, girl!" I exclaimed in a fury. "Such work is never done in silence. Think hard — remember something they said, before I turn you across my knee."

"All I remember," she gasped, "is that the tall leader said to the poor gentleman, once they had him bound — doffing his helmet in a sweeping bow — 'My lord,' quoth he mockingly, 'your ship awaits you!'"

"Sure they would put him aboard ship," exclaimed Etienne. "And the nearest place a ship would put in is Corsair Cove! They cannot be far ahead of us. If they followed the old road — as they would be likely to do, not knowing the country as I do — it will take them half an hour longer to reach the cove than it will take us, following a short cut of which I know."

"Come then!" cried Francoise, revived anew by the hope of action. And a few moments later, we were riding through the shadows for the coast. We followed a dim path, its mouth hidden by dense bushes, which wound along a rocky ridge, descending seaward amid boulders and gnarled trees.

So we came into a cove, surrounded by rugged slopes, thickly treed, and through the trees we saw the glimmer of water, and the shimmer

of the furtive moon on broad sails. And leaving our horses, and Francoise with them, we crept forward, Etienne and I, and presently looked out upon an open beach, lighted by the moon which at the time shone out through the curling clouds.

Under the shadows of the trees stood a group of black and sombre figures, and out of a boat, just drawn up on the beach (we could still see the foam floating on the water that had swirled in her wake) trooped a score of men in seamen's garb. Out in the deeper water rode a ship, the moonlight glinting on her gilt-work and spreading courses, and Etienne swore softly.

"That's *The Resolute Friend*, but those are not her crew. *They* are food for the fishes. These are the men who took her. What devil's game is this?"

We saw a man pushed forward by the masked bravos — a man tall and well-formed, who, even in torn shirt and blood-stained, with his arms bound behind him, had the bearing of a leader among men.

"Saint Denis," breathed Etienne. "It is he, right enough."

"Who?" I demanded. "Who is this fellow we must risk our lives to rescue?"

"Charles," he began, then broke off: "Listen!"

We had wriggled nearer, and Renault d'Valence's voice came plainly to us.

"Nay, that was not in the bargain. I know you not. Let Roger Hawksly, your captain, come ashore. I wish to be sure he knows his instructions."

"Captain Hawksly cannot be disturbed," answered one of the seamen in accented French; he was a tall man who bore himself proudly. "There is no need to fear; yonder is *The Resolute Friend*; here are

Hawksly's bullies. You have given us the prisoner. We will take him aboard and set sail. You have done your part; now we will do ours."

I was staring in fascination, having never seen Englishmen before. These were all tall men and stalwart, with goodly swords buckled at their hips, and steel glinting under their doublets. Never saw I such proud-seeming sailormen, or seamen so well armed. They had seized the man Etienne called Charles, and were hauling him to the boat — which task seemed to be supervised by a tall portly man in a red cloak.

"Aye," said Renault, "yonder lies *The Resolute Friend*; I know her well, or I had never delivered my prisoner to you. But I know you not. Call Captain Hawksly, or I take my prisoner back again."

"Enough!" exclaimed the other arrogantly. "I tell you Hawksly cannot come. You do not know me —"

But d'Valence, who had been listening closely to the other's voice, cried out sharply and fiercely.

"Nay, by God, I think I *do* know you, my lord!" And knocking off the seaman's bonnet the man wore, he disclosed a steel cap beneath, crowning a proud hawk-like face.

"So!" exclaimed d'Valence. "You would take my prisoner — but not to slay — nay, to hold as a club over the head of Francis! Rogue I may be, but traitor to my king — never!"

And snatching forth a pistol he fired point-blank, not at the lord, but at the prisoner Charles.

But the Englishman knocked up his arm, and the ball went wide.

The next instant all was turmoil and confusion as Renault's bravos rushed in in response to his shouts, and the Englishmen met them hand to hand. I saw the blades glimmer and flash in the moonlight as Renault and the English lord fought, and suddenly Renault's sword

was dyed red and the Englishman was down, gasping out his life on the sand.

Now I saw that the men who had been hauling along the prisoner Charles had hastened into the fray, leaving him in the hands of the portly man in the red cloak who was dragging him, despite his struggles, toward the boat drawn up on the beach. Now I heard the clack of oarlocks, and looking toward the ship, saw three other boats putting towards shore.

But even as I looked, I was whispering to Etienne, and we broke cover and ran silently across the stretch of white sand, toward the struggling pair near the beach. All about us raged the fight as the bravos, outnumbered but dangerous as wolves, slashed and parried and thrust with the reckless Englishmen.

Even as we came into the fray, an Englishman rushed at each of us. Etienne fired and missed — for moonlight is deceptive — and the next instant was fighting sword to sword. I did not fire until my muzzle almost touched my enemy's bosom, and when I pulled the trigger, the heavy ball tore through the chain-mail beneath his doublet like paper, and the lifted sword fell harmless into the sand.

A few more strides brought me up with Charles and his captor, but even as I reached them, one was before me. While men fought and slew and cursed madly, d'Valence had never lost sight of his objective. Realizing that he could not retake his prisoner, he was determined on slaying him.

Now he had cut his way through the melee, and ran with grim purpose across the sands, his sword dripping in his hand. Running up to the prisoner, he cut murderously at his unprotected head. The stroke was parried, awkwardly, by the portly man in the red cloak, who began bawling for aid in a gasping, short-winded voice which went unheeded

in the uproar of the melee. So ineptly had he parried that the sword was beaten out of his hand. But before d'Valence could strike again, I came silently and swiftly up from the side, and thrust at him with all my strength, meaning to spit him through the neck, above the gorget. But again luck betrayed me; my foot slipped in the sand, and the point rasped harmlessly along his mail.

Instantly he turned and recognized me. He had lost his mask, and his eyes danced with a sort of reckless madness in the moonlight.

“By God!” he cried, with a wild laugh. “It is the red-haired sword-wench!”

Even as he spoke he parried my whistling blade, and with no further words, we set to work, slashing and thrusting. He drew blood from my sword-hand, and from my thigh, but I smote him with such fury that my edge bit through his morion and into the scalp beneath, so that blood ran from under his burganet and trickled down his face. Another such stroke had finished him, but he, casting a quick glance aside, saw that most of his bravos were down, and he in desperate case. So with another wild laugh he bounded back, sprang aside, cut his way through those who sought to stay him, with half a dozen flailing strokes, and bounding clear, vanished in the shadows, whence presently emerged the sound of a running horse.

Now I whirled quickly to the prisoner, whose arm the portly man in red still gripped, puffing and panting, and slashing the cords that bound his arms, I thrust him toward the woods. But so wrought up was I that my push was more powerful than I intended, and sent him sprawling on all-fours.

The man in the red cloak squalled wildly and sprang to seize his captive again, but I buffeted him aside, and dragging Charles to his feet, bade him run. But he seemed half dazed by a chance blow of the

flat of a blade on the pate. But now Etienne, his sword dripping red, ran forward and seizing the captive's arm, urged him toward the woods.

And the man in the red cloak, evidently in desperation resorted to the tactics of d'Valence, for catching up his sword, he ran at the back of Charles and hewed at him. But even as he did so, I smote him under the armpit with such power that he rolled in the sand, screaming like a stuck pig. Now divers of the English halted in their rush towards me, and shouted in horror and ran to pick up the fellow; for some of the links of his chain shirt had parted under my edge, and he had been wounded slightly, so that the blood oozed through his doublet.

They shouted a name that sounded like "Wolsey," and halted in their pursuit to lift him and see to his wound, while he cursed at them. And Etienne and I bore the rescued man between us into the woods, and to the horses where Francoise awaited us.

She stood like a white shadow under the moon-dappled trees, and when he saw her, he gave back with an exclamation.

"Oh, Charles," she exclaimed, "have pity! I had no choice —"

"I trusted you above all others," said he, more in sadness than anger.

"My Lord Duc of Bourbon," said Etienne, touching his shoulder, "it is my privilege to tell you that what wrong has been done, has been righted this night as well as might be. If Francoise de Foix betrayed you, she has risked her life to rescue you. Now I beg of you, take these horses and ride, for none knows what next may chance to befall. That was Cardinal Wolsey who led those men, and he is not easy to defeat."

Like a man in a dream the Duke of Bourbon mounted, and Etienne lifted Francoise de Foix up into the other saddle. They reined away

and rode through the moonlight and so vanished. And I turned to Etienne.

“Well,” said I, “with all our chivalry, here are we back where we began, without money, or means of reaching Italy; nay, you have even given away your horse! What shall be our next adventure?”

“I held Françoise de Foix in my arms,” he answered. “After that, any adventure is but anticlimax for Etienne Villiers.”

THE SHADOW OF THE VULTURE

1.

“Are the dogs dressed and gorged?”

“Aye, Protector of the Faithful.”

“Then let them crawl into the Presence.”

So they brought the envoys, pallid from months of imprisonment, before the canopied throne of Suleyman the Magnificent, Sultan of Turkey, and the mightiest monarch in an age of mighty monarchs. Under the great purple dome of the royal chamber gleamed the throne before which the world trembled — gold-paneled, pearl-inlaid. An emperor’s wealth in gems was sewn into the silken canopy from which depended a shimmering string of pearls ending a frieze of emeralds which hung like a halo of glory above Suleyman’s head. Yet the splendor of the throne was paled by the glitter of the figure upon it, bedecked in jewels, the aigrette feather rising above the diamonded white turban. About the throne stood his nine viziers, in attitudes of humility, and warriors of the imperial bodyguard ranged the dais — Solaks in armor, black and white and scarlet plumes nodding above the gilded helmets.

The envoys from Austria were properly impressed — the more so as they had had nine weary months for reflection in the grim Castle of the Seven Towers that overlooks the Sea of Marmora. The head of the embassy choked down his choler and cloaked his resentment in a semblance of submission — a strange cloak on the shoulders of Habordansky, general of Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria. His rugged head bristled incongruously from the flaming silk robes presented him

by the contemptuous Sultan, as he was brought before the throne, his arms gripped fast by stalwart Janizaries. Thus were foreign envoys presented to the sultans, ever since that red day by Kossova when Milosh Kabilovitch, knight of slaughtered Serbia, had slain the conqueror Murad with a hidden dagger.

The Grand Turk regarded Habordansky with scant favor. Suleyman was a tall, slender man, with a thin down-curving nose and a thin straight mouth, the resolution of which his drooping mustachios did not soften. His narrow outward-curving chin was shaven. The only suggestion of weakness was in the slender, remarkably long neck, but that suggestion was belied by the hard lines of the slender figure, the glitter of the dark eyes. There was more than a suggestion of the Tatar about him — rightly so, since he was no more the son of Selim the Grim, than of Hafsza Khatun, princess of Crimea. Born to the purple, heir to the mightiest military power in the world, he was crested with authority and cloaked in pride that recognized no peer beneath the gods.

Under his eagle gaze old Habordansky bent his head to hide the sullen rage in his eyes. Nine months before, the general had come to Stamboul representing his master, the Archduke, with proposals for truce and the disposition of the iron crown of Hungary, torn from the dead king Louis' head on the bloody field of Mohacz, where the Grand Turk's armies opened the road to Europe. There had been another emissary before him — Jerome Lasczky, the Polish count palatine. Habordansky, with the bluntness of his breed, had claimed the Hungarian crown for his master, rousing Suleyman's ire. Lasczky had, like a suppliant, asked on his bended knees that crown for his countrymen at Mohacz.

To Lasczky had been given honor, gold and promises of patronage,

for which he had paid with pledges abhorrent even to his avaricious soul — selling his ally's subjects into slavery, and opening the road through the subject territory to the very heart of Christendom.

All this was made known to Habordansky, frothing with fury in the prison to which the arrogant resentment of the Sultan had assigned him. Now Suleyman looked contemptuously at the staunch old general, and dispensed with the usual formality of speaking through the mouth-piece of the Grand Vizier. A royal Turk would not deign to admit knowledge of any Frankish tongue, but Habordansky understood Turki. The Sultan's remarks were brief and without preamble.

“Say to your master that I now make ready to visit him in his own lands, and that if he fails to meet me at Mohacz or at Pesth, I will meet him beneath the walls of Vienna.”

Habordansky bowed, not trusting himself to speak. At a scornful wave of the imperial hand, an officer of the court came forward and bestowed upon the general a small gilded bag containing two hundred ducats. Each member of his retinue, waiting patiently at the other end of the chamber, under the spears of the Janizaries, was likewise so guerdoned. Habordansky mumbled thanks, his knotty hands clenched about the gift with unnecessary vigor. The Sultan grinned thinly, well aware that the ambassador would have hurled the coins into his face, had he dared. He half-lifted his hand, in token of dismissal, then paused, his eyes resting on the group of men who composed the general's suite — or rather, on one of these men. This man was the tallest in the room, strongly built, wearing his Turkish gift-garments clumsily. At a gesture from the Sultan he was brought forward in the grasp of the soldiers.

Suleyman stared at him narrowly. The Turkish vest and voluminous khalat could not conceal the lines of massive strength. His tawny hair

was close-cropped, his sweeping yellow mustaches drooping below a stubborn chin. His blue eyes seemed strangely clouded; it was as if the man slept on his feet, with his eyes open.

“Do you speak Turki?” The Sultan did the fellow the stupendous honor of addressing him directly. Through all the pomp of the Ottoman court there remained in the Sultan some of the simplicity of Tatar ancestors.

“Yes, your majesty,” answered the Frank.

“Who are you?”

“Men name me Gottfried von Kalmbach.”

Suleyman scowled and unconsciously his fingers wandered to his shoulder, where, under his silken robes, he could feel the outlines of an old scar.

“I do not forget faces. Somewhere I have seen yours — under circumstances that etched it into the back of my mind. But I am unable to recall those circumstances.”

“I was at Rhodes,” offered the German.

“Many men were at Rhodes,” snapped Suleyman.

“Aye,” agreed von Kalmbach tranquilly. “De l’Isle Adam was there.”

Suleyman stiffened and his eyes glittered at the name of the Grand Master of the Knights of Saint John, whose desperate defense of Rhodes had cost the Turk sixty thousand men. He decided, however, that the Frank was not clever enough for the remark to carry any subtle thrust, and dismissed the embassy with a wave. The envoys were backed out of the Presence and the incident was closed. The Franks would be escorted out of Stamboul, and to the nearest boundaries of the empire. The Turk’s warning would be carried posthaste to the Archduke, and soon on the heels of that warning would come the armies of the Sublime Porte. Suleyman’s officers knew that the Grand

Turk had more in mind than merely establishing his puppet Zapolya on the conquered Hungarian throne. Suleyman's ambitions embraced all Europe — that stubborn Frankistan which had for centuries sporadically poured forth hordes chanting and pillaging into the East, whose illogical and wayward peoples had again and again seemed ripe for Moslem conquest, yet who had always emerged, if not victorious, at least unconquered.

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It was the evening of the morning on which the Austrian emissaries departed that Suleyman, brooding on his throne, raised his lean head and beckoned his Grand Vizier Ibrahim, who approached with confidence. The Grand Vizier was always sure of his master's approbation; was he not cup-companion and boyhood comrade of the Sultan? Ibrahim had but one rival in his master's favor — the red-haired Russian girl, Khurrem the Joyous, whom Europe knew as Roxelana, whom slavers had dragged from her father's house in Rogatino to be the Sultan's harim favorite.

“I remember the infidel at last,” said Suleyman. “Do you recall the first charge of the knights at Mohacz?”

Ibrahim winced slightly at the allusion.

“Oh, Protector of the Pitiful, is it likely that I should forget an occasion on which the divine blood of my master was spilt by an unbeliever?”

“Then you remember that thirty-two knights, the paladins of the Nazarenes, drove headlong into our array, each having pledged his life to cut down our person. By Allah, they rode like men riding to a wedding, their great horses and long lances overthrowing all who opposed them, and their plate-armor turned the finest steel. Yet they

fell as the firelocks spoke until only three were left in the saddle — the knight Marczali and two companions. These paladins cut down my Solaks like ripe grain, but Marczali and one of his companions fell — almost at my feet.

“Yet one knight remained, though his vizored helmet had been torn from his head and blood started from every joint in his armor. He rode full at me, swinging his great two-handed sword, and I swear by the beard of the Prophet, death was so nigh me that I felt the burning breath of Azrael on my neck!

“His sword flashed like lightning in the sky, and glancing from my casque, whereby I was half-stunned so that blood gushed from my nose, rent the mail on my shoulder and gave me this wound, which irks me yet when the rains come. The Janizaries who swarmed around him cut the hocks of his horse, which brought him to earth as it went down, and the remnants of my Solaks bore me back out of the melee. Then the Hungarian host came on, and I saw not what became of the knight. But today I saw him again.”

Ibrahim started with an exclamation of incredulity.

“Nay, I could not mistake those blue eyes. How it is I know not, but the knight that wounded me at Mohacz was this German, Gottfried von Kalmbach.”

“But, Defender of the Faith,” protested Ibrahim, “the heads of those dog-knights were heaped before thy royal pavilion —”

“And I counted them and said nothing at the time, lest men think I held thee in blame,” answered Suleyman. “There were but thirty-one. Most were so mutilated I could tell little of the features. But somehow the infidel escaped, who gave me this blow. I love brave men, but our blood is not so common that an unbeliever may with impunity spill it on the ground for the dogs to lap up. See ye to it.”

Ibrahim salaamed deeply and withdrew. He made his way through broad corridors to a blue-tiled chamber whose gold-arched windows looked out on broad galleries, shaded by cypress and plane-trees, and cooled by the spray of silvery fountains. There at his summons came one Yaruk Khan, a Crim Tatar, a slant-eyed impassive figure in harness of lacquered leather and burnished bronze.

“Dog-brother,” said the Vizier, “did thy koumiss-clouded gaze mark the tall German lord who served the emir Habordansky — the lord whose hair is tawny as a lion’s mane?”

“Aye, noyon, he who is called Gombuk.”

“The same. Take a chambul of thy dog-brothers and go after the Franks. Bring back this man and thou shalt be rewarded. The persons of envoys are sacred, but this matter is not official,” he added cynically.

“To hear is to obey!” With a salaam as profound as that accorded to the Sultan himself, Yaruk Khan backed out of the presence of the second man of the empire.

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He returned some days later, dusty, travel-stained, and without his prey. On him Ibrahim bent an eye full of menace, and the Tatar prostrated himself before the silken cushions on which the Grand Vizier sat, in the blue chamber with the gold-arched windows.

“Great khan, let not thine anger consume thy slave. The fault was not mine, by the beard of the Prophet.”

“Squat on thy mangy haunches and bay out the tale,” ordered Ibrahim considerately.

“Thus it was, my lord,” began Yaruk Khan. “I rode swiftly, and though the Franks and their escort had a long start, and pushed on through the night without halting, I came up with them the next

midday. But lo, Gombuk was not among them, and when I inquired after him, the paladin Habordansky replied only with many great oaths, like to the roaring of a cannon. So I spoke with various of the escort who understood the speech of these infidels, and learned what had come to pass. Yet I would have my lord remember that I only repeat the words of the Spahis of the escort, who are men without honor and lie like —”

“Like a Tatar,” said Ibrahim.

Yaruk Khan acknowledged the compliment with a wide dog-like grin, and continued, “This they told me. At dawn Gombuk drew horse away from the rest, and the emir Habordansky demanded of him the reason. Then Gombuk laughed in the manner of the Franks — *huh! huh! huh!* — so. And Gombuk said, ‘The devil of good your service has done me, so I cool my heels for nine months in a Turkish prison. Suleyman has given us safe conduct over the border and I am not compelled to ride with you.’ ‘You dog,’ said the emir, ‘there is war in the wind and the Archduke has need of your sword.’ ‘Devil eat the Archduke,’ answered Gombuk; ‘Zapolya is a dog because he stood aside at Mohacz, and let us, his comrades, be cut to pieces, but Ferdinand is a dog too. When I am penniless I sell him my sword. Now I have two hundred ducats and these robes which I can sell to any Jew for a handful of silver, and may the devil bite me if I draw sword for any man while I have a penny left. I’m for the nearest Christian tavern, and you and the Archduke may go to the devil.’ Then the emir cursed him with many great curses, and Gombuk rode away laughing, *huh! huh! huh!*, and singing a song about a cockroach named —”

“Enough!” Ibrahim’s features were dark with rage. He plucked savagely at his beard, reflecting that in the allusion to Mohacz, von

Kalmbach had practically clinched Suleyman's suspicion. That matter of thirty-one heads when there should have been thirty-two was something no Turkish sultan would be likely to overlook. Officials had lost positions and their own heads over more trivial matters. The manner in which Suleyman had acted showed his almost incredible fondness and consideration for his Grand Vizier, but Ibrahim, vain though he was, was shrewd and wished no slightest shadow to come between him and his sovereign.

“Could you not have tracked him down, dog?” he demanded.

“By Allah,” swore the uneasy Tatar, “he must have ridden on the wind. He crossed the border hours ahead of me, and I followed him as far as I dared —”

“Enough of excuses,” interrupted Ibrahim. “Send Mikhal Oglu to me.”

The Tatar departed thankfully. Ibrahim was not tolerant of failure in any man.

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The Grand Vizier brooded on his silken cushions until the shadow of a pair of vulture wings fell across the marble-tiled floor, and the lean figure he had summoned bowed before him. The man whose very name was a shuddering watchword of horror to all western Asia was soft-spoken and moved with the mincing ease of a cat, but the stark evil of his soul showed in his dark countenance, gleamed in his narrow slit eyes. He was the chief of the Akinji, those wild riders whose raids spread fear and desolation throughout all lands beyond the Grand Turk's borders. He stood in full armor, a jeweled helmet on his narrow head, the wide vulture wings made fast to the shoulders of his gilded chain-mail hauberk. Those wings spread wide in the wind when he

rode, and under their pinions lay the shadows of death and destruction. It was Suleyman's scimitar-tip, the most noted slayer of a nation of slayers, who stood before the Grand Vizier.

"Soon you will precede the hosts of our master into the lands of the infidel," said Ibrahim. "It will be your order, as always, to strike and spare not. You will waste the fields and the vineyards of the Caphars, you will burn their villages, you will strike down their men with arrows, and lead away their wenchens captive. Lands beyond our line of march will cry out beneath your heel."

"That is good hearing, Favored of Allah," answered Mikhal Oglu in his soft courteous voice.

"Yet there is an order within the order," continued Ibrahim, fixing a piercing eye on the Akinji. "You know the German, von Kalmbach?"

"Aye — Gombuk as the Tatars call him."

"So. This is my command — whoever fights or flees, lives or dies — this man must not live. Search him out wherever he lies, though the hunt carry you to the very banks of the Rhine. When you bring me his head, your reward shall be thrice its weight in gold."

"To hear is to obey, my lord. Men say he is the vagabond son of a noble German family, whose ruin has been wine and women. They say he was once a Knight of Saint John, until cast forth for guzzling and —"

"Yet do not underrate him," answered Ibrahim grimly. "Sot he may be, but if he rode with Marczali, he is not to be despised. See thou to it!"

"There is no den where he can hide from me, oh Favored of Allah," declared Mikhal Oglu, "no night dark enough to conceal him, no forest thick enough. If I bring you not his head, I give him leave to send you mine."

“Enough!” Ibrahim grinned and tugged at his beard, well pleased. “You have my leave to go.”

The sinister vulture-winged figure went springily and silently from the blue chamber, nor could Ibrahim guess that he was taking the first steps in a feud which should spread over years and far lands, swirling in dark tides to draw in thrones and kingdoms and red-haired women more beautiful than the flames of hell.

2.

In a small thatched hut in a village not far from the Danube, lusty snores resounded where a figure reclined in state on a ragged cloak thrown over a heap of straw. It was the paladin Gottfried von Kalmbach who slept the sleep of innocence and ale. The velvet vest, voluminous silken trousers, khalat and shagreen boots, gifts from a contemptuous sultan, were nowhere in evidence. The paladin was clad in worn leather and rusty mail. Hands tugged at him, breaking his sleep, and he swore drowsily.

“Wake up, my lord! Oh, wake, good knight — good pig — good dog-soul — will you wake, then?”

“Fill my flagon, host,” mumbled the slumberer. “Who? — what? May the dogs bite you, Ivga! I’ve not another asper — not a penny. Go off like a good lass and let me sleep.”

The girl renewed her tugging and shaking.

“Oh dolt! Rise! Gird on your spit! There are happenings forward!”

“Ivga,” muttered Gottfried, pulling away from her attack, “take my burganet to the Jew. He’ll give you enough for it to get drunk again.”

“Fool!” she cried in despair. “It isn’t money I want! The whole east is aflame, and none knows the reason thereof!”

“Has the rain ceased?” asked von Kalmbach, taking some interest in the proceedings at last.

“The rain ceased hours ago. You can only hear the drip from the thatch. Put on your sword and come out into the street. The men of the village are all drunk on your last silver, and the women know not what to think or do. Ah!”

The exclamation was broken from her by the sudden upleaping of a weird illumination which shone through the crevices of the hut. The German got unsteadily to his feet, quickly girt on the great two-handed sword and stuck his dented burganet on his cropped locks. Then he followed the girl into the straggling street. She was a slender young thing, barefooted, clad only in a short tunic-like garment, through the wide rents of which gleamed generous expanses of white flesh.

There seemed no life or movement in the village. Nowhere showed a light. Water dripped steadily from the eaves of the thatched roofs. Puddles in the muddy streets gleamed black. Wind sighed and moaned eerily through the black sodden branches of the trees which pressed in bulwarks of darkness about the little village, and in the southeast, towering higher into the leaden sky, rose the lurid crimson glow that set the dank clouds to smoldering. The girl Ivga cringed close to the tall German, whimpering.

“I’ll tell you what it is, my girl,” said he, scanning the glow. “It’s Suleyman’s devils. They’ve crossed the river and they’re burning the villages. Aye, I’ve seen glares like that in the sky before. I’ve expected him before now, but these cursed rains we’ve had for weeks must have held him back. Aye, it’s the Akinji, right enough, and they won’t stop this side of Vienna. Look you, my girl, go quickly and quietly to the stable behind the hut and bring me my gray stallion. We’ll slip out

like mice from between the devil's fingers. The stallion will carry us both, easily."

"But the people of the village!" she sobbed, wringing her hands.

"Eh, well," he said, "God rest them; the men have drunk my ale valiantly and the women have been kind — but horns of Satan, girl, the gray nag won't carry a whole village!"

"Go you!" she returned. "I'll stay and die with my people!"

"The Turks won't kill you," he answered. "They'll sell you to a fat old Stamboul merchant who'll beat you. I won't stay to be cut open, and neither shall you —"

A terrible scream from the girl cut him short and he wheeled at the awful terror in her flaring eyes. Even as he did so, a hut at the lower end of the village sprang into flames, the sodden material burning slowly. A medley of screams and maddened yells followed the cry of the girl. In the sluggish light figures danced and capered wildly. Gottfried, straining his eyes in the shadows, saw shapes swarming over the low mud wall which drunkenness and negligence had left unguarded.

"Damnation!" he muttered. "The accursed ones have ridden ahead of their fire. They've stolen on the village in the dark — come on, girl!"

But even as he caught her white wrist to drag her away, and she screamed and fought against him like a wild thing, mad with fear, the mud wall crashed at the point nearest them. It crumpled under the impact of a score of horses, and into the doomed village reined the riders, distinct in the growing light. Huts were flaring up on all hands, screams rising to the dripping clouds as the invaders dragged shrieking women and drunken men from their hovels and cut their throats. Gottfried saw the lean figures of the horsemen, the firelight gleaming on their burnished steel; he saw the vulture wings on the shoulders of

the foremost. Even as he recognized Mikhal Oglu, he saw the chief stiffen and point.

“At him, dogs!” yelled the Akinji, his voice no longer soft, but strident as the rasp of a drawn saber. “It is Gombuk! Five hundred aspers to the man who brings me his head!”

With a curse von Kalmbach bounded for the shadows of the nearest hut, dragging the screaming girl with him. Even as he leaped he heard the twang of bowstrings, and the girl sobbed and went limp in his grasp. She sank down at his feet, and in the lurid glare he saw the feathered end of an arrow quivering under her heart. With a low rumble he turned toward his assailants as a fierce bear turns at bay. An instant he stood, head out-thrust truculently, sword gripped in both hands; then, as a bear gives back from the onset of the hunters, he turned and fled about the hut, arrows whistling about him and glancing from the rings of his mail. There were no shots; the ride through that dripping forest had dampened the powder-flasks of the raiders.

Von Kalmbach quartered about the back of the hut, mindful of the fierce yells behind him, and gained the shed behind the hut he had occupied, wherein he stabled his gray stallion. Even as he reached the door, someone snarled like a panther in the semi-dark and cut viciously at him. He parried the stroke with the lifted sword and struck back with all the power of his broad shoulders. The great blade glanced stunningly from the Akinji’s polished helmet and rent through the mail links of his hauberk, tearing arm from shoulder. The Muhammadan sank down with a groan, and the German sprang over his prostrate form. The gray stallion, wild with fear and excitement, neighed shrilly and reared as his master sprang on his back. No time for saddle or bridle. Gottfried dug his heels into the quivering flanks and the great steed shot through the door like a thunderbolt, knocking men right

and left like tenpins. Across the firelit open space between the burning huts he raced, clearing crumpled corpses in his stride, splashing his rider from heel to head as he thrashed through the puddles.

The Akinji made after the flying rider, loosing their shafts and giving tongue like hounds. Those mounted spurred after him, while those who had entered the village on foot ran through the broken wall for their horses.

Arrows flickered about Gottfried's head as he put his steed at the only point open to him — the unbroken western wall. It was touch and go, for the footing was tricky and treacherous and never had the gray stallion attempted such a leap. Gottfried held his breath as he felt the great body beneath him gathering and tensing in full flight for the desperate effort; then with a volcanic heave of mighty thews the stallion rose in the air and cleared the barrier with scarce an inch to spare. The pursuers yelled in amazement and fury, and reined back. Born horsemen though they were, they dared not attempt that break-neck leap. They lost time seeking gates and breaks in the wall, and when they finally emerged from the village, the black, dank, whispering, dripping forest had swallowed up their prey.

Mikhal Oglu swore like a fiend and leaving his lieutenant Othman in charge with instructions to leave no living human being in the village, he pressed on after the fugitive, following the trail, by torches, in the muddy mold, and swearing to run him down, if the road led under the very walls of Vienna.

3.

Allah did not will it that Mikhal Oglu should take Gottfried von Kalm-bach's head in the dark, dripping forest. He knew the country better

than they, and in spite of their zeal, they lost his trail in the darkness. Dawn found Gottfried riding through terror-stricken farmlands, with the flame of a burning world lighting the east and south. The country was thronged with fugitives, staggering under pitiful loads of household goods, driving bellowing cattle, like people fleeing the end of the world. The torrential rains that had offered false promise of security had not long stayed the march of the Grand Turk.

With a quarter-million followers he was ravaging the eastern marches of Christendom. While Gottfried had loitered in the taverns of isolated villages, drinking up the Sultan's bounty, Pesth and Buda had fallen, the German soldiers of the latter having been slaughtered by the Janizaries, after promises of safety sworn by Suleyman, whom men named the Generous.

While Ferdinand and the nobles and bishops squabbled at the Diet of Spires, the elements alone seemed to war for Christendom. Rain fell in torrents, and through the floods that changed plains and forest-bed to dank morasses, the Turks struggled grimly. They drowned in raging rivers, and lost great stores of ammunition, ordnance and supplies when boats capsized, bridges gave way, and wagons mired. But on they came, driven by the implacable will of Suleyman, and now in September, 1529, over the ruins of Hungary, the Turk swept on Europe, with the Akinji — the Sackmen — ravaging the land like the drift ahead of a storm.

This in part Gottfried learned from the fugitives as he pushed his weary stallion toward the city which was the only sanctuary for the panting thousands. Behind him the skies flamed red and the screams of butchered victims came dimly down the wind to his ears. Sometimes he could even make out the swarming black masses of wild horsemen. The wings of the vulture beat horrifically over that

butchered land and the shadows of those great wings fell across all Europe. Again the destroyer was riding out of the blue mysterious East as his brothers had ridden before him — Attila — Subotai — Bayazid — Muhammad the Conqueror. But never before had such a storm risen against the West.

Before the waving vulture wings the road thronged with wailing fugitives; behind them it ran red and silent, strewn with mangled shapes that cried no more. The killers were not a half-hour behind him when Gottfried von Kalmbach rode his reeling stallion through the gates of Vienna. The people on the walls had heard the wailing for hours, rising awfully on the wind, and now afar they saw the sun flicker on the points of lances as the horsemen rode in amongst the masses of fugitives toiling down from the hills into the plain which girdles the city. They saw the play of naked steel like sickles among ripe grain.

Von Kalmbach found the city in turmoil, the people swirling and screaming about Count Nikolas Salm, the seventy-year-old warhorse who commanded Vienna, and his aides, Roggendorf, Count Nikolas Zrinyi and Paul Bakics. Salm was working with frantic haste, leveling houses near the walls and using their material to brace the ramparts, which were old and unstable, nowhere more than six feet thick, and in many places crumbling and falling down. The outer palisade was so frail it bore the name of Stadtzaun — city hedge.

But under the lashing energy of Count Salm, a new wall twenty feet high was thrown up from the Stuben to the Karnthner Gate. Ditches interior to the old moat were dug, and ramparts erected from the drawbridge to the Salz Gate. Roofs were stripped of shingles, to lessen the chances of fire, and paving was ripped up to soften the impact of cannonballs.

The suburbs had been deserted, and now they were fired lest they

give shelter to the besiegers. In the process, which was carried out in the very teeth of the oncoming Sackmen, conflagrations broke out in the city and added to the delirium. It was all hell and bedlam turned loose, and in the midst of it, five thousand wretched noncombatants, old men and women, and children, were ruthlessly driven from the gates to shift for themselves, and their screams, as the Akinjis swooped down, maddened the people within the walls. These hellions were arriving by thousands, topping the skylines, and sweeping down on the city in irregular squadrons, like vultures gathering about a dying camel. Within an hour after the first swarm had appeared, not one Christian remained alive outside the gates, except those bound by long ropes to the saddle-peaks of their captors and forced to run at full speed or be dragged to death. The wild riders swirled about the walls, yelling and loosing their shafts. Men on the towers recognized the dread Mikhal Oglu by the wings on his cuirass, and noted that he rode from one heap of dead to another, avidly scanning each corpse in turn, pausing to glare questioningly at the battlements.

Meanwhile, from the west, a band of German and Spanish troops cut their way through a cordon of Sackmen and marched into the streets to the accompaniment of frenzied cheers, Philip the Palgrave at their head.

Gottfried von Kalmbach leaned on his sword and watched them pass in their gleaming breastplates and plumed crested helmets, with long matchlocks on their shoulders and two-handed swords strapped to their steel-clad backs. He was a curious contrast in his rusty chain-mail, old-fashioned harness picked up here and there and slovenly pieced together — he seemed like a figure out of the past, rusty and tarnished, watching a newer, brighter generation go by. Yet Philip

saluted him, with a glance of recognition, as the shining column swung past.

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Von Kalmbach started toward the walls, where the gunners were firing frugally at the Akinji, who showed some disposition to climb upon the bastions on lariats thrown from their saddles. But on the way he heard that Salm was impressing nobles and soldiers in the task of digging moats and rearing new earthworks, and in great haste he took refuge in a tavern, where he bullied the host, a knock-kneed and apprehensive Wallachian, into giving him credit, and rapidly drank himself into a state where no one would have considered asking him to do work of any kind.

Shots, shouts and screams reached his ears, but he paid scant heed. He knew that the Akinji would strike and pass on, to ravage the country beyond. He learned from the tavern talk that Salm had 20,000 pikemen, 2,000 horsemen and 1,000 volunteer citizens to oppose Suleyman's hordes, together with seventy guns — cannons, demi-cannons and culverins. The news of the Turks' numbers numbed all hearts with dread — all but von Kalmbach's. He was a fatalist in his way. But he discovered a conscience in ale, and was presently brooding over the people the miserable Viennese had driven forth to perish. The more he drank the more melancholy he became, and maudlin tears dripped from the drooping ends of his mustaches.

At last he rose unsteadily and took up his great sword, muzzily intent on challenging Count Salm to a duel because of the matter. He bellowed down the timid importunities of the Wallachian and weaved out on the street. To his groggy sight the towers and spires cavorted crazily; people jostled him, knocking him aside as they ran about

aimlessly. Philip the Palgrave strode by clanking in his armor, the keen dark faces of his Spaniards contrasting with the square, florid countenances of the Lanzknechts.

“Shame upon you, von Kalmbach!” said Philip sternly. “The Turk is upon us, and you keep your snout shoved in an ale-pot!”

“Whose snout is in what ale-pot?” demanded Gottfried, weaving in an erratic half-circle as he fumbled at his sword. “Devil bite you, Philip, I’ll rap your pate for that —”

The Palgrave was already out of sight, and eventually Gottfried found himself on the Karthner Tower, only vaguely aware of how he had got there. But what he saw sobered him suddenly. The Turk was indeed upon Vienna. The plain was covered with his tents, thirty thousand, some said, and swore that from the lofty spire of Saint Stephen’s cathedral a man could not see their limits. Four hundred of his boats lay on the Danube, and Gottfried heard men cursing the Austrian fleet which lay helpless far upstream, because its sailors, long unpaid, refused to man the ships. He also heard that Salm had made no reply at all to Suleyman’s demand to surrender.

Now, partly as a gesture, partly to awe the Caphar dogs, the Grand Turk’s array was moving in orderly procession before the ancient walls before settling down to the business of the siege. The sight was enough to awe the stoutest. The low-swinging sun struck fire from polished helmet, jeweled saber-hilt and lance-point. It was as if a river of shining steel flowed leisurely and terribly past the walls of Vienna.

The Akinji, who ordinarily formed the vanguard of the host, had swept on, but in their place rode the Tatars of Crimea, crouching on their high-peaked, short-stirruped saddles, their gnome-like heads guarded by iron helmets, their stocky bodies with bronze breastplates and lacquered leather. Behind them came the Azabs, the irregular

infantry, Kurds and Arabs for the most part, a wild, motley horde. Then their brothers, the Delis, the Madcaps, wild men on tough ponies fantastically adorned with fur and feathers. The riders wore caps and mantles of leopard skin; their unshorn hair hung in tangled strands about their high shoulders, and over their matted beards their eyes glared the madness of fanaticism and bhang.

After them came the real body of the army. First the beys and emirs with their retainers — horsemen and footmen from the feudal fiefs of Asia Minor. Then the Spahis, the heavy cavalry, on splendid steeds. And last of all the real strength of the Turkish empire — the most terrible military organization in the world — the Janizaries. On the walls men spat in black fury, recognizing kindred blood. For the Janizaries were not Turks. With a few exceptions, where Turkish parents had smuggled their offspring into the ranks to save them from the grinding life of a peasant, they were sons of Christians — Greeks, Serbs, Hungarians — stolen in infancy and raised in the ranks of Islam, knowing but one master — the Sultan; but one occupation — slaughter.

Their beardless features contrasted with those of their Oriental masters. Many had blue eyes and yellow mustaches. But all their faces were stamped with the wolfish ferocity to which they had been reared. Under their dark blue cloaks glinted fine mail, and many wore steel skull-caps under their curious, high-peaked hats from which depended a white sleeve-like piece of cloth, and through which was thrust a copper spoon. Long bird-of-paradise plumes likewise adorned these strange head-pieces.

Besides scimitars, pistols and daggers, each Janizary bore a match-lock, and their officers carried pots of coals for the lighting of the matches. Up and down the ranks scurried the dervishes, clad only

in kalpaks of camel-hair and green aprons fringed with ebony beads, exhorting the Faithful. Military bands, the invention of the Turk, marched with the columns, cymbals clashing, lutes twanging. Over the flowing sea the banners tossed and swayed — the crimson flag of the Spahis, the white banner of the Janizaries with its two-edged sword worked in gold, and the horse-tail standards of the rulers — seven tails for the Sultan, six for the Grand Vizier, three for the Agha of the Janizaries. So Suleyman paraded his power before despairing Caphar eyes.

But von Kalmbach's gaze was centered on the groups that labored to set up the ordnance of the Sultan. And he shook his head in bewilderment.

"Demi-culverins, sakers, and falconets!" he grunted. "Where the devil's all the heavy artillery Suleyman's so proud of?"

"At the bottom of the Danube!" A Hungarian pikeman grinned fiercely and spat as he answered. "Wulf Hagen sank that part of the Soldan's flotilla. The rest of his cannon and cannon royal, they say, were mired because of the rains."

A slow grin bristled Gottfried's mustache.

"What was Suleyman's word to Salm?"

"That he'd eat breakfast in Vienna day after tomorrow — the 29th."

Gottfried shook his head ponderously.

4.

The siege commenced, with the roaring of cannons, the whistling of arrows, and the blasting crash of matchlocks. The Janizaries took possession of the ruined suburbs, where fragments of walls gave them

shelter. Under a screen of irregulars and a volley of arrow-fire, they advanced methodically just after dawn.

On a gun-turret on the threatened wall, leaning on his great sword and meditatively twisting his mustache, Gottfried von Kalmbach watched a Transylvanian gunner being carried off the wall, his brains oozing from a hole in his head; a Turkish matchlock had spoken too near the walls. The field-pieces of the Sultan were barking like deep-toned dogs, knocking chips off the battlements. The Janizaries were advancing, kneeling, firing, reloading as they came on. Bullets glanced from the crenelles and whined off venomously into space. One flattened against Gottfried's hauberk, bringing an outraged grunt from him. Turning toward the abandoned gun, he saw a colorful, incongruous figure bending over the massive breach.

It was a woman, dressed as von Kalmbach had not seen even the dandies of France dressed. She was tall, splendidly shaped, but lithe. From under a steel cap escaped rebellious tresses that rippled red gold in the sun over her compact shoulders. High boots of Cordovan leather came to her mid-thighs, which were cased in baggy breeches. She wore a shirt of fine Turkish mesh-mail tucked into her breeches. Her supple waist was confined by a flowing sash of green silk, into which were thrust a brace of pistols and a dagger, and from which depended a long Hungarian saber. Over all was carelessly thrown a scarlet cloak.

This surprising figure was bending over the cannon, sighting it in a manner betokening more than a passing familiarity, at a group of Turks who were wheeling a carriage-gun just within range.

“Eh, Red Sonya!” shouted a man-at-arms, waving his pike. “Give ’em hell, my lass!”

“Trust me, dog-brother,” she retorted as she applied the glowing match to the vent. “But I wish my mark was Roxelana’s —”

A terrific detonation drowned her words and a swirl of smoke blinded every one on the turret, as the terrific recoil of the overcharged cannon knocked the firer flat on her back. She sprang up like a spring rebounding and rushed to the embrasure, peering eagerly through the smoke, which clearing, showed the ruin of the gun crew. The huge ball, bigger than a man’s head, had smashed full into the group clustered about the saker, and now they lay on the torn ground, their skulls blasted by the impact, or their bodies mangled by the flying iron splinters from their shattered gun. A cheer went up from the towers, and the woman called Red Sonya yelled with a sincere joy and did the steps of a Cossack dance.

Gottfried approached, eying in open admiration the splendid swell of her bosom beneath the pliant mail, the curves of her ample hips and rounded limbs. She stood as a man might stand, booted legs braced wide apart, thumbs hooked into her girdle, but she was all woman. She was laughing as she faced him, and he noted with fascination the dancing sparkling lights and changing colors of her eyes. She raked back her rebellious locks with a powder-stained hand and he wondered at the clear pinky whiteness of her firm flesh where it was unstained.

“Why did you wish for the Sultana Roxelana for a target, my girl?” he asked.

“Because she’s my sister, the slut!” answered Sonya.

At that instant a great cry thundered over the walls and the girl started like a wild thing, ripping out her blade in a long flash of silver in the sun.

“That bellow!” she cried. “The Janizaries —”

Gottfried was already on his way to the embrasures. He too had

heard before the terrible soul-shaking shout of the charging Janizaries. Suleyman meant to waste no time on the city that barred him from helpless Europe. He meant to crush its frail walls in one storm. The bashi-bazouki, the irregulars, died like flies to screen the main advance, and over heaps of their dead, the Janizaries thundered against Vienna. In the teeth of cannonade and musket volley they surged on, crossing the moats on scaling-ladders laid across, bridge-like. Whole ranks went down as the Austrian guns roared, but now the attackers were under the walls and the cumbrous balls whirred over their heads, to work havoc in the rear ranks.

The Spanish matchlock men, firing almost straight down, took ghastly toll, but now the ladders gripped the walls, and the chanting madmen surged upward. Arrows whistled, striking down the defenders. Behind them the Turkish field-pieces boomed, careless of injury to friend as well as foe. Gottfried, standing at an embrasure, was overthrown by a sudden terrific impact. A ball had smashed the merlon, braining half a dozen defenders.

Gottfried rose, half-stunned, out of the debris of masonry and huddled corpses. He looked down into an uprushing waste of snarling, impassioned faces, where eyes glared like mad dogs' and blades glittered like sunbeams on water. Bracing his feet wide, he heaved up his great sword and lashed down. His jaw jutted out, his mustache bristled. The five-foot blade caved in steel caps and skulls, lashing through uplifted bucklers and iron shoulder-pieces. Men fell from the ladders, their nerveless fingers slipping from the bloody rungs.

But they swarmed through the breach on either side of him. A terrible cry announced that the Turks had a foothold on the wall. But no man dared leave his post to go to the threatened point. To the

dazed defenders it seemed that Vienna was ringed by a glittering, tossing sea that roared higher and higher about the doomed walls.

Stepping back to avoid being hemmed in, Gottfried grunted and lashed right and left. His eyes were no longer cloudy; they blazed like blue bale-fire. Three Janizaries were down at his feet; his broadsword clanged in a forest of slashing scimitars. A blade splintered on his basinet, filling his eyes with fire-shot blackness. Staggering, he struck back and felt his great blade crunch home. Blood jetted over his hands and he tore his sword clear. Then with a yell and a rush someone was at his side and he heard the quick splintering of mail beneath the madly flailing strokes of a saber that flashed like silver lightning before his clearing sight.

It was Red Sonya who had come to his aid, and her onslaught was no less terrible than that of a she-panther. Her strokes followed each other too quickly for the eye to follow; her blade was a blur of white fire, and men went down like ripe grain before the reaper. With a deep roar Gottfried strode to her side, bloody and terrible, swinging his great blade. Forced irresistibly back, the Moslems wavered on the edge of the wall, then leaped for the ladders or fell screaming through empty space.

Oaths flowed in a steady stream from Sonya's red lips and she laughed wildly as her saber sang home and blood spurted along the edge. The last Turk on the battlement screamed and parried wildly as she pressed him; then dropping his scimitar, his clutching hands closed desperately on her dripping blade. With a groan he swayed on the edge, blood gushing from his horribly cut fingers.

"Hell to you, dog-soul!" she laughed. "The devil can stir your broth for you!"

With a twist and a wrench she tore away her saber, severing the

wretch's fingers; with a moaning cry he pitched backward and fell headlong.

On all sides the Janizaries were falling back. The field-pieces, halted while the fighting went on upon the walls, were booming again, and the Spaniards, kneeling at the embrasures, were returning the fire with their long matchlocks.

Gottfried approached Red Sonya, who was cleansing her blade, swearing softly.

"By God, my girl," said he, extending a huge hand, "had you not come to my aid, I think I'd have supped in Hell this night. I thank —"

"Thank the devil!" retorted Sonya rudely, slapping his hand aside. "The Turks were on the wall. Don't think I risked my hide to save yours, dog-brother!"

And with a scornful flirt of her wide coattails, she swaggered off down the battlements, giving back promptly and profanely the rude sallies of the soldiers. Gottfried scowled after her, and a Lanzknecht slapped him jovially on the shoulder.

"Eh, she's a devil, that one! She drinks the strongest head under the table and outswears a Spaniard. She's no man's light o' love. Cut — slash — death to you, dog-soul! There's her way."

"Who is she, in the devil's name?" growled von Kalmbach.

"Red Sonya from Rogatino — that's all we know. Marches and fights like a man — God knows why. Swears she's sister to Roxelana, the Soldan's favorite. If the Tatars who grabbed Roxelana that night had got Sonya, by Saint Piotr! Suleyman would have had a handful! Let her alone, sir brother; she's a wildcat. Come and have a tankard of ale."

The Janizaries, summoned before the Grand Vizier to explain why the attack failed after the wall had been scaled at one place, swore they

had been confronted by a devil in the form of a red-headed woman, aided by a giant in rusty mail. Ibrahim discounted the woman, but the description of the man woke a half-forgotten memory in his mind. After dismissing the soldiers, he summoned the Tatar, Yaruk Khan, and dispatched him up-country to demand of Mikhal Oglu why he had not sent a certain head to the royal tent.

5.

Suleyman did not eat his breakfast in Vienna on the morning of the 29th. He stood on the height of Simmering, before his rich pavilion with its gold-knobbed pinnacles and its guard of five hundred Solaks, and watched his light batteries pecking away vainly at the frail walls; he saw his irregulars wasting their lives like water, striving to fill the fosse, and he saw his sappers burrowing like moles, driving mines and counter-mines nearer and nearer the bastions.

Within the city there was little ease. Night and day the walls were manned. In their cellars the Viennese watched the faint vibrations of peas on drumheads that betrayed the sounds of digging in the earth that told of Turkish mines burrowing under the walls, and sank their counter-mines, accordingly. Men fought no less fiercely under the earth than above.

Vienna was the one Christian island in a sea of infidels. Night by night men watched the horizons burning where the Akinji yet scoured the agonized land. Occasionally word came from the outer world — slaves escaping from the camp and slipping into the city. Always their news was fresh horror. In Upper Austria less than a third of the inhabitants were left alive; Mikhal Oglu was outdoing himself. And the people said that it was evident the vulture-winged one was looking for

one in particular. His slayers brought men's heads and heaped them high before him; he avidly searched among the grisly relics, then, apparently in fiendish disappointment, drove his devils to new atrocities.

These tales, instead of paralyzing the Austrians with dread, fired them with the mad fury of desperation. Mines exploded, breaches were made and the Turks swarmed in, but always the desperate Christians were there before them, and in the choking, blind, wild-beast madness of hand-to-hand fighting they paid in part the red debt they owed.

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September dwindled into October; the leaves turned brown and yellow on Wiener Wald, and the winds blew cold. The watchers shivered at night on the walls that whitened to the bite of the frost; but still the tents ringed the city; and still Suleyman sat in his magnificent pavilion and glared at the frail barrier that barred his imperial path. None but Ibrahim dared speak to him; his mood was black as the cold nights that crept down from the northern hills. The wind that moaned outside his tent seemed a dirge for his ambitions of conquest.

Ibrahim watched him narrowly, and after a vain onset that lasted from dawn till midday, he called off the Janizaries and bade them retire into the ruined suburbs and rest. And he sent a bowman to shoot a very certain shaft into a very certain part of the city, where certain persons were waiting for just such an event.

No more attacks were made that day. The field-pieces, which had been pounding at the Karnthner Gate for days, were shifted northward, to hammer at the Burg. As an assault on that part of the wall seemed imminent, the bulk of the soldiery was shifted there. But the onslaught did not come, though the batteries kept up a steady fire, hour after

hour. Whatever the reason, the soldiers gave thanks for the respite; they were dizzy with fatigue, mad with raw wounds and lack of sleep.

That night the great square, the Am-Hof market, seethed with soldiers, while civilians looked on enviously. A great store of wine had been discovered hidden in the cellars of a rich Jewish merchant, who hoped to reap triple profit when all other liquor in the city was gone. In spite of their officers, the half-crazed men rolled the great hogsheads into the square and broached them. Salm gave up the attempt to control them. Better drunkenness, growled the old warhorse, than for the men to fall in their tracks from exhaustion. He paid the Jew from his own purse. In relays the soldiers came from the walls and drank deep.

In the glare of cressets and torches, to the accompaniment of drunken shouts and songs, to which the occasional rumble of a cannon played a sinister undertone, von Kalmbach dipped his basinet into a barrel and brought it out brimful and dripping. Sinking his mustache into the liquid, he paused as his clouded eyes, over the rim of the steel cap, rested on a strutting figure on the other side of the hogshead. Resentment touched his expression. Red Sonya had already visited more than one barrel. Her burganet was thrust sidewise on her rebellious locks, her swagger was wilder, her eyes more mocking.

“Ha!” she cried scornfully. “It’s the Turk-killer, with his nose deep in the keg, as usual! Devil bite all toppers!”

She consistently thrust a jeweled goblet into the crimson flood and emptied it at a gulp. Gottfried stiffened resentfully. He had had a tilt with Sonya already, and he still smarted.

“Why should I even look at you, in your ragged harness and empty purse,” she had mocked, “when even Paul Bakics is mad for me? Go along, guzzler, beer-keg!”

“Be damned to you,” he had retorted. “You needn’t be so high, just because your sister is the Soldan’s mistress —”

At that she had flown into an awful passion, and they had parted with mutual curses. Now, from the devil in her eyes, he saw that she intended making things further uncomfortable for him.

“Hussy!” he growled. “I’ll drown you in this hogshead.”

“Nay, you’ll drown yourself first, boar-pig!” she shouted amid a roar of rough laughter. “A pity you aren’t as valiant against the Turks as you are against the wine-butts!”

“Dogs bite you, slut!” he roared. “How can I break their heads when they stand off and pound us with cannon balls? Shall I throw my dagger at them from the wall?”

“There are thousands just outside,” she retorted in the madness induced by drink and her own wild nature, “if any had the guts to go to them.”

“By God!” the maddened giant dragged out his great sword. “No baggage can call *me* coward, sot or not! I’ll go out upon them, if never a man follow me!”

Bedlam followed his bellow; the drunken temper of the crowd was fit for such madness. The nearly empty hogsheads were deserted as men tipsily drew sword and reeled toward the outer gates. Wulf Hagen fought his way into the storm, buffeting men right and left, shouting fiercely, “Wait, you drunken fools! Don’t surge out in this shape! Wait —” They brushed him aside, sweeping on in a blind senseless torrent.

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Dawn was just beginning to tip the eastern hills. Somewhere in the strangely silent Turkish camp a drum began to throb. Turkish sentries

stared wildly and loosed their matchlocks in the air to warn the camp, appalled at the sight of the Christian horde pouring over the narrow drawbridge, eight thousand strong, brandishing swords and ale tankards. As they foamed over the moat a terrific explosion rent the din, and a portion of the wall near the Karnthner Gate seemed to detach itself and rise into the air. A great shout rose from the Turkish camp, but the attackers did not pause.

They rushed headlong into the suburbs, and there they saw the Janizaries, not rousing from slumber, but fully clad and armed, being hurriedly drawn up in charging lines. Without pausing, they burst headlong into the half-formed ranks. Far outnumbered, their drunken fury and velocity was yet irresistible. Before the madly thrashing axes and lashing broadswords, the Janizaries reeled back dazed and disordered. The suburbs became a shambles where battling men, slashing and hewing at one another, stumbled on mangled bodies and severed limbs. Suleyman and Ibrahim, on the height of Simmering, saw the invincible Janizaries in full retreat, streaming out toward the hills.

In the city the rest of the defenders were working madly to repair the great breach the mysterious explosion had torn in the wall. Salm gave thanks for that drunken sortie. But for it, the Janizaries would have been pouring through the breach before the dust settled.

All was confusion in the Turkish camp. Suleyman ran to his horse and took charge in person, shouting at the Spahis. They formed ranks and swung down the slopes in orderly squadrons. The Christian warriors, still following their fleeing enemies, suddenly awakened to their danger. Before them the Janizaries were still falling back, but on either flank the horsemen of Asia were galloping to cut them off. Fear replaced drunken recklessness. They began to fall back, and the retreat quickly became a rout. Screaming in blind panic they threw away

their weapons and fled for the drawbridge. The Turks rode them down to the water's edge, and tried to follow them across the bridge, into the gates which were opened for them. And there at the bridge Wulf Hagen and his retainers met the pursuers and held them hard. The flood of the fugitives flowed past him to safety; on him the Turkish tide broke like a red wave. He loomed, a steel-clad giant, in a waste of spears.

Gottfried von Kalmbach did not voluntarily quit the field, but the rush of his companions swept him along the tide of flight, blaspheming bitterly. Presently he lost his footing and his panic-stricken comrades stampeded across his prostrate frame. When the frantic heels ceased to drum on his mail, he raised his head and saw that he was near the fosse, and naught but Turks about him. Rising, he ran lumberingly toward the moat, into which he plunged unexpectedly, looking back over his shoulder at a pursuing Moslem.

He came up floundering and spluttering, and made for the opposite bank, splashing water like a buffalo. The blood-mad Muhammadan was close behind him — an Algerian corsair, as much at home in water as out. The stubborn German would not drop his great sword, and burdened by his mail, just managed to reach the other bank, where he clung, utterly exhausted and unable to lift a hand in defense as the Algerian swirled in, dagger gleaming above his naked shoulder. Then someone swore heartily on the bank hard by. A slim hand thrust a long pistol into the Algerian's face; he screamed as it exploded, making a ghastly ruin of his head. Another slim, strong hand gripped the sinking German by the scruff of his mail.

“Grab the bank, fool!” gritted a voice, indicative of great effort. “I can't heave you up alone; you must weigh a ton. Pull, dolt, pull!”

Blowing, gasping and floundering, Gottfried half-clambered, was

half lifted, out of the moat. He showed some disposition to lie on his belly and retch, what of the dirty water he had swallowed, but his rescuer urged him to his feet.

“The Turks are crossing the bridge and the lads are closing the gates against them — haste, before we’re cut off.”

Inside the gate Gottfried stared about, as if waking from a dream.

“Where’s Wulf Hagen? I saw him holding the bridge.”

“Lying dead among twenty dead Turks,” answered Red Sonya.

Gottfried sat down on a piece of fallen wall, and because he was shaken and exhausted, and still mazed with drink and blood-lust, he sank his face in his huge hands and wept. Sonya kicked him disgustedly.

“Name o’ Satan, man, don’t sit and blubber like a spanked school-girl. You drunkards had to play the fool, but that can’t be mended. Come — let’s go to the Walloon’s tavern and drink ale.”

“Why did you pull me out of the moat?” he asked.

“Because a great oaf like you never can help himself. I see you need a wise person like me to keep life in that hulking frame.”

“But I thought you despised me!”

“Well, a woman can change her mind, can’t she?” she snapped.

Along the walls the pikemen were repelling the frothing Moslems, thrusting them off the partly repaired breach. In the royal pavilion Ibrahim was explaining to his master that the devil had undoubtedly inspired that drunken sortie just at the right moment to spoil the Grand Vizier’s carefully laid plans. Suleyman, wild with fury, spoke shortly to his friend for the first time.

“Nay, thou hast failed. Have done with thine intrigues. Where craft has failed, sheer force shall prevail. Send a rider for the Akinji; they are needed here to replace the fallen. Bid the hosts to the attack again.”

6.

The preceding onslaughts were naught to the storm that now burst on Vienna's reeling walls. Night and day the cannons flashed and thundered. Bombs burst on roofs and in the streets. When men died on the walls there was none to take their places. Fear of famine stalked the streets and the darker fear of treachery ran black-mantled through the alleys. Investigation showed that the blast that had rent the Karnthner wall had not been fired from without. In a mine tunneled from an unsuspected cellar inside the city, a heavy charge of powder had been exploded beneath the wall. One or two men, working secretly, might have done it. It was now apparent that the bombardment of the Burg had been merely a gesture to draw attention away from the Karnthner wall, to give the traitors an opportunity to work undiscovered.

Count Salm and his aides did the work of giants. The aged commander, fired with superhuman energy, trod the walls, braced the faltering, aided the wounded, fought in the breaches side by side with the common soldiers, while death dealt his blows unsparingly.

But if death supped within the walls, he feasted full without. Suleyman drove his men as relentlessly as if he were their worst foe. Plague stalked among them, and the ravaged countryside yielded no food. The cold winds howled down from the Carpathians and the warriors shivered in their light Oriental garb. In the frosty nights the hands of the sentries froze to their matchlocks. The ground grew hard as flint and the sappers toiled feebly with blunted tools. Rain fell, mingled with sleet, extinguishing matches, wetting powder, turning the plain outside the city to a muddy wallow, where rotting corpses sickened the living.

Suleyman shuddered as with an ague, as he looked out over the

camp. He saw his warriors, worn and haggard, toiling in the muddy plain like ghosts under the gloomy leaden skies. The stench of his slaughtered thousands was in his nostrils. In that instant it seemed to the Sultan that he looked on a gray plain of the dead, where corpses dragged their lifeless bodies to an outworn task, animated only by the ruthless will of their master. For an instant the Tatar in his veins rose above the Turk and he shook with fear. Then his lean jaws set. The walls of Vienna staggered drunkenly, patched and repaired in a score of places. How could they stand?

“Sound for the onslaught. Thirty thousand aspers to the first man on the walls!”

The Grand Vizier spread his hands helplessly. “The spirit is gone out of the warriors. They can not endure the miseries of this icy land.”

“Drive them to the walls with whips,” answered Suleyman, grimly. “This is the gate to Frankistan. It is through it we must ride the road to empire.”

Drums thundered through the camp. The weary defenders of Christendom rose up and gripped their weapons, electrified by the instinctive knowledge that the death-grip had come.

In the teeth of roaring matchlocks and swinging broadswords, the officers of the Sultan drove the Moslem hosts. Whips cracked and men cried out blasphemously up and down the lines. Maddened, they hurled themselves at the reeling walls, riddled with great breaches, yet still barriers behind which desperate men could crouch. Charge after charge rolled on over the choked fosse, broke on the staggering walls, and rolled back, leaving its wash of dead. Night fell unheeded, and through the darkness, lighted by blaze of cannon and flare of torches, the battle raged. Driven by Suleyman’s terrible will, the attackers fought throughout the night, heedless of all Moslem tradition.

Dawn rose as on Armageddon. Before the walls of Vienna lay a vast carpet of steel-clad dead. Their plumes waved in the wind. And across the corpses staggered the hollow-eyed attackers to grapple with the dazed defenders.

The steel tides rolled and broke, and rolled on again, till the very gods must have stood aghast at the giant capacity of men for suffering and enduring. It was the Armageddon of races — Asia against Europe. About the walls raved a sea of Eastern faces — Turks, Tatars, Kurds, Arabs, Algerians, snarling, screaming, dying before the roaring matchlocks of the Spaniards, the thrust of Austrian pikes, the strokes of the German Lanzknechts, who swung their two-handed swords like reapers mowing ripe grain. Those within the walls were no more heroic than those without, stumbling among fields of their own dead.

To Gottfried von Kalmbach, life had faded to a single meaning — the swinging of his great sword. In the wide breach by the Karnthner Tower he fought until time lost all meaning. For long ages maddened faces rose snarling before him, the faces of devils, and scimitars flashed before his eyes everlastingly. He did not feel his wounds, nor the drain of weariness. Gasping in the choking dust, blind with sweat and blood, he dealt death like a harvest, dimly aware that at his side a slim, pantherish figure swayed and smote — at first with laughter, curses and snatches of song, later in grim silence.

His identity as an individual was lost in that cataclysm of swords. He hardly knew it when Count Salm was death-stricken at his side by a bursting bomb. He was not aware when night crept over the hills, nor did he realize at last that the tide was slackening and ebbing. He was only dimly aware that Nikolas Zrinyi tore him away from the corpse-choked breach, saying, “God’s name, man, go and sleep. We’ve beaten them off — for the time being, at least.”

He found himself in a narrow, winding street, all dark and forsaken. He had no idea of how he had got there, but seemed vaguely to remember a hand on his elbow, tugging, guiding. The weight of his mail pulled at his sagging shoulders. He could not tell if the sound he heard were the cannon fitfully roaring, or a throbbing in his own head. It seemed there was someone he should look for — someone who meant a great deal to him. But all was vague. Somewhere, sometime, it seemed long, long ago, a sword-stroke had cleft his basinet. When he tried to think he seemed to feel again the impact of that terrible blow, and his brain swam. He tore off the dented head-piece and cast it into the street.

Again the hand was tugging at his arm. A voice urged, “Wine, my lord — drink!”

Dimly he saw a lean, black-mailed figure extending a tankard. With a gasp he caught at it and thrust his muzzle into the stinging liquor, gulping like a man dying of thirst. Then something burst in his brain. The night filled with a million flashing sparks, as if a powder magazine had exploded in his head. After that, darkness and oblivion.

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He came slowly to himself, aware of a raging thirst, an aching head, and an intense weariness that seemed to paralyze his limbs. He was bound hand and foot, and gagged. Twisting his head, he saw that he was in a small bare dusty room, from which a winding stone stair led up. He deduced that he was in the lower part of the tower.

Over a guttering candle on a crude table stooped two men. They were both lean and hook-nosed, clad in plain black garments — Asiatics, past doubt. Gottfried listened to their low-toned conversation. He had picked up many languages in his wanderings. He recognized

them — Tshoruk and his son Rhupen, Armenian merchants. He remembered that he had seen Tshoruk often in the last week or so, ever since the domed helmets of the Akinji had appeared in Suleyman's camp. Evidently the merchant had been shadowing him, for some reason. Tshoruk was reading what he had written on a bit of parchment.

“My lord, though I blew up the Karnthner wall in vain, yet I have news to make my lord's heart glad. My son and I have taken the German, von Kalmbach. As he left the wall, dazed with fighting, we followed, guiding him subtly to the ruined tower whereof you know, and giving him drugged wine, bound him fast. Let my lord send the emir Mikhal Oglu to the wall by the tower, and we will give him into thy hands. We will bind him on the old mangonel and cast him over the wall like a tree trunk.”

The Armenian took up an arrow and began to bind the parchment about the shaft with light silver wire.

“Take this to the roof, and shoot it toward the mantlet, as usual,” he began, when Rhupen exclaimed, “Hark!” and both froze, their eyes glittering like those of trapped vermin — fearful yet vindictive.

Gottfried gnawed at the gag; it slipped. Outside he heard a familiar voice. “Gottfried! Where the devil are you?”

His breath burst from him in a stentorian roar. “Hey, Sonya! Name of the devil! Be careful, girl —”

Tshoruk snarled like a wolf and struck him savagely on the head with a scimitar hilt. Almost instantly, it seemed, the door crashed inward. As in a dream Gottfried saw Red Sonya framed in the doorway, pistol in hand. Her face was drawn and haggard; her eyes burned like coals. Her basinet was gone, and her scarlet cloak. Her mail was

hacked and red-clotted, her boots slashed, her silken breeches splashed and spotted with blood.

With a croaking cry Tshoruk ran at her, scimitar lifted. Before he could strike, she crashed down the barrel of the empty pistol on his head, felling him like an ox. From the other side Rhupen slashed at her with a curved Turkish dagger. Dropping the pistol, she closed with the young Oriental. Moving like someone in a dream, she bore him irresistibly backward, one hand gripping his wrist, the other his throat. Throttling him slowly, she inexorably crashed his head again and again against the stones of the wall, until his eyes rolled up and set. Then she threw him from her like a sack of loose salt.

“God!” she muttered thickly, reeling an instant in the center of the room, her hands to her head. Then she went to the captive and sinking stiffly to her knees, cut his bonds with fumbling strokes that sliced his flesh as well as the cords.

“How did you find me?” he asked stupidly, clambering stiffly up.

She reeled to the table and sank down in a chair. A flagon of wine stood at her elbow and she seized it avidly and drank. Then she wiped her mouth on her sleeve and surveyed him wearily but with renewed life.

“I saw you leave the wall and followed. I was so drunk from the fighting I scarce knew what I did. I saw those dogs take your arm and lead you into the alleys, and then I lost sight of you. But I found your burganet lying outside in the street, and began shouting for you. What the hell’s the meaning of this?”

She picked up the arrow, and blinked at the parchment fastened to it. Evidently she could read the Turkish characters, but she scanned it half a dozen times before the meaning became apparent to her exhaustion-numbed brain. Then her eyes flickered dangerously to the

men on the floor. Tshoruk sat up, dazedly feeling the gash in his scalp; Rhupen lay retching and gurgling on the floor.

“Tie them up, brother,” she ordered, and Gottfried obeyed. The victims eyed the woman much more apprehensively than him.

“This missive is addressed to Ibrahim, the Wezir,” she said abruptly. “Why does he want Gottfried’s head?”

“Because of a wound he gave the Sultan at Mohacz,” muttered Tshoruk uneasily.

“And you, you lower-than-a-dog,” she smiled mirthlessly, “you fired the mine by the Karthner! You and your spawn are the traitors among us.” She drew and primed a pistol. “When Zrinyi learns of you,” she said, “your end will be neither quick nor sweet. But first, you old swine, I’m going to give myself the pleasure of blowing out your cub’s brains before your eyes —”

The older Armenian gave a choking cry. “God of my fathers, have mercy! Kill me — torture me — but spare my son!”

At that instant a new sound split the unnatural quiet — a great peal of bells shattered the air.

“What’s this?” roared Gottfried, groping wildly at his empty scabbard.

“The bells of Saint Stephen!” cried Sonya. “They peal for victory!”

She sprang for the sagging stair and he followed her up the perilous way. They came out on a sagging shattered roof, on a firmer part of which stood an ancient stone-casting machine, relic of an earlier age, and evidently recently repaired. The tower overlooked an angle of the wall, at which there were no watchers. A section of the ancient glacis, and a ditch interior the main moat, coupled with a steep natural pitch of the earth beyond, made the point practically invulnerable. The spies had been able to exchange messages here with little fear of discovery,

and it was easy to guess the method used. Down the slope, just within long arrow-shot, stood up a huge mantlet of bullhide stretched on a wooden frame, as if abandoned there by chance. Gottfried knew that message-laden arrows were loosed from the tower roof into this mantlet. But just then he gave little thought to that. His attention was riveted on the Turkish camp. There a leaping glare paled the spreading dawn; above the mad clangor of the bells rose the crackle of flames, mingled with awful screams.

“The Janizaries are burning their prisoners,” said Red Sonya.

“Judgment Day in the morning,” muttered Gottfried, awed at the sight that met his eyes.

From their eyrie the companions could see almost all of the plain. Under a cold gray leaden sky, tinged a somber crimson with dawn, it lay strewn with Turkish corpses as far as the sight would carry. And the hosts of the living were melting away. From Simmering the great pavilion had vanished. The other tents were now coming down fast. Already the head of the long column was out of sight, moving into the hills through the cold dawn. Snow began falling in light swift flakes.

The Janizaries were glutting their mad disappointment on their helpless captives, hurling men, women and children living into the flames they had kindled under the somber eyes of their master, the monarch men called the Magnificent, the Merciful. All the time the bells of Vienna clanged and thundered as if their bronze throats would burst.

“They shot their bolt last night,” said Red Sonya. “I saw their officers lashing them, and heard them cry out in fear beneath our swords. Flesh and blood could stand no more. Look!” She clutched her companion’s arm. “The Akinji will form the rear-guard.”

Even at that distance they made out a pair of vulture wings moving

among the dark masses; the sullen light glimmered on a jeweled helmet. Sonya's powder-stained hands clenched so that the pink, broken nails bit into the white palms, and she spat out a Cossack curse that burned like vitriol.

"There he goes, the bastard that made Austria a desert! How easily the souls of the butchered folk ride on his cursed winged shoulders! Anyway, old warhorse, he didn't get your head."

"While he lives it'll ride loose on my shoulders," rumbled the giant.

Red Sonya's keen eyes narrowed suddenly. Seizing Gottfried's arm, she hurried downstairs. They did not see Nikolas Zrinyi and Paul Bakics ride out of the gates with their tattered retainers, risking their lives in sorties to rescue prisoners. Steel clashed along the line of march, and the Akinji retreated slowly, fighting a good rear-guard action, balking the headlong courage of the attackers by their very numbers. Safe in the depths of his horsemen, Mikhal Oglu grinned sardonically. But Suleyman, riding in the main column, did not grin. His face was like a death-mask.

Back in the ruined tower, Red Sonya propped one booted foot on a chair, and cupping her chin in her hand, stared into the fear-dulled eyes of Tshoruk.

"What will you give for your life?"

The Armenian made no reply.

"What will you give for the life of your whelp?"

The Armenian started as if stung. "Spare my son, princess," he groaned. "Anything — I will pay — I will do anything."

She threw a shapely booted leg across the chair and sat down.

"I want you to bear a message to a man."

"What man?"

"Mikhal Oglu."

He shuddered and moistened his lips with his tongue.

“Instruct me; I obey,” he whispered.

“Good. We’ll free you and give you a horse. Your son shall remain here as hostage. If you fail us, I’ll give the cub to the Viennese to play with —”

Again the old Armenian shuddered.

“But if you play squarely, we’ll let you both go free, and my pal and I will forget about this treachery. I want you to ride after Mikhal Oglu and tell him —”

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Through the slush and driving snow, the Turkish column plodded slowly. Horses bent their heads to the blast; up and down the straggling lines camels groaned and complained, and oxen bellowed pitifully. Men stumbled through the mud, leaning beneath the weight of their arms and equipment. Night was falling, but no command had been given to halt. All day the retreating host had been harried by the daring Austrian cuirassiers who darted down upon them like wasps, tearing captives from their very hands.

Grimly rode Suleyman among his Solaks. He wished to put as much distance as possible between himself and the scene of his first defeat, where the rotting bodies of thirty thousand Muhammadans reminded him of his crushed ambitions. Lord of western Asia he was; master of Europe he could never be. Those despised walls had saved the Western world from Moslem dominion, and Suleyman knew it. The rolling thunder of the Ottoman power re-echoed around the world, paling the glories of Persia and Mogul India. But in the West the yellow-haired Aryan barbarian stood unshaken. It was not written that the Turk should rule beyond the Danube.

Suleyman had seen this written in blood and fire, as he stood on Simmering and saw his warriors fall back from the ramparts, despite the flailing lashes of their officers. It had been to save his authority that he gave the order to break camp — it burned his tongue like gall, but already his soldiers were burning their tents and preparing to desert him. Now in darkly brooding silence he rode, not even speaking to Ibrahim.

In his own way Mikhal Oglu shared their savage despondency. It was with a ferocious reluctance that he turned his back on the land he had ruined, as a half-glutted panther might be driven from its prey. He recalled with satisfaction the blackened, corpse-littered wastes — the screams of tortured men — the cries of girls writhing in his iron arms; recalled with much the same sensations the death-shrieks of those same girls in the blood-fouled hands of his killers.

But he was stung with the disappointment of a task undone — for which the Grand Vizier had lashed him with stinging word. He was out of favor with Ibrahim. For a lesser man that might have meant a bowstring. For him it meant that he would have to perform some prodigious feat to reinstate himself. In this mood he was dangerous and reckless as a wounded panther.

Snow fell heavily, adding to the miseries of the retreat. Wounded men fell in the mire and lay still, covered by a growing white mantle. Mikhal Oglu rode among his rearmost ranks, straining his eyes into the darkness. No foe had been sighted for hours. The victorious Austrians had ridden back to their city.

The columns were moving slowly through a ruined village, whose charred beams and crumbling fire-seared walls stood blackly in the falling snow. Word came back down the lines that the Sultan would pass on through and camp in a valley which lay a few miles beyond.

The quick drum of hoofs back along the way they had come caused the Akinji to grip their lances and glare slit-eyed into the flickering darkness. They heard but a single horse, and a voice calling the name of Mikhal Oglu. With a word the chief stayed a dozen lifted bows, and shouted in return. A tall, gray stallion loomed out of the flying snow, a black-mantled figure crouched grotesquely atop of it.

“Tshoruk! You Armenian dog! What in the name of Allah —”

The Armenian rode close to Mikhal Oglu and whispered urgently in his ear. The cold bit through the thickest garments. The Akinji noted that Tshoruk was trembling violently. His teeth chattered and he stammered in his speech. But the Turk’s eyes blazed at the import of his message.

“Dog, do you lie?”

“May I rot in hell if I lie!” A strong shudder shook Tshoruk and he drew his kaftan close about him. “He fell from his horse, riding with the cuirassiers to attack the rear-guard, and lies with a broken leg in a deserted peasant’s hut some three miles back — alone except for his mistress Red Sonya, and three or four Lanzknechts, who are drunk on wine they found in the deserted camp.”

Mikhal Oglu wheeled his horse with sudden intent.

“Twenty men to me!” he barked. “The rest ride on with the main column. I go after a head worth its weight in gold. I’ll overtake you before you go in camp.”

Othman caught his jeweled rein. “Are you mad, to ride back now? The whole country will be on our heels —”

He reeled in his saddle as Mikhal Oglu slashed him across the mouth with his riding whip. The chief wheeled away, followed by the men he had designated. Like ghosts they vanished into the spectral darkness.

Othman sat his horse uncertainly, looking after them. The snow shafted down, the wind sobbed drearily among the bare branches. There was no sound except the receding noises of the trudging column. Presently these ceased. Then Othman started. Back along the way they had come, he heard a distant reverberation, a roar as of forty or fifty matchlocks speaking together. In the utter silence which followed, panic came upon Othman and his warriors. Whirling away they fled through the ruined village after the retreating horde.

7.

None noticed when night fell on Constantinople, for the splendor of Suleyman made night no less glorious than day. Through gardens that were riots of blossoms and perfume, cressets twinkled like myriad fireflies. Fireworks turned the city into a realm of shimmering magic, above which the minarets of five hundred mosques rose like towers of fire in an ocean of golden foam. Tribesmen on Asian hills gaped and marveled at the blaze that pulsed and glowed afar, paling the very stars. The streets of Stamboul were thronged with crowds in the attire of holiday and rejoicing. The million lights shone on jeweled turban and striped khalat — on dark eyes sparkling over filmy veils — on shining palanquins borne on the shoulders of huge ebony-skinned slaves.

All that splendor centered in the Hippodrome, where in lavish pageants the horsemen of Turkistan and Tatory competed in breathtaking races with the riders of Egypt and Arabia, where warriors in glittering mail spilled one another's blood on the sands, where swordsmen were matched against wild beasts, and lions were pitted against tigers of Bengal and boars from northern forests. One might have deemed the imperial pageantry of Rome revived in Eastern garb.

On a golden throne, set upon lapis lazuli pillars, Suleyman reclined, gazing on the splendors, as purple-togaed Caesars had gazed before him. About him bowed his viziers and officers, and the ambassadors from foreign courts — Venice, Persia, India, the khanates of Tataria. They came — including the Venetians — to congratulate him on his victory over the Austrians. For this grand fete was in celebration of that victory, as set forth in a manifesto under the Sultan's hand, which stated, in part, that the Austrians having made submission and sued for pardon on their knees, and the German realms being so distant from the Ottoman empire, "the Faithful would not trouble to clean out the fortress (Vienna), or purify, improve, and put it in repair." Therefore the Sultan had accepted the submission of the contemptible Germans, and left them in possession of their paltry "fortress"!

Suleyman was blinding the eyes of the world with the blaze of his wealth and glory, and striving to make himself believe that he had actually accomplished all he had intended. He had not been beaten on the field of open battle; he had set his puppet on the Hungarian throne; he had devastated Austria; the markets of Stamboul and Asia were full of Christian slaves. With this knowledge he soothed his vanity, ignoring the fact that thirty thousand of his subjects rotted before Vienna, and that his dreams of European conquest had been shattered.

Behind the throne shone the spoils of war — silken and velvet pavilions, wrested from the Persians, the Arabs, the Egyptian memluks; costly tapestries, heavy with gold embroidery. At his feet were heaped the gifts and tributes of subject and allied princes. There were vests of Venetian velvet, golden goblets crusted with jewels from the courts of the Grand Moghul, ermine-lined kaftans from Erzeroum, carven jade from Cathay, silver Persian helmets with horse-hair plumes, turban-

cloths, cunningly sewn with gems, from Egypt, curved Damascus blades of watered steel, matchlocks from Kabul worked richly in chased silver, breastplates and shields of Indian steel, rare furs from Mongolia. The throne was flanked on either hand by a long rank of youthful slaves, made fast by golden collars to a single, long silver chain. One file was composed of young Greek and Hungarian boys, the other of girls; all clad only in plumed head-pieces and jeweled ornaments intended to emphasize their nudity.

Eunuchs in flowing robes, their rotund bellies banded by cloth-of-gold sashes, knelt and offered the royal guests sherbets in gemmed goblets, cooled with snow from the mountains of Asia Minor. The torches danced and flickered to the roars of the multitudes. Around the courses swept the horses, foam flying from their bits; wooden castles reeled and went up in flames as the Janizaries clashed in mock warfare. Officers passed among the shouting people, tossing showers of copper and silver coins amongst them. None hungered or thirsted in Stamboul that night except the miserable Caphar captives. The minds of the foreign envoys were numbed by the bursting sea of splendor, the thunder of imperial magnificence. About the vast arena stalked trained elephants, almost covered with housings of gold-worked leather, and from the jeweled towers on their backs, fanfares of trumpets vied with the roar of the throngs and the bellowing of lions. The tiers of the Hippodrome were a sea of faces, all turning toward the jeweled figure on the shining throne, while thousands of tongues wildly thundered his acclaim.

As he impressed the Venetian envoys, Suleyman knew he impressed the world. In the blaze of his magnificence, men would forget that a handful of desperate Caphars behind rotting walls had closed his road

to empire. Suleyman accepted a goblet of the forbidden wine, and spoke aside to the Grand Vizier, who stepped forth and lifted his arms.

“Oh, guests of my master, the Padishah forgets not the humblest in the hour of rejoicing. To the officers who led his hosts against the infidels, he has made rare gifts. Now he gives two hundred and forty thousand ducats to be distributed among the common soldiers, and likewise to each Janizary he gives a thousand aspers.”

In the midst of the roar that went up, a eunuch knelt before the Grand Vizier, holding up a large round package, carefully bound and sealed. A folded piece of parchment, held shut by a red seal, accompanied it. The attention of the Sultan was attracted.

“Oh, friend, what has thou there?”

Ibrahim salaamed. “The rider of the Adrianople post delivered it, oh Lion of Islam. Apparently it is a gift of some sort from the Austrian dogs. Infidel riders, I understand, gave it into the hands of the border guard, with instructions to send it straightway to Stamboul.”

“Open it,” directed Suleyman, his interest roused. The eunuch salaamed to the floor, then began breaking the seals of the package. A scholarly slave opened the accompanying note and read the contents, written in a bold yet feminine hand:

To the Soldan Suleyman and his Wezir Ibrahim and to the hussy Roxelana we who sign our names below send a gift in token of our immeasurable fondness and kind affection.

Sonya of Rogatino, and Gottfried von Kalmbach

Suleyman, who had started up at the name of his favorite, his features suddenly darkening with wrath, gave a choking cry, which was echoed by Ibrahim. The eunuch had torn the seals of the bale, disclosing what lay within. A pungent scent of herbs and preservative spices filled

the air, and the object, slipping from the horrified eunuch's hands, tumbled among the heaps of presents at Suleyman's feet, offering a ghastly contrast to the gems, gold and velvet bales. The Sultan stared down at it and in that instant his shimmering pretense of triumph slipped from him; his glory turned to tinsel and dust. Ibrahim tore at his beard with a gurgling, strangling sound, purple with rage.

At the Sultan's feet, the features frozen in a death-mask of horror, lay the severed head of Mikhal Oglu, Vulture of the Grand Turk.